

10

Interest Groups

Politics in Action: How the Beverage Industry Mobilized to Stop a Sugar Tax



As the debate over health care reform dominated the political agenda in 2009, interest groups mobilized both for and against various policy changes that were under consideration. One of these proposals would have impacted many teenagers every day—namely, a federal tax of a penny an ounce on soft drinks and other highly sugared beverages. The consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages has been linked to risks for obesity, diabetes, and heart disease; therefore, supporters of this tax argued that it made sense to impose a levy on sugary drinks to offset health care costs and to reduce overconsumption of these beverages. They were bolstered by a report in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine* in April 2009, which concluded that “a penny-per-ounce excise tax could reduce consumption of sugared beverages by more than 10%.” Furthermore, this report argued that such a tax “would generate considerable revenue, and as with the tax on tobacco, it could become a key tool in efforts to improve health.”¹ The so-called soda tax proposal got a major boost in July 2009 when President Obama was asked about it by a reporter from *Men’s Health* magazine and responded positively, saying, “I actually think it’s an idea that we should be exploring. There’s no doubt that our kids drink way too much soda.”² Although Michelle Obama never spoke out about this tax, it was easy for many political observers to see how it would dovetail nicely with her initiative aimed at solving childhood obesity, called “Let’s Move.” With support from the White House seeming likely, some key members of the tax-writing Ways and Means Committee jumped on the bandwagon in support of this proposal.

In the world of interest groups politics, for every action there is a reaction. With the prospects for enacting a tax on sodas and other sweetened drinks looking up, the producers of such drinks soon mobilized to fight it. A reduction in the consumption of such drinks might have sounded good to

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**LET'S
MOVE!**

AMERICA'S MOVE TO SAVE A
HEALTHIER GENERATION OF KIDS

Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign has emphasized healthy eating. But public health advocates have found that even with the support of the First Family it is quite difficult to change public policy to promote a healthier lifestyle. For example, proposals to enact policies that will discourage the consumption of high-calorie foods and drinks usually run into the formidable obstacle of intensive lobbying from the makers of these products.



1 **The Big Picture** Do lobbyists deserve their reputation? Author Martin P. Wattenberg explains how lobbyists can actually be very useful to Congress in providing information about specific causes, and he reveals why many Congress members choose to become lobbyists when their terms are finished.



The Basics What are interest groups and what role do they play in our democracy? Listen to real people tackle these and other questions. Learn what types of interest groups exist in our country, what tactics they use to achieve their goals, and why interest groups matter.



3 **In Context** Examine the emergence of interest groups in American politics. In this video, Boston College political scientist Kay Schlozman traces the roots of interest group involvement in American politics and why they are an important part of the political process today.



Thinking Like a Political Scientist Do interest groups have an impact on policy? Boston College political scientist Kay Schlozman explains why this is not an easy question to answer. She also discusses how scholars determine which groups are represented and which groups are not.



5 **In the Real World** Is pizza a vegetable? This video illustrates the difference between elitist and populist theories of interest groups by examining real people's reactions to the recent debate over whether school cafeterias should count pizza sauce as a full serving of vegetables.



So What? What will it take for younger voters to have an influence in Congress? Author Martin P. Wattenberg describes the process by which interest groups are created and explains why they work so hard to have their voices heard—even if it means delaying certain legislation for a decade or more.



public health advocates, but it would mean billions in lost revenue to the companies that make and distribute them. The American Beverage Association, which had been spending about \$700,000 per year on lobbying Congress, suddenly spent \$18.9 million lobbying Congress in 2009. The two biggest soda producers, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, together spent \$18.6 million on lobbying, up from about \$3 million per year.³ In addition, soft drink producers enlisted a host of allies to work with them in trying to derail any consideration of such a tax. The milk industry quickly signed up, realizing that chocolate milk could well be taxed too. The fast-food industry also joined in, fearing that its sales of soda would suffer. But perhaps most significantly, many Latino groups joined in the alliance, arguing that this tax would disproportionately hurt low-income minority communities. In a \$10 million TV and magazine campaign, the coalition known as Americans Against Food Taxes placed ads in English and Spanish that stated “They say it won’t be much, but anything is too much when you’re raising a family these days.”

With all this lobbying against the proposed tax on sweetened drinks, members of Congress quickly dropped the idea of a federal tax. It never even came to a vote in a committee of Congress, much less to the floor of either house. Depending upon one’s point of view, the success of these groups in derailing this proposal can be interpreted as consistent with any one of the three theories of interest groups that will be reviewed in this chapter. Elitist theorists would clearly focus on the ability of big corporations like PepsiCo to suddenly devote millions of dollars to lobbying. Pluralists would point to the mobilization of potential groups and to the alliance formed between the financially powerful and ethnic minorities, which, although lacking financial resources, brought crucial voting power to the table. Hyperpluralists would argue that this whole episode demonstrates how the government bends over backward to avoid alienating any organized interest group, thereby leading to policy gridlock and the inability to effect policy changes.

Our nation’s capital has become a hub of interest group activity. On any given day, it is possible to observe pressure groups in action in many forums. In the morning, you could attend congressional hearings, in which you are sure to see interest groups testifying for and against proposed legislation. At the Supreme Court, you might stop in to watch a public interest lawyer arguing for strict enforcement of environmental regulations. Take a break for lunch at a nice Washington restaurant, and you may see a lobbyist entertaining a member of Congress. In the afternoon, go to any department of the executive branch (such as commerce, labor, or the interior) and you might catch bureaucrats working out rules and regulations with friendly—or sometimes unfriendly—representatives of the interests they are charged with overseeing. You could stroll past the impressive headquarters of the National Rifle Association, the AFL-CIO, or AARP to get a sense of the size of some of the major lobbying organizations. To see some lobbying done on college students’ behalf, drop by One Dupont Circle, where you’ll find the offices of many of the higher education groups, which lobby for student loans and scholarships, as well as for aid to educational institutions. At dinnertime, if you are able to finagle an invitation to a Georgetown cocktail party, you may see lobbyists trying to get the ear of government officials—both elected and unelected.

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in the 1830s, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations.”⁴ Today, this observation still rings true. In cross-national surveys, the United States routinely comes in at, or near, the top in political participation in groups. “America in Perspective: Interest Group Participation” presents results from two such surveys, showing that (1) Americans are more likely than citizens of other countries to participate in a civic association or community-service group and (2) Americans are the more likely than others to have worked with a group to express political views.

In the Federalist 10, James Madison defined interest groups as working “adverse” to the interests of the nation as a whole, and he tried to design our constitutional system to prevent such groups from having too much power. Thus, all this interest group activity raises a crucial question: *Do interest groups help or hinder American democracy?* This chapter will explore how interest groups participate in the policymaking process and what they get out of it.

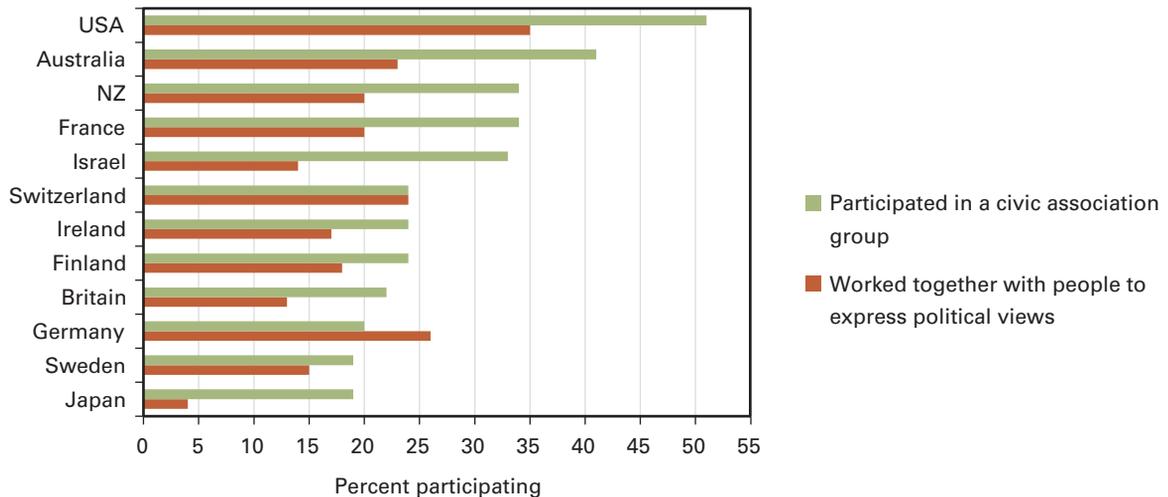
Interest Group Participation

Americans are very associational compared to people in other democracies, as you can see in the following graphic.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTION?

For civic associations – “In the last 12 months, have you participated in the activities of one of the following associations

or groups: a community service or civic association group?” For working with others – “Over the past 5 years or so, have you done any of the following things to express your views about something the government should or should not be doing: worked together with people who shared the same concern?”



SOURCES: Authors' analysis of the 2007 International Social Survey Program survey for civic associations and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, module 2 (2001–2006) for working with others.

interest group

An organization of people with shared policy goals entering the policy process at several points to try to achieve those goals. Interest groups pursue their goals in many arenas.

The Role of Interest Groups

10.1 Describe the role of interest groups in American politics.

All Americans have some interests they want represented. Organizing to promote these interests is an essential part of democracy. The right to organize groups is protected by the Constitution, which guarantees people the right “peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” This important First Amendment right has been carefully defended by the Supreme Court. The freedom to organize is as fundamental to democratic government as freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

The term *interest group* seems simple enough to define. *Interest* refers to a policy goal; a *group* is a combination of people. An **interest group**, therefore, is an organization of people with similar policy goals who enter the political process to try to achieve those goals. Whatever their goals—outlawing abortion or ensuring the right to one or regulating tax loopholes or creating new ones—interest groups pursue them in many arenas. Every level of government, local to federal, is fair game, as is every branch of government. A policy battle lost in Congress may be turned around when it comes to bureaucratic implementation or to the judicial process.

