Conflict of Interests

Does the wrangling of interest groups corrupt politics—or constitute it?

by Nicholas Lemann, New Yorker, August 11, 2008

In a year saturated with political conversation, can there be any topic that has not yet been discussed? Well, here’s one: 2008 is the centenary of a curious and mesmerizing book that was long considered the most important study of politics and society ever produced by an American—“The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures,” by Arthur Fisher Bentley. The reason its big anniversary hasn’t been celebrated is that “The Process of Government” is an ex-classic, now sunk into obscurity. The reason it should be celebrated is not just that it deserved its former place in the canon but also that it is uncannily relevant to this Presidential election.

Arthur Bentley was the son of a Midwestern banker. He was born in 1870 in Freeport, Illinois, graduated from high school in Grand Island, Nebraska, and, after working briefly for his father, attended Johns Hopkins, which was then making itself into one of the first American research universities, on the German model. After graduation, he went to the University of Berlin and studied with Georg Simmel and other late-nineteenth-century giants of political theory. The work he did there became the basis for a Ph.D. from Hopkins.

Bentley took a lectureship at the University of Chicago, but, rather than pursuing the career for which he had formally prepared himself, he went to work as a newspaperman, mostly at the Chicago Times-Herald. Ten years or so into his newspaper days, Bentley began using his spare time to write “The Process of Government,” a long, erudite theoretical work, tacitly buttressed by a newspaperman’s intense familiarity with the day-to-day public life of a bumptious big city.

The University of Chicago Press brought out “The Process of Government” in 1908, to almost no notice. In 1911, Bentley quit Chicago and newspapering and moved to the small town of Paoli, Indiana, where he remained until his death, in 1957. He produced a series of increasingly abstruse books (sample title: “Linguistic Analysis of Mathematics”), and his renown grew steadily. His closest intellectual companion was John Dewey—a published collection of their correspondence runs to more than seven hundred pages—but Bentley’s papers, at Indiana University, also contain letters sent to him over the years by, among many others, Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann, Sidney Hook, Estes Kefauver, and B. F. Skinner.

“The Process of Government” is a hedgehog of a book. Its point—relentlessly hammered home—can be stated quite simply: All politics and all government are the result of the activities of groups. Any other attempt to explain politics and government is doomed to failure. It was, in his day as in ours, a wildly contrarian position. Bentley was writing “The Process of Government” at the height of the Progressive Era, when educated,
prosperous, high-minded people believed overwhelmingly in “reform” and “good
government,” and took interest groups to be the enemy of these goals. The more populist
Progressives liked having the people as a whole decide things by direct vote; the more
élitist Progressives wanted to give authority to experts. But Bentley, who seems to have
shared the Progressives’ goal of using government to curb the power of big business,
rejected such procedural tenets. In Chicago terms, Bentley was the rare Progressive
intellectual who believed, in effect, that the machine had a more accurate understanding
of how politics worked—how it always and necessarily worked—than the lakefront
liberals did.

Bentley’s reputation soared in the years after the Second World War, and there’s a
reason. His presentation of politics as a never-ending, small-bore struggle for advantage
among constantly shifting coalitions of interest groups, which appalled the Progressives,
was appealing in the wake of Hitler and Stalin. Big ideas about the collective good had
come to seem scary—the prelude to mass murder. Bentley spent the last years of his life
alongside Tocqueville and the Federalist Papers.

But pluralism—the name for Bentley’s theory of politics—has always been good for
starting an argument. The standard objections are that pluralism gives too little weight to
the power of ideas and of social and economic forces, and that it leaves no room for
morality. (Pluralism’s equivalent in foreign relations is realism, which strikes people who
do n’t like it as having the same flaws.) What if there actually is such a thing as a policy
that’s right on the merits? Shouldn’t we find a way to make sure that it’s enacted, instead
of having to trust in the messy workings of the political marketplace? If politics worked
the way Bentley thought it did, wouldn’t the richer interest groups buy themselves
disproportionate political power? To a lot of people, pluralism sounded like pessimism. It
was during the nineteen-sixties, when reform was again in the air and impatience with
traditional forms of politics was on the rise, that “The Process of Government” began to
fall out of favor.

