CHAPTER 10

Interest Groups

Pro-life and pro-choice groups sometimes engage each other directly and angrily. (Karen Bleir/Getty)
In 2010, Americans were spectators to two fierce back-to-back lobbying wars, the first over healthcare, the second over finance. The healthcare lobby alone had more than 3,300 registered lobbyists—many of them former staffers or Congresspersons—in Washington and dished out millions to elected officials of both parties. Their goal: Make sure nothing in the legislation limited the incomes of private insurers, pharmaceutical companies, doctors, or hospitals. The finance lobby was not far behind. Its goal: Make sure no regulatory reforms hurt the ability of banks and investment houses to make lots of money.

Critics denounce the influence of “big money” on politics, but in a democracy, there is nothing to stop it. To curb such influence would require limiting group inputs to the political process. Who would decide which groups should have how much influence?

The theory here argues that on your own, even in the finest democracy, you can do little. The solution: Form a group of like-minded individuals. After hard work organizing, fund-raising, and lobbying, you can start having an impact. In this view—a pluralist view (see Chapter 6)—the crux of politics is groups. It is a somewhat naïve view, as it pays no attention to the very unequal resources of various groups. Federal lobbying now runs at some $3.5 billion a year. Rich industries have major influence, average citizens little or none. Interest-group activity is especially strong in the pluralistic United States but is found everywhere, even in dictatorships, where groups quietly try to win the favor of the dictator.

WHAT IS AN INTEREST GROUP?

The term interest group (see page 106) covers just about any collection of people trying to influence government. Some interest groups are transient, others permanent. Some focus on influencing a particular policy, others on broad changes. Some work through the executive or administrative agencies, others through the

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Can democracy exist without interest groups?
2. Are all citizens equal in organizing interest groups?
3. How does government create interest groups?
4. Are interest groups and their money too powerful?
5. What are PACs, 527s, and “soft money”?
6. Why are the French anti-pluralist?
7. Which is more effective: lobbying legislators or lobbying executives?
8. Can interest groups bypass democracy?
judicial or legislative sectors, and still others through public opinion. But all are non–publicly accountable organizations that attempt to promote shared private interests by influencing public policy outcomes.

Who Belongs to Interest Groups?
Every advanced society is pluralistic, with many industrial, cultural, economic, educational, ethnic, and religious groups. Divergent interests lead almost automatically to group formation. In a pluralist democracy, a multiplicity of interest groups push their own claims and viewpoints, creating a balance of opposing interests that, in theory, prevents any one group from dominating the political system. In this optimistic view, government policy is the outcome of competition among many groups, which represent the varied interests of the people.

Interest groups, however, overrepresent the better-off and businesses. Because some groups are rich and well-connected, the democratic playing field is not level. Elite theorists argue that if group theory really operated, the poor would organize

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY CONCEPTS</th>
<th>HOW INTEREST GROUPS DIFFER FROM POLITICAL PARTIES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interest groups are a bit like political parties. Both try to influence public policy, but interest groups do it outside the electoral process and are not responsible to the public. A party must win elections. Interest groups may influence the nomination of candidates who are sympathetic to their cause, but the candidates run under the party banner—not the interest group banner.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Goals</strong></td>
<td>Parties seek power though elections. Interest groups usually focus on specific programs and issues and are rarely represented in the formal structure of government. Instead, they try to influence legislators and executives. They often seek the favor of all political parties. Economic groups want the support of both the Republicans and the Democrats. Some interest groups favor one party. The National Rifle Association, for example, strongly supports Republican candidates.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of Memberships</strong></td>
<td>Political parties seek broad support to win elections and draw many interests into their ranks. Even the Republican Party includes people in all income brackets. The Democratic Party, billing itself as the party of the common person, has many wealthy supporters, including those from big finance. Interest groups have a narrower membership. Labor unionists share similar living and working conditions and goals. Idealistic interest groups draw those aiming at religious, environmental, or gender goals. Some groups link disparate groups, as when Roman Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants unite to oppose abortion.</td>
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For several reasons, including the length of a ballot, there are rarely more than a dozen or so political parties. But there is no limit on interest groups, and some countries, such as the United States, foster their growth. As Tocqueville observed in the 1830s, “In no country of the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objects than in America.” Tocqueville is still accurate. Open a Washington, DC, phone book to “National…” and count the hundreds of national associations, federations, and committees. Washington’s prosperity is based on its attraction as a headquarters for more than 20,000 interest groups.
What Is an Interest Group?

