

Interest Representation and the Politics of Protest

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France has long been portrayed as a nation in which interest groups play a relatively meager and ineffective role in the political process. This view is predicated on three assumptions. The first is that the French are relatively disinclined to join voluntary associations as a result of extreme individualism and the stifling effects of centralization. The second is that the strong French state stands aloof from weakly organized interests. Its higher civil servants, imbued with a Jacobin ethos, vigilantly defend the general interest against "pressure groups" broadly viewed as illegitimate. When such "lobbies" do manage to affect the decision-making process, mainly through contacts in parliament, their success often derives from corrupt and even scandalous tactics. The third assumption is that the French are uniquely prone to engage in spectacular protest demonstrations. This seems logical: if societal interests are poorly organized and routinely ignored by the state, their only recourse would seem to be to take to the streets.

While each of these three assumptions contains a grain of truth, none of them accurately describes the reality of French interest group politics in the Fifth Republic today. Perhaps the main reason why misleading images of group-state relations still have some currency is that French political scientists have traditionally focused on formal institutions, undertaking little empirical research on interest groups (Charlot, 1994, p. 230; Mény, 1989, p. 388). In recent years, however, a number of books and articles have given us a more nuanced view of interest group dynamics in contemporary France.

The Range of Organized Interests

Comparative research has demonstrated that the French are somewhat less inclined than citizens elsewhere to join associations. Whereas 85% of Swedes and 73% of Americans are members of at least one organization, the figure for France is only about 50%. However, much of this discrepancy can be explained by the fact that many more Americans are members of religious organizations (48% vs. 5% for France) and far more Swedes are members of trade unions. Organizational membership in France is now considerable, at roughly the same level as in Germany.

Moreover, there is evidence that associative life in France has increased substantially over the last thirty years. Under the terms of the 1901 law that established the right of free association in France, groups formed for the purposes of collective endeavor must register with the public authorities. Although some of these groups exist only for brief periods of time, these registrations provide a crude indicator for the level of organized activity in France, and that has been rising in recent years. Whereas 23,000 new associations were formed during a typical year in the 1970s, for example, almost three times that number (62,987) were founded in 1997. By 2001, the centenary of the law of 1901, more than 750,000 associations of all sorts were registered with the prefectures. To be sure, most of these are associations of little political relevance -- about 27% of them related to sports, for example, and 9% to culture or music. However,

from hunting associations to veterans groups or the gay action group, Act-Up, many organizations in France are devoted, at least in part, to influencing public policy (Suleiman, 1995, pp. 227-234).

Although public opinion was once hostile to lobbying by such groups, seeing them as highly-partisan spokesmen for 'partial' interests opposed to the more general 'public' interest that the state is supposed to uphold, the French have also come to regard secondary associations much more favorably. By 2000, 95 percent of voters declared themselves favorable to the work of these associations, compared to only 54 percent who rated the government favorably at that time. Indeed, as public regard for politicians declined in the wake of the corruption scandals and mixed economic performance of the 1990s, appreciation for private associations increased.

Some of the expansion of associational activity in France can be attributed to the efforts of governments on both the right and left to promote it. Despite the continuing significance of a republican tradition that sees the state as an entity standing above society, French governments have found they need the advice of those affected by public policy in order to formulate it and groups with whom to cooperate if policy is to be implemented effectively (Hoffmann *et al.* 1963). As early as 1959, the Gaullists instituted a "collective social promotion" program channeling subsidies to selected interest groups. Critics have noted that this program was motivated partly by partisan purposes (trade unions and farm organizations sympathetic to the Gaullists received far more than more hostile leftist groups), but it also represented a genuine effort to provide the state with more effective "social partners" for the management of the economy. Leftist municipal governments expanded efforts to subsidize community action groups in the 1970s, and when the Socialists won control of the national government in the 1980s new legislation was passed to encourage organization, including tax deductions for donations to voluntary associations (Wilson, 1987, p. 15). The Socialists even took the controversial step of making subsidies available (from a Social Action Fund originally established for Algerians in 1958) to associations for immigrant workers and, by the end of the 1980s, 1700 such associations were functioning with state support (de Wenden, 1988, pp. 363-75).

