CHAPTER 10 Interest Groups

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

* Define the key terms at the end of the chapter.
* Outline the positive and negative roles played by interest groups in U.S. politics.
* Explain how interest groups form.
* Create a profile of the kind of person most likely to be represented by an interest group.
* Describe the major resources that interest groups use to influence policy.
* List the tactics used by interest groups to win the support of policymakers.
* Account for the recent increase in the number of interest groups.
* Discuss the impact of high-tech lobbying by interest groups.
* Discuss how interest group bias affects how interest groups are perceived and operate.

# Interest Groups and the Challenge of Democracy

Although most Americans think we should do something to reduce our greenhouse emissions, it took thirty-two years for Congress to increase fuel efficiency standards on U.S.-made cars. While other countries began making fuel-efficient cars, Ford and GM successfully lobbied Congress for the right to continue making large inefficient cars. Now as gas prices have increased, consumers will be punishing Ford and GM for their choices.

The founders anticipated that factions or interest groups would play an important part in politics. James Madison’s writings show that they believed factions would thrive in an atmosphere of freedom: “Liberty is to faction what air is to fire.” The only way to eliminate factions or interest group politics was to curtail freedom. The founders were certainly not prepared to abandon the very value for which they had fought the Revolutionary War. So they proposed using factions to combat factions, with the government serving as the mediator.

More recently, pluralist political scientists have resurrected these Madisonian hopes. They have made it clear that U.S. politics is not majoritarian but has interest groups at its center. They also expect interests to counterbalance one another, and the system to provide open access. However, as this chapter indicates, some interests, notably those of business, are much better represented than others. Opportunities for access may often depend on money. The fact that there are no poor PACs and no food stamp PACs suggests that the interests of the poor may not be adequately represented. Insofar as political equality means one person, one vote, Americans are pretty much equal, but if political equality means more than that, then it follows that where contemporary interest group politics are concerned, social inequality leads to political inequality.

So why not limit the activities of interest groups to promote open access and make pluralism function as Madison expected it would? The answer is that limiting interest groups also means limiting the right of the people to petition their government—a fundamental freedom guaranteed under the Constitution.

Chapter Overview

## Interest Groups and the American Political Tradition

Interest groups, or lobbies—organized bodies of individuals who share some political goals and try to influence policy decisions—have always been a part of U.S. politics. The Constitution itself was designed to preserve freedom by relying on what we now call pluralist politics, or, in Madisonian terms, the use of factions to counteract other factions. But giving people freedom to organize does not necessarily promote political equality. Thus, the value people place on equality may determine whether they believe that interest groups are bad or good.

Interest groups perform a variety of important functions in the American system: They represent their members to the government; they provide channels for citizen participation; they educate their members, government officials, and the public at large; they build the public agenda by putting issues before the government; and they monitor programs important to their members.

## How Interest Groups Form

Modern pluralists believe that interest groups further democracy. They believe interest groups form naturally by a process similar to the invisible hand in economics. When unorganized people are adversely affected by change, they organize themselves into groups to protect their interests. Yet empirical evidence suggests that this doesn’t always happen; more than a simple disturbance is required. Strong leadership—provided by interest group entrepreneurs—may be critically important; in addition, social class is also a factor in interest group formation. Although the poor and less educated do form groups to advance their interests, middle- and upper-class individuals are much more likely to see the value of interest groups and to organize.

## Interest Group Resources

An interest group’s strength and effectiveness usually depends on its resources. These resources include members, lobbyists, and money. Interest groups work hard to build their memberships and to combat the free rider problem. They also keep their members well informed of group activities. Lobbyists, preferably Washington insiders with previous government experience, present the group’s views to legislators and officials of the executive branch. Currently, an important resource used by interest groups is the political action committee (PAC). This type of organization enables a group to more easily make political campaign contributions in the hope of obtaining better access to officials. PACs may make influence a function of money (thereby reducing political equality), but limiting PACs would amount to a restriction on freedom of expression. Furthermore, PACs also allow small givers to pool their resources to obtain more clout.