Bentley’s insights are almost entirely missing from political discussion these days. Only
in the realm of foreign policy is it permissible even to use the word “interests” in a
positive way, and then they must be vital national interests. In domestic policy, interest
groups (and particularly those in that ill-defined but malign category known as special-
interest groups) are always the bad guys. So are their representatives in Washington, the
lobbyists. We’re inclined to think that the wheedling of interest groups—tree-hugging
anti-free-traders, the Sugar Association, AIPAC—distorts politics. (For Bentley, the
workings of interest groups—in interaction with one another—constitute politics.) When
a politician speaks at an interest group’s convention, we want to hear that he has
somehow challenged or confronted the group, rather than “pandered” to it. Partisanship is
bad, and “partisan bickering,” which by Bentley’s lights would count as a basic
description of politics, is even worse. To an unusual extent, our Presidential candidates
this year got where they are by presenting themselves as reformers, as champions of the
transcendent public interest—as the enemies of Washington deal-making-as-usual. For
Bentley, there was no such thing as a transcendent public interest, and no politics that
didn’t involve deal-making, disguised or not.
Closer attention to Bentley would help us understand why, as politicians succeed, they become more obviously attentive to interest groups, more obviously engaged in bargain and compromise. Hillary Clinton was this year’s version of the pandering, old-politics candidate, a role that proved more appealing the longer the primary season went on. But when she was a new face in Washington, back in 1993, her identity was pretty much the opposite. Both John McCain and Barack Obama have disappointed some of their early, ardent supporters by modifying many of their positions to accommodate the established and organized interests of their parties. Much of the conversation about the Presidential election over the summer has been about how censorious we should be about their “flip-flops.”

Indeed, these days we’re inclined to think of interest groups as political interlopers, whose importance we hope to minimize, rather than as the entirety of politics. Party machines are supposedly moribund, and the organizational fabric of American society severely deteriorated. Politicians are forced to reach out to us as atomized individuals, via messages beamed into our heads through the media of mass communication, aren’t they? Well, maybe not. Maybe Obama’s and McCain’s mutating behavior is evidence that Bentley was on to something.

The heart of “The Process of Government” is a series of dyspeptic rejections of other explanations of how politics works. If Bentley’s strictures were applied today, just about everybody who makes a living explaining American politics (practitioners of what Bentley called “that particular form of activity which consists in the moving of the larynx or the pushing of a pencil”) would be out of business. Under Bentley’s rules, you can’t talk about public opinion, because there is no such thing as “the public” (there are only groups) and opinions don’t matter, only actions do. Abstractions like “the people” and “popular will” have no real content, either. “The public interest” is a useless concept, he says, because “there is nothing which is best literally for the whole people.” You can’t talk about a society as a whole having a collective soul, or about events being moved by the “spirit of the age” or the “Zeitgeist” or by feelings, individual or collective. You can’t talk about race or other biological factors (Bentley was almost alone among Progressive Era intellectuals in dismissing eugenics as silly) or about national character: it doesn’t matter what people are, it only matters what they do. You can talk about Presidents, parties, and other major political actors, but only if you understand them chiefly as mediums through which interest groups operate. Bentley took that pretty far: he wrote that the name of Theodore Roosevelt, who was President when “The Process of Government” was published, “does not mean to us, when we hear it, so much bone and blood, but a certain number of millions of American citizens tending in certain directions.” You can’t talk about morality as a force in politics, because such talk is almost always a cover for somebody’s interest. You can’t talk about progress, only about the waxing and waning of the power of different groups. You can’t talk about ideals—especially the ideals of the Founders of the United States, who represented just another collection of interest groups—as affecting the course of events. Here’s a typically sarcastic passage on that subject:

Let the stump speaker appear at the old-fashioned Fourth of July celebration. What does he tell us? Our forefathers who created this nation were led by a great ideal of liberty. It
was their highest good. Without it they would never have made this land what it is. Also
they sought independence. Had they not suffered and labored many long hard years to
breathe the air of freedom, they never would have been “free.” . . . After which, speaker
and hearers alike go back to the same old round of buying and selling, laboring and
advantage-seeking. Did the speech change their methods of dealing with their fellows,
privately or publicly? Did it move the country forward toward anything? Did the renewed
assent of all its hearers to its principles have any such results?

