

Interest Groups: Definition and Types



What Is an Interest Group?

An interest group, also called a special interest group, is an organization of people who share common goals. They bridge the gap between the public and lawmakers, and seek to influence public opinion, elections, and public policy.

Interest groups come in all sizes and shapes. They may have thousands, millions, or just a handful of members. They may be highly structured or loose and informal. Some have many resources, while others have few.

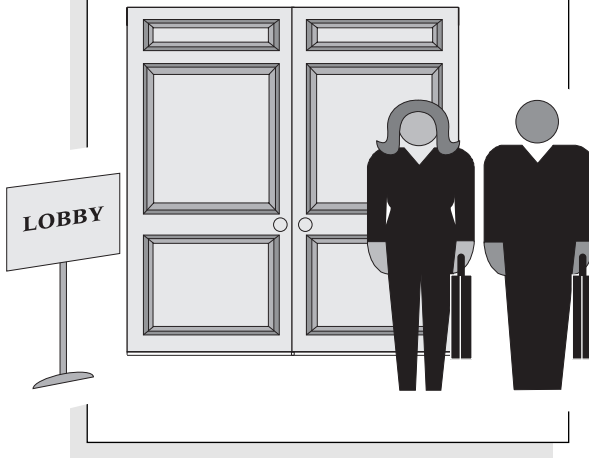
Types of Interest Groups

TYPE OF INTEREST GROUP & PURPOSE	EXAMPLES
<h4>Business and Labor Groups</h4> <p>To influence lawmakers about policies regarding the economy and business</p>	<p>National Manufacturers Association works to limit government regulation of industry.</p> <p>AFL-CIO, the largest labor organization in the U.S., seeks policies favorable to workers.</p>
<h4>Agricultural Groups</h4> <p>To represent the needs of farmers and farm businesses</p>	<p>American Farm Bureau Federation is composed of larger, successful farmers.</p> <p>National Farmers' Union represents smaller farmers.</p>
<h4>Professional Groups</h4> <p>Groups of individuals with specialized training (law, medicine, etc.) representing the needs of their profession</p>	<p>American Medical Association promotes, protects, and regulates doctors.</p> <p>American Bar Association promotes, protects, and regulates the law profession.</p>
<h4>Specific Causes</h4> <p>To influence and promote policies geared to specific causes</p>	<p>American Civil Liberties Union is devoted to defending the civil liberties of all Americans.</p> <p>Sierra Club promotes the exploration and conservation of wilderness in the U.S.</p>
<h4>Religious Groups</h4> <p>To represent the needs and viewpoints of their members</p>	<p>National Council of Churches is dedicated to advancing religious institutions nationwide.</p> <p>Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith fights discrimination, particularly against people of the Jewish faith.</p>
<h4>Public-Interest Groups</h4> <p>To represent the broad-based needs and interests of the public</p>	<p>Common Cause promotes openness and honesty in U.S. government.</p> <p>Public Citizen monitors government and corporate policies that affect the public.</p>
<h4>Government-Interest Groups</h4> <p>Groups of government officials who represent their needs to other government officials</p>	<p>National Governors Association tries to influence Congress and the president to benefit their states.</p> <p>National Conference of State Legislators tries to influence federal officials to benefit their states and localities.</p>
<h4>General Welfare Organizations</h4> <p>To promote the welfare of a particular group</p>	<p>American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars advance the interests of veterans.</p> <p>Association for the Advancement of Retired Persons promotes the interests of senior citizens.</p>

Lobbying and Other Interest-Group Tactics

Did You Know!

The term “lobbyist” was coined because interest-group representatives would contact senators or representatives in the lobbies of state or federal capitol buildings.



Lobbying

Interest groups seek to influence government policy by contacting lawmakers or other government leaders. The people who make such contacts are lobbyists. They work at the federal, state, and local levels.

Most large and important interest groups have lobbyists on their payrolls in Washington, D.C.

