

Ronald G. Shaiko. *Voices and Echoes for the Environment: Public Interest Representation in the 1990s and Beyond.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xvi + 300 pp. \$78.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-11354-0.



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Published on H-Pol (March, 2000)

The environmental movement in the United States has undergone extensive changes since its emergence in the 1960s. A major element of these shifts has been the evolution of non-profit environmental advocacy groups from scrappy upstarts to national-scale, institutionalized, professionalized public interest organizations. In the context of these changes, this book explores the relationships between organization leaders ("voices") and their informed memberships ("echoes"), using a variety of research methodologies. In particular, author Ronald Shaiko asks how these groups balance administrative concerns, such as the maintenance of memberships and organizational infrastructure, with their overarching goals of providing effective political representation in the environmental policy-making process. In doing so, Shaiko provides fascinating detail into the current dilemmas facing these groups, yet falls a bit short of making substantive recommendations for improvement.

Shaiko deftly sets the stage for his research in the first two chapters, giving an engaging history of the development of the major environmental

non-profits and the shifting political contexts in which they have evolved. One of the most important elements is a change in American public interest activism as a whole since the 1960s: rather than taking to the streets or getting arrested to push for social change, many people today conduct their "activism" primarily by writing membership checks to organizations. Less social and spontaneous than in the past, this style of participation passively follows the guidance of professional organizations and their leaders; members provide political legitimacy through their numbers and financial support through their donations, but often do not have much more direct involvement. A much larger political enterprise is possible as a result; more than 3,000 autonomous national non-profits covering a wide variety of interests now compete to represent their own particular version of "the public interest." In order to succeed in effectively advocating environmental concerns in this context, Shaiko argues that "the messages sent directly to policy makers from organization leaders and their lobbyists -- the 'voices' -- must be supported by similarly informed

messages from the grassroots memberships -- the 'echoes'" (p. 4).

Yet the organizations themselves have also grown, and this growth has created new challenges in representation. Particularly during the 1980s, both the membership rolls and annual budgets of most environmental groups soared to all-time highs; in response the organizations expanded their operations and professionalized their staffs. Changes in tax law also often required complex organizational adjustments to continue to lobby for change while retaining the tax-exempt status of a 501(c)(3) organization. As national environmental organizations evolved, the costs of maintaining their day-to-day operations and, more important, of maintaining membership bases in an increasingly competitive public interest marketplace have markedly shifted organizational resources toward maintenance of the organization and, as a consequence, away from public interest representation. Leaders are now faced with difficult decisions about how to allocate their resources "supplied, in large part, by members committed to public interest goals rather than to the maintenance of public interest organizations" (p. 21).

The bulk of the text contains detailed analyses of organizational attributes, leadership styles, leadership communications with members, recruitment efforts, membership motivations, and leadership-membership political activities, using interviews, analysis of existing survey data, and content analysis. Because environmental groups vary so widely, Shaiko specifically investigates five case studies as a representative sample to "capture the internal diversity in substantive policy agendas, organizational structures, leadership styles, membership size, organizational wealth, and longevity" (p. 39). The five organizations studied here are: Sierra Club, one of the oldest and most structurally complex groups, with unusually direct links between members and leadership; National Wildlife Federation (NWF), an "environ-

mental conglomerate" with very loose connections to its affiliated members; The Wilderness Society, with a narrow policy focus on preservation issues and few constituent services; Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), made up primarily of scientists and lawyers interested in market-based solutions to environmental problems; and Environmental Action (EA), a collective-based group which ceased operations in 1996. (Due to the significant differences in institutional structure, connections with members and/or staffing between national groups and regional or local grassroots groups, the latter are not included in this study.) Shaiko's study follows these groups through the boom of the 1980s, fueled in large part by the anti-environmentalist policies of President Ronald Reagan, and the bust of the early 1990s, when most groups drastically downsized and streamlined their operations in response to an economic recession and shrinking memberships.

The author provides a great deal of intriguing data and analysis, but his conclusions do not take full advantage of this complexity. In some ways his efforts are confounded by methodological problems. For example, the survey data on membership motivations presented in Chapter Five is twenty years old. Shaiko asserts that the motivations for belonging to public interest organizations and the incentives offered by organization leaders have not changed much in that time, but provides no concrete evidence for this conclusion. Given the extent and persuasiveness of his documentation of radical changes in the overall context and structure of most of these groups, this argument is somewhat unconvincing. Similarly, in Chapter Four, his method of analyzing the content of membership recruitment by the organizations is to examine the direct mail solicitations he himself received over a two-year period. This strikes me as unnecessarily haphazard; there may have been certain types of groups that simply did not have him on their mailing lists, and thus are underrepresented in his analysis. A more systematic

approach to gathering direct-mail data would be more persuasive.

