

Policy Connection



How do nonpolitical groups contribute to solving public policy problems?

DOMESTIC POLICY

The Policy Challenge

In Chapter 9, we examined political interest groups—that is, groups composed of individual members who share a common interest and seek to influence government decisions with regard to those interests. In that sense, we were focusing on a particular type of group or association found in our society and communities. In this Policy Connection we will broaden our perspective and consider the role that another type of group—civil society associations—plays in our lives, especially those groups that are organized to solve some of the same public problems we often expect government policies to address.

What Are Civil Society Associations?

The term “civil society associations,” or CSAs, is a label political scientists and sociologists apply to a wide array of organizations that people form to deal with a shared “collective problem.” Consider, for example, a group convened by neighbors who want to discuss the possibility of having a block party or picnic or the desire to form a local softball team for the kids. Or think of the type of association that forms when young couples pool their efforts to establish a local day-care cooperative. When tragedy strikes a local family, those same neighbors may come together to offer support and resources to get through tough times, just as a more intense and sustained effort might emerge after a natural disaster such as a flood or earthquake. In those neighborhoods characterized by strong ethnic or religious ties, associations already in place (e.g., the local

church group, the Masonic lodge) will be mobilized to action when the need arises.

American society has a long history of creating and relying on such CSAs. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat visiting the United States, famously observed that

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society. Wherever at the head of some new undertaking you see the government in France, or a man of rank in England, in the United States you will be sure to find an association.³²

These groups are neither private nor “public” in the sense of being part of government. Similarly, although some may operate as a business enterprise in terms of how they obtain (e.g., selling Girl Scout cookies) or spend their funds (e.g., purchasing uniforms for the local team), they do not seek economic gain (that is, profit) when they do so. And although they do not intend to influence government, CSAs are not antipolitical or indifferent to politics—after

all, they must obtain permission and some government support to close off the street from traffic to hold that block party.

In recent years, students of government have come to appreciate the role of CSAs in our society. Although they come in many forms, these associations share some common attributes that help us appreciate who they are and what they do. Generally, they have an organizational form—that is, there is some structure such as a committee or board of directors that can represent and speak for the members of the group. In almost all cases they are private, existing outside of any government structure, although some of their members may be people who hold government positions. As noted previously, they must often engage in what may seem like business transactions, but they are typically both legally and operationally nonprofit. In addition, they are self-governing and in control of the association's affairs and its decisions. And although they might employ staff to carry out the basic operations of the association, they frequently rely on the volunteerism of their membership.³³

The Policy Relevance of CSAs

How are these CSAs related to public policies in the United States? The answer is complex, because CSAs can have a dark side. Although we like to think that all local neighborhood community groups and similar organizations play a positive role in society and therefore pose few problems for government, some CSAs challenge the norms and standards of what is regarded as acceptable (i.e., legal) behavior. Thus, in our criminal justice system a considerable amount of public resources are devoted to fighting crimes that are rooted in organizations such as the Mafia, street gangs, and related associations that have their origins in CSA-like groups.³⁴

At the other extreme of the spectrum are CSAs that are devoted to doing “good works” on a large scale. Several national “fraternal” organizations are known for their commitment to raising money in support of health-care institutions and programs. The Shriners organization, for example, maintains twenty-two hospitals throughout the United States specializing in treatments for burn victims and individuals with severe spinal cord injuries.³⁵

Between those two extremes are CSAs that perform all forms of community service that might otherwise have to be provided through government programs and agencies. Perhaps the basic model for such organizations is the local volunteer fire department, which still plays an important role in many communities. As of 2014, it was estimated that 66 percent of all fire departments were “all volunteer,” whereas another 19 percent were mostly volunteer, and together they protected a little more than one-third of the U.S. population.³⁶

In other cases, CSAs receive limited government assistance in carrying out their good works. Over the past several decades a network of food banks has emerged in communities across the nation. Mostly local nonprofits, these food banks rely on private donations of food and money as well as a cadre of local volunteers. Occasionally they benefit from a federal program that buys food from farms when an oversupply of produce might destabilize prices, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture then makes that surplus available to the network of food bank organizations. When consumer demand is high, however, the food banks must rely on their own resources to fill the shelves in their effort to fight hunger in the United States.³⁷

There is yet another group of CSAs—mostly formally organized nonprofit organizations—that operate under contract or subsidies from local, state, and federal governments to provide a range of social services for the homeless, the elderly, and victims of abuse that would not otherwise be provided by public agencies or would be funded at minimal levels. Many are church-affiliated operations (e.g., by the Salvation Army or other “faith-based” organizations), but others are independent nonprofits funded at least in part by philanthropic organizations and maintained through donations if they do not receive public support.

Conclusion

Although we often stereotype interest groups as having political agendas, in this brief overview we have offered an alternative perspective. In recent years our knowledge and awareness of CSA groups has increased, especially as we begin to appreciate the important role they play in dealing with many of

our most perplexing social problems. At times, they fill a void in our policies and programs, especially in the realm of social policies relating to those in need. At other times, they are supplemental to ongoing public programs, as is the case in providing specialized health care where neither private nor public hospitals and clinics can meet the needs of patients. And in those instances where government policies and programs are in place, CSAs can step in to assist and complement those efforts—something we see happening in the face of major disasters, where CSAs such as local Red Cross chapters work hand-in-hand with emergency management teams.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The term “civil society associations” is a label political scientists and sociologists apply to a wide array of organizations that people form to deal with a shared “collective problem.” Define the term CSA and its relevance in the policy-making process.
2. Do you belong to a CSA? If so, discuss its mission and goals. If not, can you think of a CSA that you would belong to or try to organize? Explain.