As Tocqueville would have predicted, reforms designed to decentralize power and to improve the governing capacities of the regions, which began during the early 1980s and were reinforced in the subsequent decade, have given further impetus to associational activity. The stakes of local politics have grown substantially with the increasing powers and budgets of subnational authorities. Whereas the twenty-two regional councils could spend only 7.8 billion francs in 1982, by 1991 they were budgets amounted to more than 50 billion (Suleiman, 1995, p. 87). Even though many citizens have been slow to appreciate the value of decentralization, local notables have made substantial efforts to involve local associations in their new decision-making processes (Schmidt, 1990, pp. 286-89).

The rapid growth of secondary associations belies the traditional Tocquevillian image of France as a weakly organized society. However, it must be acknowledged that there is substantial variance across sectors in the degree of social organization, and, in some sectors, the representation of interests is more fragmented than in many other countries because of persistent ideological divisions among the groups. A brief overview of the French organizational terrain confirms this impression.

Trade Unions. The labor movement conforms most vividly to the stereotype of the French as poorly organized and divided along partisan lines. France has long had the lowest union density of all the major industrialized countries. Less than 10% of the French workforce is unionized today, compared to more than 80% in Sweden, 33% in Britain and 18% in the United States. The relative weakness of French unions has been attributed to a variety of factors, including the prevalence of small firms, the absence of the closed-shop or other regulations that often make union membership compulsory elsewhere, and a history of factional division within the labor movement.

Although union membership has declined in many countries over the past two decades, its drop in France has been especially precipitous, from 23% of the labor force in 1975 to 19% in 1980 and an estimated 8% today. Other indices of support also reveal serious problems in the French labor movement. Although union-sponsored candidates received 63% of all votes in works council elections in 1968, they received only 47% two decades later. Turnout for such elections has declined as well; and by 1985 only 24% of citizens expressed even minimal confidence in the unions, with 61% declaring a total lack of confidence in them (Kesselman, 1996, pp. 148-152).

These figures reflect what is broadly viewed as a crisis in the French labor movement caused, for the most part, by structural changes in the economy. The leverage of the unions has been undermined by intensified competition and increasing capital mobility within and beyond the EU; and the recruitment efforts of the unions have been complicated by a secular shift in employment away from industry toward the service sector, where it is more difficult for unions to organize, as well as by the increasing participation of women (who are generally less inclined to join unions) in the labor force. While similar trends have affected unions in other countries as well, the problems of the French unions have been exacerbated by two further factors. The unemployment rate in France has been among the highest within the OECD countries in recent years, peaking at 13 percent in 1997. Not only has it been difficult for unions to recruit members in this context, but many militants abandoned their union activity for fear that they might be targeted when layoffs occur. The declining role of the state in the economy has also been disorienting for French unions. Too weak to force employers into negotiations in many instances, the French unions have traditionally placed heavy emphasis on pressuring the state to intervene on their behalf in industrial conflict. But widespread privatization and deregulation that has reduced the presence of the state in many sectors has made this strategy more difficult to pursue (Kesselman, 1996, 153-158).

Compounding the weakness of the French labor movement is the fact that it has never been united within one umbrella organization such as the Swedish LO or the German DGB. For many decades the movement has been fragmented into rival confederations with partisan affinities, competing against each other for members and influence at both the national and plant levels. The oldest and still the largest of the confederations is the CGT, closely linked to the Communist Party and especially strong in the industrial sector. During the 1990s the CGT had an estimated 700,000 members and, in 1997, it received 33% of the votes cast in elections for the labor-relations tribunals (*conseils de prud'hommes*). The CFDT, known for its sympathy with the Socialist Party since the 1970s, is by most measures the second largest union organization with between 500,000 and 700,000 and 25% of the votes cast in 1997 for the labor tribunals. The third ranking confederation, FO, split from the CGT in 1948 and has

maintained a relatively pragmatic profile that stresses collective bargaining over ideological mobilization. It now claims about 500,000 members and has increased its share of the vote in tribunal elections from 17% in 1979 to 21 percent in 1997, while support for the CGT declined and support for the CFDT has held steady. Two additional unions, the CFTC and the white-collar oriented CGC, have much smaller membership bases than the big three but both have managed to maintain some support in tribunal elections, at 8% and 6%, respectively (Labb, 1994;; Safran, 1995, 135-37).

Business Associations. The French business community has been more successful than the labor movement at maintaining a semblance of organizational unity. At the national level, more than 900,000 firms of widely-varying types and sizes are represented by Medef (*le Mouvement des Entreprises de France*), known until 1998 as the CNPF or *Patronat*. From its origin in 1946 until the late 1960s, the CNPF remained a loose "liaison" organization but, after the events of May 1968, the organization restructured itself to deal more authoritatively with an increasingly powerful state and a threatening labor movement. The "new CNPF" became a confederation with increased authority of to sign accords binding its affiliates. By the end of the 1970s, its staff had grown to twice its size in the 1950s, its annual budget had reached 70 million francs, and it had become an important source of expertise and professional coordination for the government (Fredet and Pingaud, 1982).