For Bentley, every political force that matters is an interest group, regardless of whether
it cops to the charge. States and cities are “locality groups,” the legal system is a
collection of “law groups,” income categories are “wealth groups,” devoted followers of
a popular politician are “personality groups”; interest groups lie at the heart of
monarchies and dictatorships as well as of democracies. “When the groups are adequately
stated, everything is stated,” Bentley declares. “When I say everything I mean
everything.”

Bentley generally divides interest groups into two categories: organization groups
(contemporary instances would include the American Association of Retired Persons, the
National Association of Broadcasters, and the National Council of La Raza) and
discussion, or “talk,” groups. Discussion groups encompass all those who claim to
represent the public interest or a good cause— journalists, reformers, activists,
humanitarians, policy analysts—and, in Bentley’s view, they matter far less than we
think. He saw “an enormous overvaluation of the forms of activity which appear in
words.” Besides, anyone who comes into public life claiming not to have an interest is
either deluded or deceitful.

At first, this all sounds shockingly cynical and depressing. We deeply want politics to
have good guys and bad guys, good policies and bad policies. We want inviolable
principles, like human rights, democracy, the rule of law, or carbon neutrality. Yet
Bentley, who helped organize Robert La Follette’s 1924 Progressive Party Presidential
campaign in Indiana, didn’t consider pluralism to be the stuff of defeatism; if anything, it
was a call to action. People get involved in politics to get things that they want, which
may or may not entail economic advantage. People matter politically only as members of
groups, and groups matter only when they act, but political life is complicated: nobody is
a member of only one interest group, and no interest group stands apart from other groups
and behaves in a single, consistent way. Alliances are constantly shifting. No realm of
government is immune to interest-group pressures, including the judiciary. (Liberals who,
in the sixties and seventies, thought they could counteract the power of big business with
institutions beholden only to the “public interest”—whether regulatory agencies or the
courts—discovered that conservatives were capable of capturing any such apparatus.)
The net result, according to Bentley, is this: “Intelligent actions, emotional actions, linked
actions, trains of action, planned actions, plotted actions, scheming, experimenting,
persisting, exhorting, compelling, mastering, struggling, co-operating—such activities by
the thousand we find going on around us in populations among which we are placed.”

If you spend any time in Washington, Bentley’s account helps explain the nagging sense
that the official conversation about American politics doesn’t match the reality. Just
about everything in politics that is too mundane to be part of that conversation operates,
quite obviously, by the logic of pluralism—groups struggle against other groups and finally make deals, through politicians and agencies and courts—and, in the end, the higher-profile parts of politics inevitably fall prey to the tug of pluralism, too. That’s why McCain and Obama have to keep explaining away their connections to lobbyists and why they have to keep recalibrating their positions on the big issues. Like Theodore Roosevelt, they may be reformers, but they stand at the head of armies of interest groups that they must tend to. A politician who says that he wants to run for high office so that he can clean up the mess in Washington and change the old way of doing things is, in Bentley’s book, really saying that he’d like to adjust the correlation of forces among interest groups, bringing some into greater positions of power, and relegating others to lesser positions. To assert this is not necessarily to be despairing about politics. It merely means that if, for example, you want to understand Obama’s remarkable rise, you will want to know less about his passion to get beyond partisanship and more about whom his campaign mobilized to come to all those state caucuses and to make all those Internet donations, and what those groups’ political aspirations are. If that’s being cynical, then it’s cynical to try to understand the civil-rights era as having been propelled by a movement that African-Americans organized to make life better for themselves, rather than by a miraculous increase in the appeal of racial equality to the nation as a whole.

