

National Organization of Women (NOW) in Defense of Women's Rights in America

Irina BAKHTADZE*

Abstract

“In no country of the world has the principle of associations been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objectives than in America.” Alexis de Tocqueville, 1830

Interest groups in the United States play one of the most significant roles in American political life. The paper gives a brief analysis of the aims, goals and achievements of one of the widely acknowledged women associations - The National Organization for Women (NOW). The article intends to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Organization and focuses on the strategy and tactics used by the organization to encourage wide section of population actively participate in solution of the most acute political and social problems. In the result of great efforts taken by the organization, the number of females appointed in the leading government positions has been significantly increased. Women have become more self-confident, successful and independent. The experience of American interest groups in general and particularly NOW is unique and it should be carefully studied and shared by the non governmental organizations of the “young democratic” countries, like Georgia.

Keywords: Interest groups, non-governmental organizations, National Organization of Women, gender equality, women's rights

The role of interest groups in America is to deliver an incredible array of citizens' interests to Washington. An interest group (IG) is an organized body of individuals who share the same political goals and try to influence public policy decisions.

Political Scientists classify interest groups on the basis of the interests they pursue. Functional interest groups refer to the economic and social problems. There are many kinds of advocacy groups, including labour unions, business groups, gender, age, religious, and ethnic groups, public interest groups, and professional associations. The analysis showed that the function of a pressure group in American politics is widely accepted by the society at large, but at the same time it arises some controversy. Do they contribute, or in some cases hinder democratic development? Hundreds of non-governmental associations struggle to lobby the issues they consider most vital in parliament and make demands on the government. Are those issues equally acceptable for the majority, or only for a small fraction of population? The opinions of different political theorists' differ significantly on this subject. Does American society benefit from the results of a long and persistent struggle interest groups carry out in order to achieve their goals?

The present article tries to address above mentioned problem based on the analysis of the aims, goals and achievements of one of the widely acknowledged women association in the US -The National Organization for

Women (NOW). The present paper intends to demonstrate the effectiveness of the interest group and analyze its tangible results. What major issues does it address? Are the aims and goals of National Organization of Women shared by all citizens of US? How important is the size of the organization? Has NOW's policy affected wide section of population?

Views of critics vary on the role and function of IGs in America. Some believe it is a true democratic institution giving opportunity to the society to make demands on the government; others argue that only dominant well-off interest groups are successful, and those who pay money to the lobbyists enjoy much greater influence. It is also true that only very well-organized, motivated, persistent groups which reflect the needs of large social groups and are supported by large number of people are able to achieve their goals. The scope of activity of numerous IGs in America embraces virtually all problems the country and the people face. Protection of free expression is guaranteed to people by the Constitution of the United States which gives them rights to assembly peacefully, express their opinion freely and to petition government. These rights have been successfully exercised for centuries by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), associations, and unions. As a result, interest groups have developed in terms of their form, capacity, role, and function. Over the last century, the First Amendment has become the vehicle for more extensive

* An associate professor of the Faculty of Humanities at International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia. teacherbakhtadze@gmail.com

Constitutional interpretations. In 1925, the Supreme Court ruled that state governments must respect First Amendment Rights. In *Gitlow v. New York*, the Supreme Court, which relied on the First and Fourteenth Amendments, announced that freedom of speech and press were fundamental personal rights and liberties protected by the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment from impairment by the states.

Since the 1960s, the proportion of private organizations' participation in politics has increased dramatically. Though, as some theories argue, interest groups are becoming too comfortable with the government bodies. The supporters of this opinion rely on the fact that for over a century public organizations have become more powerful due to support from local governments, agencies and congressional subcommittees (Edwards, et al. 2006, p. 304). American government firmly believes that dissimilar, often controversial opinions should not only be declared, but also dully responded and appeased by the current government for the benefit of all people. Open declaration of problematic issues by interest groups is considered to be the most efficient way of maintaining peaceful and sustainable development of the country.