This multiplicity of policy arenas helps distinguish interest groups from political parties. Parties fight their battles through the electoral process; they run candidates for public office. Interest groups may support candidates for office, but American interest

groups do not run their own slate of candidates, as occurs in some other countries. In other words, no serious candidate is ever listed on the ballot as a candidate of the National Rifle Association or Common Cause. It may be well known that a candidate is actively supported by a particular group, but that candidate faces the voters as a Democrat, a Republican, or a third-party candidate.

Another key difference between parties and interest groups is that interest groups are usually policy specialists, whereas parties are policy generalists. Most interest groups have a handful of key policies to push: a farm group cares little about the status of urban transit; an environmental group has its hands full bringing polluters into court without worrying about the minimum wage. Unlike political parties, these groups need not try to appeal to everyone.

The number of interest groups in the United States has been increasing rapidly over the past half century. In 1959, there were about 6,000 groups; by 2012, the *Encyclopedia of Associations* listed over 25,000 groups.⁵ There now seems to be an organized group for just about every conceivable interest. Very few occupations or industries go without a group to represent them in Washington. Even lobbyists themselves now have groups to represent their profession, such as the American League of Lobbyists.

One of the major factors behind this explosion in the number of interest groups has been the development of sophisticated technology. A well-organized interest group can deluge members of Congress with tens of thousands of e-mail messages and phone calls in a matter of hours. Technology did not create interest group politics, but it has surely made the process much easier.

pluralism

A theory of government and politics emphasizing that many groups, each pressing for its preferred policies, compete and counterbalance one another in the political marketplace.

elitism

A theory of government and politics contending that an upper-class elite will hold most of the power and thus in effect run the government.

hyperpluralism

A theory of government and politics contending that groups are so strong that government, seeking to please them all, is thereby weakened.

Theories of Interest Group Politics

10.2 Compare and contrast the theories of pluralism, elitism, and hyperpluralism.

Understanding the debate over whether lobbying and interest groups in general create problems for government in America requires an examination of three important theories. **Pluralism** argues that interest group activity brings representation to all. According to pluralists, groups compete and counterbalance one another in the political marketplace. In contrast, **elitism** argues that a few groups (primarily the wealthy) have most of the power. Finally, **hyperpluralism** asserts that too many groups are getting too much of what they want, resulting in government policy that is often contradictory and lacking in direction. This section looks in turn at each of these three theories' claims with respect to interest groups.

□ Pluralism

Pluralist theory rests its case on the many centers of power in the American political system. Pluralists consider the extensive organization of competing groups as evidence that influence is widely dispersed among them. They believe that groups win some and lose some but that no group wins or loses all the time. Pluralist theorists offer a *group theory of politics*, which consists of several essential arguments.⁶

- **Groups provide a key link between people and government.** All legitimate interests in the political system can get a hearing from government once they are organized.
- **Groups compete.** Labor, business, farmers, consumers, environmentalists, and other interests constantly make competing claims on the government.
- **No one group is likely to become too dominant.** When one group throws its weight around too much, its opponents are likely to intensify their organization and thus restore balance to the system. For every action, there is a reaction.

- **Groups usually play by the rules of the game.** In the United States, group politics is a fair fight, with few groups lying, cheating, stealing, or engaging in violence to get their way.
- **Groups weak in one resource can use another.** Big business may have money on its side, but labor has numbers. All legitimate groups are able to affect public policy by one means or another.

Pluralists would never deny that some groups are stronger than others or that competing interests do not always get an equal hearing. Still, they can point to many cases in which a potential group organized itself and, once organized, affected policy decisions. African Americans, women, and consumers are all groups who were long ignored by government officials but who, once organized, redirected the course of public policy. In sum, pluralists argue that lobbying is open to all and is therefore not to be regarded as a problem.

□ Elitism

Whereas pluralists are impressed by the vast number of organized interests, elitists are impressed by how insignificant most of them are. Real power, elitists say, is held by relatively few people, key groups, and institutions. They maintain that the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves—a view that the majority of the public has usually agreed with in recent years. In February 2010, 78 percent of those interviewed in a *New York Times*/CBS News poll said that they thought the government “is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves” compared to just 19 percent who said that the government “is run for the benefit of all the people.”

Elitists critique pluralist theory by pointing to the concentration of power in a few hands. Where pluralists find dispersion of power, elitists find interlocking and concentrated power centers. They note, for example, that about one-third of top institutional positions—corporate boards, foundation boards, university trusteeships, and so on—are occupied by people who hold more than one such position, resulting in so-called interlocking directorates.⁷ Elitists see the rise of mighty multinational corporations as further tightening the control of corporate elites. A prime example is America’s giant oil companies. Steve Coll has recently documented how ExxonMobil has exercised a great deal of leverage over the U.S. government (as well as those of other countries).⁸ According to elitists, the power of multinational corporations regularly prevails over consumer interests.

In sum, the elitist view of the interest group system makes the following assertions:

- The fact that there are numerous groups proves nothing because groups are extremely unequal in power.
- Awesome power is held by the largest corporations.
- The power of a few is fortified by an extensive system of interlocking directorates.
- Other groups may win many minor policy battles, but corporate elites prevail when it comes to the big decisions.

Thus, lobbying is a problem, say elite theorists, because it benefits relatively few at the expense of many.

□ Hyperpluralism

Hyperpluralists, also critical of pluralism, argue that the interest group system is out of control. For hyperpluralists, the problem is, in a phrase coined by Theodore Lowi, *interest group liberalism*, a situation in which government is excessively deferential to groups, with virtually all pressure group demands seen as legitimate and the job of government to advance them all.⁹

As a result of this effort to please and appease every interest, agencies proliferate, conflicting regulations expand, programs multiply, and, of course, the budget skyrockets.

Point to Ponder

Hyperpluralists argue that there are too many special interests getting too much of what they want.

In your opinion, what is the effect of a wide range of groups pursuing their interests? Are these self-interests in reality unbridled (i.e., unrestrained)? Looking at the groups in the cartoon, what do you think pluralist and elitist theorists might say?



If environmentalists want clean air, government imposes clean-air rules; if businesses complain that cleaning up pollution is expensive, government gives them a tax write-off for pollution control equipment. If the direct-mail industry wants cheap rates, government gives it to them; if people complain about junk mail, the Postal Service gives them a way to take their names off mailing lists. If cancer researchers convince the government to launch an antismoking campaign, tobacco sales may drop; if they do, government will subsidize tobacco farmers to ease their loss.¹⁰

According to hyperpluralists, interest group liberalism is promoted by the network of *subgovernments* in the American political system that exercise a great deal of control over specific policy areas. These subgovernments, which are generally known as **iron triangles**, are composed of key interest group leaders interested in policy X, the government agency in charge of administering policy X, and the members of congressional committees and subcommittees handling policy X.

All the elements of the iron triangle have the same goal: protecting their self-interest. The subgovernment in educational policy provides a good example. Education interest groups include the National Education Association, the Coalition for Educational Success, the American Council on Education, and many others. The Department of Education administers a variety of programs to aid education, and these programs look to lobbying by education interest groups to help keep their budgets safe from cuts. Finally, most of the members of the education committees of the House and the Senate are especially committed to promoting education; often they have major concentrations of universities in their constituencies. All these elements want to protect interests related to education. Similar iron triangles of group–agency–committee ties exist in scores of other policy areas.

iron triangles

Subgovernments are composed of interest group leaders interested in a particular policy, the government agency in charge of administering that policy, and the members of congressional committees and subcommittees handling that policy; they exercise a great deal of control over specific policy areas.

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Hyperpluralists' major criticism of the interest group system is that relations between groups and the government have become too cozy. Hard choices about national policy are rarely made. Instead of making choices between X and Y, the government pretends there is no need to choose and tries to favor both policies. It is a perfect script for policy gridlock. In short, the hyperpluralist position on group politics is as follows:

- Groups have become too powerful in the political process as government tries to appease every conceivable interest.
- Interest group liberalism is aggravated by numerous iron triangles—comfortable relationships among a government agency, the interest group it deals with, and congressional subcommittees.
- Trying to please every group results in contradictory and confusing policy.

Ironically, the recent interest group explosion is seen by some scholars as weakening the power of iron triangles. With so many more interest groups to satisfy, and with many of them competing against one another, a cozy relationship between groups and the government is plainly more difficult to sustain.

Why It Matters to You

Theories of Interest Group Politics

Our conclusions about how well the Madisonian system works to control the power of special interests would depend on whether we used pluralist, elitist, or hyperpluralist interpretations. A pluralist interpretation would suggest that Madison's system has worked as intended. In an elitist interpretation, however, the wealthy hold too much power, and in a hyperpluralist interpretation, too many groups have too much power.

What Makes an Interest Group Successful?

10.3 Analyze the factors that make some interest groups more successful than others in the political arena.



For a while, *Fortune* magazine issued a list of the 25 most powerful interest groups in politics. Every year the list revealed some surprises. Although such obvious candidates as the National Rifle Association and the American Association of Retired Persons often headed up the list, some of the groups that were considered to be among the most powerful lobbying groups were relatively unknown, such as the National Beer Wholesalers Association and the National Restaurant Association.

Many factors affect the success of an interest group. Among these factors are the size of the group, its intensity, and its financial resources. While greater intensity and more financial resources work to a group's advantage, surprisingly, smaller groups are more likely to achieve their goals than larger groups.

□ The Surprising Ineffectiveness of Large Groups

In one of the most often quoted statements concerning interest groups, E. E. Schattschneider wrote that “pressure politics is essentially the politics of small groups. ... Pressure tactics are not remarkably successful in mobilizing general interests.”¹¹ There are perfectly good reasons why consumer groups are less effective than producer groups,

patients are less effective than doctors, and energy conservationists are less effective than oil companies: Smaller groups have organizational advantages over larger groups.