“The Process of Government” can be annoying—in its obsessive repetition of its main theme, in its lack of interest in empirical evidence—and yet it’s one of those rare books which change the way you look at the world. Like a tune that you can’t get out of your head, it’s always playing in the background. Most of what is said and written about American politics, which stipulates that, although the politics we have may be awful, a radiant, transcendentally good politics is a genuine possibility, becomes hard to take altogether seriously.

A case in point is “The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule,” by Thomas Frank (Metropolitan; $25), the successor to “What’s the Matter with Kansas?,” which he published four years ago, to wide acclaim from liberals. In both books, Frank starts from the premise that if conservatives are in the saddle in Washington it must be the result of trickery or connivance, since people who aren’t rich have no rational reason to vote Republican. “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” presented red-state voters as having been gullied into voting against their real economic interests by means of dubious cultural appeals. When Obama had to spend a couple of weeks last spring backing away from his explanation of why small-town Pennsylvanians weren’t voting for him (“Bittergate”), it looked as if he’d got into trouble for channelling Thomas Frank.

“The Wrecking Crew” offers another account of conservatives’ political power: they have built a mighty lobbying apparatus that has taken over Washington and disabled the normal workings of the federal government. Although Frank’s timing could be better—his book dwells psychically in the heyday of Tom DeLay and Jack Abramoff, but they’ve fallen, the Democrats control both houses of Congress, and Washington is expecting a big liberal sweep in November—he has hold of something real. As Reaganism became the dominant strain in the Republican Party, a new group of politicians and operatives, many of them products of thelegendarily rough-playing College Republicans (Abramoff, Lee Atwater, Karl Rove, Grover Norquist), adopted as their grand strategy the task of systematically disabling the Democratic Party’s structures of support, so as to achieve a
lasting Republican political order. This was no secret: they loved talking about it to anyone who would listen. Frank himself has spent time with Norquist, getting briefed on the plan over lunch at the Palm. The idea was that the Republicans would relentlessly peck away at unions and tort lawyers until the Democrats’ ability to sustain themselves was irreparably harmed.

Frank regards this project as having been strikingly successful. Wherever he looks, he finds evidence of this, especially in the downtown corridors of Washington where lobbyists have their offices and in the Virginia suburbs where prosperous Republicans live. Frank is a little like an anti-pornography crusader in his intense fascination with the thing that horrifies him—his Washington is full of mansions, fine wines, expensive suits, cigars, and wood panelling. Evoking the lobbyist as a type, he writes, “You can spot him in the field by his perfectly fitted thousand-dollar suits, usually blue; his strangely dainty shoes; his shirts, which often come in pink or blue with white collars and cuffs, the latter of which display cufflinks of the large and shiny variety; his vivid, shimmering ties, these days preferably in orange or lavender; his perfect haircut; his perfect tan; the tiny flag attesting to his perfect patriotism on his perfect lapel.”

These are, in Frank’s account, the objective correlative of the underlying problem: because conservatives, for economic and ideological reasons, don’t want government to work, they have arranged for it not to be able to work. A crippled government removes the best reason for people to vote for liberals, so the conservatives become ever stronger. As he puts it, conservatism “seems actively to want an inferior product.” Frank’s theory isn’t undermined when Democrats win, because, in his view, they consort with many of the same conservative interest groups that Republicans do. Bill Clinton is a favorite negative example of Frank’s, and no one should be surprised if Barack Obama soon becomes another.

Washington, as Frank sees it, plays host to a simple clash of interests: money and business on one side, the people on the other. “The Wrecking Crew” is written in a voice of high derision—much more so than the sincere, bewildered “What’s the Matter with Kansas?”—and it can be good, spirited fun. Frank captures a quality of exuberant bullying in those of his conservative subjects he knows well enough to identify individually, rather than categorically. He registers their self-justifying certainty that the other side is playing as rough as they are, and the soaring rhetoric about evil and freedom that they use to discuss even trivial matters.

