



BOOK REVIEW

Diaspora Lobbies and the US Government: Convergence and Divergence in Making Foreign Policy

By Josh DeWind and Renata Segura, eds. New York, NY: Social Science Research Council and New York University Press, 2014. 320 pages.

Thomas Ambrosio
North Dakota State University

While concerns about the loyalties of “hyphenated Americans” remain, the widespread acceptance of multiculturalism in American society has legitimized activities by ethnic groups to advocate within the US political system on behalf of their country of origin and its interests. This phenomenon is not new, but it has received heightened scholarly attention since the end of the Cold War for three reasons. First, given the level of American power, the United States has fewer constraints on its actions on the international stage and therefore its internal sources of conduct are more important — interest groups of all types could potentially influence US foreign policy to a greater degree than before. Second, the United States’ highly diverse ethnic composition means that nearly every event outside the country has an impact on at least some of its citizens; moreover, there are a multitude of ethnic groups vying for influence over US foreign policy. This diversity and mobilization has increased over the past few decades. Lastly, the decentralized nature of the American political system (and, in particular, the US Congress) allows for multiple points of entry into the policy-making process,

which, in turn, grants these groups greater influence. Ethnic interest groups are a core part of this system and they must be taken into account when seeking to explain American foreign policy.

Our understanding of ethnic group influence on the American foreign policy process remains tentative, however. This is, in part, because there are many ways to approach this issue. These include the following: taking the concepts of more general interest group influence on US policy (either domestic or foreign) and applying them to this specific type of group; adopting a process tracing methodology to demonstrate how the activities of an ethnic lobby have effected policy outcomes; endeavoring to determine how influential these groups actually are on the policy process through survey data or quantitative analysis; understanding the circumstances in which these groups are more or less effective in relation to rival interest groups; focusing on the relationship between the ethnic group and its homeland; and a more normative argument about the relative benefits and dangers of such influence on American national security interests.

Like the American political system, this diversity is necessary, but sometimes comes at the expense of coherence as some of the best studies talk past each other, dealing with different aspects of the same topic. Nonetheless, there is still room in the literature for a fresh approach. *Diaspora Lobbies and the US Government*, edited by Josh DeWind and Renata Segura, makes such a contribution through its focus on policy convergence/divergence between the US government and ethnic interest groups, though it is hampered by an uneven application and a lack of focus in some of its chapters.

On the plus side, the concept of convergence/divergence of policy aims and its impact on both US foreign policy and the ethnic group's activities is quite good, even if underdeveloped in the volume's introduction. In essence, it is an acknowledgment that there is a dynamic and interactive process by which the government can influence or utilize ethnic interest groups for its own ends just as much as ethnic interest groups seek to influence and utilize the government for theirs. Moreover, it recognizes that neither the US government nor the ethnic groups in question are monolithic, and therefore this convergence/divergence equation might become quite complicated as divisions within both sides can create opportunities for effecting policy outcomes. Both of these points are important to furthering our understanding of policy outcomes, ethnic group activities, and the groups' relative influence in the process.

This dynamic and interactive process is productively examined in several of this book's chapters, especially in the contributions by Lyons and Vanderbush, who looked at Ethiopia and Iraq, respectively. In the first case, the sharp

policy divergence between the US government and the Ethiopian-American lobby caused the latter to largely cease attempting to influence the former, and instead to seek a direct impact on Ethiopian politics. Vanderbush examines how a faction within the US government (which sought to remove Saddam Hussein) entered into a mutually beneficial relationship with Iraqi exiles to, in effect, capture the US foreign policy debate on Iraq in the post-9/11 context. Other chapters, too, contextualize this dynamic through their own case studies. Thompson's chapter on Northern Ireland demonstrates how divergence can be turned into convergence through having key US politicians of a particular ethnic group seek to shift the policy debate. Erikson's examination of the Haitian diaspora shows how an external event (the 2010 earthquake) can radically change the dynamic between the US government and an ethnic group. Finally, Smith contributes a largely historical account of ethnic group lobbying and US foreign policy (though it is oddly placed as the conclusion of the volume) and it deals with the issue of convergence/divergence in broad strokes.

Yet some of the other chapters either do not fit so well with the theme of convergence/divergence or lack a specific focus on this dynamic. For example, Sheffer's piece, though interesting in-and-of-itself, seems out of place. It is primarily about establishing a typology between different types of groups (transnational communities versus ethno-national diasporas) and outlining their characteristics and activities. It gives short shrift to the central dynamic outlined in the introduction. Shain and Ragachevsky examine the divergence within the Jewish-American community between traditional supporters of Israeli interests and more

liberal sentiments within this community that are more interested in “peace” than Israel’s security. Taken further, this chapter could have looked at the very interesting and complicated situation in which the matter of US support for Israel is increasingly becoming a partisan issue to the point where we are seeing divergence within both the broader population and the Jewish-American community. This is leading to a split convergence between the holders of the traditional concept of US-Israel relations (e.g., AIPAC) and Republicans/conservatives, on the one hand, and between “J Street” and the Democrats/liberals on the other. Thus, we are seeing both divergence and convergence on multiple levels. Unfortunately, Shain and Ragachevsky get sidetracked into responding to critics of the “Jewish lobby” and by making a largely normative argument about the continuing importance of Israel for American Jews. Pérez tackles Cuban-American influence on US foreign policy and provides a good, historical overview of the convergence between the Cuban exiles and American Cold War policy. However, his contribution would have been improved by a greater focus on more recent policy changes, as well as on the events of the past decade, which have caused more partisan divergence on the issue of Cuba (similar in some ways to the divide over support for Israel). Finally, Bamyeh’s piece on the Palestinians contends that US foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel-Palestine is wrong from both a moral and interests-based perspective. It (unfortunately and unironically) submits to the “theory of everything” fallacy outlined by Shain and Ragachevsky, which sees the hand of the Israeli lobby behind nearly every US foreign policy decision, ignoring the actual and legitimate convergence between Israel and the United States in

terms of values and strategic outlook.

Despite its failings, this volume, overall, makes an important contribution to the field — in particular, for the questions that it raises for future research. For example, what are the consequences on US foreign policy when a seemingly monolithic group ceases to be monolithic in terms of its policy goals, such as amongst Jewish Americans? Under these conditions, we have a case of both convergence and divergence with US foreign policy, which creates an opportunity for political entrepreneurs both from the groups themselves and from the overall political system to exploit these differences in line with their own interests and values. Additionally, how are changes in the convergence/divergence spectrum effected? And what are the consequences of such changes both for US foreign policy and on the group? Research on these topics can be conducted either within the context of these groups (e.g., through additional and possibly comparative case studies) or by examining them within the larger context of policy change. Regardless of the focus, studying change can provide important insights into other areas of the overarching study of ethnic lobbies and US foreign policy. Lastly, the issue of convergence and divergence does not take place solely within the context of the US foreign policy process, but also affects American relations with other countries. How does this affect the two-level game of internal politics and external diplomacy? Thompson’s chapter on Northern Ireland, for example, could be followed up by examining how changes in US policy toward Northern Ireland affected its relations with Great Britain.

In short, this is a good, albeit uneven, edited volume which should be read by scholars of ethnic group influence on US foreign policy.