

Interest Groups

I. Types of Interest Groups

Few would argue that one person could not make a difference in American politics. But there is power in numbers, and political institutions are more likely to respond to a collective rather than to an individual voice. An **interest group** is an organization whose members share common concerns and try to influence government policies affecting those concerns. Interest groups are also known as **lobbies**; lobbying is one of the ways in which interest groups shape legislation and bring the views of their constituents to the attention of decision-makers.

Elected officials as well as the public are often critical of the roles of "special interests" in the political process. The activities of lobbyists look like **vote-buying** and **influence-peddling**. Some political scientists believe that there are so many organized lobbies today that the distinction between "special interests" and those of the American people may no longer be valid. They believe that, in a sense, interest groups *are* the American people. Yet, the trouble with this view is that those with more money have greater access than those with less money.

There are 23,000 entries in the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, and most of them are interest groups. Many have their national headquarters in Washington, D.C.

1. Economic interest groups: Certainly the largest category, economic interest groups include organizations that represent big business, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), as well as big labor — the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, for example. Large corporations and individual unions also have offices in the capital. **Trade associations** represent entire industries. The members of the American Public Power Association (APPA), for example, are municipally owned electric utilities, rural electric cooperatives, and state power authorities. Professionals also form interest groups. The American Medical Association (AMA) opposed legislation to create health maintenance organizations (HMOs) for years.

2. Public interest groups: A large number of consumer advocacy groups and environmental organizations, such as the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), fall into this category. Perhaps best known is the League of Women Voters, which promotes simplified voting procedures and an informed electorate, and Common Cause, which backs more effective government. It lobbies for campaign finance reform. Public interest groups do not attempt to profit from their activities, but work for the public interest.

3. Government interest groups: Given the structure of our federal system, it is not surprising that there are organizations to bring the issues of local and state government before Congress and the administration. Government interest groups include the National League of Cities, the National Conference of Mayors, and the National Governors Association. One critical task performed by these groups is to help state and local governments get federal grants.

4. Religious interest groups: The separation of church and state does not preclude religious interest groups from lobbying; indeed, it is safe to say that all religious groups are involved in politics to some degree. The Christian Coalition, which draws most of its support from conservative Protestants, has an agenda that includes support for school prayer, opposition to homosexual rights, and a constitutional amendment banning abortion. It became an important factor in American politics, particularly in the Republican party, in the early 1990s.

5. Civil rights interest groups: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force represent groups that historically have faced legal discrimination and, in many respects, continue to lack equal opportunity. Their concerns involve more than civil rights, however, and encompass social welfare, immigration policy, affirmative action, a variety of gender issues, and political action.

6. Ideological interest groups: Ideological interest groups view all issues — federal spending, taxes, foreign affairs, court appointments, and so forth — through the lens of their political ideology, typically liberal or conservative. Their support for legislation or policy depends exclusively on whether they find it ideologically sound. Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), a liberal group, and the American Conservative Union (ACU) rate elected officials by the same standard. A Republican challenger might point to an incumbent's high ADA rating to show that he or she is too liberal to represent the district.

7. Single-issue interest groups: Some interest groups are formed to advocate for or against a single issue. Although other interest groups may have a position for or against gun control, it is the only issue in the political arena for the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the National Coalition to Ban Handguns (NCBH). The same is true of abortion, which pits the National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) against the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL). These examples are not meant to suggest that single-issue interest groups always generate their opposite. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), which campaigns for stiffer sentences for driving while intoxicated and mandatory penalties for the first offense, clearly does not. Although most interest groups focus on domestic issues, some are concerned with foreign policy. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), for example, focuses on the Middle East and the relationship between the United States and Israel.

II. Functions of Interest Groups

The two principal functions of interest groups are **representation** and **education**. For example, the National Telephone Cooperative Association (NTCA), which serves telecommunications cooperatives and companies in small towns and rural areas, provides its members "aggressive representation on Capitol Hill." It also conducts educational seminars, publishes a newsletter that tracks legislative and regulatory trends, and shares expertise on marketing strategies and new technology.

Representation

The representation function stems from the reason interest groups are created in the first place: Collective action is the most effective way of influencing policymaking and bringing issues to a large audience. Interest groups also serve as a watchdog, monitoring the actions of Congress, the courts, and the administration in the interest of their constituents. This work can include keeping track of the voting record of members of Congress and rating them on how well or how poorly they do on a particular issue.

Membership itself is important to success. More than 2.5 million people belong to the NRA (National Rifle Association), and 550,000 belong to the Sierra Club (an environmental organization). Such numbers give the organizations immediate political clout as well as the resources to maintain a large staff, hire lobbyists, and conduct extensive public relations efforts.