Three important theories most popular at present in the US are: pluralist, elite and hyperpluralist (Edwards, et al. 2006, p.301). Pluralist theories argue that an interest group activity brings representation to all, and a group is a key link between people and government. Wide range of society's interests is reflected by vast diversity of IGs. In this view, government should not interfere with the rise of voluntarily associations as it is an indispensable part of the democratic process - society controlling government. Groups compete and fight in most cases observing the rules, and try to affect public policy by one means or another. American history is full of stories when unpopular and marginalized groups' demands have stayed unheard by the government, but as they united and built up powerful groups, they managed to direct public policy. While size of the group is important to achieve success, pluralists argue that other factors, such as unity or coherence of the membership can compensate size in influence.

The elite theory supporters' view is sceptical of pluralism. The elite theory holds that the interests of the poor, minorities, immigrants, unorganized workers are not effectively represented by interest groups. Only those with large resources who can adapt to the powerful corporate and professional elites that control government get access and influence. On the whole, groups could win only minor policy battles, while the largest corporations influence the most important political decisions. Hyperpluralists' major criticism is that the government which seeks to please every group results in contradictory and confusing policy. (Edwards, et al. 2006, p. 304).

In general, interest groups have become more plenti-

ful and influential in recent decades. The IGs in America differ from the non-governmental organizations acting in other democratic countries. What makes American Interest groups powerful, how do they maintain effectiveness in their activities? Important factors determining whether a group of people will be able to organize successfully are: the size of the group, significance of the issue, and incentives that collective group action provides. The most significant resources of a group are: members, lobbyists, and money, including funds that can be contributed to political candidates. "The Campaign Finance Reform Law of 1973" made it legal for corporations, as well as for labor unions to form Political Action Committees (PACs) enabling them to make campaign contributions. Interest groups vary widely in type, mission, organization, size, and tactics. Most interest groups have a middle-class or upper-class biases. Members of interest groups are generally fairly well aware of the problems and are consistent in their struggle. Leaders are usually from a higher social class than other group members. Strong leadership and proven strategy make the group powerful. Effective communicators, charismatic leaders are able to influence public opinion and gain benefit in the political process. This is referred as the Martin Luther King phenomenon. Whatever is the difference between the issues of interest groups, all consider themselves devoted to the public welfare.

The National Organization for Women (NOW)

The National Organization for Women (NOW) is the largest organization of feminist activists in the United States. It has more than 500,000 contributing members and more than 550 local and campus affiliates in all 50 states and in District of Columbia. NOW, founded in 1966, has been fighting for equality for all women to bring women into full participation in society—sharing equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities with men. The Statement of Purpose adopted at the organizing conference in Washington, D.C., October 29, declares that "a new movement is toward true equality for all women in America, and toward a fully equal partnership of the sexes." (www.org/about.html). The six core issues that NOW addresses are: abortion rights/reproductive issues, violence against women, constitutional equality, promoting diversity/ending racism, lesbian rights and economic justice.

The national level of the organization is led by the national Board of Directors and by National Issues Committees. These national leaders are responsible for implementing policy as formulated by the annual National Conference, for coordinating national actions and providing membership services. NOW has a solid reputation of a leading grassroots feminist organization in the US. The power of NOW is its large membership that provides an organization with a strong financial base (Annual member-

ship fee is \$35-40). (www.now.org). Money is spent on: lobbyists, television advertisements, networking, training programs, website design that help the interest group deliver major issues to society and politicians. In 1977, NOW established its National Political Action Committee (NOW/PAC) to endorse and support candidates in federal elections. (<http://www.nowpacs.org/about.html>).