However, the employers confederation has never been able to monopolize the representation of business interests. Its status has been repeatedly questioned from two quarters. Smaller firms have long considered the employers confederation too dominated by big business. For this reason, Medef maintains within its umbrella structure a semi-autonomous organization known as the CGPME that represents over 1.5 million small commercial, manufacturing and service enterprises. At times the CGPME has openly condemned CNPF policies, but it has still not been able to stave off the emergence of rival organizations claiming that the CGPME and CNPF are insufficiently vociferous in their support of small business interests, such as CID-UNATI and the SNPMI which made headlines in the 1970s. Although the authority of the employers confederation has been challenged most openly the *petits* (or small firms), it has been undermined more quietly by the power and contacts of the *gros* (or large firms). Because senior managers in France usually have close ties to the state and often a background in public service, government officials have found it possible to bypass the employers confederation to deal directly with large firms or sectoral trade associations on many issues.

In short, the French employers confederation has long faced a difficult balancing act, which requires it to be sufficiently oppositional to the government to maintain support in a diverse business community but cooperative enough to retain influence with the government. This tension has been reflected in endemic conflict at the top of the *Patronat* and frequent turnover in its leadership, as those who see the organization as overly or insufficiently aggressive in its stance toward government policy mobilize support among its members for a change. In recent years, the most prominent flashpoints for such conflict have been the proposal of the Jospin government to legislate a 35 hour week and efforts to reform the social security system that is jointly administered by the employers association and trade unions with a view to reducing its deficits and encouraging employment. Medef has played a prominent role in each, expressing strong public opposition to changes in the workweek and support for social security reform,

while working closely with government officials behind the scenes to secure what changes it could. It has also become increasingly bold about forming coalitions with reformers in the trade union movement, joining successfully with the CFDT in 2000 to press the government for measures designed to increase the incentives of the unemployed to seek work. In recent years, there have been few weeks in which the pronouncements of Medef have not figured prominently in public debate.

Agricultural Organizations. Since the time of the Fourth Republic the dominant interest group of the agricultural sector has been the FNSEA, an umbrella organization encompassing department-level federations as well as specialized product associations and other affiliated groups (most notably its youth branch, the CNJA). During the 1950s the FNSEA sought to unify the heterogeneous farm community with anti-statist rhetoric and a focus on the main issue of common interest to all, the fight for ever higher prices for agricultural produce. From the late 1950s through the 1960s, however, the FNSEA was revamped by younger leaders committed to structural reform and agricultural modernization. By far the pivotal development of this era was the decision of the FNSEA elite to cooperate with the Gaullist government in establishing a wide array of agencies that would allow "the profession" (essentially the FNSEA and its political allies) to 'co-manage' the agricultural modernization process with state officials (Keeler, 1987). This co-management greatly facilitated the transformation of French agriculture over thirty years in which the percentage of the work force engaged in agriculture was reduced from more than 20% to less than 6%, productivity was increased, and France became the world's second largest exporter of agricultural produce, after the United States (Keeler, 1996).

This relationship between the FNSEA and the state had a profound effect on the dynamics of interest group politics in the agricultural sector. The FNSEA has been greatly strengthened as an organization, at both national and local levels, by the quasi-public powers devolved to it and by the subsidies it has received either directly (through agricultural development programs) or indirectly (through its control of departmental Chambers of Agriculture) from the state. Bolstered by this material support, the FNSEA was able to increase its membership from just over 30% of eligible farmers in the 1950s to 44% or more today (and potentially 65% if one uses public membership statistics that may be inflated). Its membership density is, therefore, several times greater than that of all the French trade unions combined.

Even here, however, membership in the FNSEA is lower than that of the main farmers unions in Britain or Germany and the sector shows some tendency toward ideological fragmentation. In response to the FNSEA's support for modernization and its association with parties of the moderate right, a number of rival unions have emerged: MODEF, closely affiliated with the Communist Party; FFA, controlled by right-wing forces, and the CNSTP and the FNSP affiliated with wings of the Socialist Party. As measured by votes in the Chamber of Agricultural elections during the 1980s, support for these unions was: FNSEA (64%), MODEF (8%), FFA (6%), CNSTP (6%) and FNSP (5%).

