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Interest-Group Participation in American Democracy

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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Interest Groups and Democratic Politics
In February 1994, the House Education Committee was hard at work on an extension of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, an important part of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society legislation. A subcommittee accepted an amendment by George Miller (D-CA) that would require school districts to have their teachers officially certified in subjects they teach. Districts that failed to meet this requirement would lose some of their federal education grants. This federal mandate would serve the public interest by boosting teacher qualifications, but there were political considerations as well. Teachers’ unions favor such requirements, because raising teacher qualifications lowers competition for teaching positions from skilled individuals in other areas who are seeking a career change. Schools of education also favor such requirements, which increase the demand for their certification programs. Thus for reasons of both public and private interest, public education constituencies supported the Miller proposal.

A home school advocate who had been following these obscure committee proceedings contacted Richard Armey (R-TX) to inquire whether the proposed mandate would affect home school teachers. Unbeknownst to many people, including most members of Congress at the time, between 500,000 and 1 million American children were being educated at home, mostly by conservative Christian parents (the number has since continued to grow steadily). Uncertain about the impact of the proposal, Armey sought the advice of the Home School Legal Defense Association. After consulting with its lawyers, the association decided that given the tendency of the courts to interpret legislative mandates broadly, there indeed was a danger that the proposed mandate might require formal certification of parents educating their children at home. The reaction was fierce and immediate. In a letter to Congress that illustrates the fevered pitch of political rhetoric today, the Home School Legal Defense Association charged that the House proposal was “the equivalent of a nuclear attack upon the home schooling community.” Employing modern communications technologies, the interest group set out to mobilize the potential constituency of home schoolers and their ideological sympathizers. Electronic communications carried the warning to every corner of the United States, and in a mat-
ter of days, the home school constituency generated more than half a million communications to Congress, tying up Capitol Hill switchboards and overwhelming fax machines. A few days later, a second wave of electronic thunder rolled across Capitol Hill after the home school coalition convinced groups representing private schools that they, too, were endangered by the proposed mandate.

In the midst of this constituency explosion, many members of Congress—blithely unaware of what was going on in one of its 275 committees and subcommittees—had gone home for the President’s Day recess. Some of them were verbally ambushed at town meetings by constituents incensed by what they thought Congress was proposing to do to home schools. And when they tried to reach their offices to find out what was going on, they found the lines jammed! Armey could not get through from Texas, and other members had to call staff at their homes to learn the nature of the problem.

In the face of such an outcry, the House sounded a full retreat. Before galleries packed with home school advocates, the committee offered a floor amendment to kill the Miller provision and add statutory language specifically exempting home schools from the legislation’s scope. This passed 424 to 1; only Representative Miller voted for his provision. Not completely satisfied, Armey introduced a further amendment declaring that the legislation did not “permit, allow, encourage or authorize any federal control over any aspect of any private, religious or home school.” Just to be on the safe side, the Democratic-controlled House passed this amendment too, 374 to 53.

**Making the Connection**

This episode graphically illustrates several features of modern American democracy. First, although most citizens do not participate actively in politics as individuals, many are associated with groups that are very active in politics. Second, mobilizing citizens who ordinarily are inactive can be a highly effective way to exert political influence. Third, interest groups have adopted state-of-the-art technologies to supplement or even replace the more traditional strategies of group influence (lobbying office holders in Washington and working to elect sympathetic candidates). Fourth, elected officials are highly responsive to organized and aroused interests.

In this chapter we examine interest groups and how they influence government. Specifically, we consider these questions:

- What kinds of interest groups are there and how are they organized to communicate their views?
- What problems do interest groups face in mobilizing their members and how do they overcome these obstacles?
- How do interest groups influence government?
- How influential are interest groups?
- Do interest groups contribute to or detract from democratic government?

**Interest Groups in the United States**

As we saw in Chapter 6, with the exception of voting, only small minorities of Americans participate directly in politics. But large majorities participate indirectly by joining or supporting interest groups—organizations or associations of people with common interests that participate in politics on behalf of their members. Although only half the adult population votes in presidential elections, more than three-quarters of Americans belong to at least one group; on average they belong to two; and they make financial contributions to four.² Compared to citizens of other nations, Americans are joiners (see the accompanying International Comparison).

