INTEREST GROUP LOBBIES AND US FOREIGN POLICY: THE ROLE OF AMERICAN EVANGELICAL

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Abstract. The rapid growth of various interest group lobbies in the United States since the 1980s has contributed to the changes in the foreign policy decision making process. During the George W. Bush presidency, the rise of the evangelicals in American politics attracted many researchers to study the roles and impacts of interest groups is influencing or shaping American foreign policy. This is due to the fact that, interest groups have been able to facilitate and create some effects to the changing trend of US foreign policy making. In this article, it is argued that, the evangelicals, as interest group movements that based on religious values and motivations can serve as a valuable new explanatory variable for understanding how the US foreign policy was formulated. The article aims to discuss the role American evangelical as an interest group in lobbying US foreign policy making.

Keywords: Evangelical, Foreign policy, Interest group.

Introduction. During the two George W. Bush presidential elections and its increased role in Republican Party gave the evangelicals a golden opportunity to leverage its religious vision of foreign policy. Furthermore, the increased of religiosity among American public contributed to the effectiveness of the evangelicals in shaping ‘climate of opinion’ of the importance of its ‘religious flavour’ international agenda to American’s national interest1. At the same time, the resurgence of religions and faiths at the global level as a new phenomenon in the 21st century2, created a spill over effect to the changing trend of US foreign policy making towards value and moral based foreign policy.

Generally, decision making in foreign policy is divided into two conditions; firstly, situations that involve crises and national security and, secondly, ongoing foreign policy that does not relate to crises or threats to the national interest. They suggest that for foreign policy that involves crises or security, decision making will rely heavily on the rationale of the president and a small group of experts. But, for other foreign policy, bureaucratic or negotiating actors such as interest groups or lobby can also be involved in guiding the formulation and decision making3. In contrast to domestic policy making that largely emphasizes representation, formulation of foreign policy basically depends on expertise. Furthermore, foreign policy and decision making during conflict or crisis is generally more centralized and only involves the top level decision makers such as the president and White House officials. Scholars such as Spanier and Uslaner contend that, for foreign policy making during the crisis or any policy that related to national security, the use of rational decision making, expert opinion, and the president’s and elite’s group decisions are most important. However, for non-crisis foreign policy making, the role of bureaucrats and congressmen also has a significant contribution to the decision making.

History of Interest Group Lobbies in the US. The rapid growth of various interest group lobbies in the United States since the 1980s has contributed to the changes in the foreign policy decision making process.4 Interestingly, the growth of the interest group lobbies has also showed that they did not restrict their focus only to domestic policy but also targeted foreign policy. This development has resulted in changes in the agenda of interest group lobbies as well as the process of their lobbies. However, the growth of interest group lobbies on Capitol Hill was also due to the institutional changes and reforms in the Congress in the 1970s and 1980s. Crabb and Holt suggest that the institutional reform of the Congress has ended the era of congressional passivity in foreign policy decision making5.

The institutional changes of the Congress in the 1970s and 1980s that reforming the Congress are important episode that contributed significantly to changes in foreign policy decision making. The ‘sunshine’ laws in 1970s6 allowed American citizens and organizations greater access to government documents and hearings, giving the public an opportunity to pressure foreign policy decision makers. The changes to the decision making system that require executive policy

5 Crabb, C., V., Holt, P, M., Invitation to Struggle: Congress, the President and Foreign Policy, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C., 1984), p. 60-61. See also Leroy N. Rieselbach, Congressional Reform in the Seventies (New Jersey, 1977)
makers to get a basic consensus at congressional level gave greater room for congressmen to practice foreign affairs activism. Consequently, it triggered transformation in the foreign policy decision making system. Thus, the institutional reforms within Congress, such as the increased number of committees on foreign affairs and open floor debates, allowed rank and file members of Congress to participate directly in foreign policy issues. Moreover, this era also witnessed the decentralization of the House and Senate. It increased the power and resources of individual senators and representatives through the creation of several subcommittees, thus allowed subcommittees to be more focused on particular international issues. In addition, the subcommittees became more influential and to some extent were able to determine foreign policy preferences as they could control the kind of legislation that was going to be tabled before the Congress.

The new electoral environment that emphasized the need for member of Congress to respond to the demands of their constituents was also important development that changed the overall foreign policy decision making process that take place in Congress. Congressmen, in order to avoid a risk of defeat in next election, give more attention to their grassroots and constituency pressure that largely shaped by domestic considerations and demands. The rise of so called "intermestic" agenda created a new climate in the Congress as congressmen are more inclined to respond to the "environment of constant campaigning and increasing localism". As a result, member of Congress are free to take independent position on any international issues regardless of their political parties' affiliation. Bailey suggested that this development has "...switched [Congress] from legislative-orientated to constituency-orientated activities."

