

Special Interest Groups—Lobbyists and PACs

CHAPTER

14

- Campaign finance reform
- Elite and class theory
- Faction
- Freedom of Information Act
- Hard money
- Interest group
- Lobbyists
- Political action committees (PACs)
- Soft money

Contemporary Connection

As a direct result of the Citizens United Supreme Court ruling that allowed unlimited spending by special interest groups, political action committees (PACs), and nonprofit interest groups, these groups spent five times more on the 2010 midterm elections than they did in 2006. This chapter explores the nature and evolution of the last linkage institution, special interest groups, and how they act as advocates in the legislative process and campaigns.



Special interest groups, including their lobbyists and political action committees, have been one of the most criticized components of the political process. This chapter will explore the reasons why special interest groups exist, how they developed, and the roles they play in the political process.

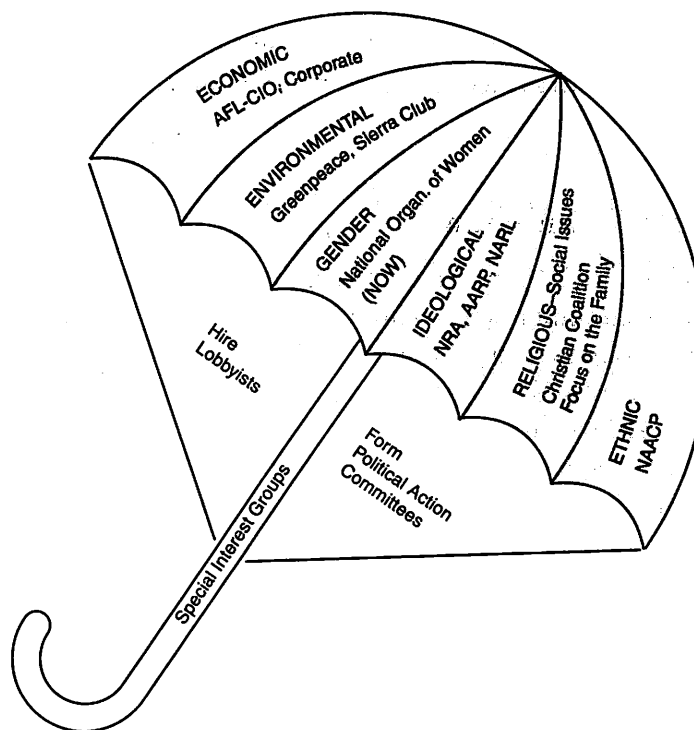
We will also apply the group theory that we introduced in Chapter 1 illustrating how special interests operate in the context of a pluralist, hyperpluralist, and elite society. These interest groups all reflect specialized characteristics and can be classified by categories such as economic, occupational, environmental, and minority. The main role of these groups is to influence public policy and the policymakers through lobbying efforts, the formation of political action committees, and legal action.

We will look at the successes and failures of these groups through case studies. When you look at the money spent in the efforts to get senators and representatives to vote for a particular bill and the perks given to them as well as the contributions made to reelection committees, you will understand why citizen groups are calling for major legislative reforms. We conclude the chapter by taking a look at these reform efforts and evaluating future trends.

CHARACTERISTICS

Interest groups have common traits and functions and have the common goal of attracting a membership that is interested in affecting public policymaking.

For the purposes of establishing a common understanding, the definition of an interest group is a linkage group that is a public or private organization, affiliation, or committee that has as its goal the dissemination of its membership's viewpoint. The result will be persuading public policymakers to respond to the group's perspective. The interest groups' goals are carried out by special interests in the form of lobbyists and political action committees. They can take on an affiliation based on specialized memberships such as unions, associations, leagues, and committees.



Interest groups and political parties are both characterized by group identification and group affiliation. However, they differ in the fact that interest groups do not nominate candidates for political office. Their function is to influence officeholders rather than end up as elected officials, and they are responsible only to a very narrow constituency. Interest groups can also make up their own by-laws, which govern the manner in which they run their organizations. Because the major function of these groups is the advocacy or opposition of specific public policies, they can attract members from a large geographic area. The only criterion is that the person joining the group has the same interests and attitudes toward the goals of the organization.