Of course, not all the groups with which people are associated are political groups—many are social clubs, charities, service organizations, church groups, and so
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— but there are literally thousands of groups that do engage in politics, and even seemingly nonpolitical groups often engage in political activity. For example, parent–teacher organizations often are active in school politics; neighborhood associations lobby about traffic, crime, and zoning policies; and even hobby or recreation groups mobilize when they perceive threats to their interests—witness the National Rifle Association!

Growth and Development of Groups

Americans have a long-standing reputation for forming groups. In his classic book Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville, the nineteenth-century French visitor to the United States, noted that

Americans . . . are forever forming associations. They are not only commercial and industrial associations . . . but others of a thousand other types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute. . . . [A]t the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an association.3

Moreover, if James Madison is to be believed, Americans—indeed, all people—come by their associative tendencies naturally. In his famous essay on factions ("Federalist 10") Madison writes,

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man . . . [and] the most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property.
Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors and those who are debtors. . . . A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views.

However natural and long-standing the American propensity to form interest groups, there is no doubt that there are more organized groups today than ever before. In fact, one study found that 40 percent of the associations with Washington offices were formed after 1960. Group formation in the United States has not been a steady, gradual process; rather, it has occurred in several waves, with the greatest wave of group formation in American history occurring in the 1960s and 1970s.

Before the Civil War, there were few national organizations in America. Life in general was local. The social organization of the United States was one of "island communities" not connected to each other by social and economic links. There was no "national" economy; instead, regions produced and consumed much of what they used themselves. As the railroads connected the country after the Civil War, a national economy developed, and national associations were not far behind. The first two decades after the war saw the birth of national agricultural associations like the Grange and of trade unions like the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor.

Another major wave of group organization occurred during the Progressive era, roughly 1890 to 1917. Many of today's most broad-based associations date from that era: the Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the American Farm Bureau Federation, for example. The members of these associations have common economic interests, but other associations founded during the Progressive era had other goals. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed as part of an effort to promote equality for black Americans, and the National Audubon Society was formed to promote conservation.

The 1960–1980 wave of group formation was by far the largest and the most heterogeneous. Thousands of additional economic groups formed, but these tended to be more narrowly based than earlier ones: The American Soybean Association, the National Corn Growers Association, the Rocky Mountain Llama and Alpaca Association, and numerous other specialized organizations joined the more general agricultural associations. Similarly, in the commercial and manufacturing sectors, numerous specialized groups joined the older, more broad-based groups.

Numerous nonprofit groups formed as well, many representing people who work in the public sector. What are sometimes called "government interest groups" proliferated as older national associations of mayors, governors, teachers, and social workers were joined by newer, more specialized associations such as the National Association of State and Provincial Lotteries, the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators, and the U.S. Police Canine Association. Similarly, nongovernmental nonprofit groups now include all kinds of specialized occupational associations. Examples of particular interest to many readers of this book include the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators and the National Association of Graduate Admissions Professionals.

Innumerable shared-interest groups have formed in recent decades. Some are actively political, working for particular points of view. Liberal groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW, a feminist group) and People for the American Way (a civil liberties group) are deeply involved in politics, as are such conservative groups as the Christian Coalition (which promotes traditional morality) and Operation Rescue (an antiabortion group). Many "citizens" groups, such as Common Cause (a political reform group), Greenpeace (an environmental group), the National Taxpayers' Union (an antitax and antispending group), and numerous other environmental, consumer, and "watchdog" groups, are less than a generation old. A subset of such groups are called single-issue groups because of their narrow focus.
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Well-known examples include pro-choice and pro-life groups, the NRA, and some environmental groups.

Other groups are not primarily political but have a political side. For example, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), established in 1958, has become the largest voluntary association that has ever existed, with upwards of 33 million members—and still growing! AARP is a major player whenever social security or Medicare is on the political agenda. Under the right circumstances almost any group may become involved in politics. Associations representing sport fishers monitor water policy in particular and natural resources policies in general. Associations representing snowmobilers and mountain bikers make themselves heard when government threatens to restrict their use of public lands. Nearly every significant interest or activity in American society has groups that represent it.

