

Discussion Questions for 17.317, U.S. Social Policy

Part II: Preferences, Participation, and Representation

- This section of the course focuses on the mass public – what does the public want, who participates in politics, and whose preferences get expressed in public policy. We begin by looking at political participation, which is a key way in which citizens voice their preferences.

Interest Groups I

- What are interest groups? What different kinds of interest groups are there? What is their role in the policymaking process?
- What is a subgovernment? What is an issue network? How have political scientists' views of policymaking and the nature of influence changed over time?
- What factors in the political system changed over time to open up the older policy subsystems?
- What is the collective action problem in Olson's view? What kinds of groups are subject to free rider problems? What are collective goods? How can groups overcome the free rider problem?
- How does Skocpol characterize changes in the nature of citizen interest groups over time? What are the characteristics of old-style membership associations – what groups are we talking about, how were they organized, what kinds of activities did they engage in, how did they overcome free rider problems, in what ways were their memberships diverse (and not diverse)?
- What about membership associations now? How do they differ from the old-style groups? What changed in American society and politics that caused these new types of organizations to emerge? What is the nature of their organization, relationships with members? What are the implications for political mobilization and policymaking of the ways in which membership associations have changed? In what ways are the new groups diverse (and not diverse)?
- What are the implications for political participation and representation?