

CHAPTER 16 INTEREST GROUPS

Narrative Lecture Outline

Are Americans still joining groups? Have the groups we join changed in the last few decades? What are the impacts of the answers to these questions? Keep these questions in mind as we proceed.

Traditionally, interest groups have been thought of as a way for citizens to access the government through “strength in numbers.” They have also been conceptualized as filling the void left by the failing political parties. In the last decade, political scientists have started to look at interest groups as supports for democracy in terms of contributing to social capital.

What Are Interest Groups?

There are a number of definitions of an interest group in your text as well as a number of aliases—pressure groups, lobby groups, special interests, etc. Some of the definitions point out the function of interest groups (to influence public policy), others point out what interest groups are not (political parties—they run candidates, while interest groups influence government), or focus on membership (shared interests or attitudes).

Interest groups may be best understood using examples. Let’s list some interest groups on the board. Then, ask questions like: Does anyone know what the largest and most powerful interest group in this country is? The answer is the AARP—American Association of Retired Persons, with 35 million members. Many students seem to think the answer would be the NRA (the National Rifle Association), with fewer than 3 million members, or the AFL-CIO (13 million members), or the American Medical Association (250,000 members). What makes them successful and powerful? What else do you know about the interest groups we listed here?

Political scientists tend to talk about interest groups in a variety of ways: how they form (Truman and disturbance theory), how many issues they deal with (multi vs. single), or as types (economic, public, governmental). You should be sure to read and understand that portion of the text, but today we will focus on the development of interest groups, their functions, and how to determine if they are successful.

The Roots and Development of American Interest Groups

Interest groups have been around at least since the founding of this country. James Madison, in Federalist No. 10, warned of the “mischief of faction” and argued that the best way to control it was through the proliferation of groups, so that no one group could get hegemony over the other groups.

National Groups Emerge (1830-89)

It was not until the 1830s that the first national groups began to form. Many were single-issue groups deeply rooted in Christian revivalism and concerned with issues such as temperance (anti-alcohol), peace, education, and slavery. After the Civil War, more groups were founded such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Grange (an educational society for farmers).

The railroad was a particularly effective interest group. The Central Pacific Railroad sent a lobbyist to Washington, who ended up becoming the clerk of the committees in both houses of Congress that were supposed to regulate the railroad industry. They proceeded to receive vast land grants from Congress and large subsidized loans. Other business interests were also on the rise, including Standard Oil.

Progressive Era (1890-1920)

Rapid industrialization and high immigration had created a host of problems by the 1890s, including crime, poverty, unsafe working conditions, corruption and high prices due to monopolistic business practices. The political and social movement that grew up to combat these problems was the Progressive Movement.

The Progressive's desire to reform led to a proliferation of interest group formation including trade, labor, and the first public interest group. In response to this pressure, the government began to regulate business. Business organized to oppose regulation and the labor unions jumped into the fray as well.

Organized Labor

In 1886, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) became the first national union bringing skilled workers from several trades together into one stronger national organization. They were quite effective in winning higher wages. Businesses began to push back. Business interests argued for "open shop" laws outlawing unions, and the AFL became increasingly politicized to fight these attempts. In 1914, after massive AFL lobbying, Congress passed the Clayton Act, allowing unions to organize free from prosecution and guaranteed the right to strike.

Business Groups and Trade Associations

The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) was founded in 1895 in response to the growing power of organized labor. NAM lobbied heavily for business rights and tariff protection, often lavishing money on members of Congress. In 1912, they were joined by the Chamber of Commerce and, shortly thereafter, by other trade associations such as cotton manufacturers.

In 1928, business lobbying had gone too far. The Senate requested that the Federal Trade Commission begin a massive investigation of lobbying tactics among business interests.

The Rise of the Interest Group State

The next big explosion of new group formation began in the 1960s and continued into the 1970s. The rise of public interest groups during these years was reminiscent of the Progressive Era. The new groups were devoted to the interests of blacks, women, the elderly, the poor, and consumers, as well as the environment. These groups were strongly influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War and the movements opposed to it. Other groups formed long ago, like the NAACP and the ACLU, found new vigor. Foundations like the Ford Foundation funded groups liberally. Among the most influential of the public interest groups formed at this time were Common Cause and Public Citizen, the latter formed by Ralph Nader.

