

Unit 14

Interest Groups: Organizing To Influence

Learning Objectives

After completing this session, you will be able to:

- Define the term *interest group* and distinguish these groups from other political organizations.
- Describe the different types of interest groups.
- Describe the resources and principal tactics used by interest groups to influence public policy.
- Analyze the role that interest groups play in the policy-making process.

Topic Overview

This penultimate unit delves into the role of interest groups in American political life. America has, as Tocqueville noted, long been a nation of joiners. We have a long history of joining together for common purposes, and thus it no surprise that organized groups prevail throughout the political system. As the unit shows, however, interest groups are not easily categorized. There is a wide variety of interests represented in the political system and they use an equally wide array of tactics and strategies. Part of this unit demonstrates the vibrancy of strategies and tactics employed by groups attempting to influence public policy.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution understood that organized interests would always attempt to exert influence on policy. They developed a constitutional system of republican government that takes organized interests as a given, and thus allows interests to weigh in on policy-making in various ways. In making the case for the Constitution's ratification, James Madison placed the problem of organized interests at the center of his theory of republican democracy. In "**Federalist No. 10**," he warns of the "**mischief of factions**" (i.e., organized interests) that could threaten individual or other groups' liberties. The remedy for the problem of factions lies not in trying to eliminate them, but in controlling their effects. One solution is to encourage the proliferation of various groups of different shapes, sizes, and motives so that no one group dominates the others in ways that undercut basic rights and liberties.

Topic Overview, cont'd.

Interest groups are any organization of people with policy goals who work within the political process to promote such goals. Groups attempt to influence policy in various ways including:

- **Lobbying government.** Organized interests hire representatives to advocate on behalf of the group's interests. Lobbying activities include contacting members of Congress and the executive branch to disseminate information about the positive or adverse effects of proposed legislation.
- **Engaging in election activities.** Interests may attempt to influence elections in order to help get people who support their issues elected or reelected. Electioneering techniques include giving money to candidates, endorsing candidates or issues, and conducting grassroots activities such as get-out-the-vote drives.
- **Educating various publics.** Interest groups work hard to educate the public at large, government officials, their own members, and potential interest group members.
- **Mobilizing various publics.** To influence policy-making, many groups rely on the efforts of people who are motivated to act on behalf of their issues and causes. So-called **grassroots activities** might include writing letters, making phone calls, contacting policy-makers, and demonstrating.

Many interest groups in society are those focused on advancing their members' economic interests. Some have a large membership base, while others represent only a few members. **Trade associations**, for example, represent one segment of the economy (e.g., defense contractors, trial lawyers) but often take a stand on a variety of policy matters. Because their members have a direct economic incentive to support the group's actions, economic interest groups tend to be well funded and very professional.

Economic interest groups often combine the services of professional lobbyists with other efforts to help their members. They may help write letters, place phone calls, meet with decision makers, and, in the case of large membership organizations such as unions, engage in demonstrations directed at decision makers.

Citizen action groups, also known as **public interest groups**, are another type of enduring interest group. Some are generally concerned with a broad range of issues that affect the public at large, such as social or environmental issues. Examples include Common Cause or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Others, including the National Rifle Association (NRA) or the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) may be committed to one or a small cluster of issues. Those groups that focus on one issue are also known as **single-issue groups**. Most citizen action groups are relatively well funded, and many employ the same tactics (e.g., hiring lobbyists, electioneering, litigation, etc.) used by economic interest groups. But because they have large memberships, mobilizing their members to promote the group's causes is also an important tactic.

Non-membership groups are a fast-growing segment of the organized interest universe. These groups include corporations that maintain offices in Washington and many state capitals. Other non-membership groups include universities and state and local governments. Non-membership groups may hire their own lobbyists or employ outside consultants to track and influence legislation.

Even without large-scale permanent organizations, citizens often organize themselves into **ad hoc associations** aimed at influencing public policy decisions. These organizations are often directed at a single cause such as neighborhood beautification or school reform. Because of their narrower focus, they tend not to outlive the issue that originally spurred their creation. Lacking financial resources and organizations, these grassroots associations depend on membership mobilization through letters, phone calls, personal contacts, and demonstrations to pursue their causes. Because they lack permanency and economic motivation, size and members' unity may constitute the greatest strength of ad hoc associations.

Many interest groups employ the services of former government officials (e.g., former Congress members, cabinet officials, and military officers) as lobbyists because these former officials are able to use their personal contacts and intimate knowledge of policy-making processes on behalf of the interests they represent. The interaction of mutual interests among Congress members, executive agencies, and organized interests during political struggles over policy-making is sometimes referred to as an **iron triangle**. While members of an iron triangle are expected to fight on behalf of their interests, constituents, or governmental department, they often seek policy outcomes that produce benefits for all members of the "triangle."