## Lobbying Tactics

Interest groups may seek help from the legislature, the courts, or the administration. Lobbyists carry out their task in several ways. They may use direct lobbying aimed at policymakers themselves, through legal advocacy, personal presentations, or committee testimony. Alternatively, they may rely on grassroots lobbying by enlisting group members to pressure elected officials through letters or political protests. Lobbyists may also use information campaigns, bringing their views to the attention of the general public through public relations methods. These campaigns may involve publicizing the voting records of legislators or sponsoring research. Lobbyists may exploit a variety of technical innovations, especially the Internet, to organize and communicate with potential supporters. Finally, lobbyists may lobby for each other through coalition building.

## Is the System Biased?

Are the decisions made in a pluralist system fair? Perhaps, if all significant interests are represented by lobbying groups and the government listens to the views of all major interests as it makes policy. Yet research shows that interest groups have a membership bias. Some parts of society are better organized than others, namely, the well educated, the wealthy, and professionals.

In addition to groups motivated by the self-interest of their members, there are also citizen groups or public interest groups motivated for reasons other than economic self-interest; these groups seek to achieve a common good that benefits all citizens. Although only a few of these liberal self-interest groups formed during the early twentieth century, more recently we have seen a distinct rise in their number. Organizations pursuing environmental protection, consumer protection, good government, family values, and equality for various groups are all increasing in number, and they receive significant coverage in the national press on their issues. Nevertheless, business groups enjoy a substantial advantage in Washington, D.C., especially on broad issues that unite a number of different industries.

Although the First Amendment guarantees the right to organize, interest groups may confer unacceptable advantages on some segments of the community. Especially with the Jack Abramoff scandal, efforts are being made to limit the impact of lobbyists, through increased federal regulations, tightened disclosure laws, gift and travel bans, more ethical rules, and a move toward more public financing of national campaigns.

Key Terms

interest group

lobbies

lobbyist

agenda building

program monitoring

interest group entrepreneur

free-rider problem

trade associations

political action committee (PAC)

direct lobbying

grassroots lobbying

information campaigns

coalition building

citizen groups

# Research and Resources

One of the most significant recent developments in U.S. politics has been the proliferation of PACs. There are several sources of data on PAC activity, including

* Political Money Line’s Federal Lobby Directory,  
  <[http://www.politicalmoneyline.com/cgi-win/lb\_directory.exe?DoFn=](http://www.politicalmoneyline.com/cgi-win/lb_directory.exe?DoFn=%3e.)>.
* Chardonneau, A., *Almanac of Federal PACs: 2008–2009* (Washington, DC: Congressional Staff Directory, 2008). Provides up-to-date descriptions of the interests and orientations of individual PACs, along with a record of their recent giving activities.

Check Yahoo for an extensive index of lobbying groups and PACs. Addresses:  
<<http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Business_to_Business/Government/Lobbying/>> <[http://dir.yahoo.com/Government/U\_S\_\_Government/Politics/Interest\_Groups/Political\_Action\_Committees\_\_PACs](http://dir.yahoo.com/Government/U_S__Government/Politics/Interest_Groups/Political_Action_Committees__PACs_/)>

Here are websites for a few well-known interest groups.

American Medical Association at <[http://www.ama-assn.org](http://www.ama-assn.org/)>

American Association for Retired Persons at <<http://www.aarp.org>>

National Organization for Women at <[http://www.now.org](http://www.now.org/)>

National Rifle Association at <[http://www.nra.org](http://www.nra.org/)>

Children’s Defense Fund at <[http://www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org/)>

Christian Coalition at <[http://www.cc.org](http://www.cc.org/)>

# Using Your Knowledge

1. Visit the websites of two or three interest groups. What types of information do they offer? What online strategies do they use to mobilize members?

2. Visit the sites of some of the lobbying firms listed on Yahoo. What types of services do they offer to their clients?

# Getting Involved

There are plenty of opportunities to learn more about the Washington community and the think tanks and lobbyists that play such an important role in policymaking. The list provided here will give you some idea of the range of possibilities available.

## Internships at Think Tanks

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) assigns interns to work for resident scholars specializing in economic policy, foreign and defense policy, or social and political policy. Internships are available in the fall, spring, or summer and run twelve weeks. They are unpaid. Deadlines are September 1 for fall, December 1 for spring, and April 1 for summer. For further information, contact the American Enterprise Institute, Intern Coordinator, 1150 17 Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. Telephone: 202-862-5800. Find AEI online at <<http://www.aei.org>>.