In trying to persuade elected officials to a group's position, these groups also provide a great deal of specialized information to legislators. Group advocates also claim they provide an additional check and balance to the legislative system. Critics of the growth of specialized groups claim they are partly responsible for gridlock in government. In addition, critics point to the manner in which groups gain access to elected officials as a tradeoff for political contributions.

Once a specialized group is formed, it also has internal functions such as attracting and keeping a viable membership. Groups accomplish this by making promises to their membership that they will be able to succeed in their political goals, which in the end will benefit the political, economic, or social needs of the members. For example, if people want stricter laws against drunk driving and join Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), they feel a political and social sense of accomplishment when federal law dictates a national minimum drinking age in return for federal aid to states for highway construction. For these groups to succeed, they also must have an adequate financial base to establish effective lobbying efforts or create separate political action committees. Dues may be charged or fundraisers might be held. The internal organization will certainly have elected officers responsible to their membership. A highly successful group, the National Association of Manufacturers, represents the interests of over 13,000 corporations. It fought hard for the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement and was able to organize its membership to fight for it.

Group Theory

The nature of group membership is not representative of the population as a whole; consequently, the importance of group theory will help explain the context in which special interest groups develop. It is interesting to note that many groups have as their members people with higher than average income and education levels and people who are white-collar workers. However, this is balanced by the number of groups that have proliferated and represent the interests of union members and blue-collar workers. Therefore, when we look again at the group theory described in Chapter 1, you will have a better understanding of group dynamics.

As discussed earlier, there are three potential kinds of group activity—pluralist, majoritarian, and elite. Pluralism suggests that a centrist position results because there is a more far-reaching and balancing group representation. Elite theory defines group behavior as deriving from an upper class. Even though we can make the argument that many interest groups are elitist in nature because of the socioeconomic characteristics of their membership and that there are so many competing groups that can cause gridlock in government, these groups often compete with each other in a manner consistent with pluralism.

Let's support this assertion by briefly describing the characteristics of each of these theories as they relate to special interest groups. Pluralists maintain that

- competing groups are healthy because they provide a political connection to government, offering government officials a choice;
- the competition often clarifies information and prevents any one group from dominating government; and
- competing groups have each developed political strategies to achieve their goals and that eventually the resources of one group will independently affect governmental policy.

The group theory of modern government encourages the development of special interest groups.

Critics of elitist group theory maintain that

- power is concentrated by the largest and richest organizations;
- the unequal nature of the power of groups negates the fact that groups are proliferating; and
- ultimately money talks, and these large groups will have the most influence.

Critics of the majoritarian model of government maintain that:

- direct democracy that relies on majority rule defeats the idea of a representative form of government.
- this model can result in a violation of minority rights since all decisions are made by majority rule.
- a majority rule approach to government can only work on a limited basis such as in a “town meeting” setting.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The fear and deep suspicion of special interest groups goes back to the early days of the republic.

James Madison wrote in Federalist Paper No. 10, “By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united . . . by some common . . . interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” He even went as far as saying that “the regulation of these various and interfering interests forms of the principal task of modern Legislation. . . .”

Madison’s view was that the development of factions was an inevitable feature of society. Even though he was fearful of their potential, he did not make the argument that they should be abolished. He felt that the separation of powers of the three branches of government and the division of government between the national and local governments would, in the end, provide enough government protection and regulation of these interests. In addition the formation of political parties became an additional balance to the formation of private interest groups, many of which were economically based during the early stages of our country’s existence.

One of the first examples of why Madison felt factions could be potentially dangerous was Shays’ Rebellion. Daniel Shays organized a group of unhappy farmers attempting to help them forestall foreclosure of their land. Frustrated in their attempts to get government relief, they took up arms. Shays was arrested, and the revolt failed.

Once the Constitution was ratified and the Bill of Rights was added, the First Amendment seemed to give legitimacy to the formation of special interest groups. Their right of free assembly, free speech, and free press and the right to petition seemed to create a validity for group formation. Taken together, groups felt they could associate with each other, free from government interference, disseminate the issues that they believe in to their membership and to government officials, and attempt to influence the course of public policy.