To shed light on this point, it is important to distinguish between a potential and an actual group. A **potential group** is composed of all people who might be group members because they share some common interest.¹² An **actual group** is composed of those in the potential group who choose to join. Groups vary enormously in the degree to which they enroll their potential membership. Consumer organizations are successful in mobilizing only a small fraction of those who might benefit from their efforts, which is to say almost all Americans. In contrast, organizations such as the National Beer Wholesalers Association, the American Hospital Association, and the Motion Picture Association of America include a good percentage of their potential members. These groups find it easier to get potential members to actually join in and participate.

Economist Mancur Olson explains this phenomenon in *The Logic of Collective Action*.¹³ Olson points out that all groups are in the business of providing collective goods. A **collective good** is something of value, such as clean air, that cannot be withheld from anyone. When the AFL-CIO wins a higher minimum wage, all low-paid workers benefit, regardless of whether they are members of the union. In other words, members of the potential group share in benefits that members of the actual group work to secure. If this is the case, an obvious and difficult problem results: Why should potential members work for something if they can get it free? Why join the group, pay dues, and work hard for a goal when a person can benefit from the group's activity without doing anything at all? A perfectly rational response is thus to sit back and let other people do the work. This is commonly known as the **free-rider problem**.

The bigger the potential group, the more serious the free-rider problem. One reason for this is that in a small group, shares of the collective good are more likely to be great enough to give the potential members an incentive to join the group to help it secure its goals. The old saying that "everyone can make a difference" is much more credible in the case of a relatively small group. In the largest groups, in contrast, each member can expect to get only a tiny share of the policy gains. Weighing the costs of participation against the relatively small benefits, the temptation is always to "let somebody else do it." Therefore, as Olson argues, the larger the potential group, the less likely potential members are to contribute.

This distinct advantage of small groups helps explain why consumer groups have a harder time organizing for political action than do businesses. Such groups claim to seek "public interest" goals, but the gains they win are usually spread thin over millions of people. In contrast, the lobbying costs and benefits for business are concentrated. Suppose that, for example, consumer advocates take the airlines to court over charges of price fixing and force the airlines to return \$100 million to consumers in the form of lower prices. This \$100 million settlement, divided among tens of millions of people who use airlines, amounts to relatively small change for each consumer. Yet, for each of the airline companies it amounts to a substantial sum. One can quickly see which side will be better organized in such a struggle.

In sum, the differences between large and small groups with regard to incentives to participate help explain why interest groups with relatively few members are often so effective. The power of business in the American political system is thus due to more than just money, as proponents of elite theory would have us believe. In addition to their considerable financial strength, multinational corporations have an easier time organizing themselves for political action than larger potential groups, such as consumers. Once well organized, large groups may be very effective, but it is much harder for them to get together in the first place.

The primary way for large potential groups to overcome the free-rider problem is to provide attractive benefits for only those who join the organization. **Selective benefits** are goods that a group can restrict to those who pay their yearly dues, such as information publications, travel discounts, and group insurance rates. AARP has built up a membership list of 40 million Americans over the age of 50 by offering a variety of selective benefits, ranging from insurance to travel discounts.

potential group

All the people who might be interest group members because they share some common interest.

actual group

The people in the potential group who actually join.

collective good

Something of value that cannot be withheld from a potential group member.

free-rider problem

For a group, the problem of people not joining because they can benefit from the group's activities without joining.

selective benefits

Goods that a group can restrict to those who actually join.

single-issue groups

Groups that have a narrow interest, tend to dislike compromise, and often draw membership from people new to politics.

□ Intensity

Another way in which a large potential group may be mobilized is through an issue that people feel intensely about. Intensity is a psychological advantage that can be enjoyed by small and large groups alike. When a group shows that it cares deeply about an issue, politicians are more likely to listen; many votes may be won or lost on a single issue. Amy McKay has found that the intensity of lobbying against a proposal is a powerful predictor of whether the proposal is adopted in Congress or by a federal agency.¹⁴ McKay further notes that because groups opposed to a policy change are more likely to feel intensely about their position than groups calling for the change, in practice this often serves to preserve the status quo.

The rise of single-issue groups has been one of the most dramatic political developments in recent years. A **single-issue group** can be defined as a group that has a narrow interest, dislikes compromise, and single-mindedly pursues its goal. Anti-Vietnam War activists may have formed the first modern single-issue group. Opponents of nuclear power plants, of gun control, and of abortion are some of the many such groups that exist today. All these groups deal with issues that evoke the strong emotions characteristic of single-interest groups. Even college students have gotten into the act, forming groups to lobby against tuition increases, as you can read about in “Young People and Politics: The Virginia 21 Coalition.”

Young People & Politics

The Virginia 21 Coalition

As budget crunches have hit most states in recent years, many state legislatures have cut back on funding for higher education and approved sharp increases in tuition at public colleges and universities. In response, college students in some states have started to form interest groups to fight for more state subsidies for higher education and for limiting tuition increases. In Virginia, a group called the “21st Century Virginia Coalition,” or simply “Virginia 21” for short, has recently had some success in getting the state’s politicians to listen to the opinions of college students regarding funding for higher education.

Virginia 21 first entered the political scene with a campaign to garner support for a bond referendum on the 2002 Virginia ballot to provide over \$900 million to state universities for capital improvements. The group raised over \$17,000 to support the campaign, made roughly 20,000 telephone calls to round up votes for it, and aired a student-written and student-produced radio commercial on behalf of the referendum, which passed with overwhelming support.

One of the organization’s priorities was to push for a 1-cent increase in the state’s sales tax that would be dedicated to increasing funds available for education. The organization collected over 10,000 signatures for a petition titled “Fund Virginia’s Future” and presented them to the state legislature. But they grabbed more attention when they dropped off over 200,000 pennies at the office of the state treasurer in support of the proposed

1-cent increase in the sales tax. The pennies weighed approximately three-quarters of a ton, and the gesture was designed to show that college students care “a ton” about the funding of higher education. The local media could hardly ignore such a gripping visual image.

In 2006, Virginia 21 successfully lobbied the state legislature to pass a bill designed to cut the costs of textbooks for students in Virginia colleges. The measure required public universities to come up with guidelines mandating that professors acknowledge that they are aware of the exact costs of the books they assign, and to specify whether supplements sold with these books are actually required.

Virginia 21 is committed to lobbying the state legislature to substantially increase funds for higher education. For example, during 2011 and 2012 it conducted a campaign entitled “What’s Your Number?” which was designed to make legislators more aware of the mounting debt that many students were taking on.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Would you give money and/or volunteer for a group in your state like Virginia 21? Why or why not?
2. Which of the strategies of interest group lobbying discussed later in this chapter do you think would be most effective for a group like Virginia 21?

SOURCE: www.virginia21.org.

Perhaps the most emotional issue of recent times has been that of abortion. As befits the intensity of the issue, activities have not been limited to conventional means of political participation. Protesting—often in the form of blocking entrances to abortion clinics—has become a common practice for antiabortion activists. Pro-choice activists have organized as well, especially in the wake of the 1989 *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* case, which allowed states greater freedom to restrict abortions. Both groups' positions are clear, not subject to compromise, and influence their vote.

□ Financial Resources

One of the major indictments of the American interest group system is that it is biased toward the wealthy. When he was the majority leader in the Senate, Bob Dole once remarked that he had never been approached by a Poor People's political action committee. There is no doubt that money talks in the American political system, and those who have it get heard. A big campaign contribution may ensure a phone call, a meeting, or even a favorable vote or action on a particular policy. When Charles Keating, who was eventually convicted of bank fraud and racketeering, was asked whether the \$1.3 million he had funneled into the campaigns of five U.S. senators had anything to do with these senators later meeting with federal regulators on his behalf, he candidly responded, "I certainly hope so."

It is important to emphasize, however, that even on some of the most important issues, the big interests do not always win. A recent study of interest group activity on about 100 randomly chosen policy issues by Frank Baumgartner and his colleagues provides the most comprehensive analysis ever of who got what they lobbied for and who did not. The question of how much financial resources mattered was uppermost on the minds of these political scientists, and their results were both definitive and striking. They report, "The usual types of resources that are often assumed to 'buy' policy outcomes—PAC donations, lobbying expenditures, membership size, and organizational budgets—have no observable effect on the outcomes."¹⁵ Based on their analysis, they offer several explanations for why the correlation between big money and lobbying success is so weak. First, they find that lobbying is a very competitive enterprise. Once one side mobilizes its resources, such as money, the other side is almost sure to mobilize whatever resources and allies it has to counter them. Second, in numerous instances one big interest faced off against another. In fact, a full 17 percent of the issues they examined involved one of the most powerful 25 interest groups (as rated by *Fortune*) facing off against another. Third, their data revealed a high degree of diversity within sides active in the lobbying game, as groups with substantial financial resources often allied themselves with poor groups with whom they shared a common goal. As Baumgartner and his colleagues explain, "Where the wealthy often ally with the poor ... it is logically impossible to observe a strong correlation between wealth and success."¹⁶ The tale of the wealthy soda industry forming a lobbying alliance with Latino groups recounted at the beginning of this chapter is an excellent example of this phenomenon.

How Groups Try to Shape Policy

10.4 Assess the four basic strategies that interest groups use to try to shape policy.

No interest group has enough staff, money, or time to do everything possible to achieve its policy goals. Interest groups must therefore choose from a variety of tactics. The four basic strategies are lobbying, electioneering, litigation, and appealing to the public. Keep in mind that these are not mutually exclusive strategies; indeed, most groups use multiple tactics to pursue their policy goals.