Several factors contributed to the explosion of groups and associations during the past generation. First, the expansion of government activity has given people more reason to form groups. Business groups, for instance, may form in reaction to governmental regulation or because they see an opportunity to procure a government subsidy. Second, advances in communications technology have made groups easier to form. Simply learning about the existence of other people with common interests was difficult a generation ago, especially if they were scattered across wide geographic areas. Today, computer databases permit the generation of all kinds of specialized mailing lists, and once they have located each other, people with common interests can communicate easily and cheaply via the Internet. Third, the formation of a group to advance some interest may stimulate the formation of other groups opposed to that interest. The pro-life movement formed at least in part because of the activities of the pro-choice movement. Similarly, the ranching, mining, lumber, and sporting interests that launched the “Sagebrush rebellion” were reacting to the success of the environmental movement. Mobilization of one interest stimulates countermobilization of opposing interests.

The Nature and Variety of “Interest Groups”

Robert Salisbury has called attention to the variety of groups, associations, and organizations included under the term interest groups. Some have elaborate formal organizations with membership dues, journals, meetings, conventions, and so forth; the American Medical Association is a well-known example. Others are little more than an address where sympathizers send contributions; one study found that of 83 public interest groups examined, 30 had no membership. Some, like Common Cause, are “membership groups” composed of numerous private individuals who make voluntary contributions. Others are associations consisting of corporate or institutional representatives who pay regular dues; trade associations and associations of universities are

A “Single-Issue Group”—The National Rifle Association

The NRA was founded shortly after the Civil War to promote marksmanship, and it grew into an organization of hunters, target shooters, and gun collectors. By the mid-twentieth century, the NRA operated firearms and hunter safety programs and trained law enforcement officers. With a presence in every state, it takes the lead in opposing gun control legislation. Its PAC is usually one of the top ten contributors to congressional elections, and it employs some 80 lobbyists. The NRA is one of the best examples of a “single-issue group,” a group focused on one issue to the exclusion of virtually everything else.

- How has the NRA been so successful, despite being such a small percentage of the population?

Protecting a Hobby

Associations representing hobbyists such as mountain bikers and snowmobilers make themselves heard when government threatens to restrict their use of public lands.

- How hard or easy is it to organize a group of mountain bikers to lobby the government?
Chapter 7 Interest-Group Participation in American Democracy

Upon hearing the term interest group, you probably don’t think of a university or city. But American universities and cities are in fact quite active in lobbying government.

Public universities, of course, get budget subsidies from state and local governments, but private universities lobby federal and state governments on matters ranging from student aid to building construction to research funding. Interestingly, a recent study showed that the top ten universities in reported lobbying expenditures were all private. Stanford (number 8) officials claimed that the data are unreliable because 400 of the 475 colleges and universities queried did not file reports, taking advantage of ambiguities and technicalities in the law to deny that their activities amounted to lobbying.

University Lobbying Expenditures (reported to IRS, fiscal year 1997)

1. Boston University $846,993
2. University of Miami $693,289
3. Tufts $494,880
4. Harvard $470,000
5. Columbia $440,000
6. Rochester Institute of Technology $384,263
7. Drexel $366,232
8. Stanford $335,476
9. George Washington $333,211
10. MIT $297,815

Just as we do not ordinarily think of a university as an interest group, we do not usually think of cities and other governmental units as interest groups. But such units spend millions of dollars ($34 million in 1998) in attempts to shape federal programs and gain federal funding. The top ten government spenders on lobbying in 1998 are shown below.

Government Lobbying Expenditures

1. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico $4,000,000
2. Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands $1,300,000
3. City and County of Denver $840,000
4. Los Angeles County $720,000
5. Miami/Dade County $690,000
6. City of Chicago $500,000
7. City of Sacramento $470,000
8. San Diego County $460,000
9. Orange County, CA $459,000
10. Metro Transit Authority of Harris County, TX $420,000

What local or state issues would be most important to your university or community?