Teachers' Associations. Until recently, the great majority of French teachers were represented by a single federation, the FEN, which could claim that 77% of all education employees as members in the early 1950s, 62% in 1970 and 48% in 1985, still well above-average for public sector unions (Ambler, 1996, pp. 208-9). Like the FNSEA, it

attracted members because of the quasi-official powers it secured from a close relationship with the Ministry of National Education and the extensive network of services it provides for its members. It could also organize teachers of widely-varying ideological tendencies because of the common commitment many of them had to a secular school system in the face of competition from private (Catholic) education.

Even at its peak, however, the FEN suffered from partisan tensions and conflict among its semi-autonomous affiliates, including the SNI representing elementary school teachers and the SNES representing those in secondary schools. The FEN and SNI were both led by Socialist factions, while the SNES was closer to the Communist Party, but these divisions also reflected differences in the interests of their members. Tensions among them grew during the 1980s, when the Socialist government failed to integrate public and private schools. Conflict between SNI and SNES over proposed reforms to teachers' working conditions led, in the early 1990s, to the expulsion of SNES and another affiliate controlled by the Communists from the FEN. In the ensuing organizational struggle, the FEN was restructured and renamed the SE, while the expelled unions joined with others to create the FSU. In the 1993 elections of teachers to various councils, however, the SE won only 110,000 votes compared to 190,000 for the new FSU, and its stature has suffered in recent years from the declining strength of elementary teachers in the wake of a massive expansion of secondary education (Ambler, 1996, pp. 210-211).

New Social Movements. Alongside these well-entrenched occupational groups, a number of new social movements have also appeared on the French political scene in recent years to make serious attempts to influence policy in specific issue-areas. A number of women's associations, including the MLF (Movement for the Liberation of Women) and Choisir (originally a single-issue group focused on abortion rights), emerged during the 1970s. The latter managed to transcend traditional left-right polarization and secure passage of a liberal abortion law in 1974. Pressure from the women's movement also led to the establishment, from 1974 to 1986 and from 1988 to 1993, of special ministries devoted to women's rights. For reasons ranging from the absence of a clear agenda after abortion reform was achieved to partisan divisions and cultural resistance to feminism, however, the French women's movement has remained relatively weak in political terms (Mazur, 1995).

The environmental movement has enjoyed much more success in France since the 1970s. With the help of subsidies from the Ministry of Environment, one peak organization--the FFSPN (French Federation of Associations for the Protection of Nature)--managed to increase its membership from half a million to almost 800,000 by the 1990s. More radical groups such as the RASN (Network for a Non-Nuclear Future) have also emerged to stage demonstrations in particular regions. In general, however, "the greens" remain less mobilized in France than in other countries such as neighboring Germany. This can be explained in part by the usual problem of surmounting partisan divisions, but it also reflects the strength of a cross-party consensus that for many years endorsed nuclear power (Duyvendak, 1995, pp. 166-181).

The breakthrough for the movement came in 1997 when the Green party (*Les Verts*) ran in legislative elections in partial coalition with the Socialists, winning 5 percent of the vote and the Ministry of the Environment in the new government. After winning 10 percent of the vote in the European elections of 1999, another junior minister

from the party was named to the government. Fueled by public concern about genetically-modified foods and the appearance in France of 'mad cow disease', the environmental movement gained many adherents in the late 1990s and early 00s.

Perhaps the most successful of the new social movements in contemporary France, however, has been that directed against racism. Led prominently from the 1980s by *SOS Racisme*, this movement has enjoyed conspicuous support, largely in reaction to the rise of the anti-immigrant National Front. A study of demonstrations and other "unconventional" political events from 1975 to 1989 found that more participants focused on racism than on any other theme (44% in comparison to 14% involved in actions against nuclear energy). At least four of the demonstrations organized by SOS Racisme in the late 1980s attracted at least 200,000 participants, and they were still mobilizing tens of thousands on behalf of changes to the immigration laws in the late 1990s (Duyvendak, 1995, pp. 103 and 161-166).

By the end of the 1990s, however, substantial attention was shifting toward economic issues after a decade of steadily-rising unemployment and relatively-austere economic policies associated with France's entry into monetary union. As a result, the turn of the century saw the development of organized social movements in some unlikely quarters. The unemployed, normally one of the groups in society most difficult to organize, engaged in active protests and the occupation of several government offices, with material and organizational support from the trade unions. High-school students, later joined by their teachers, took to the streets in 1999 and 2000 to demand more funding for secondary education. Both movements reflect a growing propensity among the younger generation to organize around social issues.

