

# THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF POLICY TARGETS AND THE INTEREST GROUPS

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*Frequently the major pressures on the political system are generated by groups that project their objectives and interventions – private interest groups. The presence of these groups in the public arena is considered destructive, and the influences they exercise on the political system are deemed similar to those of corruption.*

*However, political analysts consider that, effects notwithstanding, the presence of interest groups represents an unavoidable cost in any democratic system. A reason for maintaining interest groups is the connection established between citizens and public officials through unions and business, trade or professional associations.*

*The value of such a link may be equivalent to the actual price of the unavoidable distortion that occurs when interest groups are active within the public policy process. The interest groups are certainly too important to be eliminated under the pressure of the myth of corruption.*

## 1. Interest groups for citizens' voice

Most Romanian people suspect interest groups of dishonesty and corruption of the political process by unduly influencing government; most of these activities taking place within a framework that lacks transparency. Before evaluating where myth and reality lies with interest groups in Romania, we must first determine what role they play in Romanian politics, and through what resources and techniques they influence it.

A recurring debate in Romanian politics deals with the role interest groups hold in a democratic society. Are interest groups a threat to the well being of the political system and public policy making? Do they instead contribute to its proper functioning?

An early favorable image about interest groups was offer by Alexis de Tocqueville, who suggested that the existence of interest groups reflects a strong democratic culture<sup>1</sup>.

Without further arguing on the moral side of getting citizens heard in a democratic system, this paper uses the perspective of normative civism when analyzing two of the instruments Romania acknowledged as “to do’s” in its attempt to help open the policy making

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, “Democracy in America”, ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: Mentor Books, 1956), p.198.

system: public transparency and participation.

One likely question when debating upon the aforementioned means of getting democracy closer to citizens is given by the natural behavior of interest groups: *they create factions*.

A perverse effect of openness is: *the more active the factions, the more damage they cause to the coherence of the policy making process*. The author of this paper assumes, however that a counterbalance to this natural development is a built-in checks and balances system and more transparent governance, which will eventually allow competition among and inside factions.

The interest group system is still unbalanced, having segments of society (particularly business people, highly educated and rather wealthy) considerably better organized than others.

The growth in number of the citizen groups has somewhat reduced this disparity, but there are still significant inequities in how well different interests are represented in governance.

These inequities have made contemporary scholars reject two key propositions of the early pluralists: 1) the freedom to form lobbies yields a healthy competition among opposing groups; and 2) the compromises emerging from that competition lead to policies that fairly illustrate the divisions within society.

Instead, business groups and professional groups have an advantage due to their ability to organize themselves more readily and with greater resources. Despite the inequities of the interest group system, little general effort has been put together to restrict interest groups' activity.

Suppressing political freedoms must be avoided, even at the expense of allowing interest groups to promote the self-seeking interests of narrow segments of the population.

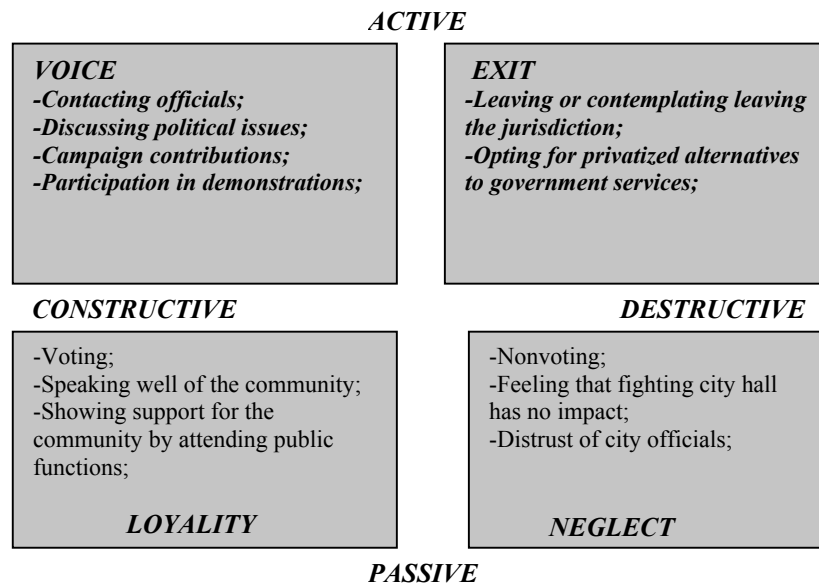
### ***Citizen' participation***

Democracy assumes citizen' participation - taking action in order to influence government. We have grown accustomed to reports of low voter turnout and public hearings that no public attends.