Should there be special restrictions on one level of government lobbying another level of government?


Some large corporations maintain their own Washington offices, as do hundreds of state, city, and county governments and even universities. As you can see in the accompanying Democratic Dilemma, institutions, corporations, and governments are not really “groups” in the usual sense, although they certainly are “interests.”

One researcher has estimated that almost 80 percent of the interest groups in existence in the 1980s represented professional or occupational constituencies. For such groups, economic matters are of crucial concern, but these groups are about equally divided between those representing profit-sector constituencies and those representing public and non-profit-sector constituencies, so they do not exert a uniformly conservative influence on government taxing and spending policies. The other 20 percent of American interest groups reflect the activities of citizens with particular interests, including those spawned by what are called social movements: broad-based reform or protest movements that bring new issues to the agenda. The civil rights movement, the environmental movement, the women’s movement, and the religious right are important contemporary examples. We shall have more to say about these later in the chapter.
SECTION SUMMARY

Interest groups are associations of people with common interests. Several periods of growth have produced a wide variety of groups focused on almost every conceivable issue. The expanded role of government, decreased information and organization costs, and even the advent of the Internet have contributed to an “advocacy explosion.” A majority of groups represent occupational or professional interests, but others represent various social, recreational, ideological, and other points of view.

Forming and Maintaining Interest Groups

That so many people belong to so many groups and associations often leads people to overlook the difficulties many groups face. But consider these facts:

There are about 107 million women over the age of 18 in the United States. Polls indicate that more than half have feminist sympathies. But the largest feminist group, NOW, has fewer than 300,000 members.

There are approximately 36 million African Americans in the United States, but the NAACP has only about 500,000 members—including whites.

About 40 million American households have at least one gun, but membership in the NRA is only 2.8 million.

Majorities of Americans consistently support spending more on the environment, but the combined membership of the seven large environmental groups is about 6.5 million (and this double- and triple-counts those who belong to more than one organization).

As these examples suggest, millions of people do not join or support associations whose interests they share. In many cases, groups and associations include 1 percent or less of their potential membership. Thus common interest may be a necessary condition for joining a group, but it is far from a sufficient one.

Why, then, do people join or decline to join groups? The question is important, because the answer bears on how well or how poorly interest groups represent the American citizenry. If some kinds of interests are not fairly represented, politics may be biased, despite the existence of thousands of groups with whom millions of people are affiliated.

Like voting, joining or supporting a group requires some investment of resources; that is, it is a costly activity. Contributing money or paying dues is the most obvious example, but the time required for group activities also can be a significant cost. People who have more resources will find participation easier. Thus it is no surprise that the affluent contribute more than the poor and that two-worker families with small children participate less than those whose family situations allow them more free time. More generally, a large institution or corporation has more resources to contribute than a solitary citizen. But whether rich or poor, one commits resources only if the incentive to do so—the expected benefit—justifies the investment.

Incentives take many forms, and different groups rely on different incentives. James Q. Wilson divides incentives into three categories. The first he calls solidary. Some people join a group for social reasons: They simply wish to associate with particular kinds of people. Activity groups and church groups are examples. Where solidary incentives are dominant, membership in the group is an end in itself. Many groups (probably the majority) are composed of individuals who join for solidary reasons, but most such groups are nonpolitical. Conversely, it is unlikely that people join the National Taxpayers’ Union to enjoy the company of other taxpayers, and people certainly do not send checks to such associations for social purposes!

A second category of incentives is material. Such incentives are economic rather than social: Some people join a group because membership confers tangible benefits.
This is obviously the dominant incentive in economic groups and associations. Microsoft does not belong to various trade associations because its executives like to socialize with other computer executives—they have plenty of other opportunities to do that. Microsoft belongs because the trade associations are seen as a way of protecting and advancing corporate interests. Material incentives also play a role in some political groups. Those who join taxpayers’ associations hope to reduce their taxes. Those who join groups that support government subsidies or services for people like themselves (realtors, the handicapped, the old, farmers) similarly hope to gain material benefits.

