

## 5.6 Interest Groups Influencing Policy Making

**Explain the benefits and potential problems of interest-group influence on elections and policy-making.**

**Explain how variation in types and resources of interest groups affects their ability to influence elections and policy making.**

Interest groups try to influence public policy for a group of people with common concerns. Called by many different names these “special interests” or factions are organized to “lobby” or effect change at every entry point of public policy. Remember James Madison in Federalist 10 said such activity was natural. “The causes of faction,” Madison wrote, are “sown in the nature of man.” Nevertheless, a vast majority of Americans, close to 75%, believe interest groups have too much power and authority over Washington DC. Perhaps this is true because people with better than average incomes are the most likely to join interest groups. Yet our pluralistic political system allows for the free flow of competing interests. Many of the largest lobbying firms have offices on K Street in Washington. For this reason, interest groups are often referred collectively as K Street.

Interest groups have proliferated in the United States because of social diversity, federalism, weak political parties and fragmented institutions. Interest groups are more common here than in other democracies because of our unique American political culture. Feelings of civic duty and high levels of political efficacy help to explain the large number of interest groups in America. Interest groups are another example of a linkage institution.

Do not forget that we are “a nation of joiners.” Guided by self-interest, we naturally join groups that share our concerns. The First Amendment protects us when advocating for issues and appealing to our government for assistance. Free speech and the right to petition are fundamental to our civil liberties and civil rights. Though we may cringe a bit when we learn that interest group activity last year spent almost \$4 billion “lobbying” or influencing the federal government, our political efficacy is strengthened when our government acts responsively to our collective requests.

The act of influencing is called lobbying. A professional who works for any given interest group is called a lobbyist. Political scientist Bryce Harlow has studied lobbyists. He stated,

*The coin of lobbying, as of politics, is trust . . . truth telling and square dealing are of paramount importance in this profession. If [one] lies, misrepresents, or even lets a misapprehension stand uncorrected—or if someone cuts his corners too slyly—he is . . . dead and gone, never to be resurrected or even mourned.*

One can imagine why lobbyists are often portrayed in sleazy ways. Yet the policy making process depends upon the expertise and connections provided by lobbyists. Nicholas W. Allard has argued, “Lobbying is an Honorable Profession.” Allard wrote,

*The most basic function of the lobbyist is to educate by providing information, and it is axiomatic that legislators benefit when they can consider information from a broad range of interested parties. The increasing scope and complexity of legislation and regulation as the United States evolves and becomes ever more entwined in a global community has further magnified the importance of lobbyists’ expertise. As Thomas Susman explains, ‘Government has become sufficiently complex that, without the information lobbyists bring to legislators, decision making*

*would be—at best—poorly informed.’ It is true, as one former highly regarded Senate aide and now chief lobbyist for a major university points out, that members of Congress and staff are not dependent on lobbyists’ information and often do their own research. However, lobbyists often have information not available to members and staff, and they perform a critical function by confirming information and even informing lawmakers of unintended consequences of their proposals. Without such feedback, legislators and regulators might fail to achieve their objectives and could even do more harm than good. It is sometimes the case that without input from the erstwhile ‘beneficiary’ of a new law or regulation, the provision would produce unwelcome results.*

Though the First Amendment protects lobbying their behavior is closely regulated not unlike campaign finance. All lobbyists must register with the government and file regular statements that itemize their activity. In addition to money and gift limits there are restrictions placed upon the “revolving door” of lobbying. The revolving door describes those elected officials and bureaucrats who are hired by lobbying firms to influence their former office. Nevertheless, many of our democratic values protect lobbyists against draconian restrictions.

Of course, hiring a lobbyist is not the only way to influence policy. Through letter writing, demonstrating and other like-minded activities anybody can play the role of an interest group. When everyday citizens participate as an interest group this is called grassroots. Too many of us are free riders, we want to enjoy the privileges of interest group activity without participating ourselves.

There are many techniques that interest groups use to influence policy. They write policy proposals that later are introduced as bills; they conduct important research; they testify before important Congressional committees; use ballot initiatives; write amicus briefs; litigate by filing lawsuits; and they help candidates’ campaign. Interest groups can affect litigation by writing amicus briefs. By far the single most important commodity held by interest groups is information. Notice making a lot of noise by demonstrating is not a strategy used often. Flying under the radar actually works best. If public opinion is aroused the work of interest groups can often be harder. This is why many interest groups try to remain bipartisan. They want to influence policy in both Democratic and Republican Administrations. Lobbyists are checked from misrepresenting too many facts because they fear losing a particular Congressman’s trust and confidence. Without access interest groups cannot influence.

In addition to working within party coalitions, interest groups exert influence through long-standing relationships with bureaucratic agencies, Congressional committees, and other interest groups; such relationships are described as “iron triangles” and issue networks and they help interest groups exert influence across political party coalitions.

Interest groups can exert public policy influence through “iron triangles.” “Iron triangles” have been called sub-governments. “Iron triangles” are commonly defined as, “...A coalition of key policy makers including members of Congress, powerful special interest lobbies, and key career bureaucrats.” Together these three agents of power and influence coalesce around a narrow issue. “Iron triangles” are tightknit and rigid relationships between common interests. Dairy farmers, for instance, represented by members of Congress on the House Agriculture Committee hire American Dairy Association lobbyists to influence rule-making in the Department of Agriculture. All three components share a vital interest, protecting dairy farmers. As long as these “iron triangles” operate outside of the public eye reform is difficult. Longstanding policy benefits stay in place. With the advent of information technology, “iron triangles” have grown more and more out of favor. Political scientists now prefer using the term “issue networks.”

Hugh Heclo coined the theory of “issue networks.” “Issue networks” are “much more fluid coalitions in which sometimes anonymous participants from both inside and outside of government coalesce around a particular issue on an ad hoc basis...[Issue networks] are temporary coalitions whose members are motivated by passion and ideals as much as by the chance of some economic gain from involvement in the policy process.” “Issue networks” involve more players, casting wider webs of influence and strategy. In our time, educational policy has been impacted in this way. National, state and local agents along with reformers, publishers and educators have teamed up to institute new standards and assessment tools.

Unfortunately, money all too often provides the currency of gaining access to our decision makers. It has been said “the mother’s milk of politics” is money. Interest groups allocate money to candidates running for office by creating PACS, political action committees. Ordinarily PACs face strict limits. Today, however, 527 groups or Super PACs can raise large sums of unlimited cash. 527 money cannot be given directly to candidates. Clearly interest groups with lots of monetary resources are advantaged when trying to affect election outcomes. It is for this reason that people with above average incomes participate in interest groups more than others. There are more interest groups that represent big business than any other sector in our economy.

E.E. Schattschneider gave voice to this realist view of democracy in America. Whereas theory argues for a pluralist political system where competing groups equally influence our politics political scientists like E.E. Schattschneider observed a more elite polity. In his classic work, *The Semi-sovereign People* (1960), Schattschneider criticized group theory. Hoping for public interests too often a select few gain private interests. The aggregate sum of interest group activity fails to deliver the common good. The majority remain less represented than those few able to muster the resources to gain access and change public policy. “The flaw in the pluralist heaven,” Schattschneider wrote, “is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.” It is no surprise when we discover that most Americans hold interest groups in contempt. These “special interests” all too often, most of us think, inhibit true democracy.

Unlike political parties who want to win elections, interest groups simply want to influence policy. Group theory, including the study of interest groups in American politics, would suggest that there are many benefits to such activity. Yet clearly there are potential problems. We all may have the legal right to speak our minds in hopes of influencing our policy makers. An elite few, however, seem to have the necessary resources to access an amped up microphone.