Apparently, the government works just fine with limited participation: *public policy represents the interests of the active, while the inactive party is ignored, because of their non-participation in voting*. If however, those citizens who do not usually vote (low income, less educated), decide to vote then they will vote in favor of those candidates who pay more attention to their needs, which will implicitly lead to a reformulation of public policies. From this perspective it is important to understand the causes that determines whether people vote or not. Within a representative democracy, voting represents the most important form of civic participation. For most citizens voting represents an act associated with civic responsibility. The right to vote is part of the fundamental human rights and its exercise provides citizens with the opportunity to choose those who will govern. However, there are other methods of participation. Consider a citizen who is unhappy because the taxes have increased substantially from one year to the next. What options are available to him/her besides voting against incumbent officeholders at the next election? As shown in Figure 1.1, the citizen can be either active or passive, and his/hers actions can be either constructive or destructive. This person has four potential responses: *loyalty, voice, exit and neglect*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> W.E. Lyons and D., Lowery, "The Organization of Political Space and Citizen responses To Dissatisfaction in Urban Communities: An Integrative Model," *The Journal of Politics* 49 (May 1986), pp. 331-333.



**Figure 1.1.** Possible responses to Dissatisfaction in the Community

Source: William E. Lyons and David Lowery, "The Organization of Political Space and Citizen responses to Dissatisfaction in Urban Communities: An Integrative Model," *The Journal of Politics* 49 (May 1986):331

According to this formulation, voting is an example of *loyalty*, a passive but constructive response to government action. An active constructive response is *voice*: the aggrieved property owner could contact officials, work in the campaign of a candidate who promises to lower taxes, or participate in a movement anti taxes groups.

*Destructive responses* (those that undermine the citizen-government relationship) are similarly passive or active. If the citizen simply shrugs and concludes that, "you can't fight city hall", he/she exhibits a passive response termed *neglect*. He/she has virtually given up on the community and does not participate. A more active version of giving up is to *exit*; that is, to leave the community altogether (this is often referred to as "voting with your feet"). The unhappy citizen will relocate in a community that is more in line with his/her tax preferences.

Every citizen has available to him these participatory options. Even though the constructive participation of citizens contributes to the general health of the political system, at the individual level it is easily observed a certain lack of interest toward the exercise of this right. Therefore in many instances citizens end up by not voting.

**Interest groups** offer another participatory venue. Interest groups are the vehicles for political participation. They provide a means by which like-minded citizens can pool their resources and channel their energies into collective political actions. And people band together because they know it is much easier to get government to listen to a group than to an individual. One farmer fighting for more generous price supports probably will not get very far; but thousands of farmers united in an organization stand a much better chance of getting policymakers to consider their needs.

Joining a group is a way for individuals to communicate their preferences to government. Interest groups attempt to influence governmental decisions and actions by pressuring decision-making bodies to put more guidance counselors in public elementary schools, to clamp restrictions on regional development, or to strengthen regulations on licensing of family therapist.

Success is getting the group's preferences enacted; some groups are more successful than others are. As we shall see, in some context interest groups dominate the policy making process.

In considering the role of groups in the political system, we must keep in mind that people join groups for reasons other than politics. For instance, a teacher may be a member of a politically active state education association because the group offers a tangible benefit but he may disagree with some of the political positions assumed by the organization.

Generally, motivations for group membership are individually determined.<sup>3</sup> The recent research on, for instance, a Romanian Export Association membership confirms this point of view.

This association provides services and material benefits to members, and they represent export interests in government. No single all-encompassing explanation for fluctuations in membership level could be determined.

The citizen has the opportunity to participate in government in ways that do not involve voting or joining an interest group. The Romanian government has undertaken extensive measures to open themselves to public scrutiny and to stimulate public input. At the very least, they enable government and the citizenry to exchange information, and thus they contribute to the growing capacity of governments. At most, they may alter political power patterns and resource allocations<sup>4</sup>.

### ***Types of Official Access of Romanian citizens***

Many of the accessibility measures adopted by the Romanian government are the direct result of public demands that the government should be more accountable. These measures reflect citizens' rejection of "policy making behind closed doors" and "government by announcement", where the decisions are taken without public consultation. The transition process has gradually led to the assimilation and conceptual internalization of good governance practices within Romania. After almost 10 years of research in this area, the Romanian political class has provided Romanian citizens accessibility to the required tools in assessing governance quality.

One such first instrument was Law 24/2000 to regulate legislative technical norms in drawing up regulatory Acts. Along with a number of provisions under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, this Law is the outcome of a process initiated in 1993 through the SIGMA Program developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development of the European Commission.<sup>5</sup>

Sole adoption of this Law was nevertheless inefficient for Romania, moreover so as one significant chapter under SIGMA recommendations<sup>6</sup> covers citizen advisory and participation granting. Romanian citizens eager to know more on this issue had neither the required means to get any relevant information for carrying out the regulatory process, nor the procedures to enable them effectively participate in the process.

Consequently, in addressing both the domestic requirements for the transition process and the external standards pertaining to the European integration, the political class and the civil society representatives launched a set of procedures aimed at both offering the Romanian population the needed procedural resources, and granting them good governance practice.