Finally, some people join groups for purposive reasons: People are committed to and wish to advance the group’s social and political goals. They want to save the whales, to bring about a liberal or conservative Congress, to end abortion, or to preserve freedom of choice. Given that many politically active groups have purposive goals, such incentives, along with the material incentives we have just discussed, would appear to be the dominant factor underlying the formation and persistence of most of the groups that are active in politics. Things are not so simple as they appear, however.

**The Free-Rider Problem**

Groups that rely on purposive and material incentives face what is known as the free-rider problem: People can enjoy the benefits of group activity without bearing any of the costs. Thus they have an incentive to “free-ride” on the efforts of others. This problem arises when individuals perceive that attainment of the group goal has little relationship to their personal contribution. If you donate $20 to Greenpeace, does your contribution guarantee the survival of some identifiable baby seal? If you donate several hours of your time to march for the end of hunger, does your contribution measurably reduce the amount of malnutrition in the world? If you recycle everything you use and take care to buy only nonpolluting products, does your personal effort make any measurable difference in the amount of global pollution? Although most well-meaning people are reluctant to admit it, in each case the truthful answer is no.

These examples have two common elements. First, on reflection, people realize that their personal impact is so small as to be unnoticeable. If you don’t contribute, just as many baby seals will live or die, world hunger will be no different, and global pollution will be the same. So if your contribution makes no difference, why contribute? The second element makes matters worse: Individuals receive the benefit
whether they contribute or not. If many others do contribute and do save some seals, reduce world hunger, or alleviate global pollution, you enjoy those outcomes even if you did not contribute. So if you get the same benefit regardless of your actions, why contribute? These two conditions are major obstacles to group formation and survival. When they hold, the temptation is for individuals not to participate themselves but, rather, to free-ride on the contributions of others. And if most people feel that way, the group may die or fail to form in the first place.

Two considerations affect the severity of the free-rider problem. First, other things being equal, the larger the group, the greater the problem. A few neighbors can pool their efforts to clean up a vacant lot that borders their properties. It is easy to identify those who don’t show up and subject them to social pressure. It would be unthinkable, however, for a large city to rely on volunteer effort to maintain city parks. Each resident’s personal responsibility is small, and social pressure is less effective where people do not know each other. Thus cities pay city employees or private contractors to maintain their parks.

Second, other things equal, the free-rider problem is more serious the greater the distance and abstractness of the benefit the group seeks to achieve. It is much easier to see one’s personal impact on cleaning up a vacant lot than on cleaning the atmosphere. It is much easier to see one’s personal impact on feeding the poor in a specific locale than on reducing world hunger.

At issue here are what economists call public goods, as distinct from private goods. A tomato is a private good. In order to consume it, you must pay the cost, in the sense that you must grow it or purchase it. Moreover, if you consume it, others cannot. World peace, in contrast, is a public good. In order to enjoy it, you need not contribute in any way to achieving it. And if you enjoy it, others are in no way prevented from enjoying it as well. Economists believe that because free riders can enjoy or consume public goods even if they make no contribution to their provision, such goods typically are provided at lower than optimal levels.

It is important to recognize that material goods can be public goods; therefore, groups and associations that seek material benefits also face free-rider problems. If General Motors lobbies successfully for a tariff or quota on Korean cars, Ford will enjoy the benefits (lower competition, higher prices) even if Ford did not aid GM in the lobbying effort. If members of the Corn Growers’ Association pool their efforts to get a higher corn subsidy, even growers who are not members of the association reap the benefit of the higher subsidy. The free-rider problem is widespread. Only those groups based on social incentives escape it; because membership itself is the benefit in such groups, there is no incentive to free-ride.

The most important implication of the free-rider problem for democratic politics lies in the kinds of groups best able to overcome it. Our discussion suggests that, other things being equal, small groups organized for narrow purposes have an organizational advantage over large groups organized for broad purposes. We call the former groups “special” interests and the latter “general” or “public” interests. For example, a small number of corporations will find it relatively easy to organize an association to lobby for regulations that raise prices; the millions of consumers who buy the products the corporations sell will find it much more difficult to organize an association to lobby against such anticompetitive regulations. The free-rider problem implies that in democratic politics special interests generally are advantaged relative to general interests.

