

Section Preview

OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the role of interest groups in influencing public policy.
2. Compare and Contrast political parties and interest groups.
3. Explain why people see interest groups as both good and bad for American politics.

WHY IT MATTERS

If you have ever joined with others who share your views on an issue, you have probably been part of an interest group. You almost surely will be part of one or more interest groups in the future. Interest groups provide an important way for Americans to influence government policies.

POLITICAL DICTIONARY

- ★ public policy
- ★ public affairs

An interest group is a private organization that tries to persuade public officials to respond to the shared attitudes of its members. You may not think that you belong to any interest groups, but as you read this section, you may well discover that you do. In fact, you might even belong to several of them. You will probably also realize that you will become a part of many more of these organizations in the years to come. This is because interest groups provide

one of the most effective means by which Americans try to get government to respond to their wants and needs.

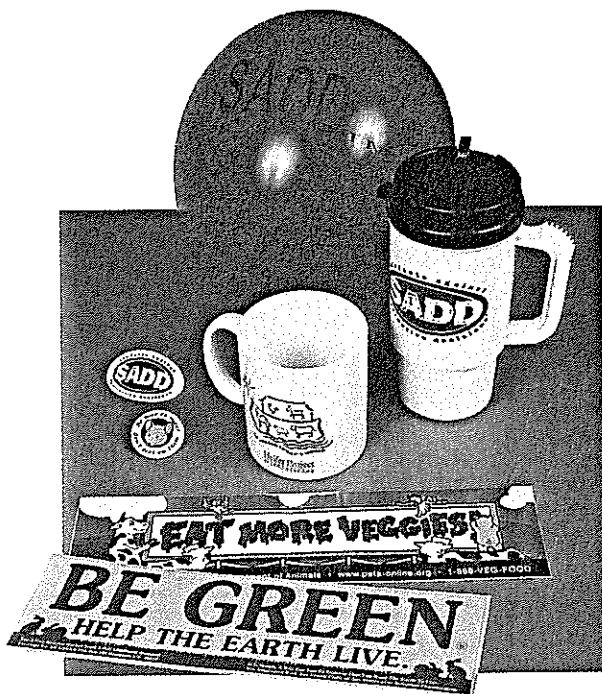
The Role of Interest Groups

Where do you stand on the question of gun control? What about prayer in public schools? Abortion? An increase in the minimum wage? What can you do to lend support to your views on these and other issues? How can you increase the chance that your position on these issues will carry the day?

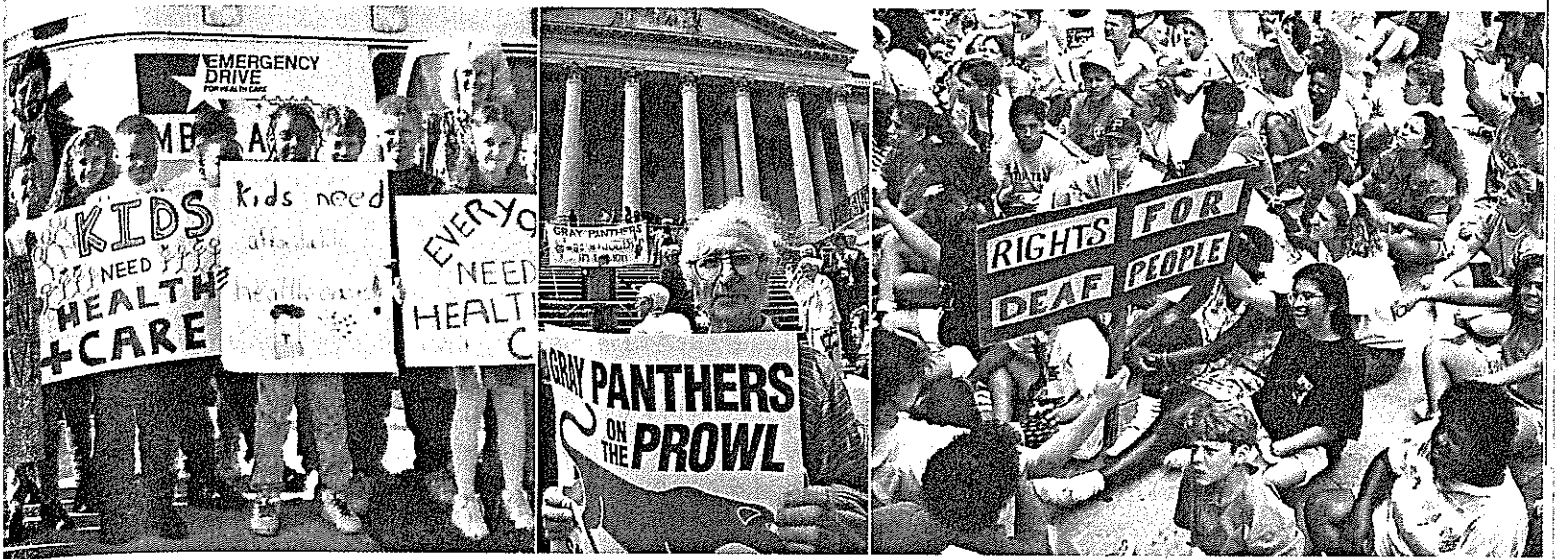
Joining with others who share your views is both practical and democratic. Organized efforts to protect group interests are a fundamental part of the democratic process. Moreover, the right to do so is protected by the Constitution. Remember that the 1st Amendment guarantees “the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Interest groups are sometimes called pressure groups. They are also known as special interests, organized interests, and lobbies. They give themselves a variety of additional names, too, such as committees, clubs, associations, leagues, and federations.

