It is conventional wisdom that business groups are often leading players in the policymaking process. Why would one expect anything else? After all, businesses can be affected in significant and costly ways by public policy, from provisions of tax laws to regulations on environmental protection. To ensure that their interests are given proper consideration, business officials seek to influence the policy agenda as well as decisions made throughout the policy process. Similarly, knowing how central the public’s views are to public policy debates, businesses and trade associations try to shape public opinion through media campaigns.

Business interests clearly have a great deal at stake when government considers taking action, and many have the resources to intervene as needed to shape policy decisions. Major energy producers in 2001, for example, played a central role in the energy policy task force established under the direction of Vice President Dick Cheney. The actions that the group recommended, which emphasized increasing energy supplies, received serious consideration in Congress during the next four years, though approval was stymied by environmentalists and other interests. In summer 2005, however, emboldened by the 2004 elections and public frustration with rising gasoline prices, Congress finally approved a far-reaching energy policy that followed the general outline of the Cheney task force recommendations. The bill provides billions of dollars in subsidies to energy producers, with oil and natural gas firms among the biggest winners.

The energy policy case is only one illustration of what critics see as the pervasive, and often detrimental, influence of business on environmental policy. By no means do business interests always win.
Yet they do seem well represented in policy debates, and they do meet with considerable success. Many examples over the past several decades could be cited in policy areas as diverse as mining, forestry, ranching, agriculture, air and water pollution control, management of toxic and hazardous chemicals, climate change, and protection of biological diversity.

It is surprising, therefore, that the role business plays in shaping public debate and in influencing the formulation, adoption, and implementation of environmental and resource policy has not been subject to as much systematic scholarly inquiry as have many other elements of environmental politics. As a result, we know little about how often business interests choose to intervene, where they intervene, what strategies and tactics they use, and especially how often they get their way in environmental policymaking. Similarly, we know little about the factors that condition their capacity to influence decision making in different government venues: the U.S. Congress, state legislatures, municipal governments, federal and state executive agencies, the courts, and multilateral international organizations. The chapters brought together in this book help fill some of these gaps in our understanding of the role and influence of business groups in environmental and natural resource policy.

In chapter 1 we provide a historical and analytic context for what follows. We review a range of studies and arguments about the role of business interests in environmental policy, and public policy more generally. We also set out what we believe are the key questions that analysts should be asking about business intervention in different political venues and the factors that condition its success. The rest of the chapters are arranged in five sections: agenda setting and elections, including the role of the media and public opinion; policy formulation and adoption in the U.S. Congress; policy implementation in administrative agencies; intervention in the courts; and policymaking at the state and local levels. In the concluding chapter we revisit the book’s major findings, highlight their implications for policymaking and democratic theory, and set out suggestions for future research that could further improve our understanding of the role and impact of business in environmental and natural resource policy.
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