

## Collective action theory

- I. "Olson's problem." The problem of the free rider.
  - A. Group benefits are inherently shared, cannot privatize your benefit.
    1. Builds on prior recognition that taxes cannot be voluntary.
    2. Thus everyone has an incentive to "free ride" on the efforts of others, to let others pay the price of the good
    3. Arguments are especially important for theorizing why some "public goods" need to be provided coercively through the political system. Also very relevant to problem of environmental pollution.
    4. Highly influential in social movements: problematizes mobilization. Collective action cannot be assumed automatically to flow from common interests.
    5. Efficacy: the probability of "making a difference." **Whether your action will make a noticeable difference in the collective good.** Paying attention to the problem of efficacy is probably one of the most important insights flowing out of Olson's work.
    6. NOTE: Olson did NOT argue that people participate in social movements out of rational self-interest. In fact, his argument implies the opposite. Can you see why? This point is VERY OFTEN misunderstood, even by published sociologists.
  
- II. Olson's Size argument & his critics
  - A. Olson argues (says he proves) that larger groups are more likely to have free rider problems
  - B. There clearly IS a free rider problem in certain "large group" contexts, especially society-level provision of infrastructure & services (military defense, transportation) AND environmental degradation & pollution
  - C. But detailed investigation of these issues (by others) shows that number of beneficiaries, per se, is not the issue.
    1. Depends upon level of jointness of supply and
    2. whether the good is subject to "crowding" (less valuable the more others share it).
  - D. The REAL "size" problem is the efficacy and externality problem: can you by yourself (or you and the social group you are connected to) make a noticeable difference in the collective good? Or is the collective good too much controlled by the actions of others and your own actions are not enough to make a difference?
  
- III. Selective incentives: private benefits for contributing to collective goods
  - A. Selective incentives are private goods given to people on the basis of whether they have contributed.
  - B. Olson argues they are necessary for collective action, either coercion or inducements.
  - C. Types of selective incentives. This is post-Olson, originates with James Q. Wilson. **This inventory is a very useful way of thinking about the problem of motivating group action.**
    1. Material: payments, incentives for participating or coercion for not participating
    2. Solidary: benefits or costs of participating (or not) arising from relationships with other people, either their respect & honor, or the communal pleasures of doing

things together

3. Purposive or moral: the internal feeling of doing the right thing

IV. Critical mass theory (Oliver & Marwell): What matters for collective action is not everyone who would benefit, but a critical mass of highly interested & resourceful people who provide collective benefits for others. Reading not assigned, this is a short summary of key arguments that are helpful for thinking about movements.

- A. Production function: outputs of collective goods for inputs of participation/contribution. (See graphics, appended)
  1. Accelerating: Each additional contribution has an increasing effect on the public good. There is no free rider problem here: others' contributions make you more willing to participate = "bandwagon effects." Instead the problem is the start-up costs. The critical mass here are the few who pay the start up and organizing costs so that the many will want to participate.
  2. Decelerating: each additional contribution has a declining effect on the public good. A few can provide benefit for many. This situation creates context for free riding and strategic gaming. The "rich" (the highly interested & resourceful actors) are "exploited" by the "poor" (those who are less interested or less resourceful). The critical mass here are the few who provide the good for the many.
  3. Generalized S-shaped curve: First a problem of overcoming start-up costs, then heightened mobilization, then declining marginal payoffs to continued mobilization. Problem of organizing initially (accelerating phase), then later the problem of maintaining efforts and shift to professionalization or abeyance structures (decelerating phase).
- B. Production functions are, themselves, subject to choice: actors select a method for accomplishing a goal that has a favorable production function. Think of the production function as what combination of people's time and money are needed: this varies with your "technology" – the different kinds of action you know how to do.
  1. Example: instead of trying to get millions of individuals to drive less or choose gas-efficient cars, you lobby Congress for a law to require fewer emissions from cars.
  2. You can choose HOW to try to gain a law. Informational campaigns, large demonstrations, disruptive protests, etc.
- C. The "size" problem pertains to whether there is a critical mass and what its structure is, and this in turn is linked to the production function.
- D. Develop some theory of organizing: the costs and benefits of mobilizing other people to contribute to collective goods. Not a theory of motives for action, but a theory of paying organizing costs, having the networks & resources to reach people and persuade them to participate.