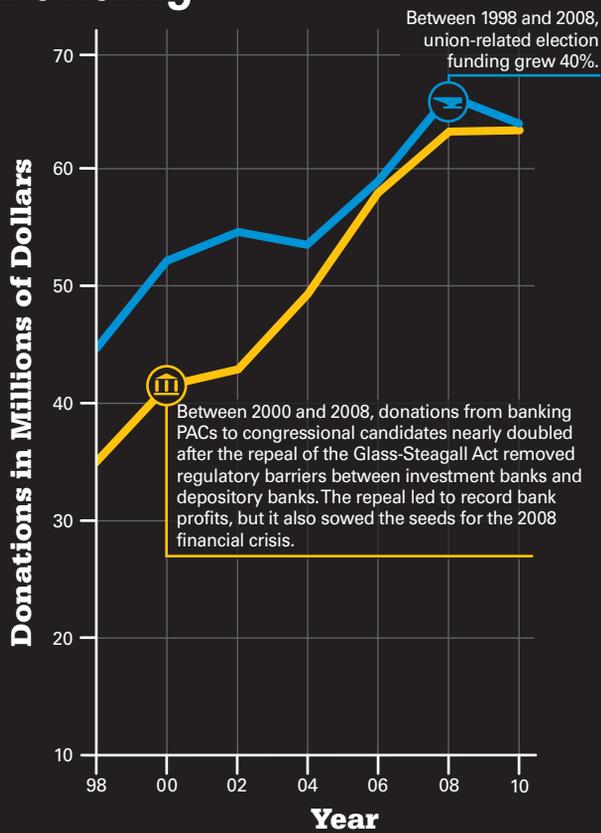


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Simulation: You Are a
Lobbyist

Can Interest Groups Buy Public Policy?

Interest groups such as banks and labor unions participate in activities that influence legislation their members care about, such as tax policy or social benefits. During the election season, interest groups team up with political action committees (PACs) to finance different congressional campaigns. Directing contributions to the party in power, and specifically to committee members who write legislation, is a common practice in American politics. Labor unions and banks donate similar amounts of money to candidates, but they have different contribution strategies.

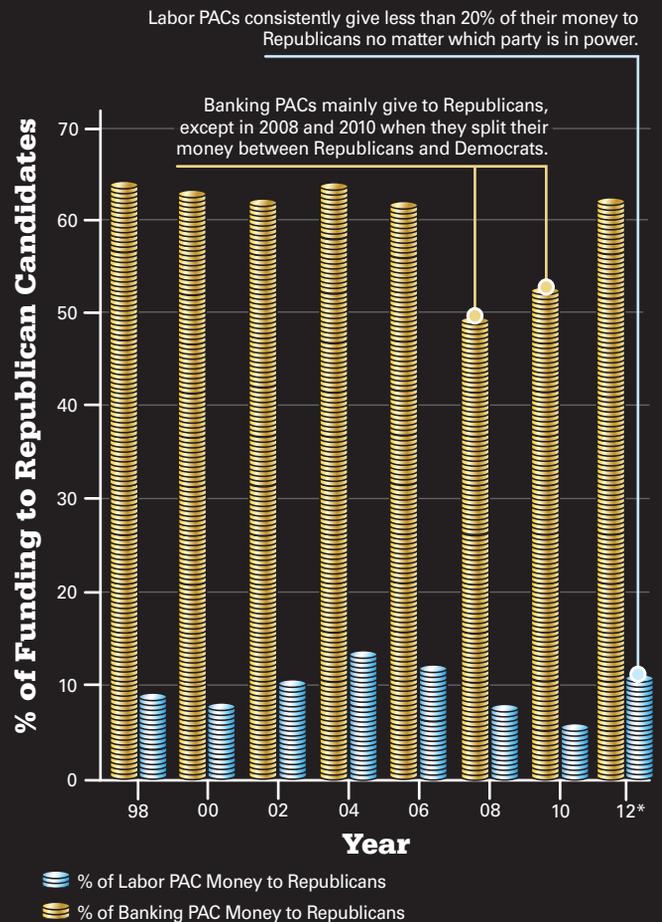
Banks and Labor Unions Have Similar Campaign Funding



Labor donations to all candidates
 Banking donations to all candidates

SOURCE: Data from the Federal Election Commission, www.fec.gov.

Banks and Labor Unions Have Different Party Priorities



*As of reporting period ending October 1, 2012.

Investigate Further

Concept Are banks or labor unions giving more money to politicians through their PACs? They are giving roughly similar amounts of money. In fact, labor PACs donate slightly more money than banking PACs.

Connection How are labor unions' donation strategies different from those of banks? Labor PACs consistently give the majority of their PAC money to Democrats even when Republicans control Congress. Banking PACs give more strategically. During most years, they focus their money on Republicans, but when Democrats are in power, they split their donations between the two parties.

Cause How do interest groups influence policy? Interest groups use PACs and campaign financing to reinforce political friendships with legislators. Labor PACs use their donations to support Democrats who share their ideological values, while banking PACs change their donation strategy depending on which party is in power.

□ Lobbying

The term *lobbying* comes from the place where petitioners used to collar legislators. In the early years of politics in Washington, members of Congress had no offices and typically stayed in boardinghouses or hotels while Congress was in session. A person could not call them up on the phone or make an appointment with their secretary; the only sure way of getting in touch with a member of Congress was to wait in the lobby where he was staying to catch him either coming in or going out. These people were dubbed *lobbyists* because they spent so much of their time waiting in lobbies.

Of course, merely loitering in a lobby does not make one a lobbyist; there must be a particular reason for such action. Lester Milbrath has offered a more precise definition of the practice. He writes that **lobbying** is a “communication, by someone other than a citizen acting on his or her own behalf, directed to a governmental decision maker with the hope of influencing his or her decision.”¹⁷ Lobbyists, in other words, are political persuaders who represent organized groups. They usually work in Washington, handling groups’ legislative business. They are often former legislators themselves. For example, according to a study by Public Citizen’s Congress Watch, over 70 former members of Congress lobbied for the financial services sector in 2009—many of them earning sums they only could have dreamed of as lawmakers.¹⁸

There are two basic types of lobbyists. The first type is a regular, paid employee of a corporation, union, or association. Such lobbyists may hold a title, such as vice president for government relations, but everyone knows that it is for a reason that his or her office is in Washington even if the company headquarters is in Houston. The second type is available for hire on a temporary basis. These lobbyists generally work for groups that are too small to afford a full-time lobbyist or that have a unique, but temporary, need for access to Congress or the executive branch.

The Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 established criteria for determining whether an organization or firm should register its employees as lobbyists. Those who fit the criteria must register with the secretary of the U.S. Senate and file a report regarding each of their clients, indicating how much they were paid by them for lobbying services. This information is made public by the Senate’s Office of Public Records, and combing through about 20,000 disclosure forms per year has become a substantial business in itself. The spring 2012 edition of *Washington Representatives*, a \$270 reference book on participants in the federal lobbying process, advertised that it provided “in-depth profiles on 18,000 lobbyists, 12,000 clients, and 1,700 lobbying firms.”¹⁹ Since 1998, the Center for Responsive Politics has been calculating the expenditures on lobbying of each industry. In Figure 10.1 on the next page, you can see the enormous amounts that the top-spending industries doled out for lobbying over the first three years of the Obama administration.

Although lobbyists are primarily out to influence members of Congress, it is important to remember that they can be of help to them as well. Ornstein and Elder list four important ways in which lobbyists can help a member of Congress:²⁰

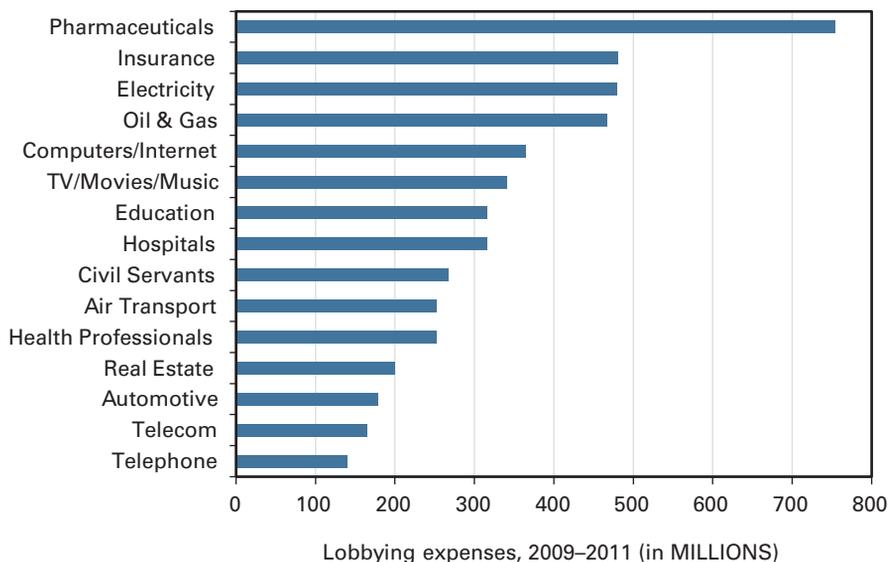
- ***They are an important source of information.*** Members of Congress have to concern themselves with many policy areas; lobbyists can confine themselves to only one area and can thus provide specialized expertise. If information is power, then lobbyists can often be potent allies. Even the most vociferous critics of our lobbying system acknowledge the informational role that lobbyists play in our democracy. For example, although the president of Common Cause denounced the money that lobbyists funnel to politicians, he also noted, “Most lobbyists are good people who perform a valuable service sharing their expertise on issues with Members of Congress.”²¹
- ***They can help politicians with political strategy for getting legislation through.*** Lobbyists are politically savvy people, and they can be useful consultants. When Leon Panetta served as White House chief of staff in the Clinton administration,

lobbying

According to Lester Milbrath, a “communication, by someone other than a citizen acting on his or her own behalf, directed to a governmental decision maker with the hope of influencing his or her decision.”

FIGURE 10.1 INDUSTRIES' BIG SPENDERS ON LOBBYING, 2009–2011

This graph presents the total amount spent on lobbying by industries that were the biggest spenders for the first three years of the Obama presidency. Keep in mind that the data are presented in terms of millions spent. Thus, the pharmaceutical industry spent \$753,953,095 on lobbying. All told, just these 15 industries spent about \$5 billion on lobbying during these three years.



SOURCE: Center for Responsive Politics.

he regularly convened a small group of Washington lobbyists to discuss how the administration should present its proposals.²²

- ***They can help formulate campaign strategy and get the group's members behind a politician's reelection campaign.*** Labor union leaders, for example, often provide help in how to appeal to typical working people, and they often provide volunteers to help out in campaigns as well.
- ***They are a source of ideas and innovations.*** Lobbyists cannot introduce bills, but they can peddle their ideas to politicians eager to attach their name to an idea that will bring them political credit.