“The Wrecking Crew” is what Arthur Bentley would call a discussion-group activity, meant to fire up the troops. It is reportorially and intellectually imprecise. How many lobbyists are there in Washington, exactly? By what yardstick did Frank conclude that we are undergoing “the greatest wave of political corruption in living memory”? What would be the sign that conservatives no longer rule, if Democrats’ controlling the political apparatus doesn’t count? Frank rarely mentions Democratic lobbyists or interest groups and glosses over the complexity in the coalitions that form the two parties: “corporations” and “conservatives” seem always to operate in perfect concert, on the Republican side. “Lobbying brings a constant pressure in a single direction,” he writes. An illustrative example is one that he offers in passing: “There was the two-day get-together between House Republicans and media company CEOs, after which the various broadcasters and
publishers were asked to replace their Democratic lobbyists with Republicans; the Telecommunications Act of 1996, almost certainly written by industry lobbyists, followed soon afterward, deregulating the airwaves and trailing clouds of glorious profits for the media companies.” You’d never guess from this that the Telecom Act pitted one group of telephone companies and their lobbyists against another group of telephone companies and their lobbyists—or that business-versus-business battles of this kind go on constantly in Washington.

Arthur Bentley, a man untroubled by insecurity, treated Karl Marx as a promising fellow in the few pages devoted to him in “The Process of Government”—at least Marx saw politics in terms of groups struggling against each other—but one whose work did not, in the end, live up to its potential. Marx insisted on excessively large, unitary groups, like the proletariat, and then, even worse, claimed that under an ideal form of government they would disappear. Frank, viewed from a pluralist point of view, has the same problem. He tends to characterize the Republicans and the Democrats as representing business and workers, period, rather than as ever-mutating coalitions of groups with differing motives—business mainly but not entirely on the Republican side, unions mainly but not entirely on the Democratic side, and many groups whose interests are not primarily economic divided between the two. Political issues, for him, usually boil down to labor-management disputes; government failures are the consequences of market ideology and the profit motive. The troubles of the American venture in Iraq, for example, are the result of “extreme privatization” and the attempt to create a “libertarian utopia.” The horrifyingly slow pace of rescue and recovery in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina can also be ascribed to the Bush Administration’s devotion to cronyism and privatization. Nor does Frank’s analysis adequately explore the possibility that Republicans pay a political price when they fail to govern competently, even though that seems to explain the way elections have been going since 2006.

It’s tempting to see Frank as a neo-Marxist, because he rarely misses an opportunity to bash capitalism. He writes, “Left unconstrained by other forces, the free-market system is one of the most restless, destructive arrangements ever contrived—tearing down and building up, obsoleting last year’s fashions and praising this year’s, driving up prices and bidding down wages, moving populations willy-nilly about the map, and scheming always to reduce the arts and sciences to sycophancy.” Really, though, Frank is closer to being an old-fashioned mugwump-style Progressive. He believes that liberals, once in power, will not merely transfer economic resources from business to working people but will tend to the public interest, to good government. Underneath all the fun Frank has with lobbyists and their dainty shoes, the heart of his book is the idea that, just as conservatives actually want government to be corrupt and incompetent, liberals have an equally strong interest in making government work properly. By his lights, if you want bad government you should vote Republican, and if you want good government you should vote Democratic.

Yet even in a world without conservatives there would be no general agreement about how government should handle anything truly important. The Clinton Administration pushed through the North American Free Trade Agreement amid gusts of public-interest rhetoric—but Frank no doubt located the public interest on the other side. What about the much hated “earmarks” and “pork-barrel projects” that voters seem to want legislators to
get for their districts—are they bad government, from the point of view of the folks back home? As Arthur Bentley pointed out, no political actor ever fails to argue that his interest is the public interest. Frank, who, at the end of “The Wrecking Crew,” seems nostalgic for the great liberal historian Richard Hofstadter, would do well to reread Hofstadter’s “The Age of Reform.” Hofstadter persuasively portrays the anti-special-interest reformers of the Progressive Era as an interest group themselves, an educated and refined élite disadvantaged by the rise of industrial capitalism in the late nineteenth century. Frank, given to wistful and self-mocking riffs on how little he matters in Washington compared with the conservative operatives he meets at parties, can sound that way himself.

