

Interest Groups



Explaining Proliferation

The Birth of Interest Groups

Kinds of Organizations

- Institutional Interests ★ Membership Interests ★
- Incentives to Join ★ The Influence of the Staff

Interest Groups and Social Movements

- The Environmental Movement ★ The Feminist Movement ★
- The Union Movement

Funds for Interest Groups

- Foundation Grants ★ Federal Grants and Contracts ★
- Direct Mail

The Problem of Bias

The Activities of Interest Groups

- Information ★ Public Support: The Rise of the New Politics ★
- Money and PACs ★ The "Revolving Door" ★
- Trouble

Regulating Interest Groups



WHO GOVERNS?

1. Do interest groups dominate government, and is any particular lobby politically unbeatable?
2. Why do people join interest groups?



TO WHAT ENDS?

1. Is the proliferation of political action committees (PACs) and other groups good or bad for America's representative democracy?
2. Should interest groups' political activities be restricted by law?

Almost every tourist arriving in Washington visits the White House and the Capitol. Many look at the Supreme Court building. But hardly any walk down K Street, where much of the political life of the country occurs.

K Street? From the sidewalk it is just a row of office buildings, no different from what one might find in downtown Seattle or Kansas City. What's to see? But in these buildings, and in similar ones lining nearby streets, are the offices of the nearly seven thousand organizations that are represented in Washington.

It is doubtful whether there is any other nation in which so many organizations are represented in its capital. They are there to participate in politics. They are interest groups, or, if you prefer, lobbies.

★ Explaining Proliferation

There are at least four reasons why interest groups are so common in this country. First, the more cleavages there are in a society, the greater the variety of interests that will exist. In addition to divisions along lines of income and occupation found in any society, America is a nation of countless immigrants and many races. There are at least seventy-two religions that claim sixty-five thousand members or more. Americans are scattered over a vast land made up of many regions with distinctive traditions and cultures. These social facts make for a great variety of interests and opinions. As James Madison said in *Federalist* No. 10, "The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man."

Second, the American constitutional system contributes to the number of interest groups by multiplying the points at which such groups can gain access to the government. In a nation such as Great Britain, where most political authority is lodged in a single official such as the prime minister, there are only a few places where important decisions are made—and thus only a few opportunities for affecting those decisions. But when political authority is shared by the president, the courts, and Congress (and within Congress among two houses and countless committees and subcommittees), there are plenty of places where one can argue one's case. And the more chances there are to influence policy, the more organizations there will be that seek to exercise that influence.

This fact helps explain why in Great Britain there is often only one organization representing a given interest, whereas in the United States there are several. In London only one major association represents farmers, one represents industry, one represents veterans, and one represents doctors. In the United States, by contrast, at least three organizations represent farmers (the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Farmers' Union, and the Grange), and each of these is made up of state and county branches, many of which act quite independently of national headquarters. Though there is one

major American labor organization, the AFL-CIO, it is in fact a loose coalition of independent unions (plumbers, steelworkers, coal miners), and some large unions, such as the Teamsters, were for many years not part of the AFL-CIO at all. Third, America, unlike other democratic nations, has public laws that, subject to certain conditions, permit religious congregations, private colleges and universities, and other organizations to own property without paying taxes on it, receive donations that donors may deduct from their own income taxes, and apply for government grants and contracts on an equal footing with business firms. This so-called nonprofit sector is huge in America but smaller or nonexistent in most other countries. There are two main nonprofit organization types, each known by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) code section that authorizes its existence. **Section 501(c)(3) organizations** receive tax deductions for their charitable giving and may seek to influence government through educational activities and the like; but they are forbidden from lobbying government officials or contributing to political campaigns. **Section 501(c)(4) organizations** are permitted to lobby and campaign, but donations to them are not tax deductible.

There is nothing even remotely like these legal arrangements or the U.S. nonprofit sector in England, Japan, or India. Like America, these nations have groups that care about various causes, but those groups rarely if ever form as nonprofit organizations that influence politics. For example, those nations each have their own native feminist movements, but none has an interest group like the National Organization for Women (NOW), a 501(c)(4) with half a million

members in 550 chapters across the land. NOW proposes legislation, organizes petition drives, and encourages members to contact legislators and government officials.¹ NOW's sister organization, the NOW Foundation, a 501(c)(3), sponsors conferences and disseminates information about women's health issues and feminist causes. As we discussed in Chapter 10, political action committees (PACs) have proliferated. NOW has two: the NOW PAC raises money for candidates for federal office, and the NOW Equality PAC raises money for state and local office

**501(c)(3)
organization**

Nonprofit group that may legally address political matters but may not lobby or campaign; donations to it are tax deductible.

**501(c)(4)
organization**

Nonprofit group that is permitted to lobby and campaign; donations to it are not tax deductible.

seekers. Table 11.1 summarizes the lobbying regulations for nonprofit organizations.

Fourth, the weakness of political parties in this country may help explain the number and strength of our interest groups. Where parties are strong, interests work through the parties; where parties are weak, interests operate directly on the government. That at least is the theory. Though scholars are not certain of its validity, it is a plausible theory and can be illustrated by differences among American cities. In cities such as Chicago where a party (in this case, the Democrats) has historically been very strong, labor unions, business associations, and citizens groups have had to work with the party and on its terms. But in cities such as Boston and Los Angeles where the parties are very weak, interest groups proliferate and play a large role in making policy.²

In Austria, France, and Italy many if not most interest groups are closely linked to one or another political party. In Italy, for example, each party—Socialist, Communist, and Christian Democrat—has a cluster of labor unions, professional associations, and social clubs allied with it.³ Though American interest groups often support one party (the AFL-CIO, for example, almost always backs Democratic candidates for office), the relationship between party and interest group here is not as close as it is in Europe.

★ The Birth of Interest Groups

The number of interest groups has grown rapidly since 1960. A study of Washington-based political associations revealed that roughly 70 percent of them established their Washington offices after 1960, and nearly half opened their doors after 1970.⁴

The 1960s and 1970s were boom years for interest groups, but there have been other periods in our history when political associations were created in especially large numbers. During the 1770s many groups arose to agitate for American independence; during the 1830s and 1840s the number of religious associations increased sharply, and the antislavery movement began. In the 1860s trade unions based on crafts emerged in significant numbers, farmers formed the Grange, and various fraternal organizations were born. In the 1880s and 1890s business associations proliferated. The great era of organization building, however, was in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Within this twenty-year period many of the

Table 11.1 Lobbying Regulations for Nonprofit Organizations

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best-known and largest associations with an interest in national politics were formed: the Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, the American Medical Association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the Farmers' Union, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the American Jewish Committee, and the Anti-Defamation League. The wave of interest group formation that occurred in the 1960s led to the emergence of environmental, consumer, and political

reform organizations such as those sponsored by consumer activist Ralph Nader.

The fact that associations in general, and political interest groups in particular, are created more rapidly in some periods than in others suggests that these groups do not arise inevitably out of natural social processes. There have always been farmers in this country, but there were no national farm organizations until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Blacks had been victimized by various white-supremacy policies from the end of the Civil War on, but the NAACP did



The greater the activity of government—for example, in regulating the timber industry—the greater the number of interest groups.

not emerge until 1910. Men and women worked in factories for decades before industrial unions were formed.

At least four factors help explain the rise of interest groups. The first consists of broad economic developments that create new interests and redefine old ones. Farmers had little reason to become organized for political activity so long as most of them consumed what they produced. The importance of regular political activity became evident only after most farmers began to produce cash crops for sale in markets that were unstable or affected by forces (the weather, the railroads, foreign competition) that farmers could not control. Similarly, for many decades most workers were craftspeople working alone or in small groups. Such unions as existed were little more than craft guilds interested in protecting members' jobs and in training apprentices. The reason for large, mass-membership unions did not exist until there arose mass-production industry operated by large corporations.

Second, government policy itself helped create interest groups. Wars create veterans, who in turn demand pensions and other benefits. The first large veterans organization, the Grand Army of the Republic, was made up of Union veterans of the Civil War. By the 1920s these men were receiving about a quarter of a billion dollars a year from the government, and naturally they created organizations to watch over the distribution of this money. The federal government

encouraged the formation of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) by paying for county agents who would serve the needs of farmers under the supervision of local farm organizations; these county bureaus eventually came together as the AFBF. The Chamber of Commerce was launched at a conference attended by President William Howard Taft.

Professional societies, such as those made up of lawyers and doctors, became important in part because state governments gave to such groups the authority to decide who was qualified to become a lawyer or a doctor. Workers had a difficult time organizing so long as the government, by the use of injunctions enforced by the police and the army, prevented strikes. Unions, especially those in mass-production industries, began to flourish after Congress passed laws in the 1930s that prohibited the use of injunctions in private labor disputes, that required employers to bargain with unions, and that allowed a union representing a majority of the workers in a plant to require all workers to join it.⁵

Third, political organizations do not emerge automatically, even when government policy permits them and social circumstances seem to require them. Somebody must exercise leadership, often at substantial personal cost. These organizational entrepreneurs are found in greater numbers at certain times than at others. They are often young, caught up in a social movement, drawn to the need for change, and in-

spired by some political or religious doctrine. Anti-slavery organizations were created in the 1830s and 1840s by enthusiastic young people influenced by a religious revival then sweeping the country. The period from 1890 to 1920, when so many national organizations were created, was a time when the college-educated middle class was growing rapidly. (The number of men and women who received college degrees each year tripled between 1890 and 1920.)⁶ During this era natural science and fundamentalist Christianity were locked in a bitter contest, with the Gospels and Darwinism offering competing ideas about personal salvation and social progress. The 1960s, when many new organizations were born, was a decade in which young people were powerfully influenced by the civil rights and antiwar movements and when college enrollments more than doubled.