Interest groups are concerned with maintaining and expanding their membership. Beyond political victories, they offer special member services that may include group health and life insurance, discounts on travel, and other similar programs. **Direct mail**, which is targeted to people likely to support the interest group based on level of income and education and their other affiliations, is a way of soliciting funds and building membership rolls. Such direct-mail campaigns can also put an issue before the public and help shape the political agenda of the country.

Education

Interest groups educate both their own constituency and the public. Through their publications, the groups keep members abreast of the latest developments on the issues they care about. Business interest groups, particularly trade associations, publish data and reports on their sector of the economy that are widely used. The American Petroleum Institute's triannual *Basic Petroleum Data Book* is an indispensable source on oil prices and production around the world. The League of Women Voters makes information available on ballot measures and the positions candidates take, and it organizes debates and issue forums. Because they have developed an expertise in a particular policy area, interest groups are often called on to testify before Congress irrespective of the position they might have on the legislation. Education is sometimes formal, as with the American Bar Association's Continuing Legal Education program, which provides attorneys with ongoing training.

III. Tactics of Interest Groups

Interest groups not only report developments or trends but also try to influence them in a manner that benefits their members or the cause they support. This persuasion is accomplished through lobbying, grass-roots campaigns, political action committees, and litigation.

Lobbying

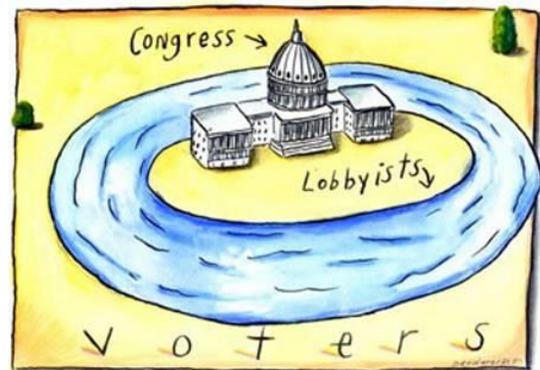
Lobbying efforts are directed primarily at the national level: committees of Congress that consider legislation, administrative agencies that are responsible for writing or enforcing regulations, and executive departments. Lobbyists depend on their personal relationships with members of Congress and the executive branch, which are based on keeping in regular contact. Many lobbyists have served in government themselves. Movement between roles in government and private businesses, including lobbying, is known as **the revolving door**. This means they have worked, in some cases for years, with the very people they are now lobbying; this experience gives them invaluable insights into how things are accomplished in Washington.

The critical legislative work in Congress takes place in committees. Lobbyists testify at committee hearings, provide the staff with information, and, more frequently than most people realize, actually write the legislation. They are sophisticated professionals and do not simply say to senators, "Vote for this bill or else," but instead explain why the bill is important to their constituency as well as what impact it will have in the senator's state. A lobbyist may have a politically connected member of the interest group contact the senator.

Important public policy decisions are made by regulatory agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Lobbyists or interest-group lawyers, particularly those representing corporations and trade associations, use the same tactics with agencies as they do with Congress. Developing regulations is a multistep process that involves initial drafting,

hearings and submission of comments, and the issuance of final rules. Interest groups are involved in all stages: They testify before administrative hearings, submit comments or file briefs, and draft the regulations their clients are required to operate under.

One of the criticisms of lobbyists is that they have too direct a role, based on their relationships with government officials, in how laws are written and implemented. The term **iron triangle** (or **cozy triangle**) describes the ties between congressional committees, administrative agencies whose funding is set by the committees, and the lobbyists who work closely with both. Few policy areas are still governed by tightly knit sub-governments, however. Policy in areas such as telecommunications and banking generally emerges from much more complex **issue networks** involving diverse players who are united, if anything, by their expertise in the area.



(Illustration: James T. Pendergrast)

Lobbyists, representing special interests, are seen here as blocking the interests of voters and keeping Washington from hearing directly from the people.

Grass-roots campaigns

An interest group can influence policy by marshalling its constituents and appealing to the public for support. It may urge its members to write to their representative and senator or even call them on the eve of an important vote. The NRA is known for its effective use of this tactic. Direct mail can also reach people who are not members and solicit both their backing for a particular policy and a contribution. During the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), business and organized labor mounted major print and media advertising campaigns to rally public opinion.

Groups with agendas as different as MADD's the NRLC's, and the AFL-CIO's have organized demonstrations and protests that usually get media attention to publicize their cause. Interest groups may also directly help candidates who support their positions by providing them with campaign workers and using their own members to get people to vote; they may publicly endorse candidates for office as well as give money to the candidates' campaign funds.