The Brookings Institution assigns its unpaid interns to work on research involving political institutions, processes, and policies. Internships run twelve weeks and are available in the fall, spring, and summer. Deadlines are August 1 for fall, December 1 for spring, and April 1 for summer. Write to the Brookings Institution, Internship Coordinator, 1775 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20036. Find Brookings online at <[http://www.brookings.edu/about/employment.aspx](http://www.brook.edu/)>.

Common Cause uses interns to work for grassroots lobbying efforts in the states as well as to monitor congressional meetings and do other research. Write to Common Cause, Volunteer Office, 2030 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. Telephone: 202-833‑1200. You can also apply online at <[http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQIwG&b=201408](http://www.commoncause.org/about/intern_intro.htm)>.

## Internships with Interest Groups

The Feminist Majority Foundation offers women and men the chance to lobby for women’s issues, including reproductive rights, sexual harassment, and women’s rights. Student interns may work in the Washington, D.C., or Los Angeles offices. For details, contact the Fund for Feminist Majority, 8105 West 3 Street, Suite 1, Los Angeles, CA 90048, or 1600 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 801, Arlington, VA 22209, or at intern@feminist.org. Telephone: 703-522-2214. See their website at <<http://www.feminist.org>>.

Americans for Democratic Action, long the nation’s best-known liberal organization, offers full- and part-time internships during the school year; there is no pay, but hours are flexible, and arrangements may be made with home institutions for coordinating course credit. Contact Americans for Democratic Action, 1625 K Street, Suite 210, Washington, DC 20005. Telephone: 202-785-5980. The ADA website is <[http://www.adaction.org](http://www.adaction.org/)>.

The Union of Concerned Scientists involves students in research and lobbying on issues related to arms control and the impact of technology. The internships are paid, and thirty to forty hours of work per week is the normal expectation. For further information, contact the Union of Concerned Scientists, 1616 P Street, NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036. Telephone: 202-332-0900. See their website at <<http://www.ucsusa.org>>.

The National Taxpayers Union works for lower taxes and reduced government spending. It offers paid internships to students interested in working on researching taxpayer issues, preparing a congressional spending analysis, and lobbying at the grassroots, national, or state levels. Students should apply six weeks ahead of the desired starting date and by April 1 for summer internships. For further information, contact the Internship Program, National Taxpayers Union, 325 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, Washington, DC 20002. Telephone: 703-683-5700. Find out more online at <[http://www.ntu.org](http://www.ntu.org/)>.

Sample Exam Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. What did Madison see as the fundamental cause of factions?

a. undemocratic tendencies

b. economic motives

c. America’s strong democratic culture

d. the nature of man

e. capitalism and the democratic nature of America

2. What is the general paradox of how we think about interest groups and lobbyists?

a. We love them, but we don’t donate money to them.

b. We hate them, except the ones that speak on our behalf.

c. We love what they do, but we don’t like their methods.

d. We think Congress is honest, but interest groups lie.

e. We think Congress lies, but interest groups are honest.

3. Which of the following is *not* one of the roles of interest groups?

a. nominating candidates

b. program monitoring

c. agenda building

d. representation

e. education

4. Which of the following *best* describes David Truman’s theory of interest groups?

a. economic theory of interest group formation

b. group leader theory of interest group formation

c. flocking theory of interest group formation

d. disturbance theory of interest group formation

e. pluralism, which explains everything about our democracy

5. Why was Cesar Chavez successful in helping farmers form an interest group?

a. He raised lots of money.

b. He knew the right people.

c. He was a dynamic leader.

d. He organized effectively.

e. He got the Democrats on his side.

6. Which of the following seems to have an advantage in forming interest groups?

a. poor and uneducated

b. laborers

c. downtrodden with a good story

d. wealthy and well educated

e. artists

7. What is one of the most valuable resources of an interest groups?

a. public interest

b. media campaign

c. access to a member of Congress

d. computer access or knowledge

e. members

8. Where do most PAC contributions come from?

a. business groups and trade associations

b. citizens’ groups

c. women’s groups

d. unions

e. individuals

9. What is the mostcommonly used grassroots lobbying tactic?

a. personal presentation of a group’s position

b. legal advocacy

c. testifying at committee hearings

d. letter-writing campaign

e. protests and demonstrations

10. Which of the following can be a problem for interest groups?

a. free-rider problem

b. maintaining membership

c. attracting new members

d. funding

e. all of the above

11. Who would most likely belong to a group working to advance their interests?

a. people receiving veterans’ benefits

b. TANF recipients

c. food stamp recipients

d. people receiving Medicaid

e. all of the above

12. What do we call an organized effort to gain public backing by highlighting a group’s views?

a. interest group activity

b. grassroots lobbying

c. information campaign

d. direct lobbying

e. agenda building

13. Which of the following is a major difference between public interest groups and other lobbies?

a. Public interest groups do not generally pursue the economic self-interests of their members.