However they label themselves, interest groups seek to influence public policy. Used in this general sense, **public policy** includes all of the goals a government sets and the various courses of action it pursues as it attempts to realize these goals. Laws governing speed limits and seat-belt



▲ Interest groups often send members items such as buttons and bumper stickers to help publicize their causes.



▲ Americans participate in wide variety of interest groups. Families USA advocates for family health care (left). The Gray Panthers call attention to the special concerns of senior citizens (center). Students from the Texas School for the Deaf acted as an interest group when they marched on their State capital to protest funding cuts that affected their school (right). *Critical Thinking* What do these groups have in common?

use are examples of public policy. So is a President's decision to send military aid to a foreign country.

Because interest groups exist to shape public policy, they operate wherever those policies are made or can be influenced. They also function at every level of government. They therefore can be found on Capitol Hill and elsewhere in Washington, D.C., in every one of the 50 State capitals, in thousands of city halls and county courthouses, and in many other places at the local level all across the country. In short, as diplomat and historian Lord Bryce put it somewhat indelicately more than a century ago: "Where the body is, there will the vultures be gathered."

Remember, our society is a pluralistic one. It is not dominated by any single elite. It is, instead, composed of a number of distinct cultures and groups. Increasingly, the members of various ethnic, racial, religious, and other groups compete for and share in the exercise of political power in this country.

Political Parties and Interest Groups

Interest groups are made up of people who unite for some political purpose. So, too, are political parties. These two types of political organizations

necessarily overlap in a number of ways. However, they differ from one another in three striking respects: (1) in the making of nominations, (2) in their primary focus, and (3) in the scope of their interests.

First, parties nominate candidates for public office; interest groups do not. Remember, making nominations is a major function of political parties. If an interest group were to nominate candidates, it would, in effect, become a political party.

Interest groups do, of course, try to affect the outcomes of primaries and other nominating contests. However, interest groups do not themselves pick candidates who then run under their labels. It may be widely known that a particular interest group actively supports a candidate, but that candidate seeks votes as a Republican or Democrat.¹

Second, political parties are chiefly interested in winning elections and controlling government. Interest groups are chiefly concerned with controlling or influencing the *policies* of government. Unlike parties, interest groups do not face the problems involved in trying to appeal to the largest possible number of people. In short, political parties are mostly interested in the *who*,

¹Note that this discussion centers on the differences between interest groups and major parties. There are some striking parallels between interest groups and most minor parties—for example, in terms of their scope of interest.

and interest groups are mostly concerned with the *what*, of government. To put it another way, political parties focus mostly on the candidate, while interest groups focus mostly on an issue such as environmental protection or gun control.

Third, political parties are necessarily concerned with the whole range of public affairs, with everything of concern to voters. Interest groups almost always concentrate only on those issues that most directly affect the interests of their members.