Pre-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

Before viewing the video, discuss the following questions:

- According to Madison, how should factions be controlled?
- What kinds of activities do interest groups use to influence policy-making?
- The general impression of interest groups is that they are the domain of big business and organized labor. Is this true?
- Think about your own interests. Are they represented by any organized group? What are they?

Watch the Video (30 minutes) and Discuss (30 minutes)

The video includes three segments. If you are watching on videocassette, watch each segment and then pause to discuss it, using the questions below. If you are watching a real-time broadcast on the Annenberg/CPB Channel, watch the complete video and then discuss.

1. The Battle Over Crusader

Most long-lasting interest groups focus on advancing the economic interests of their members. Because their members have a strong economic incentive to band together, they are likely to be well-funded professional organizations that can employ lobbyists and mount sophisticated public relations campaigns. The battle over the Crusader weapons system presents an example of how one economic interest used its resources to influence the policy process. In the end it was decided that Crusader would remain “canceled,” but United Defense would still retain a \$475-million contract to continue the development of Crusader’s cannon. That contract would employ workers in several congressional districts, which was a major concern of Congress members. The Army gained progress toward a new weapons system, while the consultants, lobbyists, and public relations specialists who worked on behalf of United Defense got nice commissions for their work.

Discussion Questions

- Why did members of Congress come to the defense of United Defense?
- What kinds of tactics did United Defense use to fend off efforts to kill the Crusader?
- In the end, was United Defense successful?
- What is the iron triangle?

2. Organizing From the Heart: The Battle Over Reauthorization of the 1996 Welfare Reform Law

Citizen action groups advocate on a wide range of social and environmental issues, and use many of the same tactics as economic groups to reach decision makers. But often they must rely more on mobilizing their membership to act in an organized and concerted way. The battle over reauthorization of the Welfare Reform Act illustrates the mobilization efforts of one citizen action group.

Discussion Questions

- Who does the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support represent?
- What motivated Ladon James to become involved in the campaign?
- Since this is a citizen action without large cash reserves, what tactics did the group utilize to influence policy-makers?

Watch the Video and Discuss, cont'd.

3. David and Goliath Go at It Again: The South Pasadena Freeway Fight

Sometimes the most effective groups are local grassroots organizations dedicated to a single cause. Lacking financial resources and permanent organizations, these groups rely on committed citizens to write letters, make phone calls, and sometimes to demonstrate, all in pursuit of their cause. The fight over a freeway plan in the Los Angeles suburb of South Pasadena is a good example of a grassroots organization in action.

Discussion Questions

- How is the grassroots organization in this story different from a citizen action group?
- What kinds of tactics did the Anti-Meridan group use to fight the freeway?
- What do you think has motivated these people to keep up the fight over a couple of generations?

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion (30 minutes)

1. Tocqueville Would Be Proud: Today's Interest Group Universe (20 minutes)

On his short visit to the United States in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at Americans' propensity to form associations (i.e., interest groups) for any cause, interest, or public purpose. In his influential and still widely read book, *Democracy in America*, he writes:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations ... and I have often admired the extreme skill with which the inhabitants of the United States succeed in proposing a common object to the exertions of a great many men, and in inducing them voluntarily to pursue it.

The following list of organized interest groups illustrates Americans' tendency to organize themselves into groups for just about any foreseeable need or cause. Specific Web site information is available to help you investigate the goals and methods of these groups. Can you find other groups to add to these categories?

Gender

Men

American Men's Studies Association:
www.mensstudies.org
National Men's Resource Center: www.mensstuff.org
National Coalition of Free Men: www.ncfm.org
Fathers' Rights and Equality Exchange:
www.dadsrights.org

Women

American Association of University Women:
<http://www.aauw.org/>
Concerned Women for America:
www.cwfa.org/about.asp
National Organization for Women: www.now.org
National Foundation for Women Legislators:
www.womenlegislators.org
Tradeswomen: www.tradeswomen.org

Age

14- 25

Jobs for America's Graduates: www.jag.org
Students Against Destructive Decisions:
www.saddonline.com
Boys and Girls Club of America: www.bgca.org
National 4-H Council: www.fourhcouncil.edu/

26-49

Active 20-30 Association: www.active20-30.com
National Association of Baby Boomers:
www.babyboomers.org

50+

American Association on Aging: www.asaging.org
Alliance for the Aging Research:
www.agingresearch.org/aboutus.cfm
Amvets—American Veteran: www.amvets.org/
National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform:
www.nccnhr.org/
National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare: www.ncpssm.org/about/index.html

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion, cont'd.

