

Interest Groups and the Mass Media

IN THIS CHAPTER

Summary: People form and join groups to take their concerns before public officials at all levels of government. Interest groups are different from a political party in that they have no legal status in the election process. They do not nominate candidates for public office; however, they may actively support candidates who are sympathetic to their cause. While political parties are interested in controlling government, **interest groups** are concerned with influencing the policies of government, usually focusing on issues that directly affect their membership. Membership in interest groups may be restricted or open to all who are interested. Not all interested people belong to interest groups. Many people belong to various interest groups at the same time.

Key Terms

interest groups

political action

committees (PACs)

lobbying

grassroots

iron triangle

issue network

mass media

gatekeepers

media events

trial balloon

Interest Groups

Historical Background of Interest Groups

Interest groups have often been viewed with suspicion. In *Federalist #10*, James Madison warned against the dangers of “factions.” Although Madison was opposed to the elimination of factions, he believed that the separation of powers under the Constitution would moderate their effect.

Functions of Interest Groups

Interest groups serve several important functions. They:

- raise awareness and stimulate interest in public affairs by educating their members and the public
- represent their membership, serving as a link between members and government
- provide information to government, especially data and testimony useful in making public policy
- provide channels for political participation that enable citizens to work together to achieve a common goal



KEY IDEA

Types of Interest Groups

Economic Interest Groups

Most interest groups are formed on the basis of economic interests.

- Labor groups promote and protect the interest of organized labor. Examples include the AFL-CIO and the Teamsters Union.
- Business groups promote and protect business interests in general. The Chamber of Commerce of the United States and the National Association of Manufacturers are examples.
- Professional groups maintain standards of the profession, hold professional meetings, and publish journals. Some examples are the National Education Association (NEA), the American Medical Association (AMA), and the American Bar Association (ABA).
- Agricultural groups, such as the National Grange and the National Farmers' Union, promote general agricultural interests.

Groups That Promote Causes

- specific causes
 - American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
 - National Rifle Association (NRA)
- welfare of specific groups of individuals
 - American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)
 - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
 - Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)
- religion-related causes
 - National Council of Churches
 - American Jewish Congress

Public Interest Groups

Public interest groups are concerned with issues such as the environment, consumer protection, crime, and civil rights.

- public interests
 - Common Cause
 - League of Women Voters
 - Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)

Strategies of Interest Groups

- *influencing elections*—Encouraging members to vote for candidates who support their views, influencing party platforms and the nomination of candidates, campaigning and contributing money to parties and candidates through **political action committees (PACs)**.

- **lobbying**—Attempting to influence policymakers, often by supplying data to government officials and their staffs to convince these policymakers that their case is more deserving than another’s.
 - **direct lobbying**—Using personal contacts between lobbyists and policymakers.
 - **grassroots lobbying**—Interested group members and others outside the organization write letters, send telegrams, e-mails, and faxes, and make telephone calls to influence policymakers.
 - **coalition lobbying**—Several interest groups with common goals join together to influence policymakers.
- **litigation**—Groups often take an issue to court if they are unsuccessful in gaining the support of Congress; this strategy was used successfully by the NAACP to argue against segregation during the 1950s.
- **going public**—Appealing to the public for support by bringing attention to an issue or using public relations to gain support for the image of the interest group itself.

Political Action Committees



The campaign finance reforms of the 1970s prohibited corporations and labor unions from making direct contributions to candidates running for federal office. Political action committees (PACs) were formed as political arms of interest groups. Federal law regulates PACs; they must register with the federal government, raise money from multiple contributors, donate to several candidates, and follow strict accounting rules.

Regulation of Interest Groups

The first major attempt to regulate lobbying came in 1946 with the passage of the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act, requiring lobbyists to register with the clerk of the House of Representatives and the secretary of the Senate if their principal purpose was to influence legislation. This law was directed only at those who tried to influence members of Congress. In 1995 Congress passed the Lobbying Disclosure Act, creating much stricter regulations by requiring registration if lobbying was directed at members of Congress, congressional staff, or policymakers within the executive branch. It also required the disclosure of more information concerning the activities and clients of lobbyists.

