Preface

Much has been written about interest groups. And much of this has, in one way or another, concerned the issue of groups and democracy. This conjunction does seem to raise passions.

This book arose out of the sense that much group scholarship tended to repeat the same basic analysis that groups lacked internal democracies, and thus were not the democratic contributors some may have thought. To my mind, the empirical finding was not wholly inaccurate, but the interpretation set far too high (and uniform) a bar for groups to leap. By this measure, few if any groups would be likely to meet expectations. The book set out to re-set expectations around democratic practice; and to argue why this was both empirically and theoretically justifiable.

Perhaps the most controversial proposal in this book is to remove the element of moral panic that besets scholars when they discover the absence of enfranchised and voluntary members within groups. The argument put here is that there is no clear normative argument for groups pursuing the interests of the unborn or nature to practise internal democratic processes – even if they have members. This offends the orthodoxy of democratic, voluntary and membership-based which underpins our working assumptions of group life.

In setting out the above argument, the intention was to cast a wide net, particularly with respect to the growth areas of group scholarship: the social movement, global civil society and NGO applications. The aim of this book has been to work towards a meeting of minds among related – although as yet separate – scholars. There is a much-lamented tendency for scholars to reinforce disciplinary

boundaries, as sociologists, political scientists or some other professional identity, without due concern for where labels obscure common interests. In the study of interest groups I think the evidence is we have just such a scenario.

A fair chunk of the first section of this book sets out the various guises in which democracy and groups arise, and the labels that are deployed for essentially the same phenomenon. This review of the literature is somewhat lengthy, but it is essential to demonstrate, not just state or claim, that there is indeed a growing 'group' scholarship that is bigger than the old-school interest group scholarly community.

The balance of the book picks out what I see as key questions that impede gaining traction over the question of the democratic nature of groups. In turn, I address scholarly conventions over terminology, normative criteria, analytical frameworks (like that of Olson's free-riding) and a range of taken-for-granted arguments about the way groups just 'are'. Each chapter is written to be largely self-contained arguments which could be read separately; although Chapters 3, 4 and 5 logically work together. However, I do draw connections throughout.

Several chapters in this book either borrow in part or embellish upon work published as journal articles. Chapters 3 and 4 develop on a paper I published as Halpin, D. (2006) 'The Participatory and Democratic Potential and Practice of Interest Groups: Between Solidarity and Representation', *Public Administration*, 84 (4): 919–40. The material in Chapter 6 draws material from a co-authored paper published as Jordan, G. and Halpin, D., 2004, 'Olson Triumphant? Explaining the Growth of a Small Business Organisation's *Political Studies*, 52 (3): 431–49.

This book is a modest, but hopefully a productive, contribution to moving the scholarly research agenda around groups, representation and democracy forward.