

# A Tribute to Ken Wald

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Upon Ken Wald's retirement, I would like to offer a few words. We all should express our appreciation for Ken (and David Leege) developing the Cambridge series on Religion and Social Theory and acknowledge his mentorship, which has been felt by many. In fact, the Religion and Politics section just honored his mentorship by designating the Ken Wald Graduate Student Paper Award. Moreover, Ken has been a great help to the journal, submitting articles and book reviews, serving on our editorial board, and providing what he is well-known (infamous?) for — detailed, considered, fair reviews. But here I want to celebrate Ken's role in the development of a powerful and coherent set of ideas and the creation of a literature.

In the same vein as (what I suspect was) his tenure letter for me, I want to try and repay the favor of recognizing and repeating what I believe the lessons are of Ken's Theory of Groups. I might add how much you should be amazed at how ahead of his time he was.

I believe we should read Ken's work as a thick strand of social theory articulating the group project that I believe has four components if groups are to be meaningful, independent actors.

- (1) *Individuals have agency over joining*; there is no way that Ken stands with Arthur Bentley — an early political scientist — who worked interchangeably with group and interest. The very fact that people are able to select their congregations despite theological differences, let alone political ones, means not that they are random processes but that the criteria for joining are individual (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1988). The implications are that...
- (2) *Individuals engage in socially messy and sometimes organized ways in deciphering their politics*. Let's call it deliberation for short. While deliberation was certainly talked about in the late 1980s, this well predates the tsunami-like "deliberative turn" in democratic theory. That

groups may end in unity (though they never do) does not imply rampant self-selection or a psychological malady like authoritarianism, but instead shows the result of a mix of intentional and unintentional processes of citizens wrestling with core political ideas. His work on authority (Owen, Wald, and Hill 1991) came at least a decade before it caught fire in political science. As a result of the persistent presence of disagreement in congregations,...

- (3) *Group cohesion is strongly a result of group structure*, both ideational and social structure. Groups should not be assumed to be coherent, but are the products of how or perhaps whether they construct their worldviews, how they channel citizen energies and friendship networks, and of course what populations they draw from (Wald, Owen, and Hill 1990). Picking up on Dean Kelley's notions about church growth, this work predates *The Churching of America* by several years and the formal launch of the economic theory of religion that exploded on sociology. This construction not only allows for variable rates of group success and decline, but sets groups apart as entities independent of the state.
- (4) *Groups can be dynamic in the construction of their politics* and are certainly not functional derivatives of their economic interests. The most forthright statement of this comes in what I regard as one of Ken's best pieces, which happened to appear in this journal in 2015 (still the longest piece the journal has yet published). In "The Choosing People," Ken's answer to explain the puzzle of the politics of American Jewry is located in *citizenship*. Citizenship is a precondition to a group's politics; remaining vigilant to a definition of citizenship unburdened by attribute has been the abiding concern of Jewish protective associations throughout American history.

To my mind, this piece fulfills the promise of the group project, for which there is nuance in group composition, groups reason over the basis for their politics that is allowed to vary in time and space without being branded as inconsistent or derivative, and groups shift their concerns in dynamic ways to threats that prove their representational value.

The piece closes with what can only be taken as Testimony in the most evangelical sense and I would second every one of them and take their application to the other groups we study.

- (1) Thou shalt "Draw on general theories of behavior to explicate the Jewish case... the idea that American Jewish political behavior is unique among Jewish communities due to differing national circumstances or that it oscillates in the short-term is entirely compatible with theories of contextual politics and rational choice."

- (2) Thou shalt do multi-level work. “Instead of explaining distinctive political loyalties and choices by reference to “internal” factors, a political science perspective counsels us to examine more carefully structural factors such as political regimes and the political attitudes of potential allies and opponents (which can be considered part of the political opportunity structure). It amounts to bringing the state back in to the analysis of political behavior by religious groups.”
- (3) Thou shalt extend “the theoretical reach of citizenship as a factor that may promote or retard political cohesion among ethnocultural groups.”

Together this marks a clarion call to students of religion and politics not to look inward, seeking to justify work by the status of self, but to think carefully about our common democratic commitments and how The Group illuminates questions about individuals in the polity. This also marks the profound impact on theory and the empirical literature that Ken’s work has had. I hope we continue to try and heed his call — we will be the better for it.

## REFERENCES

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