Groups to get a bigger piece of the economic pie. But the poor, who have less education, are slow in forming groups to promote their interests. Better-off and better-educated people are more likely to participate in politics, and this includes organizing and running interest groups. In this area, too, the poor get shortchanged.

With few organizations to represent their interests, the lower classes may act explosively rather than as groups working within the political system. Their grievances can burst out, as in the 1789 storming of the Bastille at the start of the French Revolution. In the 1960s, U.S. inner-city riots reflected the anger that race-related poverty produced among many African Americans. The ghetto riots, while publicizing grievances, did little to challenge the power of business, labor unions, or other groups that keep things as they are. Not all sectors of society can effectively form and use interest groups.

Interest Groups and Government

Interest groups try to influence government. But what if there is not much government? In Afghanistan, near-anarchy prevails. The government’s writ barely extends outside the capital, Kabul. There are plenty of groups: tribes, clans, warlords, opium growers, and Taliban fighters. In Mexico, drug-related crime is a major economic activity and leads to armed interest groups. The weak states of which we spoke in Chapter 4 are characterized by the interpenetration of crime and politics. Not all “interest group” activity is good or peaceful; it depends on the groups’ willingness to operate within the law, which in turn requires strong states.

Interest groups presuppose an existing government that is worth trying to influence. Government, in fact, virtually calls many interest groups into life, for

### KEY CONCEPTS

**How Government Creates Interest Groups**

In 1938, as part of FDR’s program to get out of the Depression, Congress created the Federal National Mortgage Association—soon known as “Fannie Mae”—to underwrite home loans and thus encourage home purchases and construction. In 1968, Congress made Fannie Mae private, turning it into a regular corporation that makes money by buying banks’ mortgages, repackaging them, and selling them like bonds. To ensure competition in this important “secondary mortgage market,” Congress in 1970 created the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (“Freddie Mac”), which is also private and does the same things as Fannie Mae.

Platoons of Fannie and Freddie lobbyists made sure Congress kept supporting the two mortgage giants. Wits described Fannie and Freddie as basically lobbying operations with mortgage side businesses. When the U.S. housing market turned sour in 2008, Congress quickly authorized unlimited taxpayer dollars to back up Fannie and Freddie, which were deemed “too big to fail.” Many criticized the bailout that let Fannie and Freddie keep profits private but passed risks on to taxpayers.

This circular flow is common: Congress creates a program, the program creates an interest group, and then the interest group works on Congress to keep supporting it. U.S. farm subsidies, originally to help struggling farmers during the Depression, now cost billions a year, much of it to corporate “agribusiness,” and few try to curb it. Programs, once set up, are hard to terminate due to interest group influence.
they are intimately associated with government programs. There are farm lobbies because there are farm programs, education lobbies because there are education programs, and veterans’ lobbies because the government goes to war.

Once government is funding something, the groups that benefit develop constituencies with a strong pecuniary interest in continuing the programs. As government has become bigger and sponsored more programs, interest groups have proliferated. By now, virtually every branch and subdivision of the U.S. government has one or more interest groups watching over its shoulder and demanding more grants, a change in regulations, or their own agency. The Departments of Education and Energy were created under these circumstances, and Ronald Reagan vowed to abolish them. He was unable to do so: The interests associated with them—in part created by them—were too powerful.

Sometimes interest groups participate in government legislation and implementation. In Britain, “interested members” of Parliament are those who openly represent industries or labor unions. This is not frowned on and is considered quite normal. (Quietly selling government influence to British interest groups, however, is considered “sleaze” and has produced scandals.) In Sweden, interest groups are especially large and powerful. Swedish “royal commissions,” which initiate most new legislation, are composed of legislators, government officials, and interest-group representatives. After a proposal has been drafted, it is circulated for comments to all relevant interest groups. Some Swedish benefits for farmers and workers are administered by their respective farm organizations and labor unions. Some call this corporatism, meaning interest groups taking on government functions. Top representatives of business, labor, and the cabinet meet regularly in Sweden to decide a great deal of public policy. Critics charge that this too-cozy relationship bypasses parliamentary democracy altogether.

**KEY CONCEPTS**

**COUNTERVAILING POWER**

One of the theories of pluralists is that no interest group can monopolize power because there are always one or more groups working against it. The theory of countervailing power argues that business associations are offset by labor unions, the Jewish lobby by the Muslim lobby, industries fearful of imports by industries eager to export, and drug companies by retiree associations. Such balances keep us free and democratic, argue pluralists.