NOW PAC is an independent, non-partisan committee which takes uncompromising stand on feminist issues. NOW PACs' strategies of grassroots organizing and early support for feminist candidates have been changing the face of government for more than three decades. NOW PAC's candidates address a wide range of women's issues, including: reproductive rights without restriction; civil rights for all people with emphasis on lesbian and gay rights and racial justice; economic justice for all women; a constitutional amendment that guarantees women's equality, including reproductive rights, and non-discrimination based on sexual orientation; affirmative action ensuring equal opportunity for women and people of color, ending all forms of violence against women. (www.nowpacs.org/about)

NOW employs three major strategies to influence voters and accomplish its goals: lobbying, electioneering, and litigation. The most important strategy is lobbying. It is a form of influence that brings the interest group into the political sphere through contact with elected officials and civil servants. Lobbying involves public hearings, providing information and submitting reports to the official representatives, and other activities. Electioneering means working for individual candidates in either party, openly or informally. Litigation or bringing cases to court at different levels of the judicial system is another tool that interest group uses to influence the political process and appeal to the public for support. NOW also uses non-conventional strategies to influence policy, among these are demonstrations and strikes. In this long and irreversible development process NOW has been using various techniques to be effective, such as propaganda-campaign, media communications. The lobbying techniques used by NOW can be formulated as direct and indirect. With direct techniques, the interest group and its lobbyists approach the officials personally to present their case. With indirect techniques, in contrast, the interest group uses media, public or individual constituents to influence the government on behalf of the interest group. Another indirect technique used by NOW is to form a coalition with other groups concerned about the same legislation. Members of such coalition share expenses and multiply the influence of their individual groups by combining their efforts. These alliances also keep compatible groups from duplicating one another's lobbying efforts.

NOW Committee has long benefited from strong leadership. Effective leadership plays a decisive role in the success of the organization. NOW's famous presidents

and leaders are mostly outstanding individuals, feminists, political activists and academics, writers, people with charisma and appeal. The names of some of the leaders listed below are truly illustrious. Betty Friedan, an American writer, activist, and feminist; a leading figure in the women's movement in the United States, and the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. Terry O'Neill, feminist, civil rights attorney and professor, also the president of the NOW. Molly Yard, political activist, feminist who served as a president of the NOW from 1987 to 1991. Judy Goldsmith, the president of NOW in 1982-85, feminist activist and academic. Kim Gandy, an American feminist who from 2001 to 2009 was the president of NOW. Barbara Seaman, one of the first women who brought the issue of women's reproductive health to wide attention in 2008. Patricia Ireland, an attorney, activist, and leader of NOW, and many others. Dedicated leaders of the organization brought wide popularity to NOW and attracted attention of the official bodies to the issues they have been promoting tirelessly for decades.

Electing the feminist leaders at all levels of public offices is a crucial part of NOW's advocacy for women's rights. It endorses the most prominent feminist political candidates and raises money for political campaigns and related activities. It employs field organizers across the country to work on campaigns, recruit volunteers and conduct voters' education. In 1968, two years after founding of the National Organization for Women, NOW's members empowered the organization to engage in electoral politics as part of its work toward achieving true equality for all women. One of the goals of the NOW/PACs is to provide help for feminist activists to be promoted and elected in US House and Senate. Only NOW members can contribute to this committee. NOW Equality PAC (NEP) (www.now.org/issues/constitution) supports feminist candidates for state and local offices. Promoting feminist supporters is one of the effective ways to defend women's rights on the state level. The results of the mentioned strategy was studied based on the feedbacks from women who had been elected with active support of the organization, these are: Senator Barbara Boxer, from California, whose candidacy was endorsed. Tammy Baldwin, a congressional candidate and the first open lesbian elected to the Wisconsin legislature. "When I ran for the U.S. Senate back in 1992, NOW was the only organization to support [me] from the beginning... and the power of its grassroots statewide network made my victory possible." Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, Illinois, the first African-American woman elected to the US Senate. A list of women activists promoted by the organization, illustrates the role NOW plays in achieving gender balance in government. (www.nowpacs.org/candidates). After being elected the officials are assisted by NOW activists who continue to work with them to become prominent leaders in the fight for equality and justice for

all women.