Just before the table of contents in “The Process of Government,” on a page all alone, is the avowal “This book is an attempt to fashion a tool.” A century later, the tool that Arthur Bentley was attempting to fashion retains its utility, and not merely for understanding the American political system. (Those who believed in 2003 that Iraqi politics was best understood as a struggle between democracy and dictatorship, rather than as a struggle among groups, could have learned from him.) Bentley may have pressed his arguments too far, but, given our tendency to dismiss interest groups as the serpents in the political Eden that the Founders created, “The Process of Government” serves as an indispensable corrective.

When the reputation of Bentley’s masterpiece was at its peak, it was not just because he had fashioned a useful tool, of course; it was because many people saw pluralism as being not only accurate but attractive. To regain that perspective today requires an even greater undoing of deeply ingrained habits of thought. Pluralism, in the tradition of Bentley, requires that one see one’s own political passions, and those of such unimpeachable actors as winners of the Nobel Peace Prize and members of the Concord Coalition, as representing something other than the promptings of pure justice. That does not come naturally. One has to see that sincere talk of the public interest and the general good can be dangerous tools in the hands of people one disagrees with, if not in one’s own. (If you’re a liberal, reread President Bush’s second inaugural address, a grandiose exercise in public-interest rhetoric meant to lay the groundwork for waging the war on terror and privatizing Social Security.) One has to get over the habit of assuming that “interests,” and, worse, lobbying and corruption, are the province only of one’s political opponents, and not one’s allies. Pluralism means dialling down the moral stature that we attach to universalist arguments, and dialling up the moral stature of particularism.

Still, the pluralist vision does admit an element of justice. In any political system that gives people the freedom to organize and vote—and even, historically, in many systems that don’t—the logic of pluralism explains why those who do the hard, quotidian work of politics will generally have more influence than those whose political participation is confined to writing, thinking, filing lawsuits, writing regulations, and spending money on media buys. In Bentley’s scheme, that’s all interest-group activity, but of the weaker “talk” (instead of the stronger “organization”) variety. Throughout American history, political organizing has been the means that outsiders—immigrants, farmers, African-Americans in the Reconstruction South, and, more recently, netroots activists on the left and evangelicals on the right—use to gain advantage against the more talk-oriented élites, who regard their political aims as corruption or special pleading. On
the last page of “The Wrecking Crew,” Frank finally mentions what, from a pluralist perspective, would be the first order of business if you believe as passionately as he does that business-controlled conservative lobbyists are running Washington into the ground: organizing a political opposition. To be truly effective, though, such an opposition would have to muster its own army of Washington lobbyists. It’s tempting to think that just over the horizon lies a procedural reform that will lead to the lasting triumph of what looks to you like good government. But the truth is that the only way to defeat one set of interests is with another set of interests.
Conflict of interest asks whether potential bias is risked in actions, judgment, and/or decision-making in an entity or individual's vested interests. A conflict of interest occurs when an entity or individual becomes unreliable because of a clash between personal (or self-serving) interests and professional duties or responsibilities. A conflict of interest occurs when an entity or individual becomes unreliable because of a clash between personal (or self-serving) interests and professional duties or responsibilities. Conflict of interest meaning: 1. a situation in which someone’s private interests are opposed to that person’s responsibilities. Learn more. (Definition of conflict of interest from the Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary © Cambridge University Press).

Conflict of interest | Business English. Conflict of interest defined and explained with examples. Conflict of Interest is a situation in which a professional might exploit his professional capacity for his own benefit. For example, a conflict of interest would arise if one law firm tried to represent both parties in a divorce case.