Like anything else, lobbying can be done crudely or gracefully. Lobbyists can sometimes be heavy handed. They can threaten or cajole a legislator, implying that electoral defeat is a certain result of not “going along.” They can even make it clear that money flows to the reelection coffers of those who cooperate. It is often difficult to tell the difference between lobbying as a shady business and lobbying as a strictly professional representation of legitimate interests.

High-priced lobbyists are often compared to the airline mechanic who is called in to fix the plane, turns just one screw, and submits a bill for a thousand dollars. Asked to justify such a huge fee for such a little bit of work, the mechanic says, “Well it’s \$10 for turning the screw, and \$990 for knowing which screw to turn.” Similarly, the skilled lobbyist is paid for knowing who to contact and with what information. A recent in-depth study of lobbyists and their work by Rogan Kersh concludes that their success depends largely on their ability to deploy information strategically on behalf of their clients. As Kersh writes, “Searching for, analyzing, and presenting information compose the central activity in most lobbyists’ daily work.”²³ Richard Hall and Alan Deardorff have characterized lobbying as a form of “legislative subsidy,” or a “matching grant of costly policy information, political intelligence, and labor to the enterprises of strategically selected legislators,”²⁴ and have argued that its purpose is not to change anyone’s mind but rather simply to help political allies.



For years, the National Rifle Association has successfully lobbied against gun control measures, arguing that the Second Amendment to the Constitution guarantees all citizens the right to bear arms. Here, a shooting instructor fires a high-power pellet rifle in the indoor range at the 2012 annual meeting of the NRA, which was attended by over 70,000 members.

Other evidence, however, suggests that sometimes lobbying can persuade legislators to support a certain policy.²⁵ The National Rifle Association, which for years kept major gun control policies off the congressional agenda, has long been one of Washington's most effective lobbying groups.²⁶ In a more specific example, many observers believe that intensive lobbying by the insurance industry derailed the possibility of Congress creating a “public option” to compete against private health insurance providers as part of the landmark 2010 health care bill.

Nailing down the specific effects of lobbying is difficult, partly because it is difficult to isolate its effects from other influences. Lobbying clearly works best on people already committed to the lobbyist's policy position. Thus, like campaigning, lobbying is directed toward primarily activating and reinforcing supporters. For example, antiabortion lobbyists would not think of approaching California's Dianne Feinstein to attempt to convert her to their position, because Feinstein clearly supports the pro-choice position. If Senator Feinstein is lobbied by anyone on the abortion issue, it will be by the pro-choice faction, urging her not to compromise with the opposition.

□ Electioneering

Because lobbying works best with those already on the same side, getting the right people into office and keeping them there is also a key strategy of interest groups. Many groups therefore get involved in **electioneering**—aiding candidates financially and getting group members out to support them.

A means for interest groups to participate in electioneering is provided by **political action committees (PACs)**. The number of PACs has exploded from 608 in 1974, the year they were created by campaign finance reforms, to 4,657 in 2012, according to the Federal Election Commission (FEC). No major interest group seeking to exert influence on the political process these days can pass up the opportunity to funnel money honestly and openly into the campaign coffers of its supporters. For example, Major League Baseball's PAC made \$528,000 in political donations during the 2010 election cycle, mostly to members of congressional committees who were considering

electioneering

Direct group involvement in the electoral process, for example, by helping to fund campaigns, getting members to work for candidates, and forming political action committees.

political action committees (PACs)

Groups that raise money from individuals and then distribute it in the form of contributions to candidates that the group supports. PACs must register with the FEC and report their donations and contributions to it. Individual contributions to a PAC are limited to \$5,000 per year and a PAC may give up to \$5,000 to a candidate for each election.

legislation that might impact the business of baseball.²⁷ As economist Roger Noll of Stanford University remarked about the activity of baseball's PAC, "Any industry that has any kind of dependence on government is pretty much forced to do what they're doing," he said. "Unfortunately, this has become the cost of doing business."²⁸

A PAC is formed when a business association or some other interest group decides to contribute to candidates whom it believes will support legislation it favors. The group registers as a PAC with the FEC and then puts money into the PAC coffers. The PAC can collect money from stockholders, members, and other interested parties. It then donates the money to candidates, often after careful research on their issue stands and past voting records. During a primary election, a PAC can donate up to \$5,000 per candidate, and it can then do the same in the general election. These donations must be reported to the FEC, which makes the records of PAC donations quickly available for public scrutiny. Thus, if PACs are corrupting democracy, as many believe, at least they are doing so openly.

Candidates need PACs because high-tech campaigning is expensive. Tightly contested races for the House of Representatives now frequently cost over \$1 million; Senate races can easily cost \$1 million for television alone. PACs play a major role in paying for expensive campaigns. Thus, there emerges a symbiotic relationship between the PACs and the candidates: Candidates need money, which they insist can be used without compromising their integrity; PACs want access to officeholders, which they insist can be gained without buying votes. Most any lobbyist will tell his or her clients that politicians will listen to any important interest group but that with a sizable PAC donation they'll listen better.

In recent years, nearly half the candidates running for reelection to the House of Representatives have received the majority of their campaign funds from PACs. These funds often provide incumbents with a major head start in fundraising, as congressional challengers typically have a hard time attracting PAC donations. For example, during the 2010 election cycle, PACs gave \$311 million to congressional incumbents, compared to just \$40 million to challengers.²⁹ Why does PAC money go so overwhelmingly to incumbents? The answer is that PAC contributions are basically investments for the future, and incumbents are the most likely to return the investment. When R. Kenneth Godwin and Barry J. Seldon asked a sample of PAC directors to explain why their PACs gave money to certain candidates, the top five answers were that these candidates were (1) on committees that are important to their interests, (2) very supportive of issues important to them, (3) from a district or state where they had facilities, (4) helping them with executive and regulatory agencies, and (5) in leadership positions that enabled them to influence issues that affect the PAC.³⁰

Only a handful of serious congressional candidates have resisted the lure of PAC money in recent years. Critics of the PAC system worry that all this money leads to PAC control over what the winners do once in office. Archibald Cox and Fred Wertheimer write that the role of PACs in campaign finance "is robbing our nation of its democratic ideals and giving us a government of leaders beholden to the monied interests who make their election possible."³¹ There have been serious calls to do away with PACs altogether, as discussed in "You Are the Policymaker: Should PACs Be Eliminated?"

Why It Matters to You

PACs

The great increase in the number of PACs over the past several decades has enabled far more groups to become involved in electioneering. Insofar as more participation is desirable, the increase of PACs has to be considered a positive development. But given that only groups that can successfully organize and raise substantial sums of money can take advantage of the PAC system, the increased importance of PACs has introduced some obvious biases into the electoral process.

You Are the Policymaker

Should PACs Be Eliminated?

The effect of PAC campaign contributions on congressional votes has become a perennial issue in American politics. Critics of PACs are convinced that they distort the democratic process and corrupt our political system in favor of those who can raise the most money. Many politicians freely admit—once they are out of office—that it is a myth to think that the PACs don't want something in return. They may only want to be remembered on one or two crucial votes or with an occasional intervention with government agencies, but multiply this by the thousands of special interests that are organized today and the worst fears of the hyperpluralists could be realized—a government that constantly yields to every special interest.

Common Cause (www.commoncause.org) has as one of its primary missions exposing what it sees as the evils of the PAC system. It argues that the influence of corporate PACs on Capitol Hill has led to “corporate welfare” and costs taxpayers billions of dollars. For example, Common Cause maintains that the George W. Bush administration’s decision to eliminate the roadless rule, which protected 1.9 million acres of federal forests in Oregon from logging, was a clear payback for PAC contributions by the timber industry. Along with others, Common Cause has attributed the failure of Congress to further regulate tobacco and cigarette advertising to the more than \$35 million of PAC contributions from tobacco companies over the past decade. And Common Cause asserts that \$3 million in PAC contributions from the biggest mortgage brokers kept Congress from scrutinizing questionable lending practices that played such a crucial role in bringing on the recession of 2008–2009.

However, others argue that connection is not causation. They believe that most members of Congress are not affected by PAC contributions, which come largely from groups they already agree with anyway. For instance, labor PACs will not waste their money trying to influence members of Congress who have consistently opposed raising the minimum wage. Defenders of the PAC system also point out that the PAC system further increases participation in the political process. As opposed to individual donations, PACs—which represent groups of people—allow better representation of occupational groups. The PAC system allows people with common professional interests, such as farmers, lawyers, dentists, and college professors, to express their support of candidates jointly through political contributions. Similarly, corporation PACs can represent the interests of stockholders and employees.

If James Madison was right in thinking that the key to controlling the power of interest groups is to expand their sphere of participation, then PACs certainly do this, according to their defenders. Beyond this, the money for today’s expensive media campaigns has to come from somewhere. Those who wish to maintain the PAC system typically argue that the alternative of the government providing campaign funds is impractical given that only about 7 percent of taxpayers participate in the \$3 voluntary income tax check-off system for financing federal campaigns.

What do you think? Would you consider eliminating PACs? Would you prefer just to leave things as they are? Or, as a middle course, would you favor reducing the amount of money (\$5,000 in the primary and another \$5,000 in the general election) that PACs can donate directly to candidates?

In addition to their role in financing campaigns, interest groups participate in elections in numerous other ways. Among these are recruiting interest group members to run as candidates for office, issuing official group endorsements, providing volunteer labor to participate in campaign work, and sending delegates to state and national party conventions to try to influence party platforms.

□ Litigation

If interest groups fail in Congress or get only a vague piece of legislation, the next step is to go to court in the hope of getting specific rulings. Karen Orren has linked much of the success of environmental interest groups to their use of lawsuits. “Frustrated in Congress,” she wrote, “they have made an end run to the courts, where they have skillfully exploited and magnified limited legislative gains.”³² Environmental legislation, such as the Clean Air Act, typically includes provisions allowing ordinary citizens to sue for enforcement. As a result, every

federal agency involved in environmental regulation now has hundreds of suits pending against it at any given time. Moreover, the constant threat of a lawsuit increases the likelihood that businesses will consider the environmental impact of what they do.

