

CHAPTER 7 - Interest Group Participation in American Democracy

OVERVIEW

Most Americans participate indirectly in politics by joining groups that attempt to influence government. Successful groups have found ways to overcome the free-rider problem, the tendency of people to enjoy a group's benefits without contributing in any way to the group.

Group characteristics and their situations lead them to adopt a variety of political strategies: lobbying (traditional and grassroots), electioneering, political protests, and influencing the courts.

It is difficult to say how effective interest groups are. For every success story, there is a story of group ineffectiveness. Some are concerned about the effectiveness of groups: they do not represent all interests, the common good gets little attention, and they help create a politics of extremes.

OUTLINE

I. Interest Groups in the United States

- Large majorities of Americans participate indirectly in politics by joining or supporting interest groups. More than 75 percent belong to at least one interest group. On average, each belongs to two groups.

A. Growth and Development of Groups

- Americans have a long-standing reputation for forming groups. Perhaps James Madison was correct when he wrote in Federalist No. 10 that the causes of factions (groups of individuals with their own interests) were "sown in the nature of man."
- Group formation has occurred in waves. Before the Civil War, there were few national organizations. The first two decades following the Civil War saw the birth of national agricultural associations and trade unions.
- Another wave of group organization occurred during the Progressive Era (c. 1890 to 1917). Most, but not all, of the groups in this wave had an economic basis.
- The 1960-1980 wave of group formation is the largest and most heterogeneous. Thousands of economic groups formed. Numerous nonprofit groups formed as well.
- Innumerable shared-interest groups have formed in recent decades. These include liberal, conservative, citizens, environmental, consumer, and watchdog groups.

B. The Nature and Variety of Interest Groups

- One researcher has shown that groups vary a great deal as to level of formal organization.
- Also, some are membership groups composed of numerous private individuals who make voluntary contributions. Others are associations consisting of corporate or institutional representatives who pay regular dues.

- One researcher estimates that almost 80 percent of interest groups represent professional or occupational constituencies, about half representing the profit sector and half nonprofit. The other 20 percent of American interest groups reflect the activities of citizens with particular interests, including those spawned by what are called social movements.

II. Forming and Maintaining Interest Groups

-In spite of the fact that the United States is a nation of joiners, millions of people do not join or support associations whose interests they share. Who are the joiners?

-Professor James Q. Wilson has identified three incentives: (1) solidarity, (2) material, and (3) purposive. People join groups when there are incentives to do so. Some people join for social reasons. Some join because membership confers tangible benefits. Some join to advance a group's social and political goals.

A. The Free-Rider Problem

- Groups relying on purposive and material incentives face the free-rider problem: Many people who share a group's goals do not join or contribute but share in the benefits of the group's efforts.
- The logic of the free-rider is that one's contribution (money or time) will not have much (if any) effect on the group's success and other group members will press on without one's contribution anyway. Thus, why contribute?
- The free-rider problem is most prominent in large groups and those groups that have goals somewhat remote from the members' everyday lives: the difference between what has been called public goods and private goods.
- Only groups whose membership is based on social incentives escape the free-rider problem. The implication for democracy is that small groups organized for narrow purposes have an organizational advantage. Such groups are called special interest groups, as contrasted with public interest groups.

B. Overcoming the Free-Rider Problem

1. Coercion

- One way to overcome the free-rider problem is to make those who benefit from a group's efforts contribute to the group. Thus, labor unions rely on closed shops.
- A milder form of coercion is to get government recognition for your group and its members (such as government certification of certain occupations).
- Coercion appears to be a declining means of overcoming the free rider problem.

2. Social Movements

- Another way in which the free-rider problem is overcome is through a social movement. These have occurred throughout U.S. history. When they occur, people are less likely to think solely of themselves and think more of what is good for the society. When this happens, free-rider thinking breaks down.
- It is difficult, however, to sustain social movements for a long period of time unless the movement finds a way to institutionalize itself.

3. Increasing the Perceived Impact

-As was noted earlier, the free-rider problem occurs because most people do not believe that their own contribution of time or money will have any noticeable impact on a particular issue or problem area. In an attempt to overcome this obstacle, groups may reformulate their appeals in order to suggest that even small contributions will have a measurable, concrete impact.

4. Selective Benefits

-Some groups discourage free-riders by providing active group members with tangible benefits.

