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Interest Groups

Chapter 13

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In this chapter you will learn about

- The various roles interest groups play in the U.S. political system and the ways they organize
- The many types of interest groups and the kinds of interests they represent
- How interest groups attempt to exert their influence through lobbying and campaign activities
- The resources that different interest groups bring to bear on influencing government decisions
- The relationship of citizens to interest groups in American politics—and the question of whether interest group politics is biased in favor of certain groups in society

Interest groups

- Faction: a group of citizens united by some common passion or interest and opposed to the rights of other citizens or to the interests of the whole community
- Interest group: an organization of individuals who share a common political goal and are united for the purpose of influencing government decisions
- Political action committee (PAC): the fundraising arm of an interest group

Roles of interest groups

- Represent specific public interests
 - Lobbying: interest group activities aimed at persuading policymakers to support the group's positions
- Participation
- Education
- Agenda building
- Provision of program alternatives
- Program monitoring

Formulation of interest groups

- Common problem or threat
- Resource advantages
- Effective leadership
 - Interest group entrepreneurs
 - E.g., MADD, 9/11 Widows

Free rider problem

- A recruiting difficulty groups face because potential members can gain the benefits of the group's actions whether or not they join
- Collective good: a good or service that, by its very nature, cannot be denied to anyone who wants to consume it
 - E.g., Public safety, clean air, national defense

Overcoming the free rider problem

- Selective incentives: benefits available only to group members as inducements to get them to join
 - Material benefit: selective incentive in the form of a tangible reward
 - Solidary benefit: selective incentive related to the interaction and bonding among group members

Overcoming the free rider problem, cont'd.

- Selective incentives, cont'd.
 - Expressive benefit: selective incentive that derives from the opportunity to express values and beliefs and to be committed to a greater cause
- Interest groups use a mix of incentives to encourage group membership

Types of interest groups

- Economic interest groups: organize to influence government policy for the benefit of members
 - Corporations and business associations
 - E.g., National Association of Manufacturers, Chamber of Commerce, Tobacco Institute, General Electric
 - Unions and professional associations
 - E.g., AFL-CIO, Teamsters, AMA, ABA
 - Agricultural interest groups
 - E.g., American Farm Bureau, Altria, ConAgra

Types of interest groups, cont'd.

- Equal opportunity interest groups: organize to promote the civil and economic rights of underrepresented or disadvantaged groups
 - Age
 - E.g., AARP, Children's Defense Fund
 - Race and Ethnicity
 - E.g., NAACP, LULAC, AIM
 - Gender
 - E.g., NOW, EMILY's List, Eagle Forum
 - Sexual orientation
 - E.g., GLAD, PFLAG, Log Cabin Republicans

Types of interest groups, cont'd.

- Public interest groups: organize to influence government to produce collective goods or services that benefit the general public
 - Environmental groups
 - E.g., Sierra Club, Greenpeace
 - Consumer groups
 - E.g., Public Citizen, Consumers Union
 - Religious groups
 - E.g., Christian Coalition, Anti-Defamation League

Types of interest groups, cont'd.

- Public interest groups, cont'd.
 - Second Amendment groups
 - E.g., NRA, Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence
 - Reproductive rights groups
 - E.g., Planned Parenthood, National Right to Life Committee
 - Human rights
 - E.g., ACLU, Amnesty International
 - Animal rights
 - E.g., Humane Society, PETA

Types of interest groups, cont'd.

- Government interest groups: organize to lobby the U.S. federal government to influence national policy
 - Foreign governments
 - E.g., Japan
 - State and local governments
 - E.g., National Governors Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, U.S. Conference of Mayors
 - Intergovernmental interests



Interest group politics

- Direct lobbying: direct interaction with public officials for the purpose of influencing policy decisions
- Indirect lobbying: attempts to influence government policymakers by encouraging the general public to put pressure on them

Direct lobbying: Congress

- Strategies for congressional lobbying
 - Personal contacts
 - Campaign contributions
 - PACs – recent regulations and loopholes coalition
 - Use of professional lobbyists
 - Revolving door: tendency of public officials, journalists, and lobbyists to move between public and private sectors
 - Providing expert testimony
 - Accurate information to Congress

Direct lobbying: Congress, cont'd.

- Lobbying reform
 - Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995
 - Subsequent easing of restrictions

Direct lobbying, cont'd.

- The president
 - Target president and Executive Office of the White House
 - Office of Public Liaison
 - Revolving door exists here as well
- The bureaucracy
 - Lobby to get laws implemented favorably
 - Strong relationship with regulators and private sector
 - Iron triangles
- The judiciary
 - Lawsuits and amicus curiae briefs

Indirect lobbying: the public

- Education: place issues on public's agenda using media, direct mail, and publicity stunts
 - Issue advocacy ads
 - Reforms
 - 527 groups
- Mobilize the public
- Larger membership groups are more successful
- Get-out-the-vote

Indirect lobbying: the public, cont'd.

- Social protest and mass movements: public activities designed to bring attention to political causes; usually done by those without access to conventional means of expressing their views
- Unconventional tactics

Astroturf political campaigns

- Grassroots lobbying: indirect lobbying efforts that spring from widespread public concern
- Astroturf lobbying: indirect lobbying efforts by interest groups that manipulate or create public sentiment, “astroturf” being artificial grassroots
- Pure grassroots lobbying is becoming increasingly rare, but astroturf public interest lobbying is growing
- Lobbying moving away from Congress to public, but this may not be any more democratic

Interest group resources

- Money
 - Staff
 - Professional assistance
 - Campaign contributions
 - PACs are limited to donating \$5,000 per primary and general election campaign
 - PAC spending continues to increase faster than inflation
 - Most PAC donations go to incumbents (79%)
 - Most spending goes to incumbents and committee members
 - Contributions buy *access*, not necessarily votes

Interest group resources, cont'd.

- Leadership
 - Effective leadership can offset other resource disadvantages (money, influence)
- Membership: size and Intensity
 - Larger groups generally have advantages (AARP)
 - Intensity can make up for lack of numbers (NRA)
 - Best possible situation is to have both
- Information
 - Can defeat powerful interest with solid information

Citizens and interest groups

- Pluralist democrats argue that interest groups are a great equalizing force in American politics
- Elitists suggest interest group resource advantages (e.g., money, staff) mean interest groups skew toward wealthy
- Equalizing positions of groups depends on citizens being willing to participate (grassroots organizing)