The public government has developed the overwhelming majority of the regulatory Acts issued in Romania. Apart from the rules and regulations directly issued by the Government through simple ordinances and emergency ordinances, the vast majority of laws adopted by the Parliament is initiated by the Government and is devised by the central public government.

<sup>3</sup> L., Harmon Zeigler, "Interest groups in States", Virginia Gray, Herbert Jacob, and Kenneth N.Vines, eds. *Politics in the American States*, 4<sup>th</sup>.ed. (Boston; Little, Brown, 1993), pp.97-131

<sup>4</sup> L., G., Popescu, "Public Policy", eds. *Economica*, 2<sup>th</sup> ed. Bucharest, 2005, p.64

<sup>5</sup> SIGMA Program (Support for Governance and Public Management Improvement in Central and Eastern Europe) was financed through PHARE.

<sup>6</sup> OECD/GD (94)59. Improving the Quality of Laws and regulations: Economic, Legal and Management Techniques, Paris: the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development /PUMA/OLIS, 1994.

To enforce laws and ordinances, the Government, the ministries and other public institutions recurrently issue a large number of normative acts.<sup>7</sup> This ongoing set of rules and regulations is made public and repeatedly amended without prior advice or involvement whatsoever from the interested players, either the law enforcement personnel, or the professional groups whose activity they regulate.

Lack of transparency and other flaws in the regulatory activity led to diminished confidence of the society in the strength and importance of both public policies and normative implementing instruments. Lack of advisory involvement shall result in recurrently amending and replacing norms to further bring about accentuated legislative instability and cause insecurity with existing public policies framework within Romania.

Actual enforcement of the transparency principle (that covers both procedures and warranties related to the information access, and participation in decision making) would eventually lead to more confidence in public policies and implicit normative instruments they make use of (laws and rules, once they have been developed through participation of the interested parties). Confidence in public policies shall result in a greater degree of law abiding, having positive effects on economic growth and maintaining cooperation and two-way support between the Government body and society.

Periodical reports on Romania's progress towards EU accession, as made public by the European Commission, acknowledge the consultative process carried out by the public administration has steadily improved though still inadequate. Despite the dialogue held between the Government and the business community representatives pertaining to horizontal measures to be undertaken towards improvement of the business environment, little progress on specific measures has been achieved.

The annual country report for 2004 by the European Commission quotes as a best practice the intense negotiations being held with the Unions, by it also emphasizes the absence of the Employers Associations representatives from the debates/consultations. As far as the dialogue with non-governmental organizations is concerned, the adoption of Law no. 544/ 2001 on free access to public interest information and Law 52/2003 on decision making transparency with public administration stands for incomplete success, mainly from a theoretical standpoint; from a practical viewpoint the general rule upholds non-involvement of the civil society in decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

Institutions that favor opacity are hiding themselves when faced with abusive interpretation of legal texts, a reflex attitude of keeping the secret around all decision-making process. Involvement of non-governmental organizations in the decision-making process is the direct effect of their own initiative. Their initiatives' success has been largely generated by some open-minded public institutions, and is mostly due to personal initiatives taken on by those institutions' management.

The dialogue held between the administration and the civil society tends to concede more on the principle ground than on factual decision. Consulting techniques of the civil society are still under development and used irresolutely, though a large array of such techniques has been handled. Practical issues that may grant success are not taken into account as yet, while the diverse contributions to setting up the final version of a public policy are often ignored.

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, only in 2004, the Parliament adopted 796 Laws, while the Government adopted 88 Ordinances and 195 Emergency Ordinances. Additionally, in 2004, no more than 1366 Government Decisions were adopted, out of which 1320 were published in *Monitorul Oficial* (Official Gazette of Romania). Central Administration ministries and other institutions adopted 729 Orders that have been published in the Official Gazette of Romania.

<sup>8</sup> L.G. Popescu, "Communication in Public Administration", eds. Economica, Bucharest, 2003, p.156.

## 2. Several typologies of interest groups in Romania

**A political interest group** is any organized group of individuals who share one or more common goals and who seek to influence government's decision-making.<sup>9</sup>

Such diverse group as the Romanian Chamber of Commerce, the National Schools and Institutes of Public Administration Association, or National Students of Public Administration Association all fit this definition. Interest groups differ from political parties, which are broad-based coalitions whose policies cover a wide range of issues. The party's ultimate goal is to contest and win elections in order to control and operate government. In contrast, interest groups put forth a limited set of demands. Although they sometimes try to affect the outcome of certain elections, interest groups do not run candidates for offices or attempt to control or operate government. Their primary concern is to influence policy that affects their own area of interest.

Differing in size and make-up, interest groups pursue varying objectives. They also serve as organizational links between their members and the elected and appointed government officials.

What justifies the existence of interest groups in a democratic, representative form of government is their role in making members of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government more aware of the needs and concerns of various segments of the population.