Finally, the more activities government undertakes, the more organized groups there will be that are interested in those activities. Most Washington offices representing corporations, labor unions, and trade and professional associations were established before 1960—in some cases many decades before—because it was during the 1930s or even earlier that the government began making policies important to business and labor. The great majority of “public-interest” lobbies (those concerned with the environment or consumer protection), social welfare associations, and organizations concerned with civil rights, the elderly, and the handicapped established offices in Washington after 1960. Policies of interest to these groups, such as the major civil rights and environmental laws, were adopted after that date. In fact over half the public-interest lobbies opened their doors after 1970.

★ Kinds of Organizations

An **interest group** is any organization that seeks to influence public policy. When we think of an organization, we usually think of something like the Boy Scouts or the League of Women Voters—a group consisting of individual members. In Washington, however, many organizations do not have individual members at all but are offices—corporations, law firms, public relations firms, or “letterhead” organizations that get most of their money from foundations or from the government—out of which a staff operates. It is important to understand the differences

Landmark Cases



Lobbying Congress

- **U.S. v. Harriss (1954):** The Constitution protects the lobbying of Congress, but the government may require information from groups that try to influence legislation.

To explore these landmark cases further, visit the *American Government* web site at college.hmco.com/pic/wilsonAGille.

between the two kinds of interest groups—institutional and membership interests.⁷

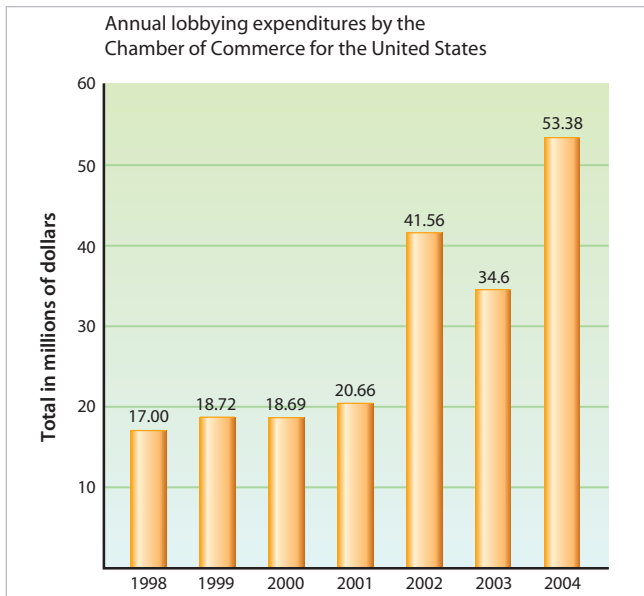
Institutional Interests

Institutional interests are individuals or organizations representing other organizations. General Motors, for example, has a Washington representative. Over five hundred firms have such representatives in the capital, most of whom have opened their offices since 1970.⁸ Firms that do not want to place their own full-time representative in Washington can hire a Washington lawyer or public relations expert on a part-time basis. Washington now has more lawyers than Los Angeles, a city three times its size.⁹ Another kind of institutional interest is the trade or governmental association, such as the National Independent Retail Jewelers or the National Association of Counties.

Individuals or organizations that represent other organizations tend to be interested in bread-and-butter issues of vital concern to their clients. Some of the people who specialize in this work can earn very large fees. Top public relations experts and Washington lawyers can charge \$500 an hour or more for their time. Since they earn a lot, they are expected to deliver a lot.

interest group *An organization of people sharing a common interest or goal that seeks to influence the making of public policy.*

Just what they are expected to deliver, however, varies with the diversity of the groups making up the organization. The American Cotton Manufacturers Institute represents southern textile mills. Those mills are few enough in number and similar enough in

Figure 11.1 What the Top Lobby Spent, 1998–2004

Source: Center for Public Integrity, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., 2006.

outlook to allow the institute to carry out clear policies squarely based on the business interests of its clients. For example, the institute works hard to get the federal government to adopt laws and rules that will keep foreign-made textiles from competing too easily with American-made goods. Sometimes the institute is successful, sometimes not, but it is never hard to explain what it is doing.

By contrast, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce represents thousands of different businesses in hundreds of different communities. The Chamber has led all interest groups in annual lobbying expenditures. All told, from 1998 to 2004, it spent \$205 million on lobbying (see Figure 11.1). Its membership is so large and diverse that the Chamber in Washington can speak out clearly and forcefully on only those relatively few matters in which all, or most, businesses take the same position. Since all businesses would like lower taxes, the Chamber favors that. On the other hand, since some businesses (those that import goods) want low tariffs and other businesses (those that face competition from imported goods) want higher tariffs, the Chamber says little or nothing about tariffs.

Institutional interests do not just represent business firms; they also represent governments, foundations, and universities. For example, the American Council on Education claims to speak for most institutions of higher education, the American Public Transit Association represents local mass-transit systems, and the National Association of Counties argues on behalf of county governments.

Membership Interests

It is often said that Americans are a nation of joiners, and so we take for granted the many organizations around us supported by the activities and contributions of individual citizens. But we should not take this multiplicity of organizations for granted; in fact their existence is something of a puzzle.

Americans join only certain kinds of organizations more frequently than do citizens of other democratic countries. We are no more likely than the British, for example, to join social, business, professional, veterans, or charitable organizations, and we are *less* likely to join labor unions. Our reputation as a nation of joiners arises chiefly out of our unusually high tendency to join religious and civic or political associations. About three times as many Americans as Britons say that they are members of a civic or political organization.¹⁰

This proclivity of Americans to get together with other citizens to engage in civic or political action reflects, apparently, a greater sense of political efficacy and a stronger sense of civic duty in this country. When Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba asked citizens of five nations what they would do to protest an unjust local regulation, 56 percent of the Americans—but only 34 percent of the British and 13 percent of the Germans—said that they would try to organize their neighbors to write letters, sign petitions, or otherwise act in concert.¹¹ Americans are also more likely than Europeans to think that organized activity is an effective way to influence the national government, remote as that institution may seem. And this willingness to form civic or political groups is not a product of higher levels of education in this country; Americans of every level of schooling are political joiners.¹²

But explaining the American willingness to join politically active groups by saying that Americans feel a “sense of political efficacy” is not much of an explanation; we might as well say that people vote because

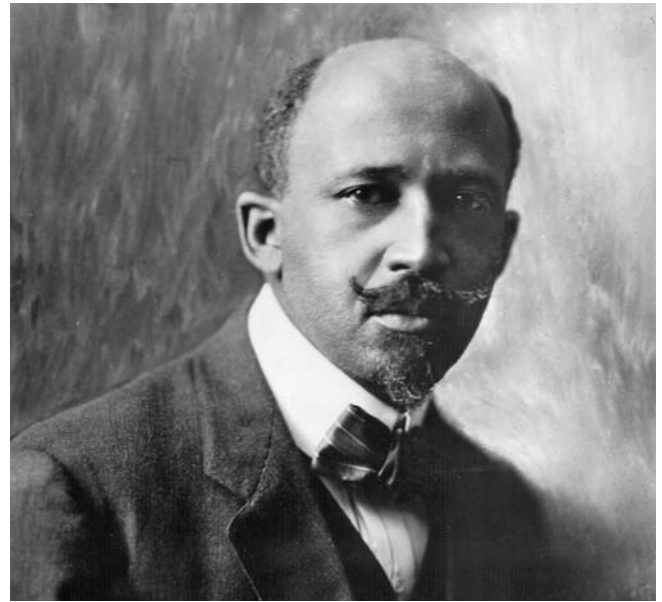
they think that their vote makes a difference. But one vote clearly makes no difference at all in almost any election; similarly, one member, more or less, in the Sierra Club, the National Rifle Association, or the NAACP clearly will make no difference in the success of those organizations.

And in fact most people who are sympathetic to the aims of a mass-membership interest group do not join it. The NAACP, for example, enrolls as members only a tiny fraction of all African Americans. This is not because people are selfish or apathetic but because they are rational and numerous. A single African American, for example, knows that he or she can make no difference in the success of the NAACP, just as a single nature enthusiast knows that he or she cannot enhance the power of the Sierra Club. Moreover, if the NAACP or the Sierra Club succeeds, African Americans and nature lovers will benefit even if they are not members. Therefore rational people who value their time and money would no more join such organizations than they would attempt to empty a lake with a cup—unless they got something out of joining.

Incentives to Join

To get people to join mass-membership organizations, they must be offered an **incentive**—something of value they cannot get without joining. There are three kinds of incentives.

Solidary incentives are the sense of pleasure, status, or companionship that arises out of meeting together in small groups. Such rewards are extremely important, but because they tend to be available only from face-to-face contact, national interest groups offering them often have to organize themselves as coalitions of small local units. For example, the League of Women Voters, the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), the NAACP, the Rotary Club, and the American Legion all consist of small local chapters that support a national staff. It is the task of the local chapters to lure members and obtain funds from them; the state or national staff can then pursue political objectives by using these funds. Forming organizations made up of small local chapters is probably easier in the United States than in Europe because of the great importance of local government in our federal system. There is plenty for a PTA, an NAACP, or a League of Women Voters to do in its own community, and so its members can be kept busy with local affairs while the national staff pursues larger goals.