More importantly, Shaiko does not draw upon the variation in success or failure among his five cases to put forward substantive proposals for change. He argues, among other things, that in order to be effective, environmental leaders must restructure their organizations to place policy influence ahead of organizational maintenance. Yet his data show that this prioritization is exactly what is increasingly difficult for these groups to do, due in part to the ever-increasing costs and competitiveness of recruiting and retaining both members and professional, well-paid staff. The one organization in his five cases that attempted to stay focused most exclusively on policy influence, Environmental Action, is ironically the one that ultimately went out of business. In addition, some organizations managed to continue to expand their memberships through the early 1990s (EDF, National Parks and Conservation Association, and The Nature Conservancy are three examples), yet Shaiko provides no analysis as to why these groups had greater success than others. Concrete suggestions as to how organization leaders might best solve these kinds of dilemmas, given the different experiences of his five cases, would greatly strengthen his conclusions.

It also seems that much could be gained from examining some of the differences in motivation and structure between organizations, rather than looking at them as elements of a single group. For example, one could argue that a major distinction between groups is the way in which they define "representation of the public interest," similar to the "principle-agent" question with regard to legislators.^[1] Do they see themselves as literally representing the public's current concerns, issues people are actively interested in right now, or are they more intent on advancing their own normative view of what is best for the environment and society in the long run, regardless of the public's current focus? One of Shaiko's cases provides an

example of the latter approach; EDF considers its support base more as contributors than members, and makes few attempts to mobilize the members themselves. This stands in stark contrast to a group like the Sierra Club, which relies heavily on extensive linkages between the leadership and members to determine policy direction—a policy which, in recent years, has caused serious rifts within the group, threatening to tear it apart. These very different conceptions of the public interest organization's role, and its associated relationship to its members, seem to require different strategies for balancing organizational needs with effective representation. Yet Shaiko only makes a one-size-fits-all recommendation, suggesting that all organizations can only be effective politically by deliberately "acting with" their members via improved connections between leaders and members.

Shaiko's identification of "grassroots lobbying and coalition building" as the primary strategies for influencing policy outcomes (p. 3) without addressing any other methods of organizational participation in the policy-making process is also problematic. In making this recommendation, he overlooks the increasing emphasis among many of these groups on the executive and judicial branches in the past few decades. By focusing so exclusively on the environmental groups' interactions with congressional decision-makers, Shaiko leaves out the tremendous role many organizations have taken on as watchdogs, drawing media attention to environmental problems or threatening lawsuits to enforce their solutions, and as scientific experts, providing formal commentary on agency plans and programs. These direct forms of policy influence often have little to do with members, and rather rely on the professional abilities of the staff. Because of the need to appear scientifically objective and neutral, these organizational goals can even run counter to the role of advocacy based in public opinion, and so would again suggest the need for different strategies for organiza-

tional maintenance, depending on which form of influence the organization prefers.

Shaiko clearly points out that many national environmental groups have developed a credibility problem in recent years, particularly as they rely more and more on corporate donations to meet their budgetary needs. There is also the irony that they actually increase their memberships when things are going poorly for the environment, especially when an "identifiable enemy" like Reagan or former Interior Secretary James Watt is in power. Yet the evidence presented here seems to suggest a trend among at least some, if not the majority, of national environmental organizations, in which an advisory role is taken on, giving a national voice to environmental concerns, while leaving the actual mobilization of the masses to organizers at the grassroots level. Perhaps the answer is to acknowledge this new role, as working in conjunction with smaller grassroots advocates rather than in competition with them; the larger national organizations would thus be institutionally better suited for representing the long-term public interest in environmental issues, rather than the of-the-minute political desires of local activists.

This book does an excellent job of identifying areas of concern for public interest groups, and anyone interested in the recent evolution of the environmental movement would benefit from reading it. It does not, however, take the essential next step of digging more deeply into how the national scope and professionalized approach of these groups can best be optimized as an advantage, rather than a liability, in achieving effective policy influence.

Note

[1]. The "principle-agent" problem asks, do legislators simply act according to the expressed preferences of the voters in their districts, or do they deviate from those wishes? See James B. Kau and Paul H. Rubin, "Ideology, Voting, and Shirk-

ing," 76 *Public Choice* 151 (1993), for a more extensive discussion and suggested readings.

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Citation: Laura A. Watt. Review of Shaiko, Ronald G. *Voices and Echoes for the Environment: Public Interest Representation in the 1990s and Beyond*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

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