Interest groups are categorized according to their function. They all have one common goal—to make their viewpoints part of the political agenda.

MODE OF OPERATION

As interest groups have grown in number and size, they have also become specialized, representing various concerns. The following represents a cross section of the different kinds of interest groups that have organizations:

- Economic and occupational including business and labor groups, trade associations, agricultural groups, and professional associations
 - * National Association of Manufacturers
 - * Airline Pilots Association
 - * AFL-CIO
 - * American Farm Bureau
 - * United States Chamber of Commerce
- Energy and environmental
 - * American Petroleum Institute
 - * Sierra Club
- Religious, racial, gender, and ethnic
 - * National Organization for Women
 - * National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
 - * National Urban League
- Political, professional, and ideological
 - * Common Cause
 - * American Medical Association
 - * Veterans of Foreign Wars
 - * National Rifle Association

The majority of these groups have headquarters in Washington, D.C., and they all have operating budgets and staffs. Most have hired lobbyists who make contacts with senators and representatives as well as the executive branch. Many have separate political action committees with well-financed budgets. They place their views on the political agenda through the following techniques:

- testifying at congressional hearings
- contacting government officials directly
- providing officials with research information
- sending letters to their own membership
- trying to influence the press to present their point of view
- suggesting and supporting legislation
- hiring lobbyists
- giving senators and representatives feedback from their constituents
- making contributions through PACs to campaign committees
- taking congressmen on trips or to dinner
- endorsing candidates
- working on the campaigns

All these groups and techniques have the potential of helping the legislative process because they do help inform office holders. They also provide elected officials with a viable strategy and a base of support. These groups also have the expertise to give elected officials an additional slant to a problem. Unlike other constituents who have hidden agendas, special interest groups place their goals on the table, up front.

LOBBYISTS

Lobbyists provide interest groups with specialists to advance their causes and influence policymaking.

Lobbyists are the primary instruments for fostering a special interest group's goals to the policymakers. The term comes from people who literally wait in the lobbies of legislative bodies for senators and representatives to go to and from the floor of the legislatures. Manuals have been published for lobbyists outlining the best ways for a lobbyist to be successful. Some of the techniques include:

- knowing as much as you can about the political situation and the people involved
- understanding the goals of the group and determining who you want to see
- being truthful in the way you deal with people
- working closely with the interest group that hired you
- keeping the people you are trying to convince in your corner by telling them of the support they will receive if they agree to the position of the group
- following up on all meetings, making sure the results you want do not change

Recently, the image of lobbyists has taken a blow because they have attracted negative publicity. Former government officials who become lobbyists have been criticized because they can take unfair advantage of contacts they developed when they were in office. An additional accusation has been made against government appointees who were former lobbyists but still maintain a relationship with the special interest group they worked for before getting the position. In 2006, lobbyist Jack Abramoff was convicted of illegal lobbying practices. As a result, Congress became embroiled in a scandal that revealed what many called a “culture of corruption.”

On the other hand, lobbyists also play a positive role as specialists. When tax reform was being considered in the 1980s and 1990s, lobbyists provided an expertise to congressional committees considering the bills. Sometimes lobby coalitions are formed when extremely important and far-reaching legislation, such as healthcare reform, is under consideration. Lobbyists may also take legal action on behalf of the interest group. They file friend of the court (*amicus curiae*) briefs or may be part of a class action suit. Cases such as *Brown v Board of Education*, *Roe v Wade*, and *Regents of California v Bakke* attracted a great deal of attention and numerous third-party briefs. Lobbyists may also provide ratings of officials. Groups such as Americans for Democratic Action and the American Conservative Union give annual ratings based on their political ideologies. Lobbyists and special interest groups also use the media to push their viewpoint. During the energy crisis, lobbyists for Mobil ran ads that resembled columns, explaining its point of view.

POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEES (PACs)

Political action committees (PACs) raise money from special interest constituents and donate hard and soft money to political parties and candidates.