Perhaps the most famous interest group victories in court were those won by civil rights groups in the 1950s. While civil rights bills remained stalled in Congress, these groups won major victories in court cases concerning school desegregation, equal housing, and employment discrimination. More recently, consumer groups have used suits against businesses and federal agencies as a means of assuring enforcement of consumer regulations.

One tactic that lawyers employ to make the views of interest groups heard by the judiciary is the filing of *amicus curiae* briefs (“friend of the court” briefs), written arguments submitted to the courts in support of one side of a case. Through these written depositions, a group states its collective position as well as how its own welfare will be affected by the outcome of the case. Numerous groups may file *amicus* briefs in highly publicized and emotionally charged cases. For example, in the case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, which challenged affirmative action programs as reverse discrimination, over 100 different groups filed *amicus* briefs. A study of participation in *amicus* briefs by Caldeira and Wright found that the Supreme Court has been accessible to a wide array of interest groups, both in deciding which cases to hear and in deciding how to rule.³³

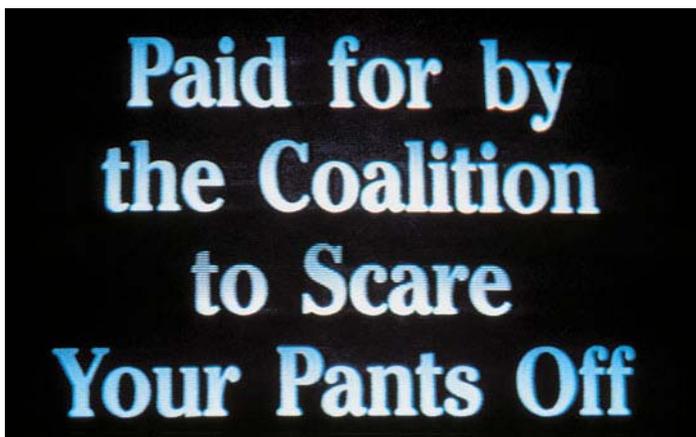
A more direct judicial strategy employed by interest groups is the filing of class action lawsuits, which enable a group of people in a similar situation to combine their common grievances into a single suit. For instance, in 1977 flight attendants won a class action suit against the airline industry’s regulation that all stewardesses be unmarried. As one lawyer who specializes in such cases states, “The class action is the greatest, most effective legal engine to remedy mass wrongs.”³⁴

□ Going Public

Groups are also interested in the opinions of the public. Because public opinion ultimately makes its way to policymakers, interest groups carefully cultivate their public image and use public opinion to their advantage when they can. As Ken Kollman finds, even the wealthiest and most powerful groups in America appeal to public opinion to help their cause. For example, when the government instituted a requirement for tax-withholding on savings accounts, the American Bankers Association appealed to their customers to protest this to their congressional representatives. After 22 million postcards flooded into Congress, lawmakers quickly reversed the policy.³⁵

Interest groups market not only their stand on issues but also their reputations. Business interests want people to see them as “what made America great,” not as wealthy Americans trying to ensure large profits. The Teamsters Union likes to be known as a united organization of hardworking men and women, not as an organization that has in the past been influenced by organized crime. Farmers promote the image of a sturdy family working to put bread on the table, not the huge agribusinesses that have largely replaced family farms. In this way, many groups try to create a reservoir of goodwill with the public.

Interest groups’ appeals to the public for support have a long tradition in American politics. In 1908, AT&T launched a major magazine advertising campaign to convince people of the need for a telephone monopoly. In 1948, when President Truman proposed a system of national health insurance, the American Medical Association spent millions of dollars on ads attacking “socialized medicine.” In both 1994 and 2010, when Congress took up major initiatives to reform health care, many groups placed advertisements in support of and opposition to the proposals made by presidents



Interest groups spent over \$100 million appealing to public opinion during the debate over health care in 1994. In a counter-ad produced by the Democratic National Committee, the argument was made that opponents of the Clinton health care plan were using scare tactics. You can see the tag end of the ad in this photo.

Clinton and Obama. In both cases, so much money was spent (over \$100 million) that many observers compared this activity to a national electoral campaign.

Lately, more and more organizations have undertaken expensive public relations (PR) efforts, whether to defend their reputations or to promote their stands on issues. After *60 Minutes* ran a story in 2009 about a lawsuit against Chevron for allegedly contaminating the Ecuadorian Amazon and causing a wave of cancer in the region, Chevron hired former CNN correspondent Gene Randall to produce a video telling its side of the story and posted the video on YouTube. In other recent examples, Toyota ran ads defending itself against charges of negligence after some of its vehicles were found to have acceleration and braking problems, and Microsoft condemned its prosecution by the Justice Department for alleged monopolistic practices. Mobil Oil has long run a visible corporate PR effort to influence the public with its regular editorial-style ads in the *New York Times* and other major publications. These ads typically address issues that affect the oil industry and big business in general. One was even titled “Why Do We Buy This Space?” Mobil answered its rhetorical question by saying that “business needs voices in the media, the same way labor unions, consumers, and other groups in our society do.”³⁶ No one knows just how effective these image-molding efforts are, but many groups seem to believe firmly that advertising pays off.

Types of Interest Groups

10.5 Identify the various types of interest groups and their policy concerns.

Whether they are lobbying, electioneering, litigating, or appealing to the public, interest groups are omnipresent in the American political system. As with other aspects of American politics and policymaking, political scientists loosely categorize interest groups into clusters. Among the most important clusters are those consisting of groups that deal with either economic issues, environmental concerns, equality issues, or the interests of consumers and the public generally. An examination of these four very distinct types of interest groups will give you a good picture of much of the American interest group system.

10.1

union shop

A provision found in some collective bargaining agreements requiring all employees of a business to join the union within a short period, usually 30 days, and to remain members as a condition of employment.

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right-to-work laws

A state law forbidding requirements that workers must join a union to hold their jobs. State right-to-work laws were specifically permitted by the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947.

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□ Economic Interests

Business, labor, and farmers all fret over the impact of government regulations. Even a minor change in government regulatory policy can cost industries a great deal. Tax policies also affect the livelihood of individuals and firms. How the tax code is written determines whether people and producers pay a lot or a little of their incomes to the government. Government often provides subsidies to farmers, small businesses, railroads, minority businesses, and others, and every economic group wants to get its share of this direct aid and government contracts. In this era of economic global interdependence, economic interests are concerned about such matters as import quotas and tariffs (fees imposed on imports) and the soundness of the dollar. Although labor and business interests both seek to influence government because of the effect of these various aspects of economic policy, the impact on economic policy they seek is considerably different.

LABOR Unions are the main interest groups representing labor. About 10 million workers are members of unions belonging to the AFL-CIO—itsself a union of unions. Millions of other workers belong to unions not affiliated with the AFL-CIO, such as the National Education Association, the Teamsters, and the Service Employees International Union.

The major aim of American union organizations is to press for policies to ensure better working conditions and higher wages. Recognizing that many workers would like to enjoy union benefits without actually joining a union and paying dues, unions have fought hard to establish the **union shop**, which requires employees of a business that has a union contract to join the union and stay in it as long as they work there. In contrast, business groups have supported **right-to-work laws**, which outlaw union membership as a condition of employment. They argue that such laws deny a basic freedom—namely, the right not to belong to a group. In 1947, the biggest blow ever to the American labor movement occurred when Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, permitting states to adopt right-to-work laws (known within the AFL-CIO as “slave labor laws”). There is little doubt that such laws make a difference. As of 2010, labor union membership averaged 8 percent in the states with right-to-work laws, compared to 16 percent in states that had no such law.

The American labor movement reached its peak in 1956, when 33 percent of the nonagricultural workforce belonged to a union; since then, the percentage has declined to about 12 percent. One factor behind this decline is that low wages in other countries have adversely affected the American job market in a number of key manufacturing sectors. The U.S. steel industry, which once dominated in the domestic market, now has to compete with imports from producers based in Brazil, Korea, and other fast-developing economies. The United Auto Workers found its clout greatly reduced as Detroit faced increasingly heavy competition from Japanese automakers. Some political scientists, however, believe labor’s problems result from more than the decline of blue-collar industries. Paul Johnson argues that the biggest factor causing the decline in union membership is the problems unions have in convincing today’s workers that they will benefit from unionization. In particular, Johnson argues that this task has become more difficult because of employers’ efforts to make nonunion jobs more satisfying.³⁷

As labor union membership has declined in traditional blue-collar industries, the labor union movement has expanded in the public sector. In 2010, public sector employees accounted for 7.6 million union members, as compared to 7.1 million in the private sector. With state and local budgets tightening in response to declining revenues in recent years, the collective bargaining rights of public sector employees have become a hot-button issue. Over the vigorous protests of union members, states



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Over the vigorous protests of union supporters, shown here, the Wisconsin state legislature passed a law that took away collective bargaining rights from public sector employees. After Governor Walker signed the bill into law, union activists mounted a campaign to recall the governor, which ultimately failed by a 53–47 percent margin in 2012.

such as Wisconsin and Indiana passed controversial measures to limit the power of unions. Supporters of such restrictions argued that they were necessary to bring public sector workers' benefits in line with those in the private sector; opponents charged that they were a power play by conservative forces seeking to break the back of public sector unions.

BUSINESS If elite theorists are correct and there is an American power elite, it certainly must be dominated by leaders of the biggest banks, insurance companies, and multinational corporations. In any event, business is well organized for political action. Most large corporations now have offices in Washington that monitor legislative activity. So do hundreds of trade associations, organizations that bring together businesses that operate in a specific industry. And the Chamber of Commerce has become an imposing lobbying force, spending over \$100 million a year lobbying on behalf of its mission to fulfill “the unified interests of American business.” Business PACs have increased more dramatically than any other category of PACs over the past several decades.