But do things always balance? As in most of the world, U.S. unions have been declining in membership and are now much weaker than business associations. Producers of electric power and gasoline form powerful lobbies that face no countervailing lobby of 300 million consumers. The battle over healthcare reform was fought by giant insurers, hospital and physician organizations, employers, and drug companies, spending $1.4 million a day in lobbying. The 2010 bill contained no provision for public insurance options—only private—because the insurance industry blocked them. Consumers of health care, on the other hand, are essentially unrepresented. The theory of countervailing power does not mean that it actually exists.
Bureaucrats as an Interest Group

Government and interest groups are related in another important but sometimes overlooked way: Bureaucracies have become big and powerful interest groups. Civil servants are not merely passive implementers of laws; they also have input in the making and application of those laws. Much legislation originates in specialized agencies. Many of the data and witnesses before legislative committees are from the executive departments and agencies. In Japan, the powerful bureaucrats of the finance and trade (METI) ministries routinely tell the Diet what to legislate.

Bureaucracies develop interests of their own. They see their tasks as terribly important and demand bigger budgets and more employees every year. When was the last time a civil servant recommended abolishing his or her agency or bureau? It was earlier proposed that interest groups are offshoots of society and the economy. That is only partly true, for they are also offshoots of government. Government
and interest groups, to paraphrase Thomas Hobbes, were born twins. The more government, the more interest groups.

To say that every political system has interest groups says little, for interest groups in different systems operate quite differently. One key determinant in the way interest groups operate is the government. Here we can refine our definition of pluralism discussed in Chapter 6. Pluralism is determined not by the mere existence of groups, each trying to influence government, but by the degree to which government permits or encourages the open interplay of groups. Pluralism has a normative component, an “ought” or a “should.”

**EFFECTIVE INTEREST GROUPS**

**Political Culture**

Interest groups flourish in pluralistic societies that have traditions of local self-governance and of forming associations. Where this is weak (see box on France below), interest groups have tough going. Americans, Britons, and Swedes are more likely to participate in voluntary associations than French, Italians, and Mexicans. The more educated are more likely to belong to an interest group. Not all groups are political, but even nonpolitical groups, by discussion among members, have some political influence. Members of a bicycle club become involved in politics when they support rails-to-trails bicycle paths. In societies where many join groups, people have a greater sense of political competence and efficacy. Some worry that the U.S. tendency to form groups has declined (see Chapter 7).

**The Rise of Big Money**

Money is probably the single most important factor in interest group success. With enough money, interests hardly need a group. Money is especially important for

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**COMPARING ■ FRENCH ANTIPLURALISM**

The United States and Britain are highly pluralistic, for interest group activity is acceptable and desirable, and lobbying is normal for a healthy democracy. In France, on the other hand, interest group activity, although it does exist, is frowned on and considered dirty. France is heir to centuries of centralized and paternalistic government. The French are used to Paris ministries setting national goals and supervising much of the economy.

Further, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau still has a hold on the French mind. Rousseau argued that there must be no “particular wills” to muddy and distort the “general will,” that which the whole community wants. Rousseau presumed there was such a thing as a general will, something pluralists deny. Accordingly, interest groups are seen as trying to pervert the good of the whole community. French bureaucratic elites pay little attention to interest groups, considering them “unobjective.” French interest groups operate in a more constrained atmosphere than their American or British counterparts.
Effective Interest Groups

elections, and groups help candidates who favor their causes. Most democracies have recognized the danger in too close a connection between interests and candidates, the danger that we will have the “best Congress money can buy,” but in 2009 the U.S. Supreme Court lifted limits on direct corporate giving. It is but a very short step from influence-buying to corruption. U.S. peanut, sugar, corn, and cotton growers give generously to candidates and get federal subsidies. The healthcare and financial industries are the biggest campaign contributors—to both parties—and receive ample consideration. Said California political boss Jesse Unruh: “Money is the mother’s milk of politics.”

Many countries have tried reforms. Japanese reformers tried to break “money politics,” the extreme dependence of politicians on interest groups—business conglomerates, banks, farmers, even gangsters—but have not yet succeeded. Germany and Sweden provide for almost complete public financing of the major parties in national elections. Spain, which rejoined the democracies only in 1977, subsidizes parties after the election according to how many votes they received and parliamentary seats they won. Some countries—Britain, France, and Germany, among others—try to limit campaign spending.