Ultimately, these changes have benefited interest groups directly or indirectly in that they allow them to play a more active role in influencing foreign policy formulation. At this point, interest groups have another avenue – subcommittees at Congress – and thus are able to approach and easily access decision makers, organize lobbying activities at Congress, freely raise international issues of its interests, and potentially have more opportunity to challenge executive branch policy choices; thus, they could possibly influence foreign policy formulation at one of the most strategic points of the decision making process. In the post-Vietnam War, changes took place in the foreign policy decision making process as the war taught lessons to policy makers about the importance of maintaining public support and public opinion for long-term foreign policies. Therefore, except in a crisis situation, American foreign policy nowadays is less an elitist model and is more towards pluralist model, in which the participation of non-governmental agencies, such as interest groups, and public opinion can play their role in asserting their influence on the decision making process. As suggested by Dumbrell; "Coalition of business interest, single industries lobbies, foreign governmental pressure, labour and 'citizens' interest and domestic ethnic lobbies have all had important influence on Congressional foreign policy since Vietnam". Thus, instead of foreign policy being solely formulated based on traditional factors such as national security, geo-politics and economic interest, those developments showed that foreign policy formulation and decision making may also consider other factors, such as interest group lobbies, election results and changes in political imperatives.

The increasing roles of the US in world affairs after the cold war era and in the present international environment in the globalization era are another two important factors that increase the role of interest groups in the foreign policy decision making process. According to Dietrich, the end of the cold war has allowed the US to be more flexible in formulating its foreign policy. As the only global superpower, the US foreign policy calculation is no longer restricted to the issue of 'global superpower rivalry'. Moreover, Dietrich argues that the demise of the Soviet Union meant the US lacked it traditional unifying and strategic vision of foreign policy.

In sum, the above historical facts gave opportunities to interest group lobbies as they created new avenues for them to participate with, engage in, frame, debate and create new concepts and priorities for US foreign policy. In this context, the Christian Right as an interest group enjoys this opportunity and exploits it to protect and pursue its international interests by participating in the foreign policy decision making process at a domestic level. However, there are some studies that suggest interest groups are not only far from being a key player in the foreign policy decision making process, but are also weak and rarely able to determine the success of their lobbies. Milbath, in his study on the role of interest groups in US foreign policy making, argues that, although interest groups are capable of having some impact on foreign policy proposals, their role is rather weak or, at best, ‘indirect and diffuse’ in determining whether the proposed foreign policy is successful or not.

Nevertheless, recently the critical role of interest group lobbies in the United States in putting pressure on some areas of foreign policy decision making, particularly in non-crisis foreign policy, cannot be denied. For instance, the

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7 Lindsay, J., M. Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy (Baltimore, 1994).
8 Dumbrell, J. The Making of US Foreign Policy (Manchester 1990), p. 120
10 Dumbrell, J. The Making of US Foreign Policy Manchester. 1990, 119
role of ethnic lobbies has been increasingly recognized by foreign policy analysts as an important and legitimate force
that potentially influences foreign policy making, especially at the congressional level.\(^{14}\)

**The Evangelical Movement.** The American evangelical as a movement, has consistently demonstrated a
remarkable capability to learn from its own historical experiences to become a more dynamic and effective force in US
politics. It has successfully understood how American liberal democracy works, and then planned on how to influence
it. The movement has utilized its rights within the liberal democratic system to participate in and, when possible, to
influence the US administration as well as the masses to accept and implement its domestic and international agenda.
Similar to other interest group lobbies, the evangelical’s influence on US foreign policy should not be exaggerated.

Despite that, the role of the evangelical was important in initiating and framing certain international issues and it has
contributed significantly to the decision making process, especially in non-crisis foreign policies that largely made at
congressional level. Those in the field of international relations study, as well as the US foreign policy officials, should
recognize that, at least on a certain level, the evangelical did manage to insert its religious agenda into US foreign
policy during the Bush administration.

In addition, as a concept of ‘soft power’ that normally being discussed by international relations scholars on the
ability of non-state actors to convince, attract, encourage, influence and persuade states’ actors to accept its policy at the
international level,\(^{15}\) the emergence of the evangelical as an actor in asserting its global agenda through US foreign
can possibly provide an example of how ‘religious soft power’ at domestic level could also contribute to US foreign policy making. The evangelical, through its various organizations, mass media, publications, internet websites
and other popular means framed the international issues of its interest to the public. Issues such as international
religious freedom, debt relief and international humanitarian assistance were perceived important and gained
overwhelming attention from all spectrum of American society including human rights activists, lobbies groups,
journalists, academicians, politicians and policymakers. Discourse and discussions on the issues were increased, gained
more popularity and consequently shaped and dominated ‘climate of opinion’ of American public. Eventually, the issues
that were originally brought forward by the Christian Right through its social and religious discourses were transformed
into political discourse. In this respect, US foreign policy preferences that was normally grounded on national security
agenda was compromised with ideas, values and religious agenda of the Christian Right. Perhaps, the changing political
climate during the George W. Bush two terms administration could explain to this phenomenon.

**Conclusion.** The discussion on the role of interest groups ie. the evangelical movement in influencing US
foreign policy argument entails further detailed research in particular to explore the role of the evangelical movement
and the effectiveness of its ‘religious soft power’ in attracting and to some extent, shaping ‘climate of opinion’ not only
to American public, but also to policy making elites. The fact that the evangelicals are just like any other interest group
lobby that means they have a limited role and have relatively little influence on foreign policy decision making. In
addition, the US foreign policy decision making process is very complicated and interconnected; thus, no single factor
can absolutely determine the formulation of the policy.

**References**