b. Public interest groups are always poorly funded.

c. Public interest groups do not support conservative causes.

d. Public interest groups still rely primarily on grassroots tactics.

e. Public interest groups rely exclusively on legal advocacy.

14. The Internet has created what principal effect on interest group organizations?

a. increased the costs for groups to organize

b. decreased the costs for groups to organize

c. increased regulation of group activities

d. decreased in the number of organized interests

e. increased the influence of groups over visible policy outcomes

15. Which of the following does *not* contribute to the increase of business lobbies in Washington?

a. expanded scope of federal government activity

b. competitive nature of business lobbying

c. success of interest groups on the religious right

d. success of liberal public interest groups

e. increase in the total number of lobbying organizations

16. Which of the following would *not* be included in program monitoring by interest groups?

a. filing lawsuits to stop agency actions

b. publicizing agency failures

c. pressuring administrators to change programs

d. publicizing the costs of agency activity

e. gaining access to administrators with PAC contributions

17. The success of 527s and the decline of political party membership signals a

a. return to normalcy.

b. shift to a more majoritarian society.

c. shift to a more plural society.

d. rise in tolerance.

e. rise of intolerance.

18. Approximately what percentage of PAC contributions come from business, professional, or corporate interests?

a. 15 percent

b. 40 percent

c. 50 percent

d. 60 percent

e. 85 percent

19. 527s possess one major difference from all other PACs. What is it?

a. They can accept donations of an unlimited amount.

b. They are nonprofit.

c. They take a stand on the issues.

d. They can endorse a candidate directly.

e. All of the above.

20. Which of the following is *not* a tactic used in direct lobbying?

a. testifying at a committee hearing

b. organizing a demonstration

c. legal advocacy

d. personal contact

e. None of the above; all are tactics used in direct lobbying.

21. What do Western democracies, think of the United States’ government?

a. It is one of the most pluralist governments.

b. It is one of the most majoritarian governments.

c. It is neither more nor less pluralist than other governments.

d. It has many groups that do not operate independently of government.

e. It is the only nation that has organized groups active in politics.

22. Why do citizens’ groups have good credibility?

a. They are well organized.

b. They are not motivated by financial gain.

c. They are large organizations.

d. They are well financed.

e. They are unlikely to rely on PACs.

23. What term do we use to describe several organizations banding together for the purpose of lobbying?

a. information campaign

b. agenda building

c. coalition building

d. trade association

e. none of the above

24. Which of the following variables is frequently used to explain the likelihood of interest group formation?

a. change in the environment

b. leadership

c. socioeconomic status of potential members

d. activities of interest group entrepreneurs

e. all of the above

25. There has been a rapid growth in recent years of ideological PACs that have no parent lobbying organization. What is the main function of these PACs?

a. increasing the number of members

b. pressuring lawmakers

c. reacting quickly to bad bills or policies

d. raising and channeling campaign funds

e. obstructing or challenging legal opinions

Essay Questions

1. The U.S. automakers’ lobby has been very successful in keeping fuel efficiency standards low. Although this currently seems a bad thing, how has it benefited Americans until just recently?

2. What benefits do interest groups provide to the U.S. political system?

3. Describe the various methods of lobbying and why they can be so successful.

4. What are the different theories behind the formation and success of interest groups?

5. Have recent changes in campaign finance law restricted or expanded the activities of PACs? Should the United States engage in an effort to reform the way that PACs are organized and the way the operate?

Answers to Multiple-Choice Questions

1. d

2. b

3. a

4. d

5. c

6. d

7. e

8. a

9. d

10. e

11. a

12. c

13. a

14. b

15. c

16. e

17. b

18. d

19. a

20. e

21. a

22. b

23. c

24. e

25. d