The United States has been reluctant to go to public financing of campaigns for several reasons. First, there is the strong emphasis on freedom. The U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted the First Amendment to include dollars as a form of free speech. When a person gives money to a candidate or cause, those are political statements. Second, U.S. campaigns are much longer and more expensive than in other democracies, the result of our weak, decentralized parties and nominating system. In Western Europe, elections can be short and cheap because the parties are already in place with their candidates and platforms. And third, given these two previous conditions, American legislators have not been able to find a formula for public financing that really works in the manner intended. Some efforts turn out to have negative unforeseen consequences.

Some individuals and political action committees contribute to parties and interest groups not directly working for a candidate’s election campaign. This soft money funds groups that produce “issue ads” aimed against the other side without mentioning their own candidate’s name, a big loophole in federal campaign laws. Soft money thus contributes to the trend toward negative advertising in political campaigns. In 2004, for example, a special “Swift-boat committee” that was clearly Republican ran TV ads accusing John Kerry of exaggerating his war heroism. In 2008, MoveOn.org (a “527,” see next page), clearly Democratic, spent without limit on anti-Republican ads.

In 2002, after a hard struggle, the McCain-Feingold Campaign Reform Act passed. In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled it constitutional. Many cheered, but by 2004 it was irrelevant, skirted in three ways. First, limits are not very limiting; individuals may give

corruption Use of public office for private gain.
public financing Using tax dollars to fund something, such as election-campaign expenses.
unforeseen consequence Bad or counterproductive result when laws or policies do not work as expected.
political action committee (PAC) U.S. interest group set up specifically to contribute money to election campaigns.
soft money Campaign contributions to parties and issue groups so as to skirt federal limits on contributions to candidates.
Chapter 10 Interest Groups

up to $2,000 directly to a presidential candidate, $25,000 to a national party, and much more to state and local parties and candidates. Second, many presidential hopefuls simply walked away from public campaign financing, which imposed spending ceilings, in favor of funds they raised on their own (now often gathered online), which have no limit. Barack Obama did this. Third, well-funded groups with no formal ties to candidates—called “527 committees” after a section of the tax code—spent prodigiously on “issues” that clearly favored one side; 527s operate under looser rules than PACs.

It is now apparent that parties and candidates will work around whatever reforms or laws attempt to curb big money in politics. In 1907, Teddy Roosevelt, reacting to the big money politics of his predecessor McKinley, supported the first reform, the Tillman Act, prohibiting corporations from giving funds. It looked good but was ineffective and has now been ruled unconstitutional. The Supreme Court’s decision seems to rule that any statutory limits on campaign contributions are restrictions on free speech.

Critics fear that money politics is out of control. Defenders say this is just the workings of pluralist democracy, and the amounts are peanuts compared with the overall U.S. economy. Can or should anything be done about interest groups and money? Some suggest we go to a European-type system in which parties are better organized and campaigns are short and relatively cheap. But that is simply not the U.S. nominating and electoral system, which is complex and long. And Europe’s interest groups still give plenty (sometimes under the table) to their favored candidates.

Public financing of all candidates—presidential nominees who gain at least 5 percent of the national vote are already entitled to federal financing—would be terribly expensive. Many U.S. taxpayers do not check off the option on their tax returns to contribute a few dollars to presidential campaigns, even though it costs them nothing. For the foreseeable future, it will not be possible to break the tie between big money and candidates in the United States.

The Rise of Single-Issue Groups

Perhaps the second-greatest factor in the influence of interest groups (after money) is the intensity of the issue involved. The right issue can mobilize millions, give the group cohesion and commitment, and boost donations. There have always been American interest groups pursuing one or another idealistic objective, but since the 1970s the rise of single-issue groups has changed U.S. politics. Typically, interest groups have several things to say about issues, for their interests encompass several programs and departments. Organized labor tries to persuade government on questions of Social Security, medical insurance, education, imports and tariffs, and the way unemployment statistics are calculated. The AFL-CIO has a long-term, across-the-board interest in Washington. The same can be said for many business groups, such as the NAM.