W.E.B. Du Bois, black scholar and activist, was one of the founders of the NAACP.

A second kind of incentive consists of **material incentives**—that is, money, or things and services readily valued in monetary terms. Farm organizations have recruited many members by offering a wide range of services. The Illinois Farm Bureau, for example, offers to its members—and *only* to its members—a chance to buy farm supplies at discount prices, to market their products through cooperatives, and to purchase low-cost insurance. These material incentives help explain why the Illinois Farm Bureau has been able to enroll nearly every farmer in the state as well as many nonfarmers who also value these rewards.¹³

Similarly, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) has recruited over 30 million members by supplying them with everything from low-cost life insurance and mail-order discount drugs to tax advice and group travel plans. About 45 percent of the nation's population that is fifty and older—one out of every four registered voters—belongs to the AARP. With an annual operating budget of over \$200

incentive *Something of value one cannot get without joining an organization.*

solidary incentives *The social rewards (sense of pleasure, status, or companionship) that lead people to join political organizations.*

material incentives *Money or things valued in monetary terms.*



Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association, the nation's largest union.

million and a cash flow estimated at a whopping \$10 billion, the AARP seeks to influence public policy in many areas, from health and housing to taxes and transportation. To gain additional benefits for members, interest groups like the AARP also seek to influence how public laws are administered and who gets government grants. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency funds the AARP to hire senior citizens as temporary workers for various environmental projects.¹⁴

The third—and most difficult—kind of incentive is the *purpose* of the organization. Many associations rely chiefly on this **purposive incentive**—the appeal of their stated goals—to recruit members. If the attainment of those goals will also benefit people who do not join, individuals who do join will have to be those who feel passionately about the goal, who have a strong sense of duty (or who cannot say no to a friend who asks them to join), or for whom the cost of joining is so small that they are indifferent to joining or not. Organizations that attract members by appealing to their interest in a coherent set of (usually) controversial principles are sometimes called **ideological interest groups**.

When the purpose of the organization, if attained, will principally benefit nonmembers, it is customary to call the group a **public-**

purposive incentive

A benefit that comes from serving a cause or principle.

ideological interest groups

Political organizations that attract members by appealing to their political convictions or principles.

public-interest lobby

A political organization whose goals will principally benefit nonmembers.

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Since the mid-1960s consumer activist Ralph Nader has spawned more than a dozen interest groups. In 2000 and 2004 Nader ran for president as a Green party candidate.

interest lobby. (Whether the public at large will really benefit, of course, is a matter of opinion, but at least the group members think that they are working selflessly for the common good.)

Though some public-interest lobbies may pursue relatively noncontroversial goals (for example, persuading people to vote or raising money to house orphans), the most visible of these organizations are

Public-Interest Law Firms

A special kind of public-interest lobby is an organization that advances its cause by bringing lawsuits to challenge existing practices or proposed regulations. A public-interest law firm will act in one of two ways: First, it will find someone who has been harmed by some public or private policy and bring suit on his or

her behalf. Second, it will file a brief with a court supporting somebody else's lawsuit (this is called an *amicus curiae* brief; it is explained in Chapter 16).

Here are some examples of liberal and conservative public-interest law firms:

Liberal

American Civil Liberties Union
 Asian American Legal Defense Fund
 Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights
 Mexican American Legal Defense Fund
 NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund
 Natural Resources Defense Council
 Women's Legal Defense Fund

Conservative

Atlantic Legal Foundation
 The Center for Individual Rights
 Criminal Justice Legal Foundation
 Landmark Legal Foundation
 Mountain States Legal Foundation
 Pacific Legal Foundation
 Washington Legal Foundation

highly controversial. It is precisely the controversy that attracts the members, or at least those members who support one side of the issue. Many of these groups can be described as markedly liberal or decidedly conservative in outlook.

Perhaps the best known of the liberal public-interest groups are those founded by or associated with Ralph Nader. Nader became a popular figure in the mid-1960s after General Motors made a clumsy attempt to investigate and discredit his background at a time when he was testifying in favor of an auto-safety bill. Nader won a large out-of-court settlement against General Motors, his books began to earn royalties, and he was able to command substantial lecture fees. Most of this money was turned over to various organizations he created that dealt with matters of interest to consumers. In addition he founded a group called Public Citizen that raised money by direct-mail solicitation from thousands of small contributors and sought foundation grants. Finally, he helped create Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) in a number of states, supported by donations from college students (voluntary at some colleges, a compulsory assessment levied on all students at others) and concerned with organizing student activists to work on local projects.

Recently cracks have begun to appear in the Nader movement. When Hawaii and California considered

plans to develop no-fault automobile insurance, some former allies of Nader led the effort to reduce auto insurance prices by adopting a no-fault system. Nader denounced this effort and urged Hawaii's governor to veto the no-fault bill. Each side criticized the other.

Conservatives, though slow to get started, have also adopted the public-interest organizational strategy. As with such associations run by liberals, they are of two kinds: those that engage in research and lobbying and those that bring lawsuits designed to advance their cause. The boxes on pages 267 and 268 list some examples of public-interest organizations that support liberal or conservative causes.

Membership organizations that rely on purposive incentives, especially appeals to deeply controversial purposes, tend to be shaped by the mood of the times. When an issue is hot—in the media or with the public—such organizations can grow rapidly. When the spotlight fades, the organization may lose support. Thus such organizations have a powerful motive to stay in the public eye. To remain visible, public-interest lobbies devote a lot of attention to generating publicity by developing good contacts with the media and issuing dramatic press releases about crises and scandals.

Because of their need to take advantage of a crisis atmosphere, public-interest lobbies often do best when the government is in the hands of an administration

Think Tanks in Washington

Think tanks are public-interest organizations that do research on policy questions and disseminate their findings in books, articles, conferences, op-ed essays for newspapers, and (occasionally) testimony before

Congress. Some are nonpartisan and ideologically more or less neutral, but others—and many of the most important ones—are aligned with liberal or conservative causes. Here are some examples of each:

Liberal

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
Center for Defense Information
Children's Defense Fund
Economic Policy Institute
Institute for Policy Studies
Joint Center for Political and
Economic Studies
Progressive Policy Institute

Conservative

American Enterprise Institute
Cato Institute
Center for Strategic and
International Studies
Competitive Enterprise Institute
Ethics and Public Policy Center
Free Congress Foundation
Heritage Foundation

Note that the labels “liberal” and “conservative,” while generally accurate, conceal important differences among the think tanks in each list.

that is *hostile*, not sympathetic, to their views. Environmentalist organizations could mobilize more resources when James Watt, an opponent of much of the environmental movement, was secretary of the interior than they could when Cecil D. Andrus, his pro-environment predecessor, was in office. By the same token many conservative interest groups were able to raise more money with the relatively liberal Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton in the White House than with the conservative Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush.

The Influence of the Staff

We often make the mistake of assuming that what an interest group does politically is simply to exert influence on behalf of its members. That is indeed the case when all the members have a clear and similar stake in an issue. But many issues affect different members differently. In fact, if the members joined to obtain solidary or material benefits, they may not care at all about

many reflect more what the staff wants than what the members believe.

For example, a survey of the white members of a large labor union showed that one-third of them believed that the desegregation of schools, housing, and job opportunities had gone too fast; only one-fifth thought that it had gone too slowly. But among the staff members of the union, *none* thought that desegregation had gone too fast, and over two-thirds thought that it had gone too slowly.¹⁵ As a result the union staff aggressively lobbied Congress for the passage of tougher civil rights laws, even though most of the union's members did not feel that they were needed. The members stayed in the union for reasons unrelated to civil rights, giving the staff the freedom to pursue its own goals.

social movement A widely shared demand for change in some aspect of the social or political order.

many of the issues with which the organization gets involved. In such cases what the interest group does

★ Interest Groups and Social Movements

Because it is difficult to attract people with purposive incentives, interest groups employing them tend to arise out of social movements. A **social movement** is a widely shared demand for change in some aspect of the social or political order. The civil rights movement

of the 1960s was such an event, as was the environmentalist movement of the 1970s. A social movement need not have liberal goals. In the nineteenth century, for example, there were various nativist movements that sought to reduce immigration to this country or to keep Catholics or Masons out of public office. Broad-based religious revivals are social movements.

No one is quite certain why social movements arise. At one moment people are largely indifferent to some issue; at another moment many of these same people care passionately about religion, civil rights, immigration, or conservation. A social movement may be triggered by a scandal (an oil spill on the Santa Barbara beaches helped launch the environmental movement), the dramatic and widely publicized activities of a few leaders (lunch counter sit-ins helped stimulate the civil rights movement), or the coming of age of a new generation that takes up a cause advocated by eloquent writers, teachers, or evangelists.

The Environmental Movement

Whatever its origin, the effect of a social movement is to increase the value some people attach to purposive incentives. As a consequence new interest groups are formed that rely on these incentives. In the 1890s, as a result of the emergence of conservation as a major issue, the Sierra Club was organized. In the 1930s conservation once again became popular, and the Wilderness Society and the National Wildlife Federation took form. In the 1960s and 1970s environmental issues again came to the fore, and we saw the emergence of the Environmental Defense Fund and Environmental Action.

The smallest of these organizations (Environmental Action and the Environmental Defense Fund) tend to have the most liberal members. This is often the case with social movements. A movement will spawn many organizations. The most passionately aroused people will be the fewest in number, and they will gravitate toward the organizations that take the most extreme positions; as a result these organizations are small but vociferous. The more numerous and less passionate people will gravitate toward more moderate, less vociferous organizations, which will tend to be larger.