5. Patrons and Political Entrepreneurs

-A *political entrepreneur* is an individual or a small number of individuals who takes the lead in setting up and operating the group. The reason for this is the economic interests of the individual or the small group of individuals. Others are driven by a cause. Even government has contributed to the formation of groups through regulations and the need to implement them.

III. How Interest Groups Influence Government

A. Government Lobbying

-Lobbying is the attempt of group representatives to personally influence the decisions of public officials. People who engage in lobbying are called lobbyists.

-The term lobbyist has negative connotations. Actually, most lobbyists operate within the law. The primary task performed by lobbyists is to provide governmental decision-makers with accurate information.

B. Grassroots Lobbying

-Unlike lobbying, which takes a direct approach, grassroots lobbying seeks to influence the governmental decision-maker indirectly. Thus, the attempt might be to influence voters who would then seek to influence their government officials.

-Grassroots lobbying is more prevalent today than in the past. The reasons are (1) the decentralization of Congress, (2) the openness of government today, and (3) technological advances.

C. Electioneering and PACs

-Another way to influence government is by working in campaigns to get particular people elected to office. Electioneering is probably the fastest-growing group tactic, and a principal vehicle of this tactic is the political action committee (PAC).

-PACs are specialized organizations that raise and spend campaign funds. They have enjoyed explosive growth in the past few decades. Far more of them represent business and commercial interests than represent labor or citizen interests.

- There is widespread public dissatisfaction with the role of PACs in campaign finance. While the media often portrays them as corrupt, most PAC contributions are small and most research indicates there is no significant relationship between PAC contributions and politicians' votes.

D. Persuading the Public

- Some groups seek to influence the public even when no specific legislation or regulation is at issue. Their goal is to build general support for the group and its interests so that it will be more successful in the long run.
- One communications technique that is a product of modern electronic communications is direct mail.

E. Direct Action

- American history is full of examples of direct action taken by groups, one of the earliest being the Revolution. Forms of direct action are often used by social movements. The media (particularly TV) pay a lot of attention to such acts.

F. Litigation

- Some groups seek to influence policy by selecting cases to litigate. They also stage demonstrations in front of courthouses, generate letters and telegrams to judges, and file amicus curiae briefs.

G. Why Groups Use Particular Tactics

1. Group Characteristics

- Size, composition, wealth, organizational structure, and other factors affect the activities groups engage in; each group allocates its resources in the way that it considers most efficient.

2. Situational Characteristics

- Various situational characteristics-party control of Congress and the presidency, the economic situation, the mood of the country, what a group seeks to achieve-interact with characteristics of interest groups to determine what mix of strategies is adopted.

IV. How Influential Are Interest Groups?

- The answers to this question are varied. Some believe interest groups dominate American politics. Scholars usually disagree, noting that one group can cancel out the effects of another group. Also, sub-governments do not seem as powerful today.

A. Subgovernments

- Scholars coined the word subgovernment for the interaction among three groups: a congressional committee, an executive agency, and an interest group. One of these actors offers something the other two desire. The strength of their relationship is summed up in the descriptive phrase "iron triangle."

-Subgovernments are not as important today. Congressional committees are not as strong. There are many more groups to counteract each other. Finally, the media are more interested in investigating stories concerning such relationships.

B. Issue Networks

- Many scholars argue that subgovernments have been replaced by networks: bigger, broader, and much looser connections of interest groups, politicians, bureaucrats, and policy experts. They are much more open than subgovernments and much less stable in their composition.
- But the importance of interest groups remains as divided as ever.

V. Interest Groups and Democratic Politics

- Political scientists generally have not held interest groups in as low regard as have ordinary citizens. Some used the word "pluralism" in a positive way to describe the role, interaction, and importance of group activity in American government. Under pluralism, change is incremental and moderate, the result of competing groups that are representative of Americans.
- Pluralism is out of fashion today. For one thing, critics point out that not all interests are equally represented by groups. For another, it is argued that the interests of the nation are not the sum of the interests of its parts. For another, group processes reinforce extremism and undercut moderation. Leaders of interest groups, acting as fiduciaries, tend to take extreme positions.
- Although James Madison is often viewed as an early supporter of pluralism (Federalist No. 10) for several reasons he would probably have second thoughts today.