But to the single-issue groups, only one issue matters, and it matters intensely. Typically, their issues are moral—and therefore hard to compromise—rather than

**single-issue group** Interest association devoted to one cause only.

**AFL-CIO** American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, the largest U.S. union federation.

**NAM** National Association of Manufacturers, a major federation of U.S. industrial executives.
Effective Interest Groups

material. The most prominent of them is the right to life, or antiabortion, movement. In 1973, the Supreme Court ruled that states could not arbitrarily restrict a woman’s right to an abortion. Many Roman Catholics and Protestant fundamentalists were shocked, for they believe that human life begins at the moment of conception and that aborting a fetus is therefore murder. “Pro-life” people would like to amend the Constitution to outlaw abortion. Opposing them are “pro-choice” forces, many linked to the women’s movement. Feminists argue that abortion is a matter for the individual woman to decide and no one else; the right to choose gives women control over their lives and is part of their liberation from second-class status.

The antiabortionists make life miserable for many legislators. They care about nothing else—where officials stand on taxes, jobs, defense, and so on. They want to know where they stand on abortion, and a compromise middle ground—the refuge of many politicians faced with controversial issues—is not good enough. How can you be a “moderate” on abortion? Some elections turn on the abortion issue. Meanwhile, the pro-choice forces organize and grow militant to offset the pro-life forces. The 2005 Terri Schiavo case—whether to pull the plug on a comatose woman—also rallied pro-lifers.

Other single-issue causes appear, such as prayer in public school and same-sex marriage. Taken together, these two and the abortion question are sometimes referred to as the “morality issue.” Gun control grew into a major issue, fanned by the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. The powerful National Rifle Association (NRA) opposes such groups as Handgun Control. None of these issues makes elected representatives any happier. They like to be judged on a wide range of positions they have taken, not on one narrow issue on which it is hard to compromise.

Size and Membership

Their size and the intensity of their members give groups clout. The biggest and fastest-growing U.S. interest group is AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons), with more than 40 million members (one American in eight), many of them educated, forceful, and strongly committed to preserving and enhancing Social Security and Medicare. Both parties proclaim that they want to preserve the two vast programs. When AARP speaks, Congress trembles.

Size alone, however, is not necessarily the most important element in interest group strength. Money and intensity often offset size. The well-funded American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), supported by many evangelical Christians, keeps Congress pro-Israel. The NRA fights gun control laws, mostly successfully. These three—AARP, AIPAC, and the NRA—are reckoned as Washington’s most influential lobbies. All things being equal, a large group has more clout than a small one—but things are never equal.

The socioeconomic status of members gives groups clout. Better-off, well-educated people with influence in their professions and communities can form
groups that get more respect. The socioeconomic status of doctors, organized as the American Medical Association (AMA), helps them prevail in Washington. As Japanese Americans climbed educationally and professionally, their Japanese American Citizens’ League (JACL) started having an impact and won apologies for the unconstitutional internment in World War II; JACL then worked on getting compensation. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), on the other hand, speaks for millions but has relatively little influence. Disadvantaged groups with the biggest grievances are among the least likely to be listened to.

Access

Money, issue, and size may not count for much unless people in government are willing to listen. The careful cultivation of members of Congress and civil servants over the years makes sure doors are open. When a group has established a stable and receptive relationship with a branch of government, it is said to enjoy, in the words of Joseph LaPalombara, structured access. Greek-American members of Congress are, quite naturally, receptive to Greek arguments on questions concerning Turkey, Macedonia, and Cyprus. Michigan legislators likewise heed the complaints of the automobile industry. Arab Americans complain bitterly that Jews enjoy too much access on Capitol Hill and organize their own groups to gain access. There is nothing wrong with access as such; it is part and parcel of a working democracy.

But what happens when groups are shut out and have no access? Pluralists think this cannot happen in a democracy, but it does. Black and Native American militants argued that no one was listening to them or taking their demands seriously. Only violence in urban ghettos and on Indian reservations got Washington to listen. When the wealthy and powerful have a great deal of access, the poor and unorganized may have none. The consequences sometimes lead to violence.

COMPARING ■ HOW POWERFUL ARE U.S. UNIONS?

Labor unions in the United States are not very powerful, especially in comparative perspective. Since the 1950s, the percentage of American workers in labor unions has dropped by more than two-thirds. The percentages of the workforce that were unionized around 2006 are shown in the right column.

U.S. unions seem powerful because they attract much attention when they strike at major firms, but their biggest numbers are actually among government employees, including schoolteachers, who are often prohibited from striking. Business in the United States has far more clout than unions. U.S. unions are now striving for new members to get back some of their former strength.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>8%</td>
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Strategies of Interest Groups

Approaching Lawmakers  Lobbying receives the most attention. The campaign contributions and favors to legislators given by corporations convince many that lobbyists buy Congress. Indeed, any major interest threatened by new laws spares no expense to make sure the laws are not passed, and they are usually successful. Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), a critic of big money, said sadly, “Money buys access.” He referred to a 2003 energy bill as “no lobbyist left behind.” Big tobacco, which is especially generous to incumbent Republican candidates, routinely blocks or dilutes antismoking legislation. One favor big companies provide cooperative congresspersons: trips in the corporate jet. The average lobbying group, however, has little money to give, so most see themselves as providers of information.