Many people join interest groups to promote their own economic well-being or to effect political and social change. They believe that the collective actions serves best that common goal.

### ***Economic Interest Groups***

Among interest groups, business, labor, professional, and agricultural groups are the most enduring and powerful type. This fact is hardly surprising, given the intensity of most people's preoccupation with their own economic welfare. There are more than one hundred groups that try to control the political climate. Tax law, government subsidies, antitrust laws, tariffs on imported goods, and consumer product and environmental regulations-all may affect the cost of doing business.

*Business and trade associations* are another type of economic interest group. The trade associations, which represent entire industries, also have widely divergent interests, ranging from government regulation of environmental pollution to the regulation of the import of foreign goods.

These groups are interested in government regulations that may affect the way a company does business.

Another important economic interest group comprises the organizations that support the employees' interests (Unions). The National Labor Block or the Romanian Confederation of Labor – an umbrella organization of thirty-five labor unions, having approximately 3 million members, represent examples of such interest groups.

*Professional associations* also bring the economic interests of their particular membership to the government's attention. As a rule, there is a strong link between the budget available for such activities and the visibility of interests that a professional association promotes or protects. There are also cases when less powerful and less rich organizations have the opportunity to concentrate the officials' attention on interests (compensation, tax laws, and other legislation affecting their professions) of their members.

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<sup>9</sup> See Jeffrey M. Berry, *"The Interest Group Society"*, 2nd ed. (Glenview: Scott Foresman, 1990); Carol Greenwald, *Group Power: Lobbying and Public Policy* (New York: Praeger, 1977); Kay Lehman Schlozman and John T. Tierney, *Organized Interests and American Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986)

### ***Citizen Activism Groups***

Not all shared interests are purely economic. In the last decade in Romania the number of citizens' groups that are civically active increased, however we cannot say that the number of those is very large (as it is in a mature democracy). The *citizen activism groups* rely on public opinion to back up their demands and expectations. We refer to these groups as *public interest groups* because some of these groups try to represent what they deem to be the interests of the public at large. Other organizations focus on specific causes or serve as advocates for those who are not able to represent themselves<sup>10</sup>.

Many public interest groups have become major players in national politics. In the US, Common Cause is one of the best-known "good government" groups; it works for campaign finance reform, ethic codes in government, and open administrative proceedings. In Romania, the best-known public interest groups are the Romanian Academic Society, Pro-Democracy, Transparency International-Romania.

A *single-issue group* is a cause group with an extremely narrow focus. The Romanian Hunters Association, which protects and preserves only the Romanian hunters, or the groups that fight for legislation and court decisions that protect the right of women there are examples of this kind of groups.

Some citizen groups serve as advocates for persons who may be unable to represent their own interests individually<sup>11</sup>. For example, The Romania Lung Cancer Society assists their target population by lobbying, and providing the public with information. Other advocacy groups focus on such issues as women's rights, racial equality, as well as the right of ethnic and religious groups, college students, and senior citizens. Many of their supporters do not benefit directly from their advocacy role but believe in the goals of the group.

### ***Government – related Interest Groups.***

A number of associations of government officials represent the collective interests of their members. These organizations include, for example, The Romanian Mayors Association, The National League of Cities. As local government have come to depend on central government for funds, the need for effective representation has increased and lobbies have become the principal means of achieving that representation.

### **3. Interest Groups' strategies**

A good image helps interest groups and therefore groups to invest resources in creating a good image. Being successful in a Parliament or at city hall involves more than a good image, however.

For example, interest groups have become effective at organizing grassroots networks that exert pressure on legislators. To maximize their strength, groups with common interest often establish coalitions.

They also hire representatives who can effectively promote their cause. To ensure that legislators will be receptive to their pressure, groups will try to influence the outcome of elections by supporting candidates who reflect their interest.

When an interest group decides to try to influence government on an issue, its staff and officers must develop a strategy, which may include a number of tactics aimed at various officials and offices. Together, these tactics should use the group's resources as effectively as possible.

Groups can seek help from courts and administrative agencies as well as from Parliament. Moreover, interest groups may have to shift their focus from one branch of the government to another. After a

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<sup>10</sup> L., Schlozman and J.,T., Tierney, "Organized Interests", New York: Harper and Row, 1986, pp.45-49.

<sup>11</sup> L., Schlozman and J.,T., Tierney, *op. cit.* pp.45-46.

bill becomes a law, for example, a group that lobbied for legislation will probably try to influence the administrative agency responsible for implementing the new law. Some policy decisions are left unresolved by legislation and are settled through regulations.

The lobby wants to make sure regulatory decisions are as close as possible to the group's preferences. We present three types of lobbying tactics here: those aimed at policymakers and implemented through interest group representatives (direct lobbying), those that involve group members (grassroots lobbying), and those directed toward the public (information campaign).

We also examine the cooperative efforts of interest groups to influence government through coalitions.