The Feminist Movement

There have been several feminist social movements in this country's history—in the 1830s, in the 1890s, in



The Million Moms March in 2004 demanded a federal ban on assault weapons.

the 1920s, and in the 1960s. Each period has brought into being new organizations, some of which have endured to the present. For example, the League of Women Voters was founded in 1920 to educate and organize women for the purpose of using effectively their newly won right to vote.

Though a strong sense of purpose may lead to the creation of organizations, each will strive to find some incentive that will sustain it over the long haul. These permanent incentives will affect how the organization participates in politics.

There are at least three kinds of feminist organizations. First, there are those that rely chiefly on solidary incentives, enroll middle-class women with relatively high levels of schooling, and tend to support those causes that command the widest support among women generally. The League of Women Voters and the Federation of Business and Professional Women are examples. Both supported the campaign to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), but as Jane Mansbridge has observed in her history of the ERA, they were uneasy with the kind of intense, partisan fighting displayed by some other women's organizations and with the tendency of more militant groups to link the ERA to other issues, such as abortion. The reason for their uneasiness is clear: to the extent they relied on solidary incentives, they had a stake in avoiding issues and tactics that would divide their membership or reduce the extent to which membership provided camaraderie and professional contacts.¹⁶

Second, there are women's organizations that attract members with purposive incentives. The National Organization for Women (NOW) and the National

Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) are two of the largest such groups, though there are many smaller ones. Because they rely on purposes, these organizations must take strong positions, tackle divisive issues, and employ militant tactics. Anything less would turn off the committed feminists who make up the rank and file and contribute the funds. But because these groups take controversial stands, they are constantly embroiled in internal quarrels between those who think that they have gone too far and those who think that they have not gone far enough, between women who want NOW or NARAL to join with lesbian and socialist organizations and those who want them to steer clear. Moreover, as Mansbridge showed, purposive organizations often cannot make their decisions stick on the local level (local chapters will do pretty much as they please).¹⁷

The third kind of women's organization is the caucus that takes on specific issues that have some material benefit to women. The Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) is one such group. Rather than relying on membership dues for financial support, it obtains grants from foundations and government agencies. Freed of the necessity of satisfying a large rank-and-file membership, WEAL has concentrated its efforts on bringing lawsuits aimed at enforcing or enlarging the legal rights of women in higher education and other institutions. In electoral politics the National Women's Political Caucus (officially non-partisan, but generally liberal and Democratic) and the National Federation of Republican Women (openly supportive of the Republican party) work to get more women active in politics and more women elected or appointed to office.

The feminist movement has, of course, spawned an antifeminist movement, and thus feminist organizations have their antifeminist counterparts. The campaign by NOW for the ERA was attacked by a women's group called STOP ERA; the proabortion position of NARAL has been challenged by the various organizations associated with the right-to-life movement. These opposition groups have their own tactical problems, which arise in large part from their reliance on different kinds of incentives. In the chapter on civil rights we shall see how the conflict between these opposing groups shaped the debate over the ERA.

The Union Movement

When social movements run out of steam, they leave behind organizations that continue the fight. But with

the movement dead or dormant, the organizations often must struggle to stay alive. This has happened to labor unions.

The major union movement in this country occurred in the 1930s, when the Great Depression, popular support, and a sympathetic administration in Washington led to a rapid growth in union membership. In 1945 union membership peaked; at that time nearly 36 percent of all nonfarm workers were union members.

Since then union membership has fallen more or less steadily. Today only about 10 percent of all workers are covered by unions. Between 1983 and 2005, the number of union members fell by 2.2 million, and the number of people who, though not union members themselves, worked for organizations in which wages and labor conditions were set at least in part by agreements with unions fell by 3.3 million. This decline has been caused by several factors. There has been a shift in the nation's economic life away from industrial production (where unions have traditionally been concentrated) and toward service delivery (where unions have usually been weak). But accompanying this decline, and perhaps contributing to it, has been a decline in popular approval of unions. Approval has moved down side by side with a decline in membership and declines in union victories in elections held to see whether workers in a plant want to join a union. The social movement that supported unionism has faded.

But unions will persist, because most can rely on incentives other than purposive ones to keep them going. In many industries they can require workers to join if they wish to keep their jobs, and in other industries workers believe that they get sufficient benefits from the union to make even voluntary membership worthwhile. And in a few industries, such as teaching and government, there has been a growth in membership, as some white-collar workers have turned to unions to advance their interests.

Unions composed of government workers are becoming the most important part of the union movement. They are almost the only part that is growing in size. Between 1983 and 2005, the number of private sector union members fell from 11.9 million to 8.2 million, but the number of public sector union members grew from 5.7 million to 7.4 million. Also, the most significant unions with respect to lobbying and campaigns are the public teachers' unions like the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association. Together, during the 2005–

2006 election cycle, the PACs for these two groups contributed nearly \$4 million to federal candidates, 95 percent of it to Democrats.

★ Funds for Interest Groups

All interest groups have some trouble raising money, but membership organizations have more trouble than most, especially membership organizations relying on appeals to purpose—to accomplishing stated goals. As a result the Washington office of a public-interest lobbying group is likely to be small, stark, and crowded, whereas that of an institutional lobby, such as the AFL-CIO or the American Council on Education, will be rather lavish.

To raise more money than members supply in dues, lobbying organizations have turned to three sources that have become important in recent years: foundation grants, government grants, and direct-mail solicitation.

Foundation Grants

One study of eighty-three (primarily liberal) public-interest lobbying groups found that one-third of them received half or more of all their funds from foundation grants; one-tenth received over 90 percent from such sources.¹⁸ In one ten-year period the Ford Foundation alone contributed about \$21 million to liberal public-interest groups. Many of these organizations were law firms that, other than the staff lawyers, really had no members at all. The Environmental Defense Fund is supported almost entirely by grants from foundations such as the Rockefeller Family Fund. The more conservative Scaife foundations gave \$1.8 million to a conservative public-interest group, the National Legal Center for the Public Interest.¹⁹

Federal Grants and Contracts

The expansion of federal grants during the 1960s and 1970s benefited interest groups as well as cities and states; the cutbacks in those grants during the early 1980s hurt interest groups even more than they hurt local governments. Of course the federal government usually does not give the money to support lobbying itself; it is given instead to support some project that the organization has undertaken.

For example, many large national for-profit firms with trade representatives or other lobbyists in Wash-

ington (sometimes unflatteringly referred to as “beltway bandits”) do most or all of their business by winning federal grants and contracts. Even large national religious nonprofit organizations such as Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities, the Salvation Army, and the Jewish Federations have received millions of dollars in government grants to provide diverse social services and run various community projects. But money for a service or project helps support the organization as a whole and thus enables the organization to press Congress for policies it favors (including, of course, policies that will supply it with more grants and contracts).

Nobody really knows whether the groups that win federal grants and contracts are doing a good job or not. The nonprofit and other organizations that receive the lion’s share of federal grants and contracts are rarely, if ever, subjected to government performance audits or independent research evaluations.²⁰ A White House report on grant-making across five federal agencies found that each agency’s top ten discretionary grant recipients changed little over the course of a decade.²¹ Due in part to the interest-group politics of federal grants and contracts, the “organizations that administer social services funded by Washington are typically large and entrenched, in an almost monopolistic fashion.”²²

In the 1980s the Reagan administration attempted to cut back on federal funds going to nonprofit groups that conservatives claimed also lobbied for liberal causes. Some writers called this an effort to “de-fund the left.” In 2001 the Bush administration attempted to increase federal funds going to faith-based organizations. Some writers construed this as an effort to “fund the religious right.” Neither effort, however, made a significant difference either in which organizations won or lost federal grants and contracts, or in how much federal money was available overall.

Businesses still receive far more money in federal contracts than nonprofit groups, and big corporations still get the biggest shares. From 2000 to 2006, spending on federal contracts nearly doubled to \$400 billion a year. Over that same period, the top twenty federal contract winners spent nearly \$300 million on lobbying and donated \$23 million to political campaigns.²³ The biggest federal contractor, Lockheed Martin, actually gets more federal money each year than does either the U.S. Department of Justice or the U.S. Department of Energy; from 2000 to 2006, it alone spent \$53 million on lobbying and its PAC gave \$6 million in campaign contributions.²⁴



A Green Bay Packers linebacker solicits money for the Salvation Army.

Direct Mail

If there is any one technique that is unique to the modern interest group, it is the sophistication with which mailings are used both to raise money and to mobilize supporters. By using computers, membership interest groups can mail directly to specialized audiences identified from lists developed by the staff or purchased from other organizations. Letters can be tailor-made, for example, to appeal to upper-income residents of Oregon who belong to the Sierra Club, live near the Columbia River, own four-wheel-drive vehicles, and thus might be interested in maintaining a local wilderness area.

A classic example of an interest group that was created and maintained by direct-mail solicitation is Common Cause, a liberal organization founded in 1970. Its creator, John Gardner, sent letters to tens of thousands of people selected from mailing lists it had acquired, urging them to join the organization and to send in money. Over two hundred thousand members were obtained in this way, each of whom mailed in dues (initially \$15 a year) in return for nothing more than the satisfaction of belonging.