Approaching the Administration  Depending on the issue, the executive branch may be a better interest-group target. The interest group may not need or want a new law, merely favorable interpretation of existing rules and regulations. For this, they turn to administrators. Antipollution groups, for instance, seek tighter definitions of clean air; industry groups seek looser definitions. Interest groups concentrate on the department that specializes in their area. Farm groups deal with the Department of Agriculture, public service companies with the Federal Power Commission, and so forth. As a rule, each department pays heed to the demands and arguments of groups in its area. In fact, many government bureaucracies are “captured” or “colonized” by the groups they deal with. The flow goes the other way, too. Some 200 former senators and congress members along with many former top administration officials stay in Washington—with offices on famous K Street—as lobbyists, billing clients $500 an hour.

  Interest groups employ many of the same tactics on executive departments that they use on legislators, including personal contacts, research, and public relations. Some provide money; in most of the world, corruption of public officials is the norm. The U.S. federal bureaucracy is one of the least corrupt in the world—state and local is something else. Federal officials caught on the take are usually political appointees and not career civil servants. Interest groups really make their influence felt in nominations to top-level government posts, including cabinet secretaries, to get officials who serve their interests.

Approaching the Judiciary  Interest groups may also use the courts, especially in the United States, for the U.S. judicial system has far more power than most judiciaries, which are merely part of the executive branch. In countries where rule of law is strong, the courts become an arena of interest group contention, as in Germany, where groups have taken cases on abortion and worker rights before the Federal Constitutional Court.

  Every year, U.S. state and federal courts hear cases filed or supported by such interest groups as the American Civil Liberties Union and Sierra Club. In recent years, the U.S. Supreme Court has dealt with several social issues brought to it by interest groups, including women’s rights, the death penalty, guns, and school
prayer. Interest groups use two judicial methods to pursue their goals. First, they may initiate suits directly on behalf of a group or class of people whose interests they represent (such suits are commonly referred to as class actions). The second is for the interest group to file a “friend of the court” brief (amicus curiae) in support of a person whose cause they share.

Aware of the importance of the U.S. judicial system, especially of the Supreme Court, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) focused much of its fight against racial segregation on the courts. It paid off. The legal staff of the NAACP, whose chief attorney was Thurgood Marshall (later a U.S. Supreme Court justice), successfully challenged the constitutionality of all state laws requiring racial segregation in public schools in the famous Brown decision of 1954. Then, the NAACP went on to challenge the legality of state laws on segregation in public transportation, restaurants, lodging, and other areas. The vast changes in U.S. civil rights happened first in the courts, not through legislation, because Congress would not tackle the issue—Southerners blocked it—until the mid-1960s. The Supreme Court led; Congress followed.

**Appeals to the Public** Organized interests often take their case to the public with peaceful—or not so peaceful—appeals. Even powerful interest groups realize the importance of their public image, and many invest in public relations campaigns to explain how they contribute to the general welfare and why their interests are good for the country. For example, railroads used television to explain their case for “fair” government policies so they could stay alive and compete with trucking. The gasoline lobby explained why environmental restrictions work against building new refineries.

Some interest groups maintain a low profile by promoting their objectives without advertising themselves. Such groups may plant news stories that promote their cause and quietly work against the publication of stories detrimental to them. The Tobacco Institute, for example, discreetly funds research that casts doubt on findings that smoking is bad for your health. The American Petroleum Institute seeks no news coverage but has its officers quoted as unbiased experts above the political fray.

**Demonstrations** Certain organizations, such as the American Cancer Society and the Heart Fund, may get free advertising space and time, but most interest groups do not, and many cannot afford to purchase such publicity. Such a disadvantaged group may hold demonstrations to publicize its cause. Mahatma Gandhi used this tactic to get the British to leave India. Gandhi learned about nonviolent protest from an influential essay on “civil disobedience” by American Henry David Thoreau, who protested the war with Mexico in 1846–1848. Thoreau’s idea was also adopted by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. to push for African American civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s.