In France, issues associated with 'globalization' have also acquired strong political resonance in recent years. On the one hand, the development of the internet and new means of transnational communication has made it feasible for many to participate in international networks of protest. On the other, many in France are apprehensive about the economic and cultural effects of the international market forces given new impetus by the creation of a single European market, monetary union, and the growing mobility of capital. The result has been the development of an amorphous movement of cultural and economic defiance aimed at globalization, the international regimes associated with it, and the cosmopolitan political elite that supports it. Not unlike the *poujadism* of an earlier era, this movement is reflected in sporadic protests of varying types, but it evokes widespread sympathy from many segments of the populace. Its most visible exponent in contemporary France has been José Bové, a farmer from Larzac with long experience of civil disobedience, whose well-publicized attacks on such symbols of global culture, as the local MacDonald's restaurant, have earned him a measure of national fame. Although these activities are too sporadic to be described as a social movement, they reflect a new dimension of continuing importance to French politics.

Group-State Relations: Access, Influence and Protest

What sort of role do these various kinds of interest organizations have in public policy-making? As we have noted, French governments have been actively, if selectively, involved in the promotion of such groups in recent decades. It has been estimated that the state provides from half to three-quarters of the operating budget of many groups, and

it augments the staffs of trade unions with thousands of public employees seconded to work for them. Without such support, many groups would be weaker, if not defunct (Wilson, 1987, p. 136). Thus, the traditional image of the Jacobin state as disdainful of social interests is at least partly misleading. Public officials have made concerted efforts to involve organized social interests in decision-making. As early as the 1960s, group representatives were accorded seats on an estimated 5,000 councils, committees or commissions at the national level and another 10,000 or so at the department level. Since then, the number of such bodies has grown substantially with the expanding scope of public policy. These groups provide public officials with valuable technical information about the potential impact of policy as well as 'advance warning' about the political viability of new initiatives (Baumgartner, 1989, p. 115)

Like the American or British systems in which a multiplicity of groups are present in most spheres, the interest group universe of France is broadly 'pluralist', but the French government attempts to structure this universe more actively than its Anglo-American counterparts, using subsidies and official recognition to influence the balance of power among groups. Some groups are simply too powerful to be excluded from the decision-making process, no matter how objectionable they may be to the current administration. However, governments can and do (re)structure the group system by rewarding allies and punishing foes. The Gaullist governments of the 1960s and 1970s gave far fewer "social promotion" subsidies to the CGT than its organizational presence would have justified and more generous subsidies to moderate unions such as FO. When they took office in the 1980s, the Socialists accorded official recognition to several rivals of the conservative FNSEA, reducing its subsidies and increasing those of its Leftist rivals. They also defunded two conservative students groups that had received 400,000 francs per year and shifted those subsidies to leftist organizations that had been denied funding by the right. After a right-wing majority under Jacques Chirac won the 1986 elections, feminist organizations that had been subsidized by the Ministry of Women's Rights saw their funding cut, and scores of other examples could be cited (Keeler, 1985; Baumgartner, 1989; Mazur, 1995).

However, these efforts to restructure the interest-group universe are not always successful. The Socialists' attack on the FNSEA generated politically-costly protests, disrupted the administration of agricultural policy, and failed to produce organizationally sound unions of the left. A similar effort by the Socialists to break the *front patronal* by recognizing a rival of the CNPF also proved counterproductive. In both cases, the government soon felt compelled patch up relations with the dominant interest group.

Whether or not public officials alter the status of groups within their purview, they have the power to accept or ignore the advice given to them in formal committees. How much influence do groups derive from their participation in such institutions? Interest group leaders often feel that their opinions are not heeded. However, the utility they assign to their contacts with the state varies substantially from sector to sector. In those with a dominant peak organization that is well-staffed and has an impressive membership base, interest groups can have substantial influence. The leaders of agricultural and business groups, for instance, view their contacts with ministers or civil servants as be far more effective than do trade union leaders. Frustrated union officials have often reported that confrontational tactics are their most effective means to influence policy. (Wilson, 1987, p. 153).