But raising money by mail costs money—lots of money. To bring in more money than it spends, the interest group must write a letter that will galvanize enough readers to send in a check. “Enough” usually amounts to at least 2 percent of the names on the list. Techniques include the following:

- Put a “teaser” on the outside of the envelope so that it won’t be thrown out as “junk mail.” If the letter is going to African Americans, put a picture of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., on the envelope.
- Arouse emotions, preferably by portraying the threat posed by some “devil.” To environmentalists, a typical devil would be former secretary of the interior James Watt; to civil libertarians, Rev. Pat Robertson; to conservatives, Senator Ted Kennedy.
- Have the endorsement of a famous name. For liberals it is often Senator Kennedy; for conservatives it may be former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.
- Personalize the letter by instructing the computer to insert the recipient’s name into the text of the letter to create the impression that it was written personally to him or her.

★ The Problem of Bias

Many observers believe that the interest groups active in Washington reflect an upper-class bias. There are two reasons for this belief: first, well-off people are more likely than poor people to join and be active in interest groups, and second, interest groups representing business and the professions are much more numerous and better financed than organizations representing minorities, consumers, or the disadvantaged.

Doubtless both these facts are true. Many scholars have shown that people with higher incomes, those whose schooling went through college or beyond, and those in professional or technical jobs were much more likely to belong to a voluntary association than people with the opposite characteristics. Just as we would expect, higher-income people can afford more organizational memberships than lower-income ones; people in business and the professions find it both easier to attend meetings (they have more control over their own work schedules) and more necessary to do so than people in blue-collar jobs; and people with college degrees often have a wider range of interests than those without. One study found that over half of the many thousand groups represented in Washington were corporations, and another third were professional and trade associations. Only 4 percent were public-interest groups; fewer than 2 percent were civil rights or minority groups.²⁵ About 170 organizations represented in Washington were concerned just with the oil industry.

But the question of an upper-class bias cannot be settled by these two facts taken alone. In the first place, they describe only certain *inputs* into the political system; they say nothing about the *outputs*—that is, who wins and who loses on particular issues. Even if 170 interest groups are trying to protect the oil industry, this is important only if the oil industry in fact gets protected. Sometimes it does; sometimes it does not. At one time, when oil prices were low, oil companies were able to get Congress to pass a law that sharply restricted the importation of foreign oil. A few years later, after oil prices had risen and people were worried about energy issues, these restrictions were ended.

In the second place, business-oriented interest groups are often divided among themselves. Take one kind of business: farming. Once, farm organizations seemed so powerful in Washington that scholars spoke of an irresistible “farm bloc” in Congress that could get its way on almost anything. Today dozens of agricultural organizations operate in the capital, with some (such as the Farm Bureau) attempting to speak for all farmers and others (such as the Tobacco Institute and Mid-America Dairymen) representing particular commodities and regions.

Farmers still have a great deal of influence, especially when it comes to blocking a bill that they oppose. But it is proving difficult for them to get Congress to approve a bill that they want passed. In part this political weakness reflects the decline in the number of farmers and thus in the number of legislators who must take their interests into account. In part their political weakness reflects splits among the farmers themselves, with southern cotton growers often seeing things differently from midwestern wheat growers or New England dairy farmers. And to some extent it reflects the context within which interest group politics must operate. In the 1950s few people thought that providing subsidies for farmers was too expensive—if indeed they knew of such programs at all. But by the 1980s consumers were acutely aware of food prices, and their legislators were keenly aware of the cost of farm-support programs.²⁶

Whenever American politics is described as having an upper-class bias, it is important to ask exactly what this bias is. Most of the major conflicts in American politics—over foreign policy, economic affairs, environmental protection, or equal rights for women—are conflicts *within* the upper middle class; they are conflicts, that is, among politically active elites. As we



Farmers once had great influence in Congress and could get their way with a few telephone calls. Today they often must use mass protest methods.

saw in Chapter 7, there are profound cleavages of opinion among these elites. Interest group activity reflects these cleavages.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to ignore the overrepresentation of business in Washington. A student of politics should always take differences in the availability of political resources as an important clue to possible differences in the outcomes of political conflicts. But they are only clues, not conclusions.

★ The Activities of Interest Groups

Size and wealth are no longer entirely accurate measures of an interest group's influence—if indeed they ever were. Depending on the issue, the key to political influence may be the ability to generate a dramatic newspaper headline, mobilize a big letter-writing campaign, stage a protest demonstration, file a suit in federal court to block (or compel) some government action, or quietly supply information to key legislators. All of these things require organization, but only some of them require big or expensive organizations.

Information

Of all these tactics, the single most important one—in the eyes of virtually every lobbyist and every academic student of lobbying—is supplying credible information. The reason why information is so valuable is that, to busy legislators and bureaucrats, information is in short supply. Legislators in particular must take positions on a staggering number of issues about which they cannot possibly become experts.

Though there are nonpolitical sources of information, such as encyclopedias, they often do not provide the kind of detailed, specific, up-to-date information that politicians need. This kind of information will ordinarily be gathered only by a group that has a strong

interest in some issue. Lobbyists, for the most part, are not flamboyant, party-giving arm-twisters; they are specialists who gather information (favorable to their clients, naturally) and present it in as organized, persuasive, and factual a manner as possible. All lobbyists no doubt exaggerate, but few can afford to misrepresent the facts or

political cue A signal telling a legislator what values are at stake in a vote, and how that issue fits into his or her own political views on party agenda.

mislead a legislator, and for a very simple reason: almost every lobbyist must develop and maintain the confidence of a legislator over the long term, with an eye on tomorrow's issues as well as today's. Misrepresentation or bad advice can embarrass a legislator who accepts it or repel one who detects it, leading to distrust of the lobbyist. Maintaining contacts and channels of communication is vital; to that end, maintaining trust is essential.

The value of the information provided by a lobbyist is often greatest when the issue is fairly narrow, involving only a few interest groups or a complex economic or technical problem. The value of information, and thus the power of the lobbyist, is likely to be least when the issue is one of broad and highly visible national policy.

Sometimes the nature of an issue or the governmental process by which an issue is resolved gives a great advantage to the suppliers of certain information and imposes a great burden on would-be suppliers of contrary information. This is an example of what is called “client politics.” For example, the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) once set airline fares and decided what airlines would fly to what cities. Historically the only organizations with any incentive to appear before the CAB and supply the necessary information were, naturally, the airlines. Until the CAB began to deregulate civil aviation, CAB decisions often tended to favor the established airlines.

For a long time only radio and television broadcasters had any incentive (or could afford) to appear before the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which decides which broadcasters shall be licensed and on what terms. Owing to changes in the industry (such as the rise of cable and satellite television) and to the growth of consumer groups, FCC hearings are now often hotly contested. When the Federal Energy Administration (FEA) was trying to allocate scarce oil and gasoline supplies among competing users, it discovered that the information it needed was possessed only by the oil companies. (It later took steps to develop its own sources of data.)

Public officials not only want technical information; they also want political cues. A **political cue** is a signal telling the official what values are at stake in an issue—who is for, who against a proposal—and how that issue fits into his or her own set of political beliefs. Some legislators feel comfortable when they are on the liberal side of an issue, and others feel comfortable when they are on the conservative side, espe-

cially when they are not familiar with the details of the issue. A liberal legislator will look to see whether the AFL-CIO, the NAACP, the Americans for Democratic Action, the Farmers' Union, and various consumer organizations favor a proposal; if so, that is often all he or she has to know. If these liberal groups are split, then the legislator will worry about the matter and try to look into it more closely. Similarly, a conservative legislator will feel comfortable taking a stand on an issue if the Chamber of Commerce, the National Rifle Association, the American Medical Association, various business associations, and Americans for Constitutional Action are in agreement about it; he or she will feel less comfortable if such conservative groups are divided. As a result of this process lobbyists often work together in informal coalitions based on general political ideology.

One important way in which these cues are made known is by **ratings** that interest groups make of legislators. These are regularly compiled by the AFL-CIO (on who is pro-labor), by the Americans for Democratic Action (on who is liberal), by the Americans for Constitutional Action (on who is conservative), by the Consumer Federation of America (on who is pro-consumer), and by the League of Conservation Voters (on who is pro-environment). These ratings are designed to generate public support for (or opposition to) various legislators. They can be helpful sources of information, but they are sometimes biased by the arbitrary determination of what constitutes a liberal, proconsumer, or conservative vote.

Both political information and political cues now arrive in the offices of politicians at a faster rate than ever before, thanks to fax machines and the Internet. Many interest groups and political activists have banks of computer-operated fax machines that can get a short, snappy document into the hands of every legislator within minutes. William Kristol, a Republican activist, used this technique to good effect in 1993 when he bombarded Republican members of Congress with arguments concerning why they should oppose President Clinton's health care plan. Many believe he played a major role in the defeat of that plan.

Public Support: The Rise of the New Politics

Once upon a time, when the government was small, Congress was less individualistic, and television was nonexistent, lobbyists mainly used an *insider strategy*:

they worked closely with a few key members of Congress, meeting them privately to exchange information and (sometimes) favors. Matters of mutual interest could be discussed at a leisurely pace, over dinner or while playing golf. Public opinion was important on some highly visible issues, but there were not many of these.

Following an insider strategy is still valuable, but increasingly interest groups have turned to an *outsider strategy*. The newly individualistic nature of Congress has made this tactic useful, and modern technology has made it possible. Radio, fax machines, and the Internet can now get news out almost immediately. Satellite television can be used to link interested citizens in various locations across the country. Toll-free phone numbers can be publicized, enabling voters to call the offices of their members of Congress without charge. Public opinion polls can be done by telephone, virtually overnight, to measure (and help generate) support for or opposition to proposed legislation. Mail can be directed by computers to people already known to have an interest in a particular matter.

