

Chapter 9: Interest Groups

Section 1: The Nature of Interest Groups

Key Words: public policy, public affairs

A. The Role of Interest Groups

1. Interest groups seek to influence public policy. 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.
2. Interest groups are made up of people who share similar views about specific issues.
3. Since interest groups exist to influence public policy, then they tend to be located where public policy is made. Special interest groups are found in Washington DC and in every state capitol.
4. Since government money is limited, interest groups compete for the limited available money with all of the groups who advocate another interest. They compete for and share the political power in this country.

B. Political Parties and Interest Groups

1. Both political parties and interest groups are made up of people who unite for some political purpose.
2. Although parties and interest groups are similar in some ways, they differ in 3 important characteristics:
 - Parties make political nominations, interest groups do not.
 - Parties seek to control government by nominating candidates who are eventually elected to office. Interest groups seek to control or influence policies of the government. Their focus is different: parties care about the “who”, while interest groups care about the “what”.
 - Politicians must be concerned with the entire spectrum of issues that interest the public. Interest groups, however, only concentrate on the specific interests that affect their members.
 - In addition, political parties are accountable to the public. Interest groups, on the other hand, are accountable only to their members.

C. Interest Groups: Good or Bad?

1. Valuable Functions of Interest Groups
 - They help stimulate interest in public affairs by promoting policies they favor.

-They represent their members on the basis of shared attitudes rather than shared geography. Public officials represent people based on geography (a district, etc) where people may not have anything else in common. Members of interest groups always know they share at least one thing in common with the other members.

-Interest groups often provide useful, specialized, and detailed information to government that supports their interest. This information is sometimes useful to government.

-Interest groups are a vehicle for political participation. In addition, the pooled voices of a group's members carry more weight than would be possible alone.

-Interest groups are a form of check and balance on the government. They keep close tabs on what government is doing and make sure they act responsibly.

-Because all of these interests compete in an open forum, they tend to limit and balance the actions of each other. It becomes very difficult for one group to gain too much control.

2. Criticisms of Special Interest Groups

-Interest groups tend to push their own agenda, which may not be in the best interest of the nation or the best use of the available funds.

-Some interest groups have influence out of proportion with their actual size. The more highly organized and best-funded groups tend to be more successful in the political arena, regardless of their size.

-Sometimes it is hard to tell how many members a group really has. Some groups with large-sounding names may really be quite small.

-Even though the groups say they speak for all of their members, the members have very different interests that may not be represented by the group at all.

-Although not common, some groups use illegal and under-handed tactics such as bribes, threats of revenge, and so on.

Chapter 9: Interest Groups **Section 2: Types of Interest Groups**

Key Words: trade association; labor union; public-interest group

A. An American Tradition

1. Today there are thousands and thousands of interest groups in the United States.
2. The largest number are those founded on economic interests.

3. Citizens often belong to more than one interest group and even to groups that take conflicting stands on issues.

B. Groups Based on Economic Interests

1. Business Groups - Hundreds of business and trade groups cooperate and compete to influence policy. Examples: US Brewer's Association, National Association of Manufacturers.

-Smaller segments of business also have their own groups called Trade Associations. Examples: American Trucking Association, National Restaurant Association, American Bankers Association.

2. Labor Groups – A labor union is an organization of workers who share the same type of job or who work in the same industry. Labor unions exercise considerable power in government, but sometimes disagree on policy matters. Examples: AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor, Congress of Industrial Organizations), Fraternal Order of Police, International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

3. Agricultural Groups - Farm groups work to protect the dwindling number of American farmers. Examples: National Grange, American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union, National Association of Wheat Growers, American Meat Institute.

4. Professional Groups – Professionals are generally defined as those occupations that require extensive and specialized training, such as medicine, law, teaching, and so on. Such groups as the AMA (physicians), the ABA (attorneys), and the NEA (teachers) promote the interests of the professions they represent.

C. Other Interest Groups

1. Groups that Promote Causes - Interest groups work to promote an endless variety of causes, from civil liberties to temperance. Examples: American Civil Liberties Union, Common Cause, League of Women Voters.

2. Organizations that Promote the Welfare of Certain Groups - Many groups work to promote the interests of certain segments of the population. Examples: American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

3. Religious Organizations - Various religious groups work to influence government policy. Examples: National Council of Churches, Christian Voice, Christian Coalition, National Catholic Welfare Council, American Jewish Congress.

4. Public-Interest Groups - Public-interest groups seek to promote policies that will benefit the American people as a whole rather than the interests of a special group. Examples: Common Cause, Public Citizen, League of Women Voters.

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Section 3: Interest Groups at Work

Key Words: propaganda; single-interest group; lobbying; grass roots

A. Interest Groups and Public Opinion

1. Public opinion is the most significant long-term force in American politics.
2. Interest groups supply the public with information, try to portray a positive image, and promote a particular public policy.
3. Propaganda
 - a. Interest groups use propaganda - techniques of persuasion - to influence public opinion.
 - b. Mass media encourage the use of propaganda.

B. Interest Groups, Parties, and Elections

1. Interest groups try to win influence in political parties by urging their members to be active in party organizations and by raising money for political campaigns, mostly through PACs.
2. In general, interest groups are primarily interested in policy issues, not elections.

C. Lobbying

1. The work of the Lobbyist
 - a. Lobbyists try to influence legislation through such methods as presenting expert testimony, using the mass media, and mounting grass-roots campaigns.
 - b. They also work to shape the ways that legislation, once passed, is interpreted and enforced.
 - c. Lobbyists will also make contributions to politicians on the behalf of PACs and other groups in an effort to either influence policy or gain access to the politician.
 - d. Lobbyists often make appeals to the grass roots, the people themselves, in an effort to have them contact politicians in order to influence legislation.
 - e. Many interest groups track the voting records of politicians and publish their voting record. This allows interest group members to decide whether a politician is friendly to their cause or not. They also make these ratings known to the media so that legislators may shift their views or help voters make decisions about future elections.

2. Lobby Regulations

- a. Though most lobbying is aboveboard, abuses such as false testimony and bribery still exist.
- b. Congress and the Texas Legislature both try to reduce unethical practices by requiring lobbyists to register, but this law is difficult to enforce.
- c. The Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 requires all lobbyists to register with the Federal government. They must report who their clients are and describe in detail their lobbying activities. This information must be reported semi-annually.