Regions

North East

Connecticut River Watershed Council: www.ctriver.org
Great Lakes United: www.glu.org

South East

Southern States Energy Board: www.sseb.org

North Central

Minnesota-Dakotas District of the Kiwanis:
www.mndak-kiwanis.org

South Central

CatFish Institute: www.catfishinstitute.com/

North West

Western U.S. Agricultural Trade Association:
www.wusata.org
Alaska Coalition: www.alaskacoalition.org

South West

Supima Association of America:
www.supimacotton.org

Race and Ethnicity

White

National Association for the Advancement of White
People: www.naawp.com
Irish National Caucus: www.irishnationalcaucus.org
National Italian American Foundation: www.niaf.org

African American

National Association for the Advancement of Colored
People: www.naacp.org
Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, Inc.:
<http://cbcfinc.org/index2.html>

Hispanic

National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed
Officials Educational: www.naleo.org/
MANA, A Latina Organization: www.hermana.org
League of United Latin American Citizens:
www.lulac.org
National Council of La Raza: www.nclr.org

Native Americans

American Indian Youth Running Strong:
www.indianyouth.org
Americans for Indian Opportunity: www.aio.org
Native American Educational Services: www.naes.edu
National Indian Health Board: www.nihb.org

Race and Ethnicity, cont'd.

Asian/Pacific Islander

Southeast Asia Resource Action Center:
www.searac.org/
Organization of Chinese Americans: www.ocanatl.org/
National Association of Korean Americans:
www.naka.org

Arab Americans

The Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee:
<http://www.adc.org/>
Middle East Policy Council: www.mepec.org

Religion

Christian

Christian Coalition of America: www.cc.org/
Christian Association of Primetimers:
christianprimetimers.org

Catholic

NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby:
www.networklobby.org/
Catholic Campus Ministry Association:
www.ccmnet.org

Jewish

The American Jewish Committee: www.ajc.org/
American Jewish Congress: www.ajcongress.org/
American Jewish Society for Service: www.ajss.org

Islam

Association of Islamic Charitable Projects:
www.aicp.org
Federation of Islamic Association in the United States:
www.islamerica.com
Islamic Assembly of North America: www.iananet.org

Buddhist

American Buddhist Association: www.bcmw.org
American Buddhist Study Center:
www.americanbuddhist.org
Buddhist Vihara: www.vihara.org

Atheist

American Atheist: www.atheist.org
Atheist Alliance: www.atheistalliance.org
Atheists United: www.atheistsunited.org

Post-Viewing Activity and Discussion, cont'd.

2. What Exactly Is a “Special” Interest? (10 minutes)

In “Federalist No. 10,” James Madison developed a theory of interest groups that he believed supported the cause of constitutional ratification. Responding to past political philosophers who contended that a democratic republic could only thrive on a small scale in societies with few competing interests, Madison advanced a new and radical conception of organized interests. According to Madison, the causes of faction are “sown in the nature of man.” Thus, to try to prevent factions from expressing themselves would be against human nature, and ultimately would undermine the basic liberty that we value as free people. Instead of removing the causes of factions, Madison proposed that we control their negative effects. One way to do this is to encourage the formation of many types of interests, so that by opposing each other they prevent one or more factions from violating the rights of all others, and ultimately the public interest. Madison wrote, “Extend the sphere [of interests], and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.”

One frequently hears complaints about “special interests” that seek unfair influence in the democratic process to promote their particular agenda. Such complaints are not new, but instead can be found in all periods of American history. In many cases it is clear that one person’s special interest is another’s public interest. Try to develop a definition of a “special” versus “public” interest, and include real examples. What factors can we use to determine the difference between special and public interests?

Homework

Read the following Readings from Unit 15 to prepare for next week’s session.

- Introduction—Global Politics: USA and the World
- Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*: “The Present and Probable Future Condition of the Indian Tribes That Inhabit the Territory Possessed by the Union” and “Why Democratic Nations Naturally Desire Peace, and Democratic Armies, War”
- The Monroe Doctrine
- The Marshall Plan
- Twain, “The War Prayer”

Read next week’s Topic Overview.

Critical Thinking Activity: Go to the course Web site and try the Critical Thinking Activity for Unit 14. This is a good activity to use with your students, too.

www.learner.org/channel/courses/democracy

Classroom Applications

You may want to have your students do the post-viewing activities: Tocqueville Would Be Proud: Today's Interest Group Universe and What Exactly Is a Special Interest? They are provided for you as blackline masters in the Appendix.

Web-Based Resources

www.alldc.org—**The American League of Lobbyists** is a membership organization dedicated to advancing the interests of the lobbying profession. The group's Web site provides an overview of the interest advocacy profession and updated information on issues that affect lobbyists.

www.commoncause.org—**Common Cause** bills itself as "a nonprofit, nonpartisan citizen's lobbying organization promoting open, honest, and accountable government." Common Cause members investigate the role of interest group money in political campaigns.