Politics and the Role of Interest Groups

Interest groups in American politics serve essential functions, but can lead to many ethical dilemmas for elected officials. Are they a “necessary evil”?

"...and this is where Congress meets! As we studied in class, Congress represents the people, automobile industry people, national rifle association people, big oil people, AFL-CIO people, consumer lobby people..."
What is an Interest Group?

Private organization of citizens whose members share a common goal and work to influence public policy.

3 Characteristics of Interest Groups:

1. It must be organized with leadership and structure. The decision making process is different in the various groups, but there must be a recognizable leader that can claim to have the “voice” of the group.

2. There must be common ideas which hold the people together. Cohesion of the interest group is essential, and members need to support the general goals.

3. It must take some action to influence the government. If no organized action is taken to influence the government, it’s just a bunch of people fussing about their problems. Interest groups must DO SOMETHING for their cause!
FUNCTIONS OF INTEREST GROUPS

- Influence public opinion; Interest groups work at the grassroots level to raise awareness for their cause. They often produce advertisements to encourage involvement and donations for group, and attempt to bring pressure on the government by raising public opinion.

- Influence elections; Interest groups work to support or oppose candidates in hopes to furthering their cause. Endorsements by certain interest groups can help a candidate get elected!

- Influence the government; After the elections, lobbyists for interest groups put pressure on the government to change public policy in a way that will meet the needs of an interest group.

- Serve as a link between the people and the elected officials; The interest group speaks louder than the individual, and members of interest groups feel a stronger link to their representatives.
People join groups for a variety of reasons:

- **Impassioned of the issue:**
  If people are passionate about an issue, they may be wish to do something for their cause. Joining interest groups can help members feel close to the issue and have greater chance at success than working alone. They have a DESIRE TO BE HEARD!

- **Social Status:**
  Some people join interest groups because it “looks good”. It may be a charitable element which can bolster a person’s status within his or her peer group.

- **Seeking company:**
  Some people want to be around others who are equally passionate about an issue. Not necessarily loneliness, but desire the camaraderie of being part of something big.

- **Economic interests:**
  This is the most popular reason for a person to join an interest group! They feel that their economic situation is tied to the goals of the economic groups.
Interest Groups:

3 Types of Groups are most prevalent in the American system:

- Economic
- Social Action
- Single Issue
Economic Interest Groups:

- Some groups try to influence economic policies which includes government appropriations and taxes.
- Some groups try to protect certain types of businesses and professions; the American Manufacturer’s Association protects the interest factory owners, and the American Medical Association protects the interests of doctors and nurses. Most professions have at least one national interest group.
- Labor Unions try to protect workers; the pressure for laws which will help American workers achieve better benefits, working conditions and improved pay.
Social Action Groups:

- Promote changes in society because of principles and ideas; these are groups that typically target one area of society that will directly benefit, but benefits will spread to other areas as well.

- Social action groups have been the source of many changes: from equal rights to environmental regulations.

- These can be: religious groups who wish the government to adopt policies congruent with their beliefs, environmental groups who wish for government regulation and encouragement to improve the environment, ethnic groups who continue to fight for equality, or even groups that look to promote the interests of an aged population.
Single-issue Groups:

- These groups focus on a single issue: single-issue groups have a narrow focus but can have widespread appeal.

- They are usually intense and cohesive: members of these groups typically join because they are passionate about the cause. These groups are most identified with grass-roots efforts and advertising.

- Most interest groups will have another group as a key adversary: issues have two distinct sides, and single-issue groups will form on both sides. Gun control, abortion, and legalization of marijuana are a few examples.
INTEREST GROUPS AT WORK: INFLUENCING PUBLIC OPINION

- They raise public awareness by supplying information: through grass-roots canvassing, advertisements and public service announcements interest groups attempt to educate people about their issue.

- To build a positive image for the group, advertising and service are offered. Interest groups attempt to make news, comment on news events, and keep themselves in the eyes of the people.

- To promote a particular public policy, interest groups take official stands on their issues and relentlessly argue their side – often engaging in the use of propaganda.
The Use of Propaganda

- Propaganda is a technique of persuasion aimed at influencing individual or group behaviors.
- Often propaganda has only a negative connotation, HOWEVER it is effectively used to present facts, partial truths, and sometimes fictions.
- The goal of propaganda is to create a particular belief;
- Propaganda does NOT use objective logic but rather presents one side of an issue.
Interest groups try to influence the behavior of political parties – keeping close ties, endorsing candidates and aligning with the party that tends to favor their issue.