In a few cases, French interest groups have developed intimate--and even controversial--relationships with specific ministries. Common to these cases is the perception of public officials that they face daunting technical or administrative tasks in which they require the collaboration of a client group if they are to be successful. Here, interest groups can wield unusual levels of power. The most noteworthy example occurs in the agricultural sector where the FNSEA's relationship with the Ministry of Agriculture has often provided the closest approximation in France to the 'neocorporatist' pattern more prevalent elsewhere in Europe (Keeler, 1987; Culpepper, 1993). Similar relationships have existed between the FEN and Ministry of Education and between the CSN (the professional association of notaries) and the Ministry of Justice (Ambler, 1996; Suleiman, 1987).

At the other end of the spectrum are groups that have rarely been able to translate formal access to the state into influence over policy. Even they seldom refuse to meet with public officials. After all, they acquire visibility and status from such contacts, but, more fundamentally, this is where power lies in the Fifth Republic. Lobbying members of parliament, an effective tactic during the Fourth Republic, has not been as useful in the Fifth which features a powerful executive, solid majorities, and relatively-strong party discipline. In 1979, only 4% of interest group leaders described this kind of lobbying as effective (Wilson, 1987, p. 153). In recent years, however, with the decline of party discipline, the appearance of governments supported by complex coalitions, and 'co-habitation' between a president drawn from one party and a legislative majority from the opposition, interest groups have shown more interest in lobbying parliamentarians. The "horizontal tribalism" of cross-party alliances opens up new targets of influence for them (Robert-Diard, 1996, pp. 100-103).

For groups disappointed by the consultative process, protest is always available as a means of attempting to affect the policy process. The popular perception within France and beyond it is that the French are uniquely inclined to take to the streets in dramatic protest demonstrations. This image has been shaped by a history of regime-threatening uprisings from the Revolution of 1789 through the events of May 1968, and it is reinforced by the concentration of power, and therefore protest, in Paris (Wilson, 1994, p. 26). But just how accurate is this stereotype of the contentious French?

Recent research provides some support for this view, while suggesting nuances to it. In surveys of the United States and eleven European countries, for example, the French rank above average in their propensity to engage in 'unconventional political action' but they are not the most prone to protest. The French ranked fourth (behind the Americans, the Swiss and the Finns) with regard to their propensity to engage in lawful demonstrations, and second (behind the Swiss again) in their readiness to occupy buildings. A study of protest events from 1948 to 1977 in five advanced industrial countries found France ranked third (with 1,566 such events), far behind Britain (5,133) and the United States (4,208), except for the years 1958-1967 when France ranked first (Wilson, 1994, pp. 24 and 37-38). Another examination of participation in "unconventional events" per capita from 1975 to 1989 in four European states ranked France last (behind Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland) for new social movement activity, but first overall based on the volume of protest mounted by more traditional groups. Among these nations, France experienced the most protests by education-related interests, anti-racist groups, labor unions, and farmers. France also enjoyed the dubious

distinction of having the greatest percentage of events involving "heavy violence." (Duyvendak, 1995, pp. 65 and 101).

How effective is protest as a means of affecting public policy in France? By and large, the answer must be that it often secures a favorable response from the government. Interviews with interest group leaders indicate that 60% of them think protest produces results and only 22% viewed it as entirely ineffective (Wilson, 1987, pp. 174-176). No systematic study of the efficacy of protest in France has yet been conducted, but there have been many occasions when protests led the government to withdraw proposals or provide concessions to social groups. In 1984, for instance, President François Mitterrand withdrew his key initiative in the sphere of education, the Savary Law that denied public funds to Catholic schools, after more than a million protesters gathered to condemn it as an attack on "free" (Catholic) schools. Prime Minister Jacques Chirac abandoned the Devaquet education bill in 1986 in the wake of massive student protests; and Prime Minister Alain Juppé retreated from key elements of his austerity program in 1995 when a strike wave mobilized more than a million people throughout France. More recently, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin withdrew plans to reduce the pensions of public transport workers when a national strike drew wide public support in 1998; and he provided substantial subsidies to cover rising fuel costs to taxi drivers, ambulance staff, and truckers when these groups mounted disruptive demonstrations in 2000.