Interest Group Influence

Not all interest groups exert the same influence over the political system. Interest groups may gain influence because of their access to political and economic resources. Money allows them to hire professional lobbyists or contribute to political campaigns, which can help interest groups gain access to policymakers. Membership size may be another factor that allows some interest groups to be more influential. For example, AARP is composed of millions of members, and policymakers are willing to listen to such a large group.

Interest groups also face certain problems. Members of interest groups share a common cause, but the “free-rider” problem makes it difficult for interest groups to increase their membership when some members just sit back and allow others to do the work to achieve the group’s goals.

Interest groups spend millions of dollars each year to lobby members of Congress on various issues. These groups try to influence the legislation passed by Congress, including programs of the government and the budget that supports those programs. For example, AARP lobbies Congress to increase Social Security and Medicare for the elderly.

Many interest groups employ the services of former government officials such as members of Congress or their staff as lobbyists. These former officials can use their personal contacts and knowledge of the policymaking process to help the interests of the group. This phenomenon is called the “revolving door” because so many former government officials end up working for interest groups.

Interest groups can also influence policymaking through their relationships with congressional committees and executive agencies. The **iron triangle** created by this three-way relationship often brings mutual policy outcomes that produce benefits for all members of the “triangle.” An **issue network** includes multiple special interests, bureaucratic agencies, mass media, think tanks, and others who work together on policy.

Mass Media

Mass media refers to all forms of communication that transmit information to the general public. Although the mass media are not the only means of communication between citizens and government (political parties, interest groups, and voting are other means), they are the only linkage mechanism that specializes in communication.

Development of the Modern Media

The development of the mass media in the United States reflects the growth of the country, new inventions and technology, and changing attitudes about the role of government.

Newspapers

The earliest American newspapers, operating during colonial times, were expensive, had small circulations, and were often prepared or financed by political organs or those advocating a particular cause. Improvements in printing, the telegraph, and the rotary press led to the growth of newspapers and newspaper circulations. By the 1890s almost every major city in the United States had one or more daily papers. Circulation wars led to “yellow journalism” and political consequences resulted. Since the 1950s newspaper competition has decreased. By 2009, many newspapers in the United States had gone out of business and the very future of the newspaper was being called into question.

Magazines

Magazines tended to have smaller circulations with less frequent publication. The earliest public affairs magazines were published in the mid-1800s. They often exposed political corruption and business exploitation with the writings of muckrakers such as Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, and Sinclair Lewis. In the 1920s and 1930s, three weekly news magazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*, attracted mass readership. Today, they often substitute for daily newspapers. Liberal and conservative magazines have smaller circulations but are read by supporters on both sides.

Radio

The wide use of radio began in the 1920s and made celebrities of news personalities. Franklin Roosevelt successfully used radio to broadcast his “fireside chats” to the American people.

Television

Today, television claims the largest audience of the mass media. After World War II television increased the visibility of broadcast journalists, making them celebrities. Television promoted the careers of politicians such as Joe McCarthy, during hearings of the House Unamerican Activities Committee, and John Kennedy, during his campaign debates against

Richard Nixon. The recent growth of cable TV news and the 24/7 news cycle have greatly changed the coverage of the American political system.

Internet as Media

The rapid growth of Internet usage has led to media organizations using the Internet as a way to convey information. Newspapers, magazines, blogs, and radio and television stations have sites on the World Wide Web. More and more Americans are receiving their news from the Internet. Critics note that Internet news has less “fact-checking” associated with it than does news from the more traditional forms of media; they claim that rumor and unsubstantiated allegations make up a large portion of Internet “news.”