One of the major goals of the NOW is to assist the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to be ratified. About seventy non-governmental organizations support the ERA. It was first proposed in 1923, and it affirms that women and men have equal rights under the law. It was passed out of Congress in 1972 and for present it has been ratified by 35 of necessary 38 states. At its second national conference NOW adopted passage of the ERA. A series of activities have been carried out by NOW in support of the document for almost half a century to get necessary votes for the passage of the Amendment. It uses different tactics, such as persuasion, networking, visiting states and asking for support, organizing marches. One of the results of a long and persistent fight is that at present, when three more states vote Yes, ERA could become the 28th Amendment.

NOW is the first national organization to support the legalization of abortion. The activists of NOW of all generations have been faithful to their purpose – get abortion rights for women. The problem has rather deep roots; two movements, Pro-life and pro-choice, have been opposing each-other for more than fifty years. The struggle for the abortion rights is particularly important today because the Republican lawmakers do their best to pass antiabortion laws. For example, the Republican-controlled Michigan Senate is trying to pass a draconian anti-abortion clinic bill designed to make the full range of reproductive health services illegal, including abortion care, and make it unavailable for Michigan women. The bill passed the Michigan House in June, 2012 and the Senate Judiciary Committee in July. (www.michnow.org/memo_hb5711analysis.pdf).

NOW takes active steps to bring women, as a class, into the mainstream of society, rather than offering aid to individual women in achieving personal solutions or temporary relief from oppression. One of the most active supporters of NOW goals is New York state chapter (NOW/NYS). At present, they are trying to urge the Governor and the NYS legislatures to support the bill against women violence. The chapter also initiated a survey which aims to investigate how women have suffered at the hands of courts. Preliminary study of the problem showed that the courts are biased against women. This is a good example how the organization approaches the problems. After the problem is identified, its deep and versatile study is planned, and various scientific methods of investigations are applied, such as surveys, observation, and interviews. Based on the analysis of obtained data, a thorough study of the problem is conducted, the results are summarized and subsequent recommendations are provided to plan further effective approaches to the problem. NOW NYS also fights for Fair Pay Act to pass. The feminization of poverty is an issue that affects women in their everyday life. Women should not be discriminated on the workplaces on the account of

gender. The struggle for equal payment is one of the core issues for the organization. (www.nownys.org). The NYS Assembly has passed this bill on equal payment, but it has yet to pass the NYS Senate. NOW NYS activists carry out active campaign in support of the Reproductive Health & Privacy Protection Act. They ask all supporters to sign a petition in support of the Act.

NOW has a very strong network through which it spreads news and important documents in order to have its members well-informed about the current issues. Internet sites, newspapers, journals, newsletters publish alarming news providing distressing figures about the women who have experienced domestic violence, who were killed by men close to them, who are the victims of sexual harassment, who suffer from low payment, job discrimination, anti-abortion laws, and other misfortunes. The availability of information supported by true facts and adequate analysis plays an outstanding role. It mobilizes the organization forces, helps recruiting new members, and enhances the change process.

In the 1990s a new era in feminist movement started. Fierce struggle for the women's and minorities' rights carried out by many national women organizations brought significant changes in legislation on national level. President Bill Clinton was a devoted supporter of women's rights.

During Clinton's presidency women achieved progress in their struggle for the most crucial problems, such as equal payment, access to the jobs previously restricted to them, legalization of abortion. For example, in 1993, with Family and Medical Leave Act, women got the right tounpaid work leaves; Violence against Women Act (VAWA) was directed against domestic violence, sexual violence and harassment.