This kind of *grassroots lobbying* is central to the outsider strategy. It is designed to generate public pressure directly on government officials. The "public" that exerts this pressure is not every voter or even most voters; it is that part of the public (sometimes called an *issue public*) that is directly affected by or deeply concerned with a government policy. What modern technology has made possible is the overnight mobilization of specific issue publics.

Not every issue lends itself to an outsider strategy: it is hard to get many people excited about, for example, complex tax legislation affecting only a few firms. But as the government does more and more, its policies affect more and more people, and so more and more will join in grassroots lobbying efforts over matters such as abortion, Medicare, Social Security, environmental protection, and affirmative action.

Undoubtedly the new politics creates new conflicts. Since conflict is the essence of politics, it may seem strange that politicians dislike controversy. But they do, and for perfectly human reasons: no one enjoys dealing with people who are upset or who find one's viewpoint objectionable or unworthy. Consequently, most legislators tend to hear what they want to hear and to deal with interest groups that agree with

ratings Assessments of a representative's voting record on issues important to an interest group.

them.²⁷ Two senators from the same state may choose to listen to very different constituencies in that state and to take very different policy positions. Neither senator may feel “pressured” or “lobbied,” because each has heard mostly from groups or persons who share his or her views. (Politicians define “pressure” as arguments and inducements supplied by somebody with whom they disagree.)

Members of an interest group will also tend to work primarily with legislators with whom they agree; lobbyists do not like to argue with people who are suspicious of them or who are unlikely to change their minds no matter what is said. For the lobbyist the key target is the undecided or wavering legislator or bureaucrat. Sometimes lobbyists will make a major effort to persuade an undecided legislator that public opinion is strongly inclined in one direction. A lobbyist will do this by commissioning public opinion polls, stimulating local citizens to write letters or send telegrams, arranging for constituents to pay personal visits to the legislator, or getting newspapers to run editorials supporting the lobbyist’s position.

Though most lobbying organizations cultivate the goodwill of government officials, there are important exceptions. Some groups, especially those that use an ideological appeal to attract supporters or that depend for their maintenance and influence on media publicity, will deliberately attack actual or potential allies in government in order to embarrass them. Ralph Nader is as likely to denounce as to praise those officials who tend to agree with him, if their agreement is not sufficiently close or public. He did this with Senator Edmund Muskie, the author of the Clean Air Act, and with William Haddon, Jr., an early administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The head of the Fund for Animals is not reluctant to attack those officials in the Forest Service and the Interior Department on whose cooperation the fund must rely if it is to achieve its goals.²⁸ Sometimes, as we shall see later in this chapter, the use of threats instead of rewards extends to physical confrontations.

It is not clear how often public pressure works. Members of Congress are skilled at recognizing and discounting organized mail campaigns and feel that they can occasionally afford to go against even legitimate expressions of hostile public opinion. Only a few issues of great symbolic significance and high visibility are so important that a member of Congress would think that to ignore public opinion would mean losing the next election. In 1978 the proposed Panama

Canal treaties were one such case; since the 1980s abortion has been another. Issues such as these can make or break a member of Congress.

Of late, interest groups have placed great emphasis on developing grassroots support. Sometimes it is impossible to develop such support, as when a complicated tax regulation of interest to only a few firms is being changed. But sometimes a proposed bill touches a public nerve such that even businesses can help generate an outpouring of mail: when the Food and Drug Administration announced it was going to ban saccharin on the grounds that it caused cancer in laboratory animals, the Calorie Control Council (closely tied to the Coca-Cola Company, a big user of saccharin in soft drinks such as Tab) ran newspaper ads denouncing the policy. The public, worried about losing access to an artificial sweetener important to dieters, responded with an avalanche of mail to Congress, which promptly passed a law reversing the ban.

Usually, however, the public at large doesn’t care that much about an issue, and so interest groups will try by direct-mail campaigns to arouse a small but passionate group to write letters or vote (or not vote) for specified candidates. Beginning in 1970 Environmental Action designated certain members of the House of Representatives as the “Dirty Dozen” because of their votes against bills that the lobbying group claimed were necessary to protect the environment. Of the thirty-one members of Congress so listed in various elections, only seven survived in office. Many members of Congress believe that the “Dirty Dozen” label hurts them with pro-environment voters in their districts, and though they are angry over what they feel is the unfair use of that label, they strive to avoid it if at all possible.

The press sometimes depicts certain large, well-funded interest groups as all-powerful, but few are. Take, for example, the National Rifle Association (NRA). Founded in 1871 as a group dedicated to shooting instruction, the NRA in the 1960s and 1970s became a lobby opposing policies that would restrict citizens’ rights to own and use firearms for sporting and other legal purposes. By the 1980s the NRA’s dues-paying membership had increased from 1 million to nearly 3 million. Its members receive magazines, decals, and other direct benefits. From 1983 to 1992 the NRA spent \$8 million on congressional races both in direct contributions to their favored candidates and in independent expenditures supporting or opposing various candidates. Still, in the mid-1990s the NRA

lost a major battle to repeal New Jersey's ban on certain types of semiautomatic weapons and lost similar battles in Connecticut, Virginia, and other states. In 1993, over fierce opposition from the NRA, Congress passed the Brady bill, a major piece of gun control legislation named after Jim Brady, the press secretary who was shot and permanently disabled during an attempt to assassinate President Reagan. By the late 1990s the NRA had a negative image even among most gun owners, and the organization found itself constantly in the political cross hairs of small but media-savvy pro-gun control lobbies such as Handgun Control, Inc. As the NRA's recent history teaches, in American politics no interest group, no matter how big its budget or mammoth its membership, is a lobby that cannot be beat.

Money and PACs

Contrary to popular suspicions, money is probably one of the less effective ways by which interest groups advance their causes. That was not always the case. Only a few decades ago powerful interests used their bulging wallets to buy influence in Congress. The passage of the campaign finance reform law in 1973 changed that. The law had two effects. First, it sharply restricted the amount that any interest could give to a candidate for federal office (see Chapter 10). Second, it made it legal for corporations and labor unions to form political action committees (PACs) that could make political contributions.

The effect of the second change was to encourage the rapid growth of PACs. By 1993 some 4,200 PACs existed, over six times the number that existed in 1975. By 2003, the number had climbed to over 4,700. In 2003–2004, they raised \$629 million and contributed \$205 million to federal candidates. Some people worry that the existence of all this political money has resulted in our having, as Senator Edward Kennedy put it, “the finest Congress that money can buy.” More likely the increase in the number of PACs has had just the opposite effect. The reason is simple: with PACs so numerous and so easy to form, it is now probable that there will be money available on every side of almost every conceivable issue. As a result members of Congress can take money and still decide for themselves how to vote. As we shall see, there is not much scholarly evidence that money buys votes in Congress.

Indeed, some members of Congress tell PACs what to do rather than take orders from them. Members

will frequently inform PACs that they “expect” money from them; grumbling PAC officials feel that they have no choice but to contribute for fear of alienating the members. Moreover, some members have created their *own* PACs—organizations set up to raise money from individual donors that is then given to favored political allies in and out of Congress or used to advance the members' own political ambitions. When Charles Rangel, congressman from New York, was hoping to be elected whip of the Democratic party in the House, he set up a PAC that made campaign contributions to fellow representatives in hopes that they might vote for him as whip. There are many other examples from both sides of the aisle. An ironic consequence of this is that a conservative Republican may give money to a PAC set up by a moderate Democrat, who then gives the money to a liberal Democrat (or vice versa), with the result that the original donor winds up having his or her money go to somebody that he or she profoundly dislikes.

Almost any kind of organization—corporation, labor union, trade association, public-interest lobby, citizens group—can form a PAC. Over half of all PACs are sponsored by corporations, about a tenth by labor unions, and the rest by various groups, including ideological ones.

The rise of ideological PACs has been the most remarkable development in interest group activity in recent years. They have increased in number at a faster rate than business or labor PACs, and in several elections they raised more money than either business or labor. One study calculated that there were more than one thousand ideological PACs; about one-third were liberal, about two-thirds conservative.²⁹

Though the ideological PACs raised more money than business or labor ones, they spent less on campaigns and gave less to candidates. The reason for this anomaly is that an ideological PAC usually has to raise its money by means of massive direct-mail solicitations, expensive efforts that can consume all the money raised, and more. By contrast, a typical business or labor PAC solicits money from within a single corporation or union. Even a well-run ideological PAC must spend fifty cents to raise a dollar; some spend much more than that.³⁰

Of the ten PACs that gave the most money to candidates in the 2004 election, most were labor unions, business organizations, and groups that represented doctors, lawyers, realtors, and government employees. Incumbents received more PAC money than challengers.

Labor PACs gave almost exclusively to Democrats. Business PACs favored Republicans.