Roles of the Media

The media perform several important functions:

- informing the public
- shaping public opinion
- providing a link between citizens and government
- serving as a watchdog that investigates and examines personalities and government policies
- agenda setting by influencing what subjects become national political issues; protests against the Vietnam conflict are an example

Media Ownership and Government Regulation

The mass media are privately owned in the United States, giving them more political freedom than in most other countries, where they are publicly owned, but also making them more dependent on advertising profits. Government regulation of the media affects the broadcast media (radio and television) more than the print media (newspapers and magazines) and the Internet. Government regulation of the broadcast media falls into three categories:

- *technical regulations*—The Federal Communications Act of 1934 created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as an independent regulatory agency to regulate interstate and foreign communication by radio, television, telephone, telegraph, cable, and satellite.
- *structural regulations*—These control the organization and ownership of broadcasting companies; in 1996 the Telecommunications Act broadened competition.
- *content regulations*—Although the mass media are protected by the First Amendment, the broadcast media have been subject to regulation of content.

What Is News? Reporting the News

“News” is any important event that has happened within the past 24 hours. The media decide what is news by deciding what to report. News is generally directed through **gatekeepers**—media executives, news editors, and prominent reporters—who decide which events to present and how to present them. Time limitations and the potential impact of the story are major elements in selecting what is news. In political coverage, “horse-race journalism” often focuses on which candidate is winning or losing, rather than the issues of the election.

Media and the President



KEY IDEA

The major news organizations maintain journalists in major cities and government centers to report political events firsthand. Washington, D.C., has the largest press corps of any city in the United States, with one-third of the press assigned to cover the White House. News events may be staged as **media events**. The White House allows special access to the president, with the press receiving information through the Office of the Press Secretary.

Some ways that journalists receive information are:

- *news releases*—Prepared texts to be used exactly as written.
- *news briefings*—Announcements and daily questioning of the press secretary about news releases.
- *news conferences*—Questioning of high-level officials, often rehearsed.
- *leaks*—Information released by officials who are guaranteed anonymity; may be intentional to interfere with the opposition or to “float” an idea (**trial balloon**) and measure reaction.

Reporters are expected to observe “rules” when talking to officials:

- *on the record*—The official may be quoted by name.
- *off the record*—What the official says cannot be printed.
- *on background*—What the official says can be printed but may not be attributed to the official by name.
- *on deep background*—What the official says can be printed, but it cannot be attributed to anybody.

Media and Congress



KEY IDEA

Fewer reporters regularly cover Congress, which does not maintain as tight a control over news stories as the White House. Most of the coverage of Congress concerns the House of Representatives, the Senate, or Congress as an organization, rather than individual members. News about Congress may cover confirmation hearings, oversight investigations, or scandals among members.

C-SPAN (Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network) was created to increase coverage of congressional activities. The floor and some committee proceedings of the House of Representatives and Senate are now broadcast on C-SPAN and C-SPAN II. Members of Congress may also record radio and television messages to their constituents.

Media and Elections

The media plays a crucial role in a democracy. While the media often functions as a “watchdog,” it has other roles in the electoral process:

- educating voters
- reporting on campaigns
- providing an avenue for political parties and candidates to communicate their message to voters
- providing an avenue for the public to communicate their concerns, opinions, and needs, to the parties, candidates, and officeholders
- allowing the parties and candidates to debate one another
- reporting and monitoring election results

Media and Public Opinion

While measuring the extent of influence of the media on public opinion is difficult, almost 90% of Americans believe that the media has a strong influence on public opinion. Most people learn about political events through the media; therefore, how events are reported might have a strong impact on public opinion. The media's use of polls, and its coverage of elections, can impact the electoral process. In 2000, the media declared George W. Bush the winner of the presidential election, although the outcome was not certain. This declaration created an impression that the election had already been decided, yet polls were still open in numerous states

Biases in the Media

Critics of the media contend the media are biased in reporting. Reporters are said to have a liberal bias, while media owners, publishers, and editors are said to be more conservative. Studies confirm that reporters have a liberal orientation; however, the bias tends to be against incumbents and frontrunners. There is also a tendency toward "pack journalism," with journalists adopting the viewpoints of other journalists with whom they spend time and exchange information. This bias often extends to viewers, listeners, and readers because individuals often read, watch, or listen to news outlets that support political views that they already have.