Giving to women volunteers comprehensive leadership training and free internship opportunities is one of the efficient tactics of the Organization. It holds a series of workshops to empower young feminists and give them the necessary knowledge and skills to become leaders; besides, the interns participate in a wide range of activities to get experience. (www.equalitynow.org/about.../internships). This initiative is supported by a number of Washington universities, and it is plays an important role because internship opportunities, both full time and part time carried out throughout the year, attract young activists and prepare them to stand firm for equality and justice. Besides, the students learn necessary professional skills and techniques how to make NGO successful by working side by side with prominent leaders of feminist movement. A number of training teams which have different goals are organized for the young activists to get necessary experience: **Communications, Conference/Events Organization, Government Relations/Public Policy, Membership/Fundraising, President's Assistant, Political Action**

Committee teams. Each team offers a training program of four to fifteen week length. As the team names indicate, the students learn how to draft and edit articles for NOW's online and print publications, plan events. They learn legislative research and writing, political campaign work, how to support NOW's chapters, members, and fundraising efforts. Internship embraces a wide range of activities. The students assist with NOW/PAC organizing, including meeting with candidates, supporting endorsement requests, and managing Federal Election Commission materials. **NOW President's assistant interns work directly with the president, helping with correspondence and speeches.** NOW interns participate in a wide range of activities which give them opportunity to make a first-hand observation of how a sexist, racist, and classist political system impacts women in America, learn how to lobby, how to build coalitions and networks. Interns attend Congressional and US Supreme Court hearings, press conferences, and rallies. Interns discuss feminist issues in groups led by National NOW staff and officers. Many well-known colleges and universities of Washington participate in a special program One Semester in Washington. (www.now.org/organization/intern.htm). NOW sponsors those students who wish to spend one semester in Washington, D.C. The course projects and assignments in this program vary based on the changing political and social climate in Washington, D.C. Besides internship, the organization offers employment opportunities to the interns, which is a proven tactic for promotion of young activists. (<http://www.iccnw.org/?mod=employment>).

In July, the NOW Political Action Committee enthusiastically endorsed Barack Obama and Joe Biden for reelection in 2012. The president supports women's rights in contrast to the harsh anti-woman policies pushed by the Republican Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan.

The Tea Party extremists in 2010 declared a so called War on Women in Congress in 2010 aiming to violate fundamental rights of women. They favored a restriction of abortion and even of birth control, cutting social security benefits. Paul Ryan even supported redefining rape, undermining the lifesaving Violence Against Women Act. A top priority for the women's organization in the elections 2012 was to run successfully for the seats in the Senate. Elizabeth Warren is running for the U.S. Senate seat in Massachusetts currently held by Republican Scott Brown. If successful, Baldwin would be the first out LGBT person to serve in the Senate, and Mazie Hirono would be the first female senator of Asian descent. Two women of color running for the first time for the House: Val Demings (FL-8), Orlando's first female chief of police and Grace Meng. (nowpacs.org/2012).

Today NOW strives to: eliminate discrimination and harassment in all sectors of society; secure abortion, birth control and reproductive rights for all women. Its goal is

to resist to all forms of violence against women and defend equality and justice. Racism, sexism and homophobia are three most widespread diseases of the modern societies, eradication of which should be the aim of each citizen irrespective of gender, political or sexual orientation. NOW tries to achieve its goals through direct mass actions, including marches, rallies, pickets, counter-demonstrations, non-violent civil disobedience; also through intensive lobbying, grassroots political organizing and litigation, including lawsuits.

Conclusions

Interest groups are in a sense a true face of America. An infinite divergence of the aims and goals they specify and fight for mirrors American multicultural society. Citizens identify and openly declare about the mission of their organization having no fear that they will be persecuted because of their beliefs. The problem which makes hundreds of thousand people come together is least likely to be immoral, or could enclose any threat for the safe and peaceful development of the nation.