**Electioneering** – attempting to influence the outcome of elections.

Electioneering happens in several ways:

- **PAC donations**: interest groups will raise money through Political Action Committees and donate directly to the candidates or on behalf of the candidate to help with election costs.
- **Endorsements** are granted to candidates who an interest group will publicly support and encourages voters at the ballot.

Interest groups are hoping to gain **ACCESS** after the election!
Lobbying includes all activities by which interest groups directly pressure the government process.

Lobbyists work at all levels and in all branches of the government; anywhere policy is made and enforced, the lobbyists attempt to influence.

Access to the officials is the most important factor in their success; without access a lobbyist will not be able to influence policy.

Lobbyists will also work at the “grass roots” level, attempting to directly influence voters using direct contact as well as the mass media.
INTEREST GROUPS AT WORK: LOBBYISTS

Lobbyists try to influence the actions of executive agencies, because these agencies carry out and enforce laws and public policies. They petition executive departments for action.

Lobbyists have an interest in the actions of the courts, which interpret and apply laws. Lobbyists sometimes exert influence in the judicial system through serving as expert witnesses and bringing lawsuits which help meet their needs.

Lobbyists try to shape the laws that are made in legislative bodies, such as Congress, the State legislatures and city councils. They bring petitions, meet directly with representatives and serve as experts during hearings.

Lobbyists try to influence the making and content of public policy. They work wherever policy is made or influenced.
Factors that determine the effectiveness of each group:

- **Size** - obviously, groups that are larger (with more members) will have greater influence.
- **Geographic Distribution** - local groups will not be as influential as larger regional and national groups.
- **Funding** - groups that are well financed tend to have more power than those that are not.
- **Prestige** - the respectability of who these groups represent.
- **Cohesion** - the ability of the group to stick together.
- **Intensity** - how strongly does the group feel about the issue.
- **Access** - these groups need to affect policy; the only way to do this is to have access to the officials who make policy.
Limits on Interest Groups

- Abuses in lobbying will occur – we are talking about money and power.

- We often hear about potential “ethics reform” from legislators; laws that deal with limiting the activities of interest groups and lobbyists fall under the idea of ethics reform.

- Lobbyists are required to register and report their lobbying activities, and elected officials must report any gifts directly received, or any monetary contributions directly to campaigns.

- Some states and localities have stricter rules regarding the amounts of gifts that can be given to elected officials.

- It is ILLEGAL for an elected official to accept bribes – but the line is very fuzzy and very difficult to prosecute: it must be proven that an official actually did something as a direct result of a gift or contribution.
It is very difficult to bring about ethics reform. It would require legislators to essentially put limits on themselves, and potentially hurt their ability to win elections. Even though most of the electorate (and even many elected officials) realize there is a dangerous relationship between interest groups, lobbyists and the government, meaningful reform will be difficult to achieve.
Interest Groups: “The Good”

- Provides a link to officials to make policy; interest groups help translate public concerns into government policy. Interest groups have been responsible for many laws and policies which benefit Americans.

- Provide useful information to government; members of Congress are not experts on the issues and interest groups help to educate the lawmakers.

- Stimulate political participation; as people get involved they embrace the fundamental principles of the democratic process. People can do more than vote when they become active members of an interest group.

- Stabilizing force in democratic process; as groups work against each other they fulfill the argument of James Madison – the opposing factions can cancel out the potential for runaway panic and force cooperation and compromise.
Interest Groups: “The Bad”

- Speaks for the few: there is a danger when legislators listen to interest groups rather than the voters.

- Funding supports only the “well off”; the ability of a group to raise money can offset public opinion and influence the government.

- Active minorities dictate groups decisions – the leadership of a group determines endorsements, PAC contributions and official policy statements.

- “The wheel that squeaks the loudest gets the grease.” Even if a group has a narrow or selfish cause, they can influence policies if they make enough noise.

- Corrupt tactics; there is a link between money and power.
Interest Groups: “And the Ugly”

- Interest groups have been around in the American political process since the very beginning.
- It will be very difficult to bring reforms to the system, because the elected officials rely so much on interest groups.
- Pressure groups are protected under the First Amendment, and most Americans are not comfortable limiting our liberties.
- Interest groups are something like a two-sided coin, both good and bad.

...with liberty and justice for sale.