In addition, interest groups are private organizations. Unlike political parties, they are not accountable to the public. Their members, not the voters, pass judgment on their performance.

Interest Groups: Good or Bad?

Do interest groups pose a threat to the well-being of the American political system? Or, on the contrary, are they a valuable part of that system? The argument over the merit of interest groups goes back to the beginnings of the Republic.

Two Early Views

Many people have long viewed interest groups with deep suspicion. In 1787, James Madison warned the new nation against the dangers of what he called “factions.” He made his view of those groups clear when he defined a faction as

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“a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”

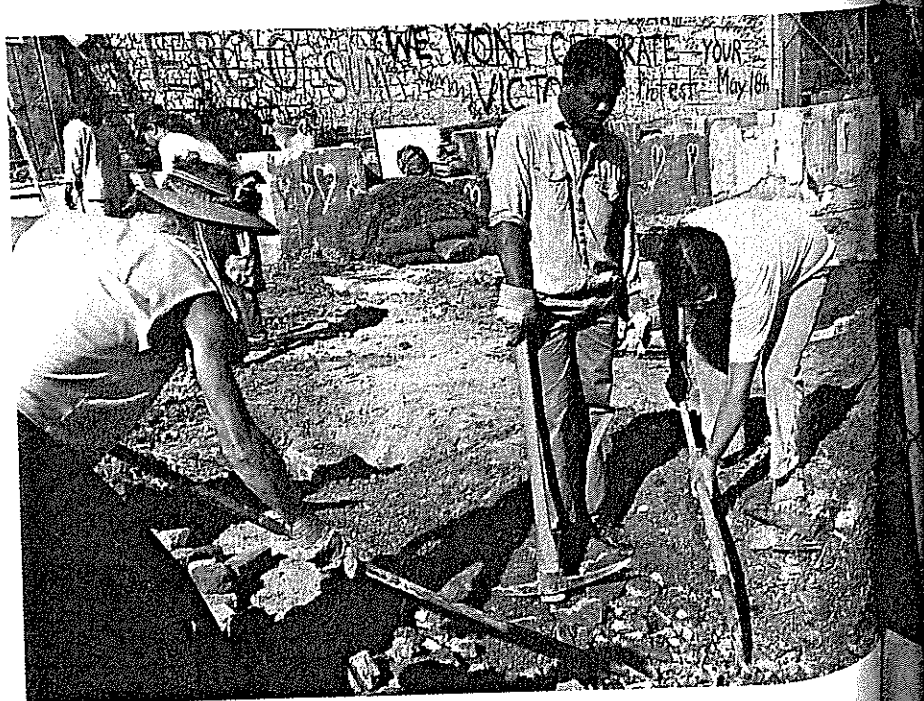
— *The Federalist* No. 10²

Despite his mistrust, Madison thought that factions were inevitable in human society, and he was opposed to any attempt to abolish them. A society could only eliminate factions, he said, by eliminating freedom. Instead, wrote Madison, it was necessary to moderate the potential extremism of factions with a balance of powers; that is, with the governmental system set out in the proposed Constitution. The separations of power in that system would mean, said Madison, that factions would tend to counteract and balance each others’ power. Thus, none could become a dominating influence.

Nearly fifty years later, Alexis de Tocqueville was deeply impressed by the vast number of organizations he found in the United States. Tocqueville was a Frenchman who toured much

²The text of *The Federalist* No. 10 appears in the historic documents section that begins on page 780.

► These photos show a vacant lot in Berkeley, California, being turned into a park by community activists. Many such activists belong to interest groups that work to persuade local governments to clean up and improve unused land in towns and cities throughout the United States. **Critical Thinking** What are the advantages to an individual citizen of joining an interest group?



of this country in the early 1830s. In *Democracy in America* he wrote that

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“In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used, or more unsparingly applied to a multitude of different objects, than in America.”

— Alexis de Tocqueville

In a similar vein, he also observed that

“Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations . . . not only commercial and manufacturing . . . but . . . of a thousand other kinds—religious, moral, serious, futile, extensive or restricted, enormous or diminutive.”