Interest groups often oppose each other, and a fierce struggle between them only helps truly important ideas to win the battle and become dominant. The existence of IGs encourages American citizens to fight for the better future of their children. To my mind, this is the way the ideals of Founding Fathers come true. Participation in the government of your country in a democratic society cannot be limited merely to a voting right. One of the effective means of influencing the American government is by joining an organized interest group. Using different methods of persuasion, the IGs influence public policy, make the official representatives to work on the changes and pass necessary laws. The words written by Alexis de Tocqueville, "Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form association" (cited in Edwards 2006, p.326) proved to be true, and will continue to be vital in future. Looking back to the history of a long and tireless struggle of NOW for the rights of women, we can say that over the course of its 46 years it has achieved a lot. It has proved to be a truly national association which reflects nearly all those problems that women, girls and elderly women face in America. The people organized under one aim has brought a significant positive changes reflected in the lives of each American citizen.

NOW helps candidates break through the political glass ceiling by using effective strategies, among which education and training of young members and political candidates should be outlined. In the result of the great efforts taken by the organization, the number of females appointed in the leading government positions has been incredibly increased. Women have become more self-confident, successful and independent. At present they en-

joy more opportunity to make choice in their carriers and private lives. A large scope of women's issues - gender discrimination, reproductive rights, education and child care, economic equality regardless of gender and race - receive attention from politicians. Federal law establishes equal rights of women in all spheres of social and political life, and women are not slow to take advantage of these opportunities.

Experience of American interest groups is unique and it should be carefully studied and shared by the nongovernmental organizations of the "young democratic" countries, like Georgia. A democratic government is successful in case the society supports, criticizes and openly opposes the injustices injected by the administration. The role of nongovernmental organizations in Georgia increases every year, and in the result, hundreds of such organizations have emerged for the last twenty years. Georgian women have been working with great enthusiasm in women NGOs. A brief study of Georgian women organizations' activities for the last decade has revealed some weak points that are present in the organizations' structure, management, strategy and tactics. I believe that learning more about the premises of success of American interest groups will bring a significant positive change and make Georgian organizations more successful in their struggle for solution of the problems which different groups of society face.

The source of permanence, endurance and unprecedented success of American interest groups is the people's belief in the values of democracy, their commitment to the ideals, and the ability to dedicate their energy, time, and resources to struggle for justice and better life of their children. Referring to the President Bill Clinton's words, "In our hearts and in our laws, we must treat all our people with fairness and dignity, regardless of their race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. "(Clinton 2004, p.154).

In a sense, *interest groups are the American people.*

References

- Baumgartner, F. & Beth L. 1998, Basic interests: The importance of groups in politics and in political science. Princeton, NJ: Princeton.
- Burns, J., Peltason, J. & Cronin, T. 1990, Government by the people: Bill of rights edition. Englewood Cliffs. 14th ed. NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Clinton, B. (2004). My Life. The Autobiography. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.
- National Organization of Women information, 2010, viewed 10 Sept. 2012. <http://www.nowpacs.org/about.html>.
- Edwards G., Wattenberg, M., & Lineberry, R. 2006, Government in America: People, politics, and policy. 8th ed. New York: Pearson Education.
- McKay, D. 1991, American politics and society. Oxford UK: Blackwell.
- Shelley, M., & Schmidt, S., 2008, American government and politics today. Wadsworth, US: Pearson Education.
- Mancur, O. 1971, The Logic of collective action: Public goods and theory of groups. US: Harvard College.
- National Organization of Women information, 2012, viewed 15 Sept. 2012. <http://www.nowpacs.org/2012/bysiewicz.html>.
- National Organization of Women information, 2012, viewed 1, Oct, 2012. <http://www.nownys.org/2012/bysiewicz.html>.
- National Organization of Women information, 2012, viewed 5, Oct, 2012. <http://www.equalitynow.org/about.../internships>.
- National Organization of Women information, n.d., viewed 7, Oct, 2012. <http://www.iccnw.org/?mod=employment>.
- National Organization of Women information, n.d., viewed 5, Oct, 2012. <http://www.equalrightsamendment.org/supportorgs.htm>.