When an interest group gets involved directly in the political process, it forms separate political action committees. These PACs raise money from the special interest group's constituents and make contributions to political campaigns on behalf of the special interest. The amount of money contributed over the last few elections has been staggering. PACs such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), labor's “Vote Cope,” American Bankers Association (BANKPAC), PAC of the National Automobile Dealers Association, Black Political Action Committees (BlackPAC), and Council for a Strong National Defense have made major contributions to political campaigns and have had a tremendous impact on local and national elections.

The next five largest contributors were the corporate United Parcel Service PAC at \$1.4 million, the Teamsters' Democratic Republican Independent Voter Education (DRIVE) Committee at \$1.2 million, the Machinists Non-Partisan Political League at \$1.2 million, and PACs for two trade organizations, the Association of Trial Lawyers of America at \$1.2 million, and the American Medical Association at \$1.1 million.

The remaining four PACs included more labor PACs, each giving about \$1 million: the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Committee on Political Education, Carpenters Legislative Improvement Committee, United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners, the United Auto Workers Voluntary Community Action Program, and the National Education Association PAC.

The amount of contributions to congressional campaigns by PACs has skyrocketed from 1981–2000. From 1981 to 1982, \$83.7 million was contributed to candidates for the House and Senate, as compared to \$245.3 million contributed to candidates running for the House and Senate in 1999–2000. What is more astonishing is that, even when senators and representatives were not facing any opposition, they received hundreds of thousands of dollars. For example, Representative Charles Rangel of New York was given more than \$300,000 from PACs for an election campaign in 1988 when nobody was running against him. In 1996 the FBI investigated the accusation that foreign money was involved in political donations. Their investigation revealed that China tried to influence local, congressional, and presidential elections.

Top PAC Contributions 2009–2010

PAC Name	Total Amount	Democrat	Republican
National Assn. of Realtors	\$3,680,296	57%	43%
Honeywell International	\$3,569,700	55%	45%
AT&T Inc.	\$3,047,375	47%	53%
Intl. Brotherhood of Electrical Workers	\$2,888,623	98%	2%
National Beer Wholesalers Assn.	\$2,708,000	56%	44%
American Assn. for Justice	\$2,654,000	97%	3%
American Bankers Assn.	\$2,637,404	33%	66%
American Federation of Teachers	\$2,282,250	99%	0%
American Federal/State/County/ Municipal Employees	\$2,192,000	99%	0%
Operating Engineers Union	\$2,188,288	90%	10%
Teamsters Union	\$2,157,060	97%	2%

Congressional candidates raised billions of dollars in the 2010 midterm elections, a significant increase from the 2006 election cycle. In 2006, House candidates raised \$544 million, up 18 percent from 2002, while Senate candidates raised \$350 million dollars, up 15 percent from 2002. In 2010, congressional candidates raised over \$2 billion, shattering all records.

REFORM

Calls for campaign finance reform and regulation of interest groups stem from the money and perks they give legislators and candidates for elective office.

Special interest public interest groups such as Common Cause and the Center for Independence in Politics have been in the forefront of calling for reform and regulation of interest groups, lobbyists, and PACs. They maintain that these groups are dominated by the rich and ignore the needs of the poor. They accuse big business interests of dominating special interests and give examples of the excessive amounts of money donated and the questionable trips and other perks given to officials. These complaints must be balanced by the legitimate right of special interest groups to exist and do their business. They are constitutionally protected, and as long as they don't break the law, they have the right to pursue their interests. The vast majority of recognized groups do not cross the line, and there are relatively few documented cases of outright corruption.

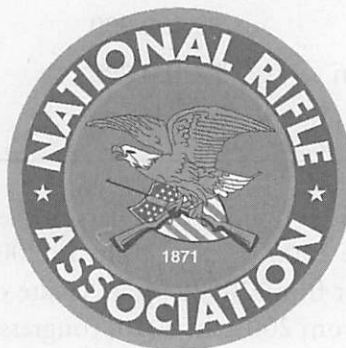
PUBLIC AWARENESS AND EFFECTIVENESS

The success and failure of interest groups, lobbyists, and PACs to achieve their goals depends, to a large extent, on their public image and their ultimate ability to influence the outcome of public policy.