Both parties have become dependent on PAC money. Still, the popular image of rich PACs stuffing huge sums into political campaigns and thereby buying the attention and possibly the favors of the grateful candidates is a bit overdrawn. For one thing, the typical PAC contribution is rather small. The average PAC donation to a House candidate is only a few hundred dollars and accounts for less than 1 percent of the candidate's total receipts. Most PACs spread small sums of money over many candidates, and despite their great growth in numbers and expenditures, PACs still provide only about one-third of all the money spent by candidates for the House.³¹

Moreover, scholars have yet to find systematic evidence that PAC contributions generally affect how members of Congress vote. On most issues how legislators vote can be explained primarily by their general ideological outlooks and the characteristics of their constituents; how much PAC money they have received turns out to be a small factor. On the other hand, when an issue arises in which most of their constituents have no interest and ideology provides little guidance, there is a slight statistical correlation between PAC contributions and votes. But even here the correlation may be misleading. The same groups that give money also wage intensive lobbying campaigns, flooding representatives with information, press releases, and letters from interested constituents. What these studies may be measuring is the effect of persuasive arguments, not dollars; no one can be certain.³²

It is possible that money affects legislative behavior in ways that will never appear in studies of roll-call votes in Congress. Members of Congress may be more willing to set aside time in their busy schedules for a group that has given money than for a group that has not. What the money has bought is access: it has helped open the door. Or contributions might influence how legislators behave on the committees on which they serve, subtly shaping the way in which they respond to arguments and the facts on which they rely. No one knows, because the research has not been done.

In any event, if interest group money makes a difference at all, it probably makes it on certain kinds of issues more than others. In the chapter on policy-making we define the kind of issues—we call them “client politics”—on which a given interest group is

likely to be especially influential, whether by means of arguments, money, or both. After reading that chapter and considering the examples given there, it will be easier to put the present discussion of PAC money into context.

The “Revolving Door”

Every year, hundreds of people leave important jobs in the federal government to take more lucrative positions in private industry. Some go to work as lobbyists, others as consultants to business, still others as key executives in corporations, foundations, and universities. Many people worry that this “revolving door” may give private interests a way of improperly influencing government decisions. If a federal official uses his or her government position to do something for a corporation in exchange for a cushy job after leaving government, or if a person who has left government uses his or her personal contacts in Washington to get favors for private parties, then the public interest may suffer.

From time to time there are incidents that seem to confirm these fears. Michael K. Deaver, once the deputy chief of staff in the Reagan White House, was convicted of perjury in connection with a grand jury investigation of his having used his former government contacts to help the clients of his public relations firm. Lyn Nofziger, a former Reagan White House aide, was convicted of violating the Ethics in Government Act by lobbying the White House, soon after he left it, on behalf of various businesses and labor unions. In Chapter 15 we will have more to say about more innocent, if no less costly, bureaucratic dysfunctions related to contracting.

How systematic is this pattern of abuse? We don't know. Studies of the revolving door in federal regulatory agencies have found no clear pattern of officials' tilting their decisions in hopes of landing a lucrative business job.³³ Over the years there have been more than a few scandals concerning corrupt dealings between federal department officials and industry executives. Many have involved contractors or their consultants bribing procurement officials. Far more common, however, have been major breakdowns in the procurement process itself. For example, in 2006, the Department of Homeland Security revealed the results from an internal audit.³⁴ In the previous year, the department had spent \$17.5 billion on contracts for airport security, radiation-monitor detectors, and

How Things Work

Conflict of Interest

In 1978 a new federal law, the Ethics in Government Act, codified and broadened the rules governing possible conflicts of interest among senior members of the executive branch. The key provisions were as follows.

The president, vice president, and top-ranking (GS-16 and above) executive branch employees must each year file a public financial disclosure report that lists:

- The source and amount of all earned income as well as income from stocks, bonds, and property; the worth of any investments or large debts; and the source of a spouse's income, if any
- Any position held in business, labor, or certain nonprofit organizations

Employment after government service is restricted. Former executive branch employees may *not*:

- Represent anyone before their former agencies in connection with any matter that the former employees had been involved in before leaving the government

- Appear before an agency, for two years after leaving government service, on matters that came within the former employees' official sphere of responsibility, even if they were not personally involved in the matter
- Represent anyone on any matter before their former agencies, for one year after leaving them, even if the former employees had no connection with the matter while in the government

In addition, another law prohibits bribery. It is illegal to ask for, solicit, or receive anything of value in return for being influenced in the performance of one's duties.

Finally, an executive order forbids outside employment. An official may not hold a job or take a fee, even for lecturing or writing, if such employment or income might create a conflict of interest or an apparent conflict of interest.

Sources: National Journal (November 19, 1977): 1796–1803; Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report (October 28, 1978): 3121–3127.

other goods and services. But records for nearly three dozen contracts were completely missing, and records for many other contracts lacked evidence that the department had followed federal rules in negotiating best prices. (The internal audit itself was performed by private consultants, presumably in compliance with all relevant rules.)

Agencies differ in their vulnerability to outside influences. If the Food and Drug Administration is not vigilant, people in that agency who help decide whether a new drug should be placed on the market may have their judgment affected somewhat by the possibility that, if they approve the drug, the pharmaceutical company that makes it will later offer them a lucrative position.

On the other hand, lawyers in the Federal Trade Commission who prosecute businesses that violate

the antitrust laws may decide that their chances for getting a good job with a private law firm later on will increase if they are particularly vigorous and effective prosecutors. The firm, after all, wants to hire competent people, and winning a case is a good test of competence.³⁵

Trouble

Public displays and disruptive tactics—protest marches, sit-ins, picketing, and violence—have always been a part of American politics. Indeed, they were among the favorite tactics of the American colonists seeking independence in 1776.

Both ends of the political spectrum have used display, disruption, and violence. On the left feminists, antislavery agitators, coal miners, autoworkers, welfare

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Lawsuits, such as this one arguing that Massachusetts allow marriage among gay and lesbian couples, are often more effective than protest demonstrations in changing policies.

mothers, African Americans, antinuclear power groups, public housing tenants, the American Indian Movement, the Students for a Democratic Society, and the Weather Underground have created “trouble” ranging from peaceful sit-ins at segregated lunch counters to bombings and shootings. On the right the Ku Klux Klan has used terror, intimidation, and murder; parents opposed to forced busing of schoolchildren have demonstrated; business firms have used strong-arm squads against workers; right-to-life groups have blockaded abortion clinics; and an endless array of “anti-” groups (anti-Catholics, anti-Masons, anti-Jews, anti-immigrants, antisaloons, antiblacks, anti-protesters, and probably even anti-antis) have taken their disruptive turns on stage. These various activities are not morally the same—a sit-in demonstration is quite different from a lynching—but politically they constitute a similar problem for a government official.

An explanation of why and under what circumstances disruption occurs is beyond the scope of this book. To understand interest group politics, however, it is important to remember that making trouble has, since the 1960s, become a quite conventional political resource and is no longer simply the last resort of ex-

tremist groups. Making trouble is now an accepted political tactic of ordinary middle-class citizens as well as the disadvantaged or disreputable.

There is of course a long history of the use of disruptive methods by “proper” people. In a movement that began in England at the turn of the century and then spread here, feminists would chain themselves to lampposts or engage in what we now call “sit-ins” as part of a campaign to win the vote for women. The object then was much the same as the object of similar tactics today: to disrupt the working of some institution so that it is forced to negotiate with you, or, failing that, to enlist the sympathies of third parties (the media, other interest groups) who will come to your aid and press your target to negotiate with you, or, failing that, to goad the police into making attacks and arrests so that martyrs are created.

The civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s gave experience in these methods to thousands of young people and persuaded others of the effectiveness of such methods under certain conditions. Though these movements have abated or disappeared, their veterans and emulators have put such tactics to new uses—trying to block the construction

of a nuclear power plant, for example, or occupying the office of a cabinet secretary to obtain concessions for a particular group.

Government officials dread this kind of trouble. They usually find themselves in a no-win situation. If they ignore the disruption, they are accused of being “insensitive,” “unresponsive,” or “arrogant.” If they give in to the demonstrators, they encourage more demonstrations by proving that this is a useful tactic. If they call the police, they run the risk of violence and injuries, followed not only by bad publicity but by lawsuits.

★ Regulating Interest Groups

Interest group activity is a form of political speech protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution: it cannot lawfully be abolished or even much curtailed. In 1946 Congress passed the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act, which requires groups and individuals seeking to influence legislation to register with the secretary of the Senate and the clerk of the House and to file quarterly financial reports. The Supreme Court upheld the law but restricted its application to lobbying efforts involving direct contacts with members of Congress.³⁶ More general “grassroots” interest group activity may not be restricted by the government. The 1946 law had little practical effect. Not all lobbyists took the trouble to register, and there was no guarantee that the financial statements were accurate. There was no staff in charge of enforcing the law.

After years of growing popular dissatisfaction with Congress, prompted in large measure by the (exaggerated) view that legislators were the pawns of powerful special interests, Congress in late 1995 unanimously passed a bill that tightened up the registration and disclosure requirements. Signed by the president, the law restated the obligation of lobbyists to register with the House and Senate, but it broadened the definition of a lobbyist to include the following:

- People who spend at least 20 percent of their time lobbying
- People who are paid at least \$5,000 in any six-month period to lobby
- Corporations and other groups that spend more than \$20,000 in any six-month period on their own lobbying staffs

The law covered people and groups who lobbied the executive branch and congressional staffers as well as elected members of Congress, and it included law firms that represent clients before the government. Twice a year, all registered lobbyists were required to report the following:

- The names of their clients
- Their income and expenditures
- The issues on which they worked

The registration and reporting requirements did not, however, extend to so-called grassroots organizations—that is, campaigns (sometimes led by volunteers, sometimes by hired professionals) to mobilize citizens to write or call the government about some issue. Nor was any new enforcement organization created, although congressional officials may refer violations to the Justice Department for investigation. Fines for breaking the law could amount to \$50,000. In addition, the law barred tax-exempt, nonprofit advocacy groups that lobby from getting federal grants.