Political action committees

Political action committees (PACs) are groups that raise and distribute money to candidates. They may be affiliated with an existing interest group, such as a labor union or trade association, but they can be independent. When changes in campaign financing laws in 1971 limited the amount of money an individual could contribute, PACs became a major force in American politics. The number of PACs has grown dramatically in the last 20 years, as has the amount of money they donate. Under current law, there is a \$5,000 limit on PAC contributions to candidates for Congress.

PACs are not always separate from other interest groups. Often they are the campaign-financing wing of a larger lobbying effort. Among the top ten PACs, judged by their donations to campaigns in recent years are the National Association of Realtors, the American Bankers Association, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. It is not surprising that

labor unions give the overwhelming majority of their contributions to Democratic candidates while most business groups favor Republicans.

It is unclear how much the contributions actually change policy. Because most of the money goes to incumbents and because research has not turned up much evidence that members of Congress change their votes in response to contributions, many scholars doubt that the money has any direct impact. On the other hand, a member of Congress keeps a busy schedule and has little time to consider the desires of everyone. Contributions are a good way to buy time, either opening channels of access to representatives or convincing them to work hard promoting legislation.

Litigation

When Congress and the executive branch are unresponsive, interest groups can turn to the courts for remedy. The NAACP, for example, played a major role in the landmark civil rights cases of the 1950s and 1960s. Pro-life groups have filed suit in state and federal courts to limit abortions. Planned Parenthood, on the other hand, has sought injunctions against demonstrators blocking access to clinics where abortions are performed. Interest groups may be a plaintiff in a lawsuit, provide the attorneys or underwrite the costs of the legal team, or submit an *amicus curiae* brief in support of one side or another.

IV. Regulation of Interest Groups

Interest groups have both their opponents and supporters. The critics maintain that they only give those who have considerable wealth and power additional political influence and that the tactics used and the money available corrupts the political process. The defenders argue, on the other hand, that the system is much more open than in the past and point to the effective lobbying that groups representing women, minorities, and older adults are able to do. They claim that instances of corruption are the rare exceptions, and they champion interest groups as a vehicle for Americans to petition the government. As in other areas, however, this First Amendment guarantee is not absolute. The courts have ruled that limitations on lobbying are legitimate because its goal is to directly influence legislation.

Controls over lobbying

Lobbyists are required to register with the clerk of the House and the secretary of the Senate and indicate what group they are representing, the amount of their salary or compensation, and what types of expenses are reimbursed to them. They also have to file quarterly financial statements. These controls, which admittedly have not been effective in limiting abuse, date from the 1946 Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act. In addition, lobbyists who represent foreign governments or corporations must register with the Justice Department as agents of those countries.

Congress has also attempted to slow down the so-called **revolving door** by which an official begins to lobby his or her colleagues immediately after leaving a government position. Under the 1978 Ethics in Government Act, senior executive branch officials cannot lobby federal agencies on a matter that fell within their scope of responsibility for two years after leaving government service. In addition, they are prohibited from lobbying anyone in their former agency 1) on any issue for one year and 2) forever on matters that they were involved in.

The success of lobbyists depends on their personal ties with those in government. Those relationships were often cemented with gifts that could range from tickets to a football game to weekends at resort hotels. Reforms adopted in 1995, banned all gifts to members of the House and put limits on the value of gifts to senators. The legislation also required lobbyists to disclose the issues and bills they worked on and the branches of government they contacted. Stricter rules regarding lobbying were also adopted by Congress in 2007 in response to highly publicized scandals. The Senate now bars all gifts from lobbyists, lobbyists are required to disclose payments to organizations controlled by or named for a member of Congress, and "bundled" contributions from lobbyists are more closely scrutinized.

Control of political action committees

Many Americans are concerned with the amount of money PACs raise and give to candidates. The public interest group Common Cause believes PACs should be abolished altogether. Short of this step, there are proposals to reduce the amount of money an individual PAC can contribute to a candidate or the total amount the candidate can accept from all PACs. Expanding federal financing of elections to include congressional races or making some provision for the government to underwrite certain types of campaign expenses would also limit the importance of PACs. For obvious reasons, Congress has not been very willing to tackle this problem.

Moreover, in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* in 2010 the United States Supreme Court held that the First Amendment prohibits the government from restricting political independent expenditures by corporations, associations, or labor unions. That is, there is no limit on the amount an interest group can spend on any issue they want to. In essence, the Supreme Court has said that money equals free speech. As a result, we can expect to see ever growing amounts of money in American politics, especially through the PACs.



In this cartoon, ordinary tax-paying citizens do not have access to the politicians in Washington and are left outside, while rich powerful business interests have access and get what they want—in this case, cuts in social welfare spending to reduce government spending (and lower taxes).