*Direct lobbying* relies on personal contact with policymakers. A tactic related to direct lobbying is *legal advocacy*. Using this tactic, a group tries to achieve its policy goals through litigation.

*Grassroots lobbying* involves an interest group's rank-and-file members and may include people outside the organization who sympathize with its goals. Grassroots tactics, such as letter-writing campaigns and protests, are often used in conjunction with direct lobbying. If people in government seem unresponsive to conventional lobbying tactics, a group might resort to some form of political protest. A protest or demonstration, such as picketing or marching, is designed to attract media attention to an issue. Protesters hope that television and newspaper coverage will help change public opinion and make policymakers more receptive to the group's demands.

When three thousand transporters from Romanian National Confederation of Labor came into Bucharest with their cars to show their disappointment with transportation policy, the spectacle attracted considerable publicity and the government might take some limited action.

The main drawback to protest activity is that policymaking is a long-term incremental process, whereas a demonstration is short-lived. It is difficult to sustain the anger and activism of group supporters - to keep large numbers of people involved in protest after protest - simply to keep the group's demands in the public attention.

### ***Information campaigns***

Interest groups generally feel that public backing adds strength to their lobbying efforts.

In addition, because all interest groups believe they are right in their policy orientation, they believe that they will get that backing if they make the public aware of their positions and the evidence that supports them. To this end, interest groups launch information campaigns, organized efforts to gain public backing by bringing group views to the public's attention. The underlying assumption is that public ignorance and apathy are as much a problem as the views of competing interest groups.

### ***Coalitions***

The final aspect of lobbying strategy is coalition building, in which several organizations band together for purpose of lobbying. This joint effort conserves or makes groups with similar views for more effective use of the resources. Coalitions form most often among groups that work in the same policy area and are similar in their political outlook. Most coalitions are informal, ad hoc arrangements. Groups have limited resources and prefer not to commit those resources to long-term coalitions. In addition, they do not always share an equal degree of enthusiasm for all issues. Ad hoc coalitions that center around one immediate issue allow a group to keep its resource commitments flexible, while broadening its resources to increase the chances of influencing policy-makers at key times.

## **4. The impact of Interest Groups on the construction of Public Policy**

*Public policies* are the decisions made by elected and appointed government officials, and these decisions are of crucial concern to society.

Interest groups pose a number of problems for a democratic society, and the rise of factions is inevitable in a democracy. Thus factions could destroy the policy-making process, it did not want prohibit them, for that would undetermined the basic tenets of a participatory republic. The divisiveness of factions can be possible both by built-in checks and balances and by a political system that would assure the creation of competing factions.

The question that lies before us now is how do major governmental institutions develop new, or modify existing public policy? However, no general description of policy formulation can ever adequately answer this question; such a description would have to be valid over a staggering range of public policy and multiplicity of bureaucratic agencies and commissions.

It is easy to examine politics and policymakers in Romania by looking at the institutions of Romanian government-Parliament, Government, the bureaucracy, and the courts- as separate self contained political bodies. Each is characterized by its own set of policymaking procedures, different patterns of personal recruitment, and particular responsibilities that have been assigned by the Constitution. But policymaking is actually a dynamic process in which all of these institutions interact with one another and the private sector.

From a pragmatic point of view, taking into consideration the Romanian context, we can speak about only few active and transparent manifestations of the interest groups, as these are defined in the literature. Having in mind the domains of strategic interest for the Romanian society, like public health, education, culture, and the interest groups interventions consisted mainly of criticism regarding public policies implemented by governmental structures. And even like that, as F. Fukuyama said: "The good governance is not possible without democracy and public participation: in time, the quality of a bureaucracy isolated by the population surveillance is going to be deteriorated; corruption can be limited only if the larger public becomes conscious of the its existence and requires better performance from the officials."<sup>12</sup>

In a related role, interest groups bring new issues into the political limelight through a process called *agenda building*. There are many problem areas in Romanian society, but not all of them are being addressed by the public officials. Interest groups make the government aware of problems through their advocacy, and then try to see to it that something is done to solve them.

In our opinion the intervention of the interest groups over the public policies will follow the pattern represented in the fig. 1.2. Then the opportunity of closeness between the *public agenda* and the *political* one it will be reached and the interest groups will gain the status of a real player involved in the process of public policies.

In addition to the regulated industries and interest groups are four key political institutions: Parliament, the Government, the courts and the bureaucracy. The later institution may be either an agency within an executive department or an independent regulatory agency.

Generally, governmental control of the agency is much weaker in the latter case, since it is limited largely to appointment power and persuasion; but many agencies within an executive department enjoy considerable autonomy due to their strong ties with Parliament, interest sector or citizen groups. Figure 1.2. shows these trends and other channels of influence among the participants in policy formulation.