Just as the Republicans moved expeditiously to pass new regulations on interest groups and lobbying when they regained majorities in Congress in the November 1994 elections, the Democrats’ first order of business after retaking Congress in the November 2006 elections was to adopt sweeping reforms. Beginning March 1, 2007, many new regulations took effect, including the following:

- No gifts of any value from registered lobbyists or firms that employ lobbyists
- No reimbursement for travel costs from registered lobbyists or firms that employ lobbyists
- No reimbursement for travel costs, no matter the source, if the trip is in any part organized or requested by a registered lobbyist or firm that employs lobbyists

Strictly speaking, these and related new rules mean that a House member cannot go on a “fact-finding” trip to a local site or a foreign country and have anyone associated with lobbying arrange to pay for it. Even people who are not themselves registered lobbyists, but who work for a lobbying firm, are not permitted to take members of Congress to lunch or give them any other “thing of value,” no matter how small.

But, if past experience is any guide, “strictly speaking” is not how the rules will be followed or enforced. For instance, buried in the new rules’ fine print are provisions that permit members of Congress to

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

MEMORANDUM

To: Kathleen Moore, Senate majority leader

From: Christopher Franklin, chief of staff

Subject: Full federal financing of presidential campaigns

Every presidential election since 1976 has been financed in part by federal funds. Now presidential candidates say they will forego public funding for the general election, given the vastly greater resources available through private fund-raising. Congress needs to decide whether elections are a public investment or a political free market for citizens and candidates.

Arguments for:

1. Legal precedents are promising. Federal matching funds already go to presidential primary candidates who have raised at least \$5,000, in contributions of \$250 or less, in each of twenty states. For the general election, each major party nominee already is eligible for federal funding if he or she agrees to spend no more than that amount.
2. The funding required would be small. Allocating \$1 billion out of the public treasury for a presidential election every four years is hardly a fiscal drain on a nearly \$2 trillion annual budget.
3. The effects would be pervasive. Candidates and party leaders would stop covertly courting big donors with phone calls, lunches, and personal visits, and would focus instead on the needs of average citizens.

Arguments against:

1. Constitutional precedent for requiring political candidates to accept public funds is weak. In *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), the Supreme Court upheld limits on campaign contributions for candidates who accept public money, but it also defined spending money for political purposes as expression protected by the First Amendment, thereby giving individuals the right to raise and spend as much of their own money as they choose, if they forego federal funds.
2. Campaign spending would soon spiral once again. The federal government may not restrict spending by individuals or organizations working independently from the political parties, and federal funds would merely supplement, not supplant, private fund-raising.
3. Less than 10 percent of taxpayers currently supports public financing through voluntary federal income tax checkoffs, and voters likely would view bankrolling elections as serving politicians, not the people.

Your decision:

Support legislation _____ Oppose legislation _____

Bipartisan Group in Senate Proposes Full Public Financing of Presidential Campaigns

February 15

WASHINGTON, D.C.

With the upcoming presidential election expected to cost more than \$1 billion, a bipartisan group of senators has proposed that Congress control those expenses by fully funding and setting an upper limit on financing for presidential campaigns. Presidential contenders so far have refrained from taking a position on the legislation . . .

accept reimbursement for travel from lobbyists if the travel is for “one-day trips,” so long as the lobbyists themselves do not initiate the trip, make the reservations, or pick up incidental expenses unrelated to the visit. Moreover, these rules have not yet been adopted in precisely the same form by the Senate; and neither chamber had yet clarified language or closed loopholes related to lobbying registration and reporting.

Do not suppose, however, that such remaining gaps in lobbying laws render the system wide open to abuses or evasions. For one thing, loopholes and all, the lobbying laws are now tighter than ever. For another, as we intimated earlier in this chapter, the most significant legal constraints on interest groups come not from the current federal lobbying law (though that may change) but from the tax code and the campaign finance laws. A nonprofit organization—which includes not only charitable groups but almost all voluntary associations that have an interest in politics—need not pay income taxes, and financial contributions to it can be deducted on the donor’s income tax return, provided that the organization does not devote a “substantial part” of its activities to “attempting to influence legislation.”³⁷ Many tax-exempt organizations do take public positions on political questions and testify before congressional committees. If the organization does any serious lobbying, however, it will lose its tax-exempt status (and thus find it harder to solicit donations and more expensive to operate). Exactly this happened to the

Sierra Club in 1968 when the Internal Revenue Service revoked its tax-exempt status because of its extensive lobbying activities. Some voluntary associations try to deal with this problem by setting up separate organizations to collect tax-exempt money—for example, the NAACP, which lobbies, must pay taxes, but the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, which does not lobby, is tax-exempt.

Finally, the campaign finance laws, described in detail in Chapter 10, limit to \$5,000 the amount any political action committee can spend on a given candidate in a given election. These laws have sharply curtailed the extent to which any *single* group can give money, though they have increased the *total* amount that different groups are providing.

Beyond making bribery or other manifestly corrupt forms of behavior illegal and restricting the sums that campaign contributors can donate, there is probably no system for controlling interest groups that would both make a useful difference and leave important constitutional and political rights unimpaired. Ultimately the only remedy for imbalances or inadequacies in interest group representation is to devise and sustain a political system that gives all affected parties a reasonable chance to be heard on matters of public policy. That, of course, is exactly what the Founders thought they were doing. Whether they succeeded or not is a question to which we shall return at the end of this book.

★ SUMMARY ★

Interest groups in the United States are more numerous and more fragmented than those in nations such as Great Britain, where the political system is more centralized. The goals and tactics of interest groups reflect not only the interests of their members but also the size of the groups, the incentives with which they attract supporters, and the role of their profes-

sional staffs. The chief source of interest group influence is information; public support, money, and the ability to create “trouble” are also important. The right to lobby is protected by the Constitution, but the tax and campaign finance laws impose significant restrictions on how money may be used.

RECONSIDERING WHO GOVERNS?

1. *Do interest groups dominate government, and is any particular lobby politically unbeatable?*

The answers are “not really” and “no,” respectively. There are so many governmental institutions in which power may be exercised that no single group can dominate most public policy decisions. What the government does is often the outcome of a complex pattern of political haggling, innumerable compromises, and shifting alliances among and between different groups and their leaders. Even supposedly all-powerful lobbies (like the National Rifle Association [NRA] on gun control, or the American Association of Retired Persons [AARP] on senior citizens’ health care benefits) sometimes find themselves on the losing side of legislative decisions and court opinions.

2. *Why do people join interest groups?*

Pretty much for the same basic reasons that people join any organization. There are three kinds of incentives: solidary, material, and purposive. Organizations, including interest groups, can attract members through one, two, or all three incentives. Some interest groups rely mainly on one incentive. For example, ideological political action committees (PACs) rely largely on purposive incentives, attracting members by appealing to their beliefs in a coherent set of principles or their passions on a particular set of issues. Even these groups, however, normally provide their members with certain tangible, members-only benefits (for example, magazines or special discounts on various products). Organizations that principally benefit nonmembers are sometimes called public-interest lobbies.

RECONSIDERING TO WHAT ENDS?

1. *Is the proliferation of political action committees (PACs) and other groups good or bad for America’s representative democracy?*

What would James Madison say? Go back to the Appendix and *Federalist* No. 10. Madison recognized that freedom begat factions, but he hoped that the government proposed under the Constitution would succeed in “regulating these various and interfering interests” in ways that secured the “public good.” The mere proliferation of interest groups in our time does not justify a negative answer to that question. Rather, one would also have to believe that the political process is dominated by groups that seek to serve their members with little or no regard for the well-being and rights of other citizens. To some pro-choice voters, certain pro-life groups may appear as factions, and to some pro-life citizens, certain pro-choice groups may appear as factions. Both these and other ideological groups have proliferated in recent decades. Whether this is good or bad for America’s representative democracy is a question on which reasonable minds can and do differ. But this much is clear: in contemporary American politics, one citizen’s special-interest group is often another citizen’s public-interest lobby.

2. *Should interest groups’ political activities be restricted by law?*

The first thing to notice is that there are already literally scores of such laws on the books. For example, Washington lobbyists must register with the House or Senate. All registered lobbyists must publicly divulge their client list and expenditures. There are legal limits on PAC contributions. Every new wave of campaign finance laws (see Chapter 10) has resulted in more rules regulating interest groups. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has tightly restricted political activity by religious groups, private schools, and other organizations as a condition for their exemption from federal income tax. The courts have consistently upheld such restrictions and ruled that they do not, under most circumstances, violate freedom of speech or other constitutional protections. On the other hand, the courts have effectively afforded even tax-exempt groups ways of legally, but indirectly, engaging in political activity. Finally, states and cities have their own laws regulating interest groups, and some places are more restrictive than others.

WORLD WIDE WEB RESOURCES

Conservative interest groups
 American Conservative Union:
www.conservative.org
 Christian Coalition: **www.cc.org**
 Liberal interest groups
 American Civil Liberties Union: **www.aclu.org**
 Americans for Democratic Action:
www.adaction.org
 Environmental groups
 Environmental Defense:
www.environmentaldefense.org

National Resources Defense Council: **www.nrdc.org**
 Civil rights groups
 NAACP: **www.naacp.org**
 Center for Equal Opportunity: **www.ceousa.org**
 Feminist group
 National Organization for Women: **www.now.org**

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