Conservative Backlash: Religious and Ideological Groups

The growth and success of public interest groups, civil rights organizations, and women's rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s led to a conservative backlash in the late 1970s and 1980s. Religious and ideological conservatives became a potent force in U.S. politics, with the founding of the Moral Majority by Jerry Falwell in 1978. This group was widely credited with helping Ronald Reagan win the presidency. In 1990, Pat Robertson, of the TV program The 700 Club, formed a new group called the Christian Coalition. Religious conservatives accounted for one-third of votes cast in the 1994 elections. Following IRS troubles in the 1990s, the Christian Coalition had its tax-exempt status revoked and the group began to restructure as a for-profit entity, with a smaller nonprofit affiliate. The religious right continues to pressure Congress and others in power for bans on abortions, repeal of the marriage penalty, and a constitutional amendment allowing prayer in schools. The National Rifle Association and Focus on the Family are other conservative groups that have made substantial contributions or had influence in politics.

This leaves a quandary for the Republican Party. The religious right can really deliver votes, but they turn off moderate Republicans and business groups who donate most of the money for campaigns.

Business Groups, Trade and Professional Associations

Business and other groups also rallied in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1972, they created the Business Roundtable to encourage business leaders to directly lobby government officials. Most large corporations have their own lobbyists in Washington, DC and give huge sums to favored politicians.

Organized Labor

The political clout of organized labor has been falling since its heyday (the late 1950s, after the merger of the AFL and the CIO). Union membership has been falling for decades as the economy has been shifting from industry to service, and now high-tech. In 1997, only 13.9 percent of workers were unionized. In 1996, the unions seemed to reclaim some of their clout. They went back to basics and ran grassroots campaigns and did lots of soft money advertisements. In 1998, they moved away from the ads and vested more heavily in grassroots campaigning. Union members went to the polls in record numbers, voting mostly Democrat. However, the electoral weakness of labor was evident in the 2004 elections. Despite the active endorsement of organized labor, Dick Gephardt's (D-MO) candidacy for president went nowhere. He withdrew from the race after coming in fourth in Iowa.

In 2005, labor was further weakened when three of the largest member unions withdrew from the AFL-CIO. There were also strong disagreements about how the unions were spending money. It should also be noted that 84 percent of union members live in only 12 states.

What Do Interest Groups Do?

As an example of what interest groups do, let's take the 1993 health care reform proposal put forward by President Clinton. More than \$100 million was spent in campaign contributions, television ads, expense paid trips for lawmakers on both sides, and more. Campaign contributions alone were over \$25 million and over \$8.2 million of that went to members of the five committees, most likely to have jurisdiction over the legislation. Six hundred and fifty health-related groups made contributions. The AMA sponsored fifty-five trips to sunny spots where lawmakers addressed groups, played golf, and sunned themselves. At least eighty former executive and legislative branch officials went to work for health interests at this time. But this is an extreme example.

Interest groups also do a lot of good. And some groups with little political clout and little money have made a huge difference, like the NAACP for example. Interest groups allow individuals to gather together to multiply their political power. A congressman may not meet with you as an individual, but they will meet with a representative of an association with 800,000 members! Banding together promotes common interests.

The downside is that most interest groups make claims without regard to broader interests or the effects of their demands on other groups or individuals. This selfishness is not positive for society as a whole and can lead to increased costs on programs or efforts that don't benefit everyone.

Lobbying Congress

The most common and effective interest group technique is lobbying, or seeking to influence and persuade others to support your group's position. Lobbyists are hired by universities, businesses, foreign countries, trade associations and anyone else wanting their voice heard on the Hill.

The most popular ways to lobby include:

- testifying at legislative hearings
- talking directly to government officials
- helping to draft legislation
- alerting state legislators of a bill's effects on their districts
- having influential constituents contact a legislator's office
- mounting grassroots campaigns
- letter writing
- donating money
- litigation
- endorsing candidates and more.