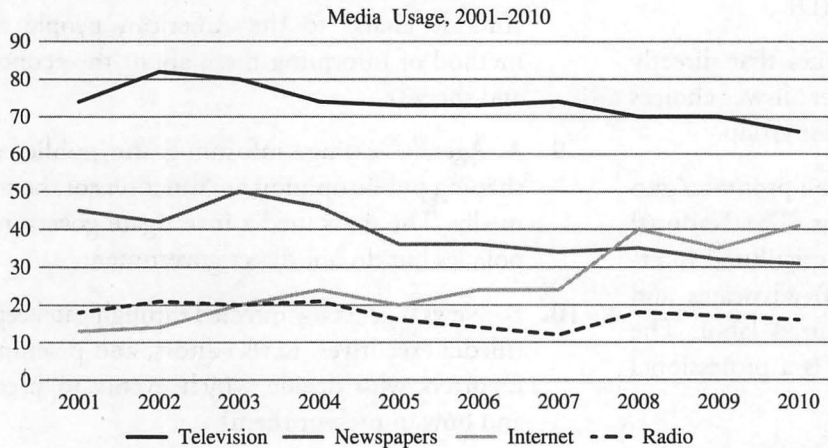
> Review Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

- How does an interest group differ from a political party?
 - Interest groups often support political candidates for office.
 - Membership in an interest group is nonrestrictive.
 - Interest groups have no legal status in the election process.
 - Interest groups control government.
- Which of the following is NOT a function of an interest group?
 - represent a broad range of interests
 - raise awareness and stimulate interest in public affairs
 - serve as a link between its members and government
 - provide information to the government
- An example of an interest group that would promote a specific cause is
 - the National Grange
 - the Teamsters Union
 - the National Rifle Association
 - the American Bar Association
- An example of a public interest group is
 - the League of Women Voters
 - the American Association of Retired Persons
 - the American Bar Association
 - the National Council of Churches
- A method of lobbying by which interest group members and others outside the organization write letters, send telegrams, and make telephone calls to influence policymakers is known as
 - litigation lobbying
 - grassroots lobbying
 - direct lobbying
 - coalition lobbying
- Which of the following is true regarding the regulation of lobbying?
 - The Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act was directed at those who tried to influence members of the executive branch.
 - The first major attempt to regulate lobbying came during the Progressive Era, in the early years of the 20th century.
 - In the second half of the 20th century, laws regulating lobbying became more lenient.
 - Both the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act and the Lobbying Disclosure Act required lobbyists to register.
- Which is true of government regulation of the media?
 - Government regulation of the media affects the print media more than the broadcast media.
 - Structural regulations deal with issues affecting the organization of broadcasting companies.
 - The Telecommunications Act (1996) restricted competition among broadcasting companies.
 - The Federal Communications Commission is restricted to the regulation of interstate commerce.
- In the history of radio as a mode of mass media, which American president was first to make the medium a regular feature of his administration as a method of informing the people?
 - Ronald Reagan
 - Franklin Roosevelt
 - Bill Clinton
 - George H. W. Bush

9. Which of the following has NOT been an important function in the role of the mass media?
- directing government
 - agenda setting
 - informing the public
 - shaping public opinion
10. Those media executives and news editors who decide which events to present and how to present the news are called
- content regulators
 - gatekeepers
 - technical regulators
 - telecommunication regulators

Use the graph below to answer question 11.



Source: Pew Research

11. Which of the following is an accurate statement about the information on the line graph?
- The greatest decrease in media usage was in the use of the radio.
 - The greatest increase in media usage was in the use of newspapers.
 - The least-used form of media was television.
 - The greatest decrease in media usage was in the use of newspapers.

Free-Response Question

12. Interest groups often exert vast influence over public policymaking.
- Identify the primary goal of interest groups.
 - Describe two strategies used by interest groups to influence public policymaking.
 - Explain how interest groups are limited in achieving their goals by each of the following:
 - the media
 - separation of powers

