



Book Review:

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Local Interests: Politics, Policy, and Interest Groups in US City Governments

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In examining the recurring success of certain political parties and groups, most political science scholars largely attribute these outcomes to factors at the national level. Even within studies of local governance, scholars frequently emphasize explanations that link electoral success to enduring dynamics, such as cultivated popularity, citizen engagement, and patron-client relationships within communities.

In *Local Interests: Politics, Policy, and Interest Groups in U.S. City Governments*, Sarah F. Anzia presents a pioneering exploration of the role of local interest groups in U.S. municipal governance. Diverging from traditional approaches, Anzia shifts the focus to the influence of interest groups on local policymaking. Using a “policy-focused approach,” she argues persuasively that the activities and alliances of local interest groups—spanning chambers of commerce, labor unions, and neighborhood associations—are fundamental to understanding the political dynamics of American cities. This work addresses a significant gap in the literature, broadening our understanding of political representation and governance at the local level, where policy intersects closely with the daily lives of citizens.

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Key Arguments and Theoretical Contributions

Based on this analysis, the central argument of the book underscores the influence of interest groups on local political interventions, highlighting the importance for public administration scholars to closely scrutinize the policies these groups prioritize. By examining the interests and partisan orientations of these groups, the analysis reveals not only surface-level relationships—such as formal interactions, regulatory engagements, and public participation—but also the deeper complexities of local politics, shaped by an interplay of group interests, intergroup dynamics, and business priorities. Anzia contends that focusing on these dimensions effectively captures the policy-centric nature of local politics.

The book's analytical framework is grounded in both political and sociological concepts, particularly attentive to the unique features of each municipality, including smaller institutional characteristics, nonpartisan elections, and diverse governance structures. Through a rigorously developed theoretical approach, the author departs from traditional interest group scholarship, shifting the focus from resource-based frameworks to an emphasis on policy objectives. This approach allows Anzia to analyze local issues—such as business tax incentives, housing, and public safety expenditures—through a lens that privileges the priorities of active interest groups over ideological divides. Such a perspective is invaluable for scholars aiming to understand political dynamics in settings where ideology and partisanship exist but do not dominate as primary arenas of contention.

Structure and Content Overview

The book's ten chapters build progressively on Anzia's framework and findings. Chapters 1 and 2 establish the foundation for her "policy-focused approach" to studying interest groups in U.S. local government. In Chapter 1, *Interest Groups and Public Policy in U.S. Local Government*, Anzia introduces key issues—including high housing costs, police misconduct, and budgetary constraints—to illustrate how these crises reveal underlying policy tensions shaped by interest groups. This foundation underscores the unique role of interest groups, which can surpass the impact of political parties. Chapter 2, *The Policy-Focused Approach to Studying Interest Groups*, details her theoretical framework, advocating that the influence of interest groups is best understood through specific policies they

endorse, contrasting with broader, less targeted studies in existing literature. Anzia argues that focusing on local issues such as housing and policing allows for a more precise analysis of interest group impact.

Chapters 3 through 5 delve into the activities of various interest groups in U.S. cities, showing that business associations, labor unions, and neighborhood groups often dominate local policy arenas, frequently deviating from national ideological divides. Chapter 3 highlights the engagement of these groups in local governance, supported by survey data from city officials indicating that business groups, unions, and neighborhood associations are often more active on key local issues than political parties. Chapter 4 examines specific groups, such as chambers of commerce, neighborhood associations, and unions, challenging the notion that business interests invariably prevail. Anzia reveals that group activity patterns shift across policy areas, particularly for land use and public safety. Chapter 5 turns to political parties' role in local politics, where Anzia finds that parties are often less dominant, functioning more as one interest group among others. Labor and business groups prioritize distinct issues, with local alignments diverging from national partisanship, as group activity is driven by policy rather than ideology.

The book's latter half (Chapters 6–10) presents an empirical analysis of interest group influence through case studies and survey data from municipal officials and candidates. Chapter 7, *Business and Growth*, examines economic development policy, showing that cities with active business groups tend to adopt pro-growth policies—such as tax incentives and zoning adjustments—that align with business priorities, even when these may diverge from residents' ideological preferences. In Chapter 8, Anzia analyzes public safety spending, noting that union influence, particularly from police and firefighter unions, frequently drives city budgets upward, highlighting unions' budgetary influence distinct from political party dynamics.

Chapter 9 extends the analysis to electoral contexts, exploring how local interest groups shape candidate positioning and election outcomes. Through examples of groups endorsing or financially supporting candidates aligned with their policy goals, Anzia demonstrates the significant impact these groups have on local political landscapes, beyond mere legislative lobbying. In Chapter 10, Anzia revisits the core question of "who governs" by underscoring the context-dependent influence of interest groups in U.S. local politics. Drawing on Robert Dahl's pluralist theory, she argues that power

in local governance is decentralized and varies by policy domain, with different groups emerging as dominant players across areas such as housing, economic development, and public safety.

Strengths and Contributions

Anzia's methodological rigor is one of the book's most commendable strengths. By leveraging survey data and case studies across a diverse set of municipalities, she offers a rare quantitative glimpse into local political structures. Her findings have profound implications for the study of political representation. While national politics is often studied through the lens of partisan alignment, Anzia demonstrates that local politics requires a distinct theoretical and empirical approach.

This book also challenges long-held assumptions in the study of local governance. Anzia reveals that municipal policies are not as insulated from political conflict as often assumed. Instead, the relative lack of open conflict in local governance, compared to national politics, obscures a more subtle, yet powerful, influence by organized groups. This insight is invaluable for researchers interested in local-level policymaking in diverse contexts, as it suggests that interest group dynamics might similarly shape policies in cities outside the U.S., albeit through different cultural and institutional frameworks.

Criticisms and Limitations

While *Local Interests* is groundbreaking, a few limitations merit discussion. The book's exclusive focus on U.S. cities may limit the generalizability of its findings, particularly in countries with different local governance structures. Anzia acknowledges this limitation, yet comparative insights could have further enriched the analysis, especially considering the variations in urban governance across international contexts.

Moreover, the book's reliance on survey data introduces potential issues of subjectivity, particularly in chapters where the influence of interest groups is assessed through self-reported data from local officials. While this approach is necessary given the lack of formal data on local lobbying, it may underrepresent less visible forms of interest group activity that indirectly impact policy.

Lessons for Broader Research in Local Governance

Local Interests offers valuable insights for scholars of local governance globally. The book's focus on policy over partisanship suggests that analyzing municipal policy through the lens of interest group influence could reveal overlooked layers of power and influence, even in contexts where partisanship plays a lesser role in local politics. Anzia's approach encourages political scientists to reassess assumptions about representation and governance by examining how local policy areas attract unique interest alignments that diverge from those at the national level.

For scholars of Thai politics, Anzia's work underscores the importance of investigating how business associations, neighborhood groups, and unions may similarly shape local policies outside of traditional partisan conflicts. Her findings on the subtle influence of U.S. interest groups could inspire research on the ways Thai local interest groups influence governance through less visible but impactful means, thereby shaping public policy in significant ways.

Conclusion

Local Interests is a significant contribution to political science and the study of local governance. By focusing on policy outcomes rather than ideological divisions, Anzia offers a comprehensive framework for examining the actual extent of interest group influence in municipal politics. Her book is poised to become an essential reference for scholars in local governance, public administration, and political representation, establishing a new standard for analyzing interest groups within local political landscapes.