The role of government, the courts, and the interest groups are usually less crucial than those of the agency, Parliament (especially the relevant subcommittees), and the regulated industries

Because the agency performs the vital task of converting all the demands of the other five participants into outputs, it is the linchpin of the entire system. The outputs of the agency are the rules and

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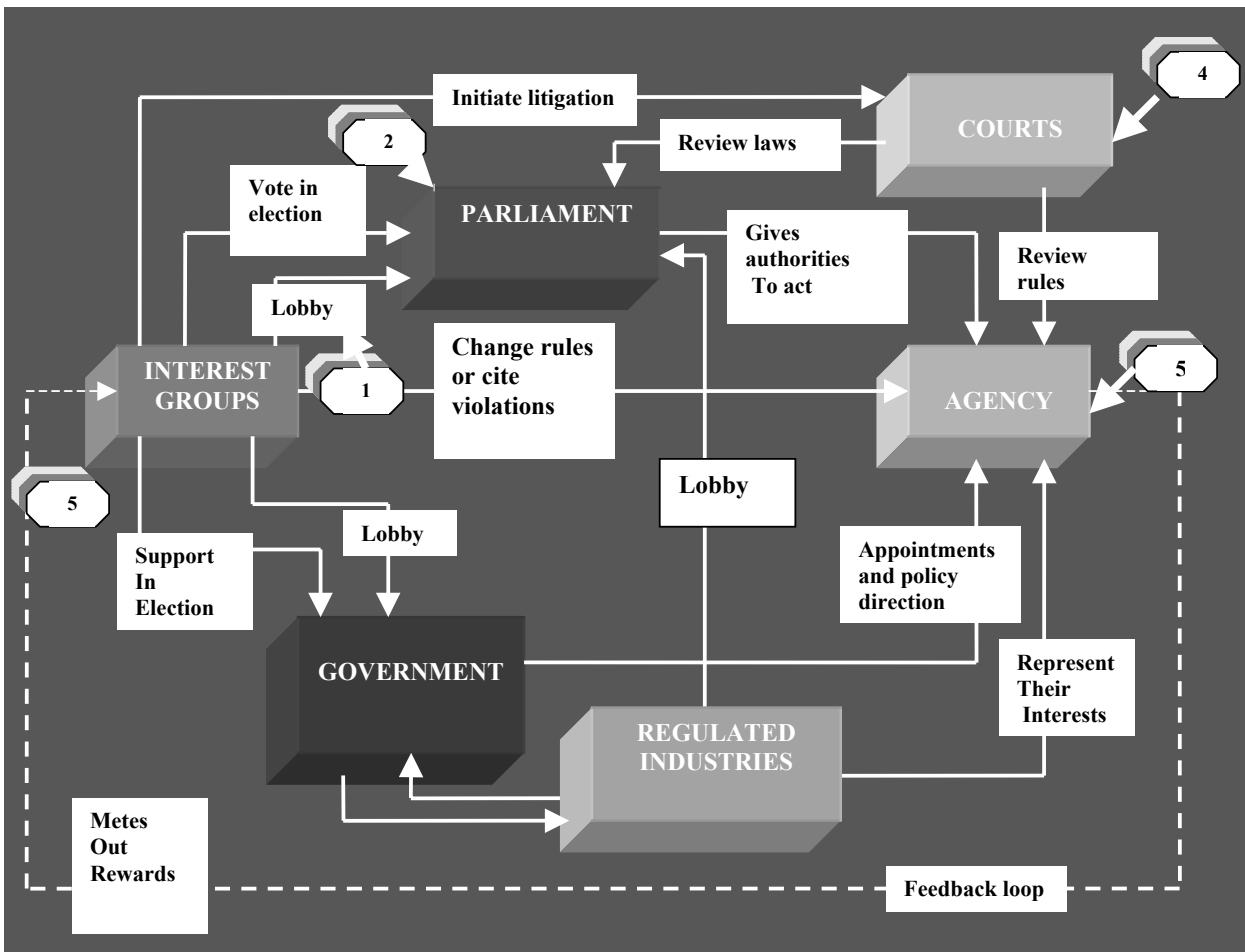
<sup>12</sup> F. Fukuyama (2006) *America la Răscruce*, ed. Antet XX PRESS, p.114

adjudicated decisions that bestow rewards or impose deprivation upon the various participants and, more, often than not, the general public. Reactions to these agency outputs reverberate through entire system-as indicated by the feedback loop-and become new input demands for future policies.

A closer look at the non-business components of the national policymaking system-interest groups, Parliament, the Government, the courts, and the bureaucracy – will help to sharpen the details of and the relationships in Figure 1.2. In the discussion that follows two things should be kept in mind.

First, because we are dealing with a system, the power any component can assert over an issue depends on both the power and interests of the other five components.

Second, because the system is preeminently political in nature, the components must bargain if an issue is to be processed. Failure to do so usually means stalemate.