Why are protests of this sort such a prominent feature of French politics? Many factors can be cited. Demonstrations are frequent in France at least partly because they produce results. By launching disruptive protests, those concerned about an issue turn it into a problem of public order, to which a state generally has to respond. Why does the French state respond often enough with concessions, rather than repression, to encourage the practice? In some measure, the answer must be because this has become an accepted dimension of normal politics there. There is more tolerance, even outright support, among the public for this kind of civic engagement in France than in many nations. That tolerance has historical roots. It has become traditional for those with grievances to seek redress at the hands of the state and customary for the state to respond, at least on many occasions, sympathetically. What might be seen as outrageous elsewhere is treated as more normal in France. Thus, when a group of employees about to be made redundant at a chemical firm dumped sulfuric acid into a tributary of the Meuse river in 2000, the government promptly stepped in and arranged a more orderly retirement plan. When demonstrations on behalf of the unemployed were organized simultaneously in 78 French departments in early 1998, the government responded with a billion francs of additional aid (Royall 2000).

Of course, it is easier to draw public attention to one's cause in France than in many other nations because so much of that attention is concentrated on Paris, the seat of power over decision-making. And many French organizations, such as its trade unions, rely on periodic demonstrations to mobilize their members, who are otherwise tied only loosely to the organization. Protest has become an established component of the repertoire available to groups seeking to make their voices heard; and it is rendered unusually-effective by the level of public support that it commands. In virtually all of the cases outlined here, public opinion leaned toward the demonstrators despite the inconveniences they imposed on the populace.

New Trends and Prospects

Although the basic patterns of group-state relations in France are well entrenched, they are hardly immutable. Indeed, the last decades have seen shifts in the character of French policy-making that have destabilized many traditional policy communities (see Muller, 1992; Mény, 1989). Regional decentralization has played a role in this process. Shifts in power and funding from the central state to local authorities have created new opportunities for interest groups at the departmental or regional levels (see Portelli, 1996). As a result, many are strengthening their organizational presence there, giving rise to a revival of associational life in the regions.

The most important developments for interest-group activity, however, are the processes of European integration that render Brussels an increasingly-important center for decision-making. As a result, many of the policy communities that once centered on Paris and were tightly managed by top ministry officials have given way to looser issue networks of social interlocutors interested in such issues and spread across Europe. Groups that cannot find a sympathetic hearing in Paris may now seek one in Brussels. At the same time, many established groups, such as the FNSEA or Medef, must lobby EU officials and other member-states if they are to influence policy because the latter is now made largely through the negotiations in the European Union.

As a result, it is not unusual to find lobbyists for various interests operating in tandem with French officials to press the EU into a particular position. Indeed, some French officials, such as Edith Cresson when she served as Minister of European Affairs, have actively encouraged French groups to "*agir pour ne pas subir*" (act so as not to be acted upon) at the EU level. In the two years from 1988 to 1990, for example, the French employers confederation increased its staff in Brussels from seven to thirty-one (Schmidt, 1996, pp. 233-234). Domestic protest is also often used to strengthen the negotiating position of the French government at the international level. In the 1990s, for example, the FNSEA orchestrated a wave of protest demonstrations to enhance the credibility of the Balladur government's claim that France could not accept a proposed GATT agreement on agriculture negotiated by the European Commission without substantial concessions. In the end, both the EU and the United States conceded these points (Keeler, 1996).

Taken together, such shifts in the structure of political decision-making have begun to render lobbying in the American sense of the term a more prevalent and politically-acceptable practice in France. In Brussels, lobbying of this sort has become the norm, and it has inspired virtually all French industrial groups, public enterprises, and professional associations to enhance their lobbying capacities with effects that are also being felt in the domestic arena. Most such groups now employ parliamentary attachés, often former members of ministerial cabinets, to maintain contacts with elected officials (Suleiman, 1995, p. 231).

Endeavors of this sort are also becoming increasingly professionalized. Many groups now turn for assistance to public relations agencies that offer professional lobbying services. Some firms of this type existed as early as the 1960s, but they have proliferated since the 1980s to the point that they now have their own professional associations, Syntec (the *Syndicat des Agences Conseils en Relations Publiques*), founded in 1988, and the *Association Française des Conseils en Lobbying* (AFCL),

launched in 1991. Their efforts typically target both policy-makers and the media. A French firm seeking approval to build a canal, for instance, recently employed a consulting firm to respond to criticisms raised by the ecological movement. A merchants' association faced with union opposition to the opening of stores on Sunday hired a PR firm to make its case to the media, hoping to mobilize pressure for a change in policy (Lamarque, 1996, 126-129).

Although some citizens still view lobbying "as a shadowy profession associated with prevarication, influence trafficking, illicit interference, etc.", it is increasingly seen as a "normal" political activity in France (Lamarque 1996, p. 130). Suleiman (1995, 228-323) describes this development as a natural one in a context where the state has lost its "image of infallibility" in the face of economic crises and recurrent corruption scandals. If public officials can no longer be counted on to defend the "general interest" of the nation, efforts to advance the "particular interests" of society appear increasingly acceptable.