Many lobbyists are former government officials who have friends in Congress and the executive branch. Lawyers and public relations specialists may also become lobbyists.

The Job of a Lobbyist

They spend most of their time trying to influence members of Congress, but also seek out members of the executive and judicial branches.

They supply lawmakers with information that supports the position of the interest group on a particular issue. (Members of Congress realize that lobbyists may be biased, but a lobbyist who purposely misrepresents the facts may lose access to the legislator.)

They help to draft bills. Many large interest groups retain legal and research staffs for this purpose.

Election Support

Interest groups can promise campaign contributions to lawmakers who favor their policies or threaten to withhold support from those who do not. The elected official may not always vote the way the interest group would like, but the contribution assures the group access.

Interest groups also conduct “get out the vote” campaigns urging members and people who share their views to vote for particular candidates.

Interest groups may also encourage their own members to seek public office.

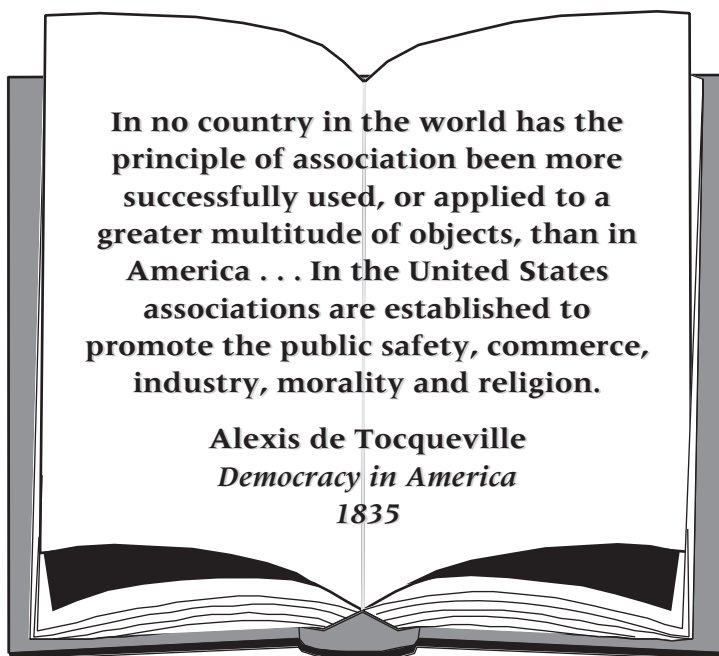
Court Action

Interest groups may take their concerns to the courts. For example, business groups may sue the government to protest federal regulations.

Public Support

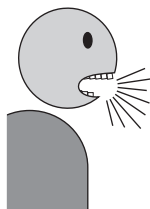
Interest groups may run campaigns to gain public support for their policies, using television, radio, the internet, newspapers, and magazines.

Debate Over Interest Groups



Positive

1. James Madison believed that factions were inevitable and that a republican form of government would allow groups to balance each other so that none could become too powerful.
2. Interest groups provide additional representation for the public in Congress. People can be represented in terms of their economic, social, or occupational interests.
3. A pressure group also serves as a watchdog and can protest government policies that might harm its members.



Negative

1. James Madison warned the new nation against the dangerous side of "factions," which he defined as "a number of citizens . . . who are united by some common impulse . . . adverse to the rights of other citizens" (Federalist 10, 1787). Today, the competition among interest groups can cripple efforts to change policy.
2. The greatest concern over interest groups in recent years has been their contributions to political campaigns. Many argue that interest groups have far too much control over members of Congress.
3. Regulating lobbying by interest groups is difficult. By law, all lobbyists must register with the clerk of the House and the secretary of the Senate; until 1995, only interest groups that claimed their primary function to be lobbying were required to register. The Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, however, extended the definition of a lobbyist to include any individual who spends at least 20% of his or her total time lobbying on behalf of an interest group. As a result of this legislative reform, many more interest groups were required to register with Congress.