**Figure 1.2** The policy-making system

Source: adopted by Grover Starling (1994) *The Changing Environment of Business-A managerial Approach*, Kent Publishing Company, p. 176.

- 1 *Under pressure from interest groups, Parliament defines the problems.* Often there is a gap between the objective evidence about the problem and the way Parliament defines it. The evidence is usually specific, limited, but the problem as defined is general.
- 2 *Parliament formulates a solution.* In order to act quickly yet avoid gross error, members of Parliament tend to address the issue not in general terms but as a problem of institutional design. Thus, new agencies are proposed to deal with the issue.

- 3 *Agency selects its approaches.* Usually with only vaguely worded legislation as its guide, the agency must „do something” about the problems that caused the agency’s creation. To say that the law is „vague” implies that Parliament confers extremely broad powers on agencies (such as” act in the public interest”) and provides little *specific policy guidance*. *As a generalization, this conclusion is accurate; but it should be noted that laws establishing newer agencies could be extremely lengthy and specific.*
- 4 *Courts uphold the agency.* While courts do not approve all agency exercises of power they tend approve most.
- 5 *Positive feedback.* Regulatory activity helps to identify yet more problems needing regulation.

Parliament is an intricate and complex structure, with its own set of formal rules and procedures. As intricate and complex as structure of parliament is, a few generalizations are possible. Because Parliament is a highly decentralized institution in which power is widely dispersed, decision-making generally involves coordination among autonomous units. Members tend to accept the work and expertise of other members on various committees; in return, they expect little interference in their own work. This fragmentation of political power and relative autonomy are often decisive importance to interest groups. Under such conditions, it is seldom necessary to influence all members of Parliament; it suffices to win the battle in committee, or even subcommittee, and then all clear sailing.

In deciding which senators and representatives within committees of Parliament to approach on legislative matters, interest groups need to keep in mind the tendency of committee members to develop close personal identifications with particular issue.

Most members of Parliament attempt to stake out certain issues as “their” issues; this is the way political careers made. The interest groups, recognizing this phenomenon, must thus seek out committees with whom they share areas of interest.

By these interventions, interest groups do distort the democratic process, mainly because their membership is clearly biased toward the upper half of the socioeconomic ladder. Business and professional lobbies working on economic issues that benefit the already advantaged in society dominate the groups that have the most influence. The poor, the young, and the elderly have much less representation. Thus, the haves gain more, while the have-not remains underrepresented by interest groups. To the extend that the business, labor and professional groups have exceptional influence, policy is similarly distorted.

Interest groups are essentially middle –and upper class institutions representing middle-and upper class values in the policymaking process. Though they may intend to serve the nation’s interests, they generally design their goals and limit their commitments to suit a relatively small group of private interests.

### ***The Theory of the Iron Triangle***

Political scientists are fond of describing the operations of committees of Parliament in terms of *iron triangle* or *subsystems politics*. These terms refer to a pattern of relationships that involve some committees or subcommittees, an agency or two, and the interest groups concerned with the policy area in question. For example, the subsystem focused on the Health Services is composed of the committees of the Government and the Parliament and appropriations subcommittees, and groups representing this kind of services. Such subsystems develop because not everyone can possibly be interested in every area of public policy.

Thus, the business that is keenly interested in policy affecting the garment industry may have little or no interest in public industries policies and consequently will leave them to others who, in turn, largely ignore policy related to the garment industry. “The formulation of public policy comes to be

a kind of closed game, played by interest group members of the Government, Parliament committees, and officials of administrative departments, which takes something of the form that it would take if there were not elections or no concern about the nature of public opinion. That is, those immediately concerned make themselves heard in the process of decision”.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Decision Points in Policymaking***

Another aspect of the structure of the Parliament that is interest to group is that it is serial-that is, it involves a number of different approvals. Because many things can happen to a bill along the way, proposed legislation must be a bill along the way; proposed legislation must be constantly watched. In addition, because the decision-making process is a systematic process opportunity for delay abound. Taking advantage of opportunities may be useful when interest group oppose a bill.