Moreover, the government continues to seek the cooperation of organized social interests in spheres where it faces the most intractable policy problems. One of those of special importance in recent years is that of social security. Important components of the French social security system have long been administered by tribunals on which the trade unions and employers confederation are prominently represented. When fiscal deficits appeared in the system during the 1980s, the government was initially tempted to take control of the system, given that it was devoting large, new resources to it. But, once it discovered in 1995 that reforms to the system were bound to be controversial, it pulled back from unilateral initiatives and began to seek ways of involving its 'social partners' more intensively in the reform process so as to secure their help in mobilizing public support.

This has not been easy. A backlash among its members against the government's attempt to impose a 35 hour work-week on employers forced Medef to take a strong stand against the government, and the French trade unions have difficulty forming a united front with regard to reforms that impose costs on some groups because they compete with each other for members and are often tempted to outbid one another for rank-and-file support. Conscious of the value of organizational support, however, the Jospin government made concerted efforts to find common ground among these groups. Despite opposition within his own party, for instance, Prime Minister Jospin deliberately endorsed an initiative, proposed by Medef and the CFDT, to use the surpluses in social security funds to improve the attractiveness of employment, in order to forestall threats by Medef to withdraw from the administration of the unemployment insurance system. French governments are seeking ways in which to work more closely with organized interest groups, and many leaders of those groups, such as Nicole Notat of the CFDT, are encouraging such initiatives.

In short, the traditional portrait of France as a nation without much associational life, governed by a state that pays little heed to organized interests no longer fits the realities of French politics. The French employers confederation remains less powerful vis-a-vis its members and the French unions remain weaker and more divided than their counterparts in many other European nations, but they are not the only organizations in French society. Beside them, a large number of other associations exist, which the government is actively, if judiciously, involving in the formation of public policy.

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Guide to Further Reading

There is now an extensive literature in English in interest groups, although the coverage of specific sectors is uneven. The best recent general study is that of Wilson (1987); see Keeler (1985) for a critique of Wilson's theoretical approach. Schmidt (1996) provides a wide-ranging analysis of business-state relations. Kesselman (1996) presents a brief but cogent analysis of the labor movement. Keeler (1987) explores relations between groups and the state in the agricultural sector. Suleiman (1987) discusses the interesting case of the notaries and their intimate ties to the state. Mazur (1995) examines the women's movement and its impact on public policy. Duyvendak (1995) is the best basic source on new social movements. Wilson (1994, 1996) challenges the conventional wisdom that France is uniquely prone to protest, and Worms (2001) assesses changes in associational life and 'social capital' in France. For continuing coverage of relevant developments in pressure politics, the journal, *French Politics and Society* published by Berghahn Books is an indispensable source.

Abbreviations

AFCL (Association Française des Conseils en Lobbying)
CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail)
CFTC (Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens)
CGC (Confédération Générale des Cadres)
CGPME (Confédération Générale des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises)
CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail)
CID-UNATI (Confédération Intersyndicale de Défense-Union Nationale des Artisans et Travailleurs Indépendants)
CNJA (Centre National des Jeunes Agriculteurs)
CNPF (Conseil National du Patronat Français)
CNSTP (Confédération Nationale Syndicale des Travailleurs-Paysans)
CSN (Conseil Supérieure du Notariat)
FEN (Fédération de l'Éducation Nationale)
FFA (Fédération Française de l'Agriculture)
FFSPN (Fédération Française des Sociétés de Protection de la Nature)
FNB (Fédération Nationale du Bâtiment)
FNSEA (Fédération Nationale des Syndicats d'Exploitants Agricoles)
FNSP (Fédération Nationale des Syndicats Paysans)
FO (Force Ouvrière)
FSU (Fédération Syndicale Unitaire)
MEDEF (Mouvement des Entreprises de France)
MLF (Mouvement de la Libération des Femmes)
MODEF (Mouvement de Défense des Exploitants Familiaux)
RASN (Réseau pour un Avenir Sans Nucléaire)
SE (Syndicat de l'Enseignement Supérieur)
SNES (Syndicat Nationale d'Enseignement Supérieur)
SNI (Syndicat Nationale des Instituteurs)
SNPMI (Syndicat Nationale de la Petite et Moyenne Industrie)