V. Research on Collective Action [this material not assigned, you can find it in the "more reading" section]

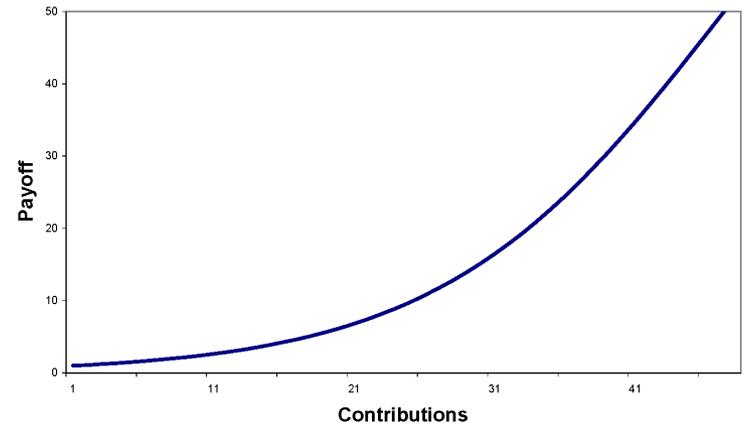
- A. Empirical research on why people participate: concern about the collective good, influence of people around them (networks, solidary incentives), personal sense of capacity, approval/disapproval of the statements or tactics of leaders
- B. Subjective perceptions of value of collective good, likelihood of others' participating,

probability of making a difference

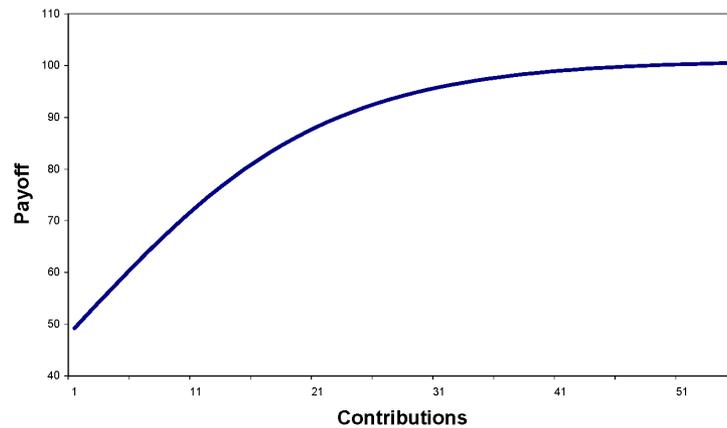
- C. HOWEVER, empirical data does NOT fit a rational-action framework entirely:
  - 1. Movement participants often REJECT the free-rider dilemma, attribute to themselves personally as individuals the efficacy they think the group would have if everyone acted like them. It is perceived **collective** efficacy that seems most important.
  - 2. Contrary to theory, participants in movements often report that they bear high costs, while non-participants say participants are not bearing costs (are just having fun).
  
- VI. Summarizing what we "get out" of the collective action (rational action) perspective
  - A. Interests matter: what people will gain or lose from various proposals, or what they think they will gain or lose.
  - B. A reminder that people do not necessarily or automatically act out of their common interests
  - C. People do often participate in social movements out of a desire to accomplish goals, achieve interests. BUT rational action theory has little (nothing) to say about WHICH goals people will care about or how they define their interests.
  - D. Collective action theory provides an inventory of factors that affect decisions, ESPECIALLY the importance of efficacy (probability of making a difference) PLUS concern about the collective good PLUS moral or social incentives. A checklist of things to consider.
  
- VII. Relating to the next topics
  - A. Networks: Preferences for collective goods arise in social network contexts, people are raised with certain ideas, spend time with people who influence their ideas.
    - 1. Socialization processes: learning to hold particular ideas
    - 2. Common action requires connections between people, cannot act collectively if you do not have some social connection.
    - 3. People who are connected to each other can create a sense of collective efficacy in interaction with one another.
  - B. Logics of action
    - 1. Rational action is logic of **consequences**: you do things because they are instrumental in producing goals, tied to interests
    - 2. Identity-based action (next section) is a logic of **appropriateness**: you do things because people like you (or good people) do that kind of thing
  - C. Construction of grievances/interests: people's beliefs are not automatically given from their social position, but are constructed in the process of socialinteraction with others.
  - D.

# Production Function Graphics

### Accelerating Production Function



### Decelerating Production Function



### S-Shaped Production Function