Are interest groups “good” or “bad”? To determine the answer, you must weigh, on the one hand, the functions those groups perform in American politics and, on the other, the various criticisms that are often leveled at them.

Valuable Functions of Interest Groups

First, among their several valuable functions, interest groups help to stimulate interest in **public affairs**. Public affairs are those issues and events that concern the people at large. Interest groups raise awareness of public affairs mostly by developing and promoting those policies they

favor and by opposing those policies they see as threats to their interests.

Second, interest groups represent their members on the basis of shared attitudes rather than on the basis of geography—by what their members think as opposed to where they happen to live. Public officials are elected from districts drawn on maps. But many of the issues that concern and unite people today have less to do with *where* they live than with, say, *how* they make a living. A labor union member who lives in Chicago may have much more in common with someone who does the same kind of work in Seattle than he or she does with someone who owns a business in Chicago or runs a farm in another part of Illinois.

Third, organized interests often provide useful, specialized, and detailed information to government—for example, on employment, price levels, or the sales of new and existing homes. These data are important to the making of public policy, and government officials often cannot obtain them from any other source. This flow of information works both ways, as well. Interest groups frequently get information from public agencies and pass it along to their members.

Fourth, interest groups are vehicles for political participation. They are a means through which like-minded citizens can pool their resources and channel their energies into collective political action. One mother concerned about drunk driving cannot accomplish very much acting alone. Thousands of people joined in an organization like MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) certainly can.

Fifth, interest groups add another element to the checks-and-balances feature of the political process. Many of them keep close tabs on the work of various public agencies and officials and thus help to make sure that they perform their tasks in responsible and effective ways.

Finally, interest groups regularly compete with one another in the public arena. That competition places a very real limit on the lengths to which some groups might otherwise go as they seek to advance their own interests. For example, the automotive industry may work to weaken or postpone auto emission standards imposed under the Clean Air Act. Their efforts may be opposed—and to some





Interpreting Political Cartoons What does the cartoon suggest about the relationship between interest groups and Congress?

extent counterbalanced—by environmental and health-related organizations.

Criticisms

All of what has just been said is not meant to suggest that interest groups are above reproach. On the contrary, they can be, and often are, criticized on several counts.

The potential “bad” side of interest groups is sometimes all too apparent. Many of them push

their own special interests which, despite their claims to the contrary, are not always in the best interests of other Americans. Their critics often make these more specific charges:

1. Some interest groups have an influence far out of proportion to their size, or, for that matter, to their importance or contribution to the public good. Thus, the contest over “who gets what, when, and how” is not always a fair fight. The more highly organized and better-financed groups often have a decided advantage in that struggle.

2. It is sometimes hard to tell just who or how many people a group really represents. Many groups have titles that suggest that they have thousands—even millions—of dedicated members. Some organizations that call themselves such things as “The American Citizens Committee for . . .” or “People United Against . . .” are, in fact, only “fronts” for a very few people with very narrow interests.

3. Many groups do not in fact represent the views of all of the people for whom they claim to speak. Very often, both in and out of politics, an organization is dominated by an active minority who conduct the group’s affairs and make its policy decisions.

4. Finally, some groups use tactics that, if they were to become widespread, would undermine the whole political system. These practices include bribery and other heavy-handed uses of money, overt threats of revenge, and so on. They are not altogether common, but the danger is certainly there.

Section 1 Assessment

Key Terms and Main Ideas

1. What is **public policy**?
2. List and describe the three main areas in which political parties and interest groups differ.
3. (a) How do interest groups stimulate interest in **public affairs**?
(b) Name at least three additional functions of interest groups.
4. On what bases are interest groups often criticized?

Critical Thinking

5. **Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment** Suppose that you want to form a group in your school to combat racial discrimination. Which of the functions of interest groups described in this section would your group most likely fulfill? Explain your answer.

6. **Making Decisions** Suppose that you are asked to contribute money to an interest group that calls itself “Citizens for Better Schools.” What information would you want to find out about this group before making a contribution?



Take It to the Net

7. Select some groups that interest you and follow links to their Web sites. If you were to support one of these groups, which would it be? Write a paragraph explaining your choice. Use the links provided in the Social Studies area at the following Web site for help in completing this activity. www.phschool.com