**Overcoming the Free-Rider Problem**

On first learning about the free-rider problem, some skeptics protest, “What if everyone felt that way?” Well, a great many people do; that is why so many groups mobilize such a small proportion of their potential constituencies. Consumers, taxpayers, environmentalists, conservatives, and liberals all enlist only a small proportion of the people who sympathize with their goals. Still, there are groups that represent broad

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**Making a Statement**

Large numbers of Americans sometimes donate their time and effort to general causes, as in marches to end hunger.

- What types of causes see this kind of mass support? And which types will engage in more direct lobbying of legislators?
purposive interests like these. How do these groups manage to overcome the free-rider problem? History reveals a number of useful strategies.

**Coercion** If members of a labor union strike for higher wages, how can they prevent nonunion workers from enjoying the results? Historically, the answer has been coercion. Social pressure and even violence have been used to coerce reluctant workers to join unions or prevent them from crossing union picket lines. Because violence is costly to inflict and often brings violence in return, unions preferred to rely on a strategy of negotiating “closed shops” with management. Such agreements permit only union members to work, and they require workers to join the union as a condition of employment.

Milder forms of coercion are still widespread, although they are often unrecognized. For example, professional and occupational associations may lobby governmental jurisdictions to hire, approve, or certify only their members, thus making membership a condition of working or practicing in that jurisdiction. The practice of law usually requires membership in the state bar, the practice of specialized trades such as plumbing may require a state license, and teachers usually must be state-certified to teach in public schools. Such requirements are ways of coercing potential free riders into joining the associations that represent their trades and professions.

Although it has been very effective historically, coercion appears to be a declining means of overcoming the free-rider problem. The union movement has fallen on hard times, its membership declining from more than one-third of the workforce to less than one-sixth, as shown in Figure 7.1. Privatization is on the increase, and the general trend toward deregulation opens up occupations to competition.

**Social Movements** At times people do not think individualistically, as they do when they free-ride. Periodically large numbers of people get swept up in some larger cause. Often politicians are surprised by the breadth and intensity of feeling that erupts over a short period of time (see accompanying Window on the Past). Such **social movements**—broad-based demands for government action on a problem or issue—have a long history in American politics. The abolitionist movement is one of the best known. Dedicated to ending slavery, the abolitionists forced the issue onto the national agenda and played a role in the political upheaval of the 1850s and, ultimately, in the outbreak of the Civil War. Other nineteenth-century social movements included the Populists and labor in the 1880s and 1890s and the women’s suffrage movement, which culminated in passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

The civil rights movement is probably the best-known example of a social movement in modern times. As discussed in Chapter 17, the massive demonstrations of the 1960s evolved from a few sit-ins and boycotts in the 1950s. The movement culminated with the adoption of landmark federal legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

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**Figure 7.1**

**Union Membership Has Declined Significantly Since Mid-Century**

Other movements soon followed. On April 22, 1970, Earth Day marked the sudden eruption of an environmental movement. Within the year, the United States had an Environmental Protection Agency and a Clean Air Act. As we discuss in Chapter 17, the women's movement took off at about the same time, flexing its muscle in the 1972–1982 campaign for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which succeeded in 35 states, 3 short of the three-fourths majority needed to adopt a constitutional amendment.16 On the other side of the political spectrum, the ranks of the religious right swelled in the late 1970s and contributed to Ronald Reagan's presidential victories in the 1980s and to the Republican congressional resurgence of the 1990s.17 The movement supports constitutional amendments to outlaw abortion and allow prayer in schools, but, like the feminists, the religious right has been unable as yet to achieve constitutional change.

Social movements build on emotional or moral fervor. Many of those active within such movements dedicate themselves to what they see as a higher cause. When individuals adopt a moral perspective, or when they think more collectively than individually, they may ignore the considerations that normally would lead them to free-ride. As the examples cited demonstrate, social movements can mobilize interests and alter the policies and practices of government.