Some protesters against nuclear plants, facing the financial and political resources of power companies, felt that marching, picketing, and blocking plant
entrances were their only options. News media coverage of their protests brought them adherents, contributors, and sometimes access in Washington. Their powerful opponents, of course, often prevailed, leading some protesters to become frustrated and bitter.

**Violent Protest** A group that loses faith in conventional political channels may see violent protest as its only alternative. The United States is no stranger to violent protests, which require a psychological buildup nurtured by poverty, discrimination, frustration, and a sense of personal or social injustice. An incident may spark pent-up anger, and mob behavior can escalate. Shootings and arrests of African Americans have sparked riots in U.S. cities. Defenders of the rioters claim they are simply opposing the violence they suffer daily at the hands of police, all levels of government, and an economy that keeps them underpaid or unemployed.

Does violent protest work? Perhaps it was no coincidence that the Great Society was passed during a period of U.S. urban riots. The British got out of India and Palestine when violence made the areas impossible to govern. The white government of South Africa started offering reforms only when blacks turned to violence.

**HOW TO . . . CREATE TABLES**

A table is a list of the things you are studying—counties, countries, years, voters, legislators, interest groups—with numerical measures attached to each. Later, you may use some of these as “variables” (see page 148). Measures are whatever is relevant to the case you wish to make—dollars, population, or how many listings in a phone book. You list these things in some order—the biggest, most, or latest. Alphabetical order is often useless. In this chapter, we might list which PACs gave the most money, with the biggest givers first.

To take another example, the relative wealth of countries can be measured in several ways. The most basic is gross domestic product (GDP, see page 33), the first column of numbers, now usually corrected for cost of living (purchasing-power parity, PPP). Dividing that by population (the second column) gives per capita GDP (GDPpc) at PPP, the third column, the best comparison of relative wealth. Note how the table goes from richest to poorest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GDP ($ Billion)</th>
<th>Population (Million)</th>
<th>Per Capita GDP at PPP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>$14,300</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>$47,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>32,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>2,200</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>15,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>14,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>399</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>7,800</td>
<td>1,338</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>3,300</td>
<td>1,166</td>
<td>2,800</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: CIA World Factbook
In certain circumstances, violence works. As black radical H. “Rap” Brown put it, “Violence is as American as cherry pie.” (He is now in prison for murder.)

**INTEREST GROUPS: AN EVALUATION**

Interest groups are part of every democracy, but how well do they serve the needs of citizens? Interest groups help represent a wider range of interests in the legislative process—a good thing. Many smaller organizations, however, have neither the members nor the money to have any input. Unless they are able to form coalitions, they cannot defend their interests from larger, more powerful groups. The mere fact that interest groups articulate demands does not mean the demands will be heeded. Resources are highly unequal among interest groups. Some are rich and powerful and have a lot of influence. Others are ignored.

There is a further problem: What about individuals who are not organized into groups? Who speaks for them? Many citizens are not members or beneficiaries of interest groups. They vote for elected leaders, but the leaders pay more attention to group demands than to ordinary voters. If legislators and executives are attuned to interest groups, who is considering the interests of the whole country? At times, it seems as if no one is. Then we may begin to appreciate Rousseau’s emphasis on the “general will” over and above the “particular wills” that make up society (see page 182).

For this reason, the “citizens’ lobby” Common Cause was formed in 1970. Supported by donations, it won public funding of presidential campaigns, an end to the congressional seniority system, and disclosure of lobbying activities. In a similar vein, Ralph Nader set up several public interest lobbies on law, nuclear energy, tax reform, and medical care. Although groups such as these have done much good work, they raise an interesting question: Can a society as big and complex as America’s possibly be represented as a whole, or is it inherently a mosaic of groups with no common voice?

Another problem is whether interest groups really speak for all their members or represent the views of a small but vocal minority. Most interest group leaders, like leaders of political parties, have stronger views than followers. Leaders are often red-hot, ordinary members lukewarm.

**Skewing Policy**

Interest group input may skew policy. The finance industry, for example, is a major interest group that contributes heavily to both parties and lobbies intensively. (Barack Obama got nearly $15 million from Wall Street and $19.4 million from health-related groups during his 2008 campaign. McCain got lesser amounts.) Since Reagan, Congress has generally delivered whatever the finance industry specified, and regulations and safeguards were rolled back so much of U.S. finance was little supervised. It was supposed to be “self-policing.” One result was the 2006 **subprime crisis** that turned into a world-shaking...
financial crisis in 2008. Lenders had pushed unqualified borrowers to take out home mortgages they could not afford. The dubious loans were packaged and sold off in pieces, like bonds. They were sold as safe investments, but then home foreclosures shot up, and billions of dollars were lost. Frantically, Washington pumped taxpayer money into banks and into Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac (see page 180), as their collapse threatened a new Depression.