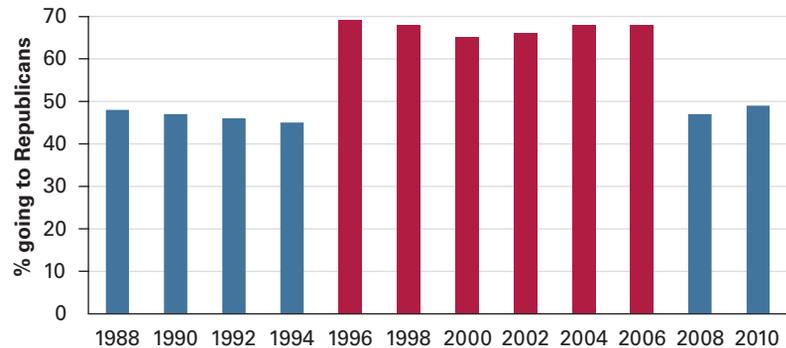
Many people assume that corporate PAC contributions are always tilted in favor of the Republican Party and its tax-cutting and deregulatory agenda. All else being equal, it is true that corporate PACs are more likely to favor the Republicans. However, as you can see in Figure 10.2, these PACs have also swayed significantly with the political winds over time, with Democrats receiving more business money when they are in the majority than in other years. This pattern indicates that a good part of what business expects to get from PAC contributions is access to the most powerful policymakers.

One should also keep in mind that business interests are far from monolithic, as different business interests compete on many specific issues. Both Microsoft and Google have their lobbyists on Capitol Hill pressing their competing interests. Trucking and construction companies want more highways, but railroads do not.

FIGURE 10.2 HOW CORPORATE PACS HAVE SHIFTED TOWARD THE MAJORITY PARTY

This graph shows the percentage of corporate PAC spending in each two-year election cycle that went to Republican candidates for the House of Representatives. Although data for 2012 were not available yet when this book was published, if past patterns hold, the percentage should go up from 2010, as the Republicans were once again in the majority in the House during the 2012 campaign.

Corporate PAC money has gone more to Republicans in years when they were in the majority in the House (those colored in red)



SOURCE: Federal Election Commission.

An increase in international trade will help some businesses expand their markets, but others may be hurt by foreign competition. In short, business interests are generally unified when it comes to promoting greater profits but are often fragmented when policy choices have to be made.

□ Environmental Interests

Among the newer political interest groups are the environmentalists. A handful of environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, have been around since the nineteenth century, but many others trace their origins to the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. On that day, ecology-minded people marched on Washington and other places to symbolize their support for environmental protection. Just two decades later, one estimate pegged the number of environmental groups at over 10,000 and their combined revenues at \$2.9 billion—demonstrating “how widely and deeply green values had permeated the society.”³⁸ No doubt this figure would be even higher today. Russell Dalton finds that the United States ranks high among democracies in the percentage of its adult population that belongs to a group whose main aim is to protect the environment.³⁹ Among the environmental groups that can boast at least a million members in the United States are the World Wildlife Fund, the Nature Conservancy, and the National Wildlife Federation.

Environmental groups have promoted policies to control pollution and to combat global warming, wilderness protection, and species preservation. In pursuing their goals, they have opposed a range of policies and practices, including oil drilling in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, strip mining, supersonic aircraft, and nuclear power plants. On these and other issues, environmentalists have exerted a great deal of influence on Congress and state legislatures. In particular, the arguments of environmentalists about radiation risks have had a profound impact on public policy. From 1977, when the nation’s worst nuclear accident occurred at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, to 2010, no new nuclear plants were approved.⁴⁰ More recently, however, Congress appropriated \$18 billion in loan guarantees for new reactors built to higher safety standards, and the Obama administration approved new plants for construction in Georgia and South Carolina.



A few interest groups use unconventional methods to get attention for their views and demands. The environmental activist group Greenpeace is well known for coming up with activities the media can hardly ignore. Here, Greenpeace activists attract media attention in an attempt to get the secretary of the interior to take regulatory action to combat global warming and help save the polar bear species.

□ Equality Interests

The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees equal protection under the law. American history, though, shows that this is easier said than done. Two sets of interest groups, representing minorities and women, have made equal rights their main policy goal.

Equality at the polls, in housing, on the job, in education, and in all other facets of American life has long been the dominant goal of African American groups. The oldest and largest of these groups is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It argued and won the monumental *Brown v. Board of Education* case, in which the Supreme Court, in 1954, held that segregated schools were unconstitutional. Today, civil rights groups continue to push for equality, for example, through affirmative action programs to ensure that minority groups are given educational and employment opportunities.

Although the work of civil rights interest groups in fighting segregation and discrimination is well known, Dona and Charles Hamilton argue that “much less is known about the ‘social welfare agenda’—the fight for social welfare policies to help the poor.”⁴¹ They argue that civil rights groups, since their early days, have been concerned with larger and more universal economic problems in American society.

In recent decades, women’s rights groups, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), have lobbied for an end to discrimination against women. One of their top goals has long been the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which

10.1

public interest lobbies

According to Jeffrey Berry, organizations that seek “a collective good, the achievement of which will not selectively and materially benefit the membership or activists of the organization.”

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states that “equality of rights under the law shall not be abridged on account of sex.” Although the ERA fell three states short of ratification, NOW remains committed to achieving the protection that the amendment would have constitutionally guaranteed by advocating the enactment of many individual statutes. As is often the case with interest group politics, issues are rarely settled once and for all; rather, they shift to different policy arenas.

□ Consumer and Other Public Interest Lobbies

Today thousands of organized groups are championing various causes or ideas “in the public interest.” These **public interest lobbies** are, in Jeffrey Berry’s definition, organizations that seek “a collective good, the achievement of which will not selectively and materially benefit the membership or activists of the organization.”⁴² If products are made safer by the lobbying of consumer protection groups, it is not the members of such groups alone that benefit; rather, everyone should be better off. The benefit that public interest lobbies seek may be for the public as consumers, for the public more broadly defined, or for some sector of the public.

If ever a lobbying effort was spurred by a single person, it was the consumer movement. In the name of consumers, Ralph Nader took on American business almost single-handedly at first. He was propelled to national prominence by his 1965 book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, which attacked General Motors’ Corvair as mechanically deficient and dangerous. General Motors made the mistake of hiring a private detective to look for some dirt they could use to discredit him. Nader eventually learned about the investigation, sued General Motors for invasion of privacy, and won a hefty damage settlement. He used the proceeds to launch the first major consumer group in Washington.

Consumer groups have won many legislative victories. In 1973, for example, Congress responded to consumer advocacy by creating the Consumer Product Safety Commission, which it authorized to regulate all consumer products and to ban products that were dangerous. Products that the commission investigated included, in 2010, children’s cribs reported to cause accidental strangulation and Starbucks water bottles reported to shatter in consumers’ hands.

In addition to consumer groups, the wide range of public interest groups includes groups seeking to protect those who cannot speak for themselves, such as children or the mentally ill; good-government groups such as Common Cause, which push for openness and fairness in government; and religious groups like the Christian Coalition, which pursue what they consider to be moral standards for society.

Understanding Interest Groups

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Evaluate how well Madison’s ideas for controlling the influence of interest groups have worked in practice.



he problem of interest groups in America is much what it was over 200 years ago when James Madison defined it in speaking of his concerns about factions: A free society must allow for the representation of all groups that seek to influence political decision making, yet groups are usually more concerned with their own self-interest than with the needs of society as a whole; for democracy to work well, it is important that groups not be allowed to assume a dominant position.

□ Interest Groups and Democracy

Madison’s solution to the problems posed by interest groups was to create a wide-open system in which many groups would be able to participate. In a wide-open system,

according to Madison, groups with opposing interests would counterbalance one another. Pluralist theorists believe that a rough approximation of the public interest emerges from this competition. Indeed, with the tremendous growth of interest group politics in recent years, for every group with an interest, there now seems to be a competing group to watch over it—not to mention public interest lobbies to watch over them all. Robert Salisbury argues that “the growth in the number, variety, and sophistication of interest groups represented in Washington” has transformed policymaking such that it “is not dominated so often by a relatively small number of powerful interest groups as it may once have been.”⁴³ He concludes that the increase in lobbying activity has actually resulted in less clout overall for interest groups—and in better democracy.

Elite theorists clearly disagree with this conclusion and point to the proliferation of business PACs as evidence of more interest group corruption in American politics than ever. A democratic process requires a free and open exchange of ideas in which candidates and voters can hear one another out, but PACs—the source of so much money in elections—distort the process. Elite theorists particularly note that wealthier interests are greatly advantaged by the PAC system. It is true that there are over 4,000 PACs, but the relatively few big-spending ones dominate the fund-raising game. Rozell, Wilcox, and Madland report that in one recent election cycle a quarter of all PAC contributions came from just 48 PACs, each of which gave over a million dollars. In contrast, the 2,180 smallest PACs (in terms of donations made) accounted for just 10 percent of all PAC contributions.⁴⁴

Hyperpluralist theorists maintain that whenever a major interest group objects strongly to proposed legislation, policymakers will bend over backward to try to accommodate it. With the formation of so many groups in recent years and with so many of them having influence in Washington, hyperpluralists argue that it has been increasingly difficult to accomplish major policy change in Washington. And this policy gridlock, so often evident in American politics today, diminishes democracy.

□ Interest Groups and the Scope of Government

Although individualistic, Americans are also very associational, as shown at the start of this chapter. This is not at all contradictory. By joining a number of political associations, Americans are able to politicize a variety of aspects of their own individualism. The multiplicity of the American interest group structure and the openness of American politics to input from interest groups allow individuals many channels for political participation and thus facilitate representation of individual interests.

Although individualism is most often treated in this book as being responsible for the relatively small scope of American government, when it works its way through interest group politics, the result is just the opposite. Individual interest groups fight to sustain government programs that are important to them, thereby making it hard for politicians ever to reduce the scope of government. Many American politicians have found their attempts to cut waste in federal spending frustrated by interest groups. For example, a month before leaving office, President Reagan remarked that “special interest groups, bolstered by campaign contributions, pressure lawmakers into creating and defending spending programs.”⁴⁵ Above all, most special interest groups strive to maintain established programs that benefit them.