### ***Cozy Triangles vs. Issue networks***

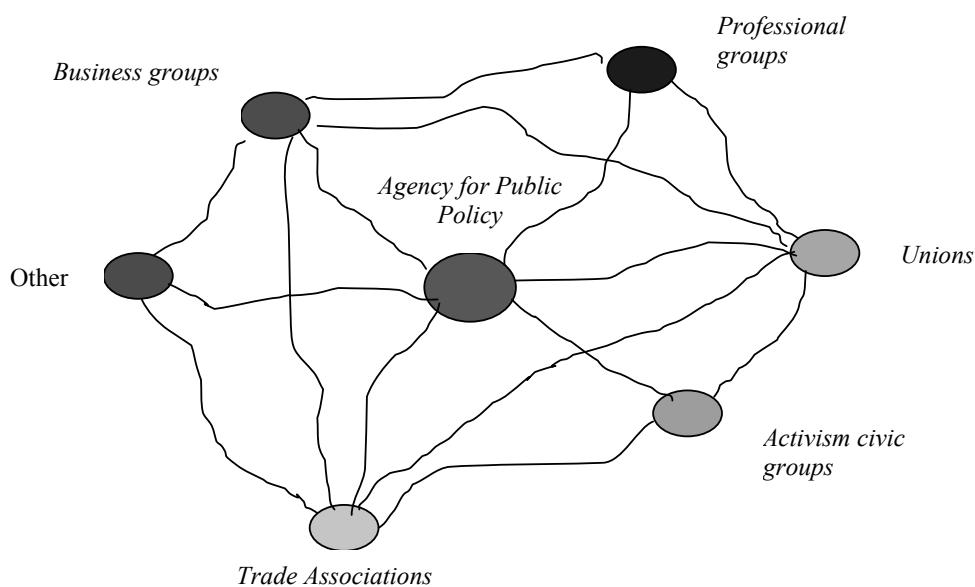
Interest groups can also distort the policymaking by joining a cozy triangle-an informal network of interest groups, members of committees of Parliament and staff, and bureaucracy.

By exchanging information, advice, and providing mutual assistance, each group, working in behalf of its own interest, also works for the advantage of the others.

The success of any cozy triangle coalition depends on its members’ ability to limit participation to a few “insiders” and to maintain a low public profile.

At the *opposite extreme* from cozy triangles are sub-governments organized as ***issue networks*** (see Figure 1.3). Issue networks involve a large number of participants with different degrees of interest in and commitment to the policies and problem concerns that bring them together.

An issue network is an open and at time highly visible sub-government. Those who take part in it may come and go constantly, and often there is neither the time nor the leadership to develop shared attitudes toward policy. Bureaucrats also play a role in issue network, but that role often depends on their grasp of the issues and their willingness to dive into the open policy making process.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 1.3.** Issue Network of Public Policy

<sup>13</sup> L.G. Popescu (2005), *Public Policy*, ed.2th, eds. Economica, Bucharest, p. 210.

<sup>14</sup> L.G. Popescu (2005), *Public Policy*, ed.2th, eds. Economica, Bucharest, p.78.

#### 4. Conclusion

A recurring debate in Romanian politics concerns the role of interest groups in a democratic society. Are the interest groups a threat to the well being of the political system? Alternatively, do they contribute to its proper functioning? Unquestionably, interest groups have come to wield increasing political power in Romania.

With large treasuries to disburse and an inside track with public officials, they are potentially a distorting influence on the functioning of the political system. Not every group with shared interest is self-interested, however. To see only the biasing effects of interest groups is to perpetuate the myth of corrupting influence. The more interest groups' system favors individuals and groups in our society that are most affluent and have the greatest resources, the more unbalanced, if not corrupt, society is. If broad national interest is lost in the clamor of pressure groups' activity and narrow self-interest, the system compromises the ideals of democratic government.

The threat of interest groups politics is all too apparent. Each group pushes its own selfish interests, which, despite the group's claims to the contrary, are not always in the best interest of other citizens.

The favorable contribution of interest groups may not be as clear, and in the pages of our papers we was tried to response how do the actions of interest groups benefit our political system by transparency and participation.

First, interest groups are vehicles for political *participation*. They provide a means by which like-minded citizens can pool their resources and channel their energies into collective political action. Moreover, people band together because they know it is much easier to get government to listen to a group than to an individual. In addition, *the interest groups are organizations that give voice to the voiceless and represent the underrepresented*.

Second, interest groups bring new issues into political limelight, through a process called *agenda building*. There are public officials addressing many problems areas in Romanian society, but not all of them. Interest groups make the government aware of problems, and then try to see to it that something is done to solve them.

Of course, this thing would not be possible without *transparency*.

Finally, interest group engages in program monitoring. In other words, they follow government programs important to their constituents, keeping abreast of developments in the local communities where public policies are implemented. When problems emerge, interest groups push administrators to solve them in way that promotes the group's goals. They draw attention to agency officials' transgressions and even file suit to stop actions they consider unlawful. In this case, transparency is very important because it limits the opportunity for one single group to become dominant in the interest area.

Interest groups do, and then play some positive roles in their pursuit self-interest. Nevertheless, it is too soon to assume that the positive side of interest groups neatly balances the negative.

"Controlling the clientele, verifying the fact that the public money are spend to the publics goods and not for loyalty network, and also limiting the corruption contributes simultaneous to promote the development of the democratic political systems and also to give legitimacy to those"<sup>15</sup>.

In conclusion, the interest groups are an inevitable cost in any democratic system. These groups link citizen and public officials through corporate, labor, trade and professional association and through citizen activism groups. Such linkage may be worth the price of real distortions that inevitably occur when interest groups are active in policymaking process.

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<sup>15</sup> F. Fukuyama, *op. cit.* p.117.

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