Interest Groups and the Softwood-Lumber Dispute

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INTRODUCTION

Canada and the United States, neighbors and longtime trading partners, continue in one of the world’s largest trade disputes: the battle over softwood lumber. Traditionally, understanding of the dispute relies on economic analysis and trade policy research. Interest group theory provides another framework for generating useful insights into the ongoing situation. By using a form of interest group taxonomy to categorize the participating interest groups and associations, we find difficult tradeoffs and unexpected coalitions occurring throughout the lumber dispute as groups attempt to meet the needs of their members while influencing trade policy.

The softwood lumber dispute between Canada and the U.S. shows the participating interest groups falling into four distinct categories: single-issue, multi-issue, business and government. Single-issue groups focus on the policy goals specific to the ongoing lumber dispute. Multi-issue groups have multiple goals and engage in the lumber dispute as part of advancing a broader agenda of objectives. Business groups rely on the aims and objectives of individual business members, using policy negotiations as business tools. Government actors pursue objectives that combine the goals of the interest and business groups within their country.

What can interest group taxonomy tell us? The objectives of groups participating in the U.S. Canadian lumber dispute exceeded the narrow issue of tariffs. While single-issue groups followed the purist goal of influencing policy outcomes, most groups balanced multiple goals. Thus, depending on their primary goals, groups placed varying importance on influencing the public policy of Canadian softwood lumber.

When assessing group effectiveness in influencing lumber policy, the taxonomy categorizes participants along logical lines. Single-issue groups demonstrate marked focus and success in communicating and implementing efforts to affect policy change. Multi-issue groups offered proposals and support for the lumber dispute; the needs of their members did not require total dedication to a single issue. Businesses and trade associations took a pragmatic approach, balancing operational needs and financial performance with the potential policy changes. Government officials and agencies acted, primarily, as arbiters, helping to shape and implement policy compromises.

Categorizing participants for disparate policy disputes can help us understand policy creation. Interest group theory helps us see how policies change and why, providing insight into who may be the winners and losers and why. This helps us as researchers, and as active citizens seeking to effectively influence policy outcomes.

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LITERATURE CITED