However, a lobbyist cannot lie or misrepresent the truth if he or she wants to remain effective. Access to lawmakers is critical, and if you earn the reputation of being untruthful or disingenuous, doors will close all over Washington, DC. Of course, lobbyists put their group's position in a favorable light, but good lobbyists will also make lawmakers aware of the downsides of a bill and the arguments on that side as well.

The Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act in 1946 was the first attempt to regulate lobbying. The Act required lobbyists to register as a lobbyist and file quarterly financial reports. But, few did. Public opinion polls continued to show that Americans think Congress is often "bought," so in 1995, Congress passed the Lobbying Disclosure Act. Lobbyists (those who spend over 20 percent of their time in lobbying activities) are required to register with the Clerk of the House or the Secretary of the Senate, report their clients and the agency or house they lobbied, and estimate the amount

they were paid by each client. In 1998, 14,000 lobbying groups were registered in Washington, D.C.

Lobbying the Executive Branch

In the executive branch, lobbyists work closely with the administration to try to influence policy at the formulation and implementation stages of the process. There are many points of access in the executive from the White House to the agencies and beyond.

Especially strong links exist between interest groups and regulatory agencies (remember from the bureaucracy chapter?). Groups monitor and report on laws and the expertise of the lobbyists is often needed by various agencies as well.

Lobbying the Courts

Many court cases are either sponsored by an interest group, or an interest group will submit a friend of the court brief to lobby the courts. Interest groups also attempt to influence judicial appointments, aiming for judges who might be sympathetic to their issues.

Grassroots Lobbying and Protest Activities

Interest groups also mobilize individuals at a grassroots level through door-to-door campaigns or petition drives. Fax campaigns and Internet lobbying are also becoming popular. The goal is to get constituents to argue their case for them. They are often quite influential.

The Civil Rights Movement used nonviolent protest to excellent effect, and others have used more violent forms of protest to draw attention to problems. This has been an American tradition since the Boston Tea Party.

Election Activities

Interest groups can also have an effect by electioneering such as:

- endorsements
- rating the candidates or office holders
- creating political parties
- get out the vote campaigns
- giving money
- and creating political parties.

Interest Groups and Political Action Committees (PACs)

Since the 1970s, most interest groups have formed PACs. A PAC is a political arm for a business, labor, trade, professional, or other group legally authorized to raise funds on a voluntary basis from employees or members, for contribution to a party or candidate. PAC money plays a significant role in campaigns.

What Makes an Interest Group Successful?

How would you measure the success of an interest group? (Discuss.)

Groups often claim credit for “winning” legislation, court cases, or elections. But in general, three things tend to lead to interest group success:

Leaders and Patrons: Having a prominent leader, who also finances your group, aids the reputation of the group and enhances a group’s ability to attain its goals.

Funding: Funding is critical. If a group does not have money, it is hard to get their message out.

Members: A group must have members to be successful. The whole purpose of organizing is strength in numbers...so a group needs numbers!

Conclusion

In the final analysis, what can we say about interest groups? They are both democratic and anti-democratic, they are part of the system and hurt the system, in truth, they are a paradox. Was Madison right? Does the proliferation of groups keep a balance in the system and prevent any one group from getting too powerful, or has money corrupted the whole theory? Your answers may rest on what you think of government. If you believe that government is made up of self-seeking, power and money hungry, dishonest rats and you believe that congressmen and deputy secretaries can be bought—then interest groups are bad because they encourage the corruption inherent in the system. On the other hand, if you believe people go into government for good, sound reasons, like helping others or solving societal problems and you believe most politicians are honest and have principles...and probably can’t be bought, then groups are good. Alternatively, you can think of it this way: Do interest group contributions change minds? Or do interest groups contribute to like-minded people? Could the NRA give enough money to Jim Brady to change his pro gun control stance? I seriously doubt it. Could the Abortion Rights League give enough money to an anti-abortion congressman to change his or her vote? No. So, are interest groups good, bad, or indifferent? You decide.