> Answers and Explanations

- C.** Interest groups have no legal status in the election process, whereas political parties fulfill many roles in the election process. Interest groups may support political candidates for office, but only political parties nominate candidates for office (A). Membership in an interest group may be restricted (B). Interest groups influence governmental policies, whereas political parties control government (D).
- A.** Interest groups focus on issues that directly affect its membership. The other answer choices reflect the functions of an interest group.
- C.** The National Rifle Association promotes gun ownership as a right of citizens. The National Grange (A) promotes general agricultural interests. The Teamsters Union (B) advocates and protects the interests of organized labor. The American Bar Association (D) is a professional group.
- A.** The League of Women Voters is a public-interest group created to encourage voter participation. AARP (B) and the National Council of Churches (D) are groups that promote causes. The American Bar Association (C) is a professional group.
- B.** Grassroots lobbying attempts to reach the average voter at the local level. Litigation lobbying involves taking an issue to court (A). Direct lobbying (C) uses personal contacts between lobbyists and policymakers. Coalition lobbying (D) brings together several interest groups with common goals.
- D.** Both laws require the registration of lobbyists, with the Lobbying Disclosure Act requiring registration under more circumstances than the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act. The Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act was directed at those trying to influence members of Congress (A). The first major attempt to regulate lobbying came in 1976 (B). Laws regulating lobbying became stricter and more comprehensive (C).
- B.** Structural regulations control the organization and ownership of broadcasting companies. Government regulation affects radio and television more than newspapers and magazines (A). The Telecommunications Act broadened competition (C). The FCC regulates interstate and foreign communication (D).
- B.** Franklin Roosevelt used the radio to deliver “fireside chats” to the American people as a method of informing them about the economy and the war.
- A.** Agenda setting, informing the public, and shaping public opinion are functions of the mass media. The mass media investigate government policies but do not direct government.
- B.** News is generally directed through gatekeepers (media executives, news editors, and prominent reporters who decide which events to present and how to present them).
- D.** The greatest decrease in media usage was in the use of newspapers, not radio (A). The greatest increase in media usage was in the use of the Internet, not newspapers (B). The least-used form of media was the radio, not television (C).
- A.** The primary goal of interest groups is to influence the policies of government, often focusing on issues that affect the interest of their members.
B. Interest groups can lobby members of government. Lobbying is the activity of trying to persuade someone, such as a government official, to support a group’s position on an issue. Interest groups can use electioneering, helping to get a candidate elected who might support a group’s position on issues. This may involve contributing to a political campaign or mobilizing voter support for a candidate. Interest groups may use litigation or taking action through the courts. They may file lawsuits against the government, a program or legislation; finance lawsuits filed by others; or file amicus curiae briefs

to support a side of an existing court case. Lastly, interest groups may bring the attention of the public to the issue by going public. They could hold strikes, boycotts, rallies, or marches; purchase advertising; or generate news coverage to bring attention to a topic.

C. The media acts as a “watchdog” over the behaviors of interest groups. The media can inform the public about the activities of interest groups. If the

media portray the interest group in a negative manner, this can affect the success of the group. The media also acts as a gatekeeper, deciding what news to present and how it will be presented. This can limit the success of interest groups, because their message may not be portrayed the way they want and therefore they lose support for their position on the issue.

› Rapid Review

- Interest groups are different from political parties.
- James Madison warned against the dangers of “factions” in *Federalist #10*.
- Interest groups perform many functions: creating awareness among the public, linking the public and government, providing information, and creating avenues for political participation.
- There are three major types of interest groups: economic, cause-related, and public interest.
- Strategies used by interest groups may include influencing elections, lobbying, litigation, and going public.
- PACs, or political action committees, are political arms of interest groups that raise money for political candidates.
- Federal, state, and local laws regulate interest group activities and fundraising.
- Mass media refers to all the forms of communication that transmit information to the general public. Mass media include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet.
- One of the major roles of the media is agenda setting.
- The mass media are privately owned in the United States.
- Government regulation of broadcast media includes technical, structural, and content regulation.
- Gatekeepers are the media executives, news editors, and prominent reporters who decide which events to present and how to present them.
- The Office of the Press Secretary allows the press to have greater access to the president through new releases, briefings, and conferences.
- Media coverage of Congress often centers on the institution rather than individual members.
- Criticism of the media’s influence often refers to bias in reporting.
- More and more Americans are receiving their news from the Internet rather than from traditional news outlets; some critics note the potential unreliability of news reported in the Internet age.