In order for an interest group to succeed, not only must a public awareness of the group's position take place but legislators must also accept the bill of sale presented to them. There is no doubt that the National Rifle Association's membership consists of a small percentage of the American public. Yet because of its image, for example, the "We are the NRA" commercials and its advocacy of the constitutional right to bear arms, the public is certainly aware of its stand, and polls indicate that many people support its position.

The National Rifle Association is a good example of how a special interest group successfully influences public policy. From 1994–2008, the NRA's political influence has been felt by both parties. In 1994, they successfully campaigned against Democrats who voted for the Assault Weapons Ban. This was key to the Republicans taking control of Congress. Even though the Assault Weapons Ban passed and was signed into law by President Clinton, because of the efforts of the NRA the law was allowed to expire in 2004. The NRA has also played a key role in getting public support for what they call "the Second Amendment right to bear arms." They were influential in their support of the Supreme Court case that ruled that Washington, D.C., did not have the right to ban handguns. The NRA's membership has increased, and if you explore their website, nra.org, you will see their extensive outreach program.

ONE OF THE AIMS OF THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION
IS TO SUPPORT THE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS



There are very few consistent winners or losers in the attempts by special interests to control the policy agenda. What is clear is that, when the system works, compromise and bipartisanship take place. What is also evident is that when the system breaks down, gridlock occurs, and special interests are called to task. Whether Madison was right in his concern about factions is debatable. They are an important part of the political process. They have major constituencies who rely on them as much as they rely on elected officials.

Review

Section 1: Multiple-Choice Questions

- An interest group is most likely to have influence in Congress with which of the following situations?
 - An issue that is narrow in scope and low in public visibility
 - An issue that is part of the president's legislative package
 - An issue that has been highly dramatized by the media
 - An issue that engages legislators' deeply held convictions
 - An issue that divides legislators along party lines
- All the following statements concerning interest groups are true EXCEPT
 - they are policy experts
 - they attempt to appeal to a broad spectrum of political interests
 - they often run their own candidates for public office
 - they lobby different levels of government
 - they have specific policy goals
- Special interest groups do all of the following EXCEPT
 - testify at congressional hearings
 - donate money to federal judges
 - endorse candidates for political office
 - try to influence the media
 - work on the campaigns of candidates
- All the following arguments are essential to the special interest theory of politics EXCEPT
 - Interest groups compete with each other.
 - Interest groups provide linkage between people and government.
 - One or two interest groups may dominate the debate over legislation.
 - Interest groups encourage membership from diverse groups that may disagree with their goals.
 - Interest groups have been protected by Supreme Court decisions.

5. Which of the following represents a major reason for the proliferation of special interests and lobby groups?
 - (A) The reactive nature of interest groups and lobbyists to new issues
 - (B) The increase in donations received by interest groups from their membership
 - (C) The trust citizens have in the legislative process
 - (D) The ability of lobbyists and special interest groups to get members from their own group to run for political office
 - (E) The increasing demand for campaign reform

6. Which of the following officials do lobbyists most succeed with?
 - (A) Officials who have a basic philosophical affinity with the lobbyist
 - (B) Officials who have a basic philosophical difference with the lobbyist
 - (C) Officials who are neutral with the lobbyist's position
 - (D) Officials who have strong convictions
 - (E) Officials who are very conservative

7. A significant amount of PAC money most likely goes to
 - (A) candidates challenging Republican seats
 - (B) candidates challenging Democratic seats
 - (C) candidates who are new to the political scene
 - (D) candidates who have wide philosophical differences with the PAC
 - (E) candidates who hold incumbent status

8. Which of the following statements represents the main function of special interest groups?
 - (A) They eventually want to end up as political office holders.
 - (B) They nominate candidates for political office.
 - (C) They have the primary function of funding political campaigns.
 - (D) They want to influence officeholders and achieve legislative goals.
 - (E) They attempt to recruit an elite membership in order to become influential.

9. All the following are techniques used by lobbyists EXCEPT
 - (A) testifying at congressional hearings
 - (B) providing officials with research information
 - (C) appearing on the floor of Congress as staff assistants to senators and representatives
 - (D) taking senators and representatives to conferences sponsored by a special interest group
 - (E) giving senators and representatives feedback from their constituents