

5.7 Groups Influencing Policy Outcomes

Explain how various political actors influence public policy outcomes.

Interest groups come in all shapes and sizes. They activate and empower individuals and groups across the political spectrum. Democrats may unite with Republicans on certain issues. Special interests may act in a bipartisan fashion. Then again, factions often divide. Pit us against each other. Our Founders feared the “baneful effect” of factions. Today it is common place for various political actors, in the form of interest groups, professional organizations, social movements, the military, and bureaucratic agencies, to influence the policy making process. In our democratic republic they all operate as special interests.

There are interests groups that represent vast numbers of people, like the AARP, the American Association of Retired Persons who advocate for the elderly. There are single-issue groups, like EMILY’S List, an advocacy group who works to get pro-choice candidates elected. Or there are those groups who simply are formed to protest against injustice like Black Lives Matter. This movement hopes to attract attention to and change unwarranted and excessive uses of state violence against black youth. Protest politics in American society is found in our DNA. The spirit of dissent gave birth to the United States. In our Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson wrote,

That whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness.

Additionally, the First Amendment codified our rights to free speech, free press, free exercise of religion, while given the right to assemble and petition our government. The government, after all, is not bricks and mortar but people provided with authority to represent our will. And when that will is challenged or neglected by our elected officials we have been empowered to protest.

Think how the civil rights movement not only impacted our society but greatly affected policy making. African Americans organized when working to overcome the residual effects of slavery. Kate Masur, in *An Example for All the Land*, writes,

Beginning during the Civil War, black Washingtonians insisted on a remarkably expansive interpretation of racial equality. The black population was anything but homogeneous. Existing black residents, the majority of whom had been free before the war, were joined by thousands of fugitives from slavery and by migrants from the North who came in search of work, education, and opportunities for political activism. In their private lives, African Americans observed distinctions in wealth, education and place of origin. When it came to making demands in public, however, they were strikingly allied across classes in the pursuit of a broad definition of equality. Using a variety of tactics, including written petitions, individual protests, and mass demonstrations, black Washingtonians demanded much more than basic equality in legal proceedings. They sought recognition as members of the civic body and full and equal access to streetcars, theaters, public schools, and the proceedings of Congress. They demanded fair treatment by the police and a fair share of public works employment, equal access to trade unions, and official recognition of their militia organizations.

Change did not come easy for African Americans seeking equality but it would have taken a lot longer had they not joined together. In succeeding generations groups like the NAACP, SCLC and SNCC were formed to advance the cause of civil rights.

Through litigation the NAACP was able to affect legal outcomes. No better example than the case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Through the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., SCLC was able to use boycotts and marches to draw attention to the plight of black America. Their efforts resulted in such landmark pieces of legislation as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. SNCC mobilized Freedom Rides throughout the south helping to raise the stakes in participatory democracy by registering thousands of African Americans to vote.

These voters, today, are a major force in determining electoral outcomes. Political scientists have labeled such shifts as critical elections. Critical elections, also called realignments, involve large groups shifting their alliance from one party to another. In the case of African Americans, they were once considered loyal to the Republican Party. The civil rights movement changed this. As Republicans increasingly became the party of the South, African Americans realigned and became ardent supporters of the Democratic Party.

As we have seen political actors influence public policy outcomes, like in the area of civil rights. Political actors have proven to be successful agents of change. Representative democracy is built to be responsive. Certain institutional changes have resulted in weakened political parties. Election rules along with campaign finance reforms have restricted the activity of our two major political parties. Unfettered interest groups, however, using a variety of means and methods continue to successfully link American citizens to their government. Advocating for their own self-interests, these pressure groups and movements have proven again and again that “we the people” can in fact change public policy.

Another great example of the role played by various pressure groups is the budget of the United States government. Now close to \$4 trillion dollars, the federal government’s budget process is a political science lesson in influence peddling. Competing actors such as interest groups, professional organizations, social movements, the military and even bureaucratic agencies all participate in influencing final outcomes. “Show me the money” is the rallying cry of the political class in America.

The stage upon which public policy is played out is made up of many competing actors and groups. To varying degrees throughout American history policy outcomes have been impacted by elections, public opinion, interest groups and political parties. No one group or strategy owns the policy making process. Pluralities of voters along with competing groups across the political spectrum vie for the policy agenda here.

The political science community has recognized that “influence is to the study of decision-making what force is to the study of motion.” The forces that move public policy in America include elections, public opinion, interest groups and political parties. In a representative democracy like ours, one rooted in pluralism, we can only hope that competing interests keep us all equally active in governing ourselves.