The subsequent bailout of major financial institutions created a scandal, but it was nothing new; indeed, there is about one every decade. In the 1980s, savings and loans got Congress to roll back restrictions so they could make foolish and sometimes crooked loans. Then the whole thing collapsed, and the federal government had to step in. In 2001, the mighty Enron, which manipulated electricity prices, collapsed amid massive, hidden debts. Enron executives walked away with more than $1 billion while employees and investors lost everything. Enron had also given $5.9 million in political contributions, mostly to Republicans, to Bush 43, to 71 senators, and to 19 of the 23 members of the House energy committee. Several Enron executives were convicted, and the blue-chip accounting firm of Arthur Andersen (also a major Bush contributor) was found to have rigged audits and was forced to close. Congress, by deregulating reasonable safeguards, bears much responsibility.

CLASSIC WORKS

American economist Mancur Olson’s 1965 Logic of Collective Action is widely accepted and cited. He noted that small and well-organized groups, especially with money, often override the broader public interest. The reason: The former have much to gain from favorable but narrow laws and rulings, so they lobby intensely. The latter see nothing to gain, are not organized or intense, and lobby little. The public does not care if the price of shoelaces jumps up, but shoelace manufacturers do. The few trump the many.

Related to this is Olson’s “free-rider syndrome”: Why buy a ticket when you can ride for free? People will not invest their time and money in a cause when they get the same results anyway. Why pay union dues when you are already under a union contract? Why should Europeans contribute much to NATO when the Americans provide them with free security?

Olson warned in his 1982 The Rise and Decline of Nations against what happens when interest groups become too strong: They choke off change and growth, leading to national stagnation. Politicians, responding to one or more powerful interests, do not consider the wider public good. A prime example is Britain, which, with highly organized interests and politicians listening closely to those interests, went into economic decline until Margaret Thatcher blasted policy loose from both unions and owners.

Germany and Japan, with their organized interests destroyed in World War II, were free for spectacular growth in the decades after the war. By the late twentieth century, however, both were so gunked up with labor, industry, and farming associations that their growth slowed to a trickle. Japan has an “iron triangle” of economic interest groups, politicians, and bureaucrats that defies reform. Some followers of Olson fear that such “sclerosis” is the fate of all countries. Has the United States fallen victim to overstrong interests, or has it been able to periodically shake loose from them?
Such scandals are found worldwide; most trace back to laws that interest groups set up to favor themselves.

**Stalemating Political Power**

Interest groups compete with one another and in so doing limit the influence that any group can have on the legislature or a government agency. Interest groups may stalemate government action. Certain issues are “hot potatoes” because government action either way angers one group or another. Typically, such issues are ardently supported and vehemently opposed by competing groups with enough voting power and influence to drive politicians to equivocation. Government may get stuck, trapped between powerful interests and unable to move on important problems. Italy has been called a “stalemate society” for this reason.

In two-party systems, especially, issues tend to be muted by political candidates who try to appeal to as broad a segment of the voting public as possible. The result is a gap between the narrow interest of the individual voter and the general promises of an electoral campaign—a gap that interest groups attempt to fill by pressing for firm political actions on certain issues. But how well do interest groups serve the needs of the average citizen? The small businessperson, the uninformed citizen, and minority groups with little money tend to get lost in the push and pull of larger interests and government. The successful interest groups, too, tend to be dominated by a vocal minority of well-educated, middle- and upper-class political activists. In some cases, interest groups have become so effective that they overshadow parties and paralyze policymaking with their conflicting demands. The precise balance between the good of all and the good of particular groups has not yet been found.
KEY TERMS

- AFL-CIO (p. 184)
- amicus curiae (p. 188)
- class action (p. 188)
- corporatism (p. 180)
- corruption (p. 183)
- Diet (p. 181)
- lobbying (p. 187)
- METI (p. 181)
- NAM (p. 184)
- political action committee (p. 183)
- public financing (p. 183)
- scandal (p. 191)
- single-issue group (p. 184)
- socioeconomic status (p. 185)
- soft money (p. 183)
- structured access (p. 186)
- subprime (p. 190)
- unforeseen consequence (p. 183)

FURTHER REFERENCE