However, one can also argue that the growth in the scope of government in recent decades accounts for a good portion of the proliferation of interest groups. The more areas in which the federal government has become involved, the more interest groups have developed to attempt to influence policy. As William Lunch notes, “A great part of the increase was occasioned by the new government

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responsibility for civil rights, environmental protection, and greater public health and safety.”⁴⁶ For example, once the government got actively involved in protecting the environment, many groups sprung up to lobby for strong standards and enforcement. Given the tremendous effects of environmental regulations on many industries, it should come as no surprise that these industries also organized to ensure that their interests were taken into account. As Salisbury writes, many groups have “come to Washington out of need and dependence rather than because they have influence.”⁴⁷ He argues that interest groups spend much of their time merely monitoring policy developments in order to alert their membership and develop reactive strategies.

Review the Chapter



Listen to **Chapter 10** on **MyPoliSciLab**

The Role of Interest Groups

10.1 Describe the role of interest groups in American politics, p. 332.

Interest groups are groups that participate in the political process in order to promote policy goals that members share. They usually focus their efforts on one specific issue area, unlike political parties, which have to address all issues on the public agenda.

Theories of Interest Group Politics

10.2 Compare and contrast the theories of pluralism, elitism, and hyperpluralism, p. 333.

The theory of pluralism asserts that the policymaking process is very open to the participation of all interest groups, with no single group usually dominating. Pluralists tend to believe that as a result the public interest generally prevails. In contrast, elitism contends that an upper-class elite holds the power and makes policy, regardless of the formal governmental organization. Hyperpluralism criticizes pluralism from a different perspective, contending that, with so many groups being so strong, government is weakened and its ability to make effective policy is crippled.

What Makes an Interest Group Successful?

10.3 Analyze the factors that make some interest groups more successful than others in the political arena, p. 336.

Groups that have large numbers of potential members are usually less effective than groups that have a smaller potential membership, because it is easier to mobilize members of a smaller group, who have more incentive to participate. Both large and small groups can benefit from the intensity of their members' beliefs. Money always helps lubricate the wheels of power, though it is hardly a surefire guarantee of success.

How Groups Try to Shape Policy

10.4 Assess the four basic strategies that interest groups use to try to shape policy, p. 339.

Interest groups use four basic strategies to maximize their effectiveness. Lobbying is one well-known group strategy. Although the evidence on its influence is mixed, it is clear that lobbyists are most effective with those legislators already

sympathetic to their side. Thus, electioneering becomes critical because it helps put supportive people in office. Often today, groups operate in the judicial as well as the legislative process, using litigation in the courts when lobbying fails or is not enough. Many also find it important to project a good image, employing public relations techniques to present themselves in the most favorable light.

Types of Interest Groups

10.5 Identify the various types of interest groups and their policy concerns, p. 347.

Economic interest groups involve business and labor, with business focusing on governmental regulations and subsidies, and labor focusing on policies to ensure good working conditions and wages. Environmental interests advocate policies to deal with problems such as global warming and pollution; they are also heavily involved in efforts to protect the wilderness and endangered species. Interest groups that are concerned with equality promote the fair treatment of groups that have been discriminated against in the past, such as African Americans and women. Public interest lobbies pursue policy objectives that they believe will benefit all citizens, such as consumer protection laws.

Understanding Interest Groups

10.6 Evaluate how well Madison's ideas for controlling the influence of interest groups have worked in practice, p. 352.

The issue of controlling interest groups remains as crucial to democracy today as it was in James Madison's time. Some scholars believe that the growth of interest groups has worked to divide political influence, just as Madison hoped it would. Critics of this point of view tend to focus on the PAC system as the new way in which special interests corrupt American democracy or on the problem of too many groups having too much power to block policy change.

Learn the Terms



Study and **Review** the **Flashcards**

interest group, p. 332
pluralism, p. 333
elitism, p. 333
hyperpluralism, p. 333
iron triangle, p. 335
potential group, p. 337

actual group, p. 337
collective good, p. 337
free-rider problem, p. 337
selective benefits, p. 337
single-issue group, p. 338
lobbying, p. 341

electioneering, p. 343
political action committees (PACs),
p. 343
union shop, p. 348
right-to-work laws, p. 348
public interest lobbies, p. 352

Test Yourself



Study and **Review** the **Practice Tests**

- 1.** Which of the following is NOT one of the roles regularly played by interest groups?
- lobbying elected officials on behalf of policies supported by the group
 - working on behalf of candidates for public office
 - nominating candidates to run for public office
 - protesting against policies opposed by the group
 - providing financial support for candidates for public office

2. What role do interest groups play in American politics? That is, what do interest groups hope to influence and why?

- 3.** Which of the following is NOT an element of the pluralist group theory of politics?
- Groups provide a crucial link between people and government.
 - Groups usually follow the rules of the game.
 - Groups compete with each other.
 - Groups often counterbalance each other's strengths and weaknesses.
 - Groups often become too dominant.

4. Elite theory relies on the notion that subgovernments exercise a great deal of control over numerous policy areas.

True _____ False _____

5. What is "interest group liberalism" and how does it explain interest groups in American politics? Do you think that this theory presents an accurate depiction of interest group politics today? Explain, using a specific policy area as an example.

6. Compare and contrast pluralist, hyperpluralist, and elitist theories of interest group politics. Which paints the most favorable picture of interest groups, and how? Which do you think best depicts interest group politics today? Explain.

7. Which of the following is NOT true of the success of interest groups?

- The more intense a group, the more successful it tends to be.
- The more financial resources a group has, the more successful it tends to be.
- The more potential members a group has, the more successful it tends to be.
- The smaller a group is, the more successful it tends to be.
- All of the above are true.

8. Single-issue groups often succeed by using an emotional issue to their advantage.

True _____ False _____

9. Explain why large groups are often surprisingly ineffective. How might large groups improve their effectiveness? Your answer should include reference to collective goods, selective benefits, and the free-rider problem.

10. What did Frank Baumgartner and his colleagues find concerning the role that money plays in lobbying effectiveness? Do these findings change your view of interest groups and money and the role they play in American politics? Why or why not?

11. Which of the following is NOT a tactic interest groups use?

- lobbying to influence policy
- forming political action committees to influence elections
- fielding candidates for office in general elections
- litigating to influence policy through the courts
- appealing to the public to promote a positive group image

12. Political action committees contribute more or less equally to the campaigns of challengers and incumbents.

True _____ False _____

13. Interest groups engage in a variety of activities to influence public policy. Discuss each of these activities and explain when each is most likely the best option for influencing public policy. Then pick a policy area that you are interested in and explain which tactic you think would be most effective and why.

14. What are the main arguments brought forth by advocates and critics of political action committees (PACs)? Which side do you agree with more, and why? Would you favor the abolition of PACs? Why, or why not?

15. Which of the following types of interest group tends to push for a collective good?

- a. labor groups
- b. consumer groups
- c. environmental groups
- d. equality groups
- e. all of the above

16. Labor groups have continued to expand their membership and influence into the twenty-first century.

True _____ False _____

17. Based on the discussion in the chapter of interest group theories and of factors contributing to interest group success, which of the various types of interest groups do you think would be most successful, and why?

18. Which of the following points was NOT part of James Madison's thinking about interest groups?

- a. A free society must allow for the representation of all groups.
- b. Groups are usually concerned about their own self-interest.
- c. Groups are usually not concerned about the general public welfare.
- d. A few wealthy groups will usually exert most of the political power.
- e. No one group should be allowed to assume dominance in political power.

19. How do interest groups affect the scope of government? Why is it difficult for politicians to reduce the scope of government when interest groups are so prevalent? Are there ways in which interest groups might tend to reduce the scope of government? Explain.

Explore Further

WEB SITES

www.aarp.org

The official site of AARP.

www.afcio.org

The nation's largest labor association, the AFL-CIO, posts material at this site.

www.nea.org

The site of the National Education Association.

www.greenpeaceusa.org

The place to go to learn more about the activities of this environmental protection group.

www.commoncause.org

The official site of Common Cause, one of the nation's oldest and largest public affairs interest groups.

FURTHER READING

Baumgartner, Frank R., et al. *Lobbying and Policy Change*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. A path-breaking study of who wins and loses in the lobbying game and why.

Berry, Jeffrey M. *The New Liberalism: The Rising Power of Citizen*

Groups. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1999. Berry argues that citizen groups have been strikingly successful in influencing the policy agenda in recent decades.

Berry, Jeffrey M., and Clyde Wilcox. *The Interest Group Society*, 6th ed. New York: Longman, 2013. One of the best contemporary textbooks on interest groups in American politics.

Cigler, Allan J., and Burdett A. Loomis, eds. *Interest Group Politics*, 8th ed. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2012. An excellent collection of original articles on the modern interest group system.

CQ Press Editors. *Public Interest Group Profiles, 2006–2007*.

Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2006. A comprehensive reference book about interest groups that provides information about internship and employment opportunities with many groups.

Domhoff, G. William. *Who Rules America? Challenges to Corporate and Class Dominance*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010. A good summary of the elitist view of interest groups.

Herrnson, Paul S., Christopher J. Deering, and Clyde Wilcox, eds. *Interest Groups Unleashed*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 2012. A set of interesting case studies of how interest groups have been participating in the electoral process.

Kollman, Ken. *Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion and Interest Group Strategies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998. An insightful study of how many interest groups use public opinion in the lobbying process.

Lowi, Theodore J. *The End of Liberalism*, 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1979. A critique of the role of subgovernments and the excessive deference to interest groups in the American political system.

Olson, Mancur. *The Logic of Collective Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965. Develops an economic theory of groups, showing how the cards are stacked against larger groups.

Rauch, Jonathan. *Demosclerosis: The Silent Killer of American Government*. New York: Random House, 1994. A good treatment of hyperpluralism in American politics.