Still, social movements typically mobilize only small proportions of their prospective constituencies. Some people can be induced to think in moral or collective terms, but not many. Moreover, for most people, emotional and moral fervor are temporary conditions that they cannot sustain for long periods. Thus a social movement has a tendency to "run down" as its emotional basis subsides. Some scholars argue that conservative forces in politics often can stall social movements until they weaken, leaving things much as before. Murray Edelman, for example, suggests that under pressure from a social movement, Congress may pass a statute that establishes a regulatory agency or commission. But as the movement subsides, the regulators increasingly operate in an environment dominated by the more entrenched economic interests they are supposed to regulate. In the end, the payoff to the movement is more symbolic...
than substantive. For a social movement to exert continued long-term influence, it must find a way to “institutionalize” itself—to spin off organized groups and formal associations that will continue to work for its interests.

**Selective Benefits** Many groups that work to achieve collective goods also provide their members with valuable private goods. Professional associations publish journals that contain occupationally useful information but restrict subscriptions to members. Trade associations inform their members—and only their members—about important technological advances. Agricultural associations provide their members—and only their members—with the latest information about new varieties of crops and new growing methods. In short, people, corporations, and institutions may join associations less to support the collective goods that the association supports than for the specific private goods that the association provides—selectively—to members: its **selective benefits**.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) offers the most notable example of this strategy for overcoming the free-rider problem. For a mere $8 per year, members gain access to the world’s largest mail-order pharmacy (where volume buying keeps prices low); low-cost auto, health, and life insurance; discounts on hotels, air fares, and car rentals; and numerous other benefits. Even a senior citizen who disagrees with the political positions of AARP finds it hard to forgo membership!

Selective benefits are not limited to direct economic ones or to information that indirectly produces economic benefits. Anything that people like and that can be selectively provided can be a selective benefit. Some environmental groups produce magazines full of beautiful pictures, organize outings and activities, rate outdoor clothing and equipment, and so forth. These and other benefits of membership often are sufficient to induce people to pay the modest amounts that membership requires.

In short, what you think of as the principal reason for a group’s existence may not be the principal reason why many people belong. Just the opposite may be true—in the minds of members, the political activity in which the group engages may be secondary to the selective benefits it provides.

**Patrons and Political Entrepreneurs** Discussions of the free-rider problem typically reflect a bottom-up notion of how groups form. The implicit assumption is that individual people, corporations, or institutions band together and form associations. Recent research, however, indicates that the process of group formation often is more top-down than bottom-up. Many groups owe their existence to a **political entrepreneur**, an individual or a small number of individuals who take the lead in setting up and operating the group.

In the first place, some individuals, institutions, or corporations may be so rich or have so great a stake in the group goal that it is worth their while to act independently or alone. Microsoft, General Motors, the state of California, and hundreds of other actors have their own Washington offices staffed by paid employees, because they have a great deal at stake and are sufficiently powerful that their activities and contributions can make a difference. Such large actors do not face a free-rider problem; for them, maintaining a lobbying arm is just a good business decision. Sometimes an association will be dominated by a single large firm that bears most of the costs but allows other members to free-ride to give the appearance of a broad base of support. Ralston-Purina in the feed industry is an example.

Similarly, a rich individual with a deep commitment to the group goal may be able to make a difference. Your $20 contribution to Greenpeace may have no measurable impact, but if you are in a position to give a million dollars, you can probably save some seals. Foundations also support groups with grants and contracts. The W. Alton Jones Foundation and the Ford Foundation give millions of dollars a year to environmental groups. Similarly, conservative foundations help to fund the Wise Use Movement that opposes traditional environmental groups.
In the second place, political entrepreneurs often set up and maintain a group for their own reasons. Their motives are varied. Some feel so strongly about a goal that they are willing to let others free-ride on them. We call such people either fanatical or dedicated, depending on whether we sympathize with their goals. An ascetic lawyer, Ralph Nader, did more than anyone else to organize the consumer movement and has devoted his life to it. A Missouri activist, Phyllis Schlafly, organized the anti-ERA cause. Ross Perot founded and subsidized his own political party. Many (though not all) such individuals have passed up opportunities to parlay their visibility into riches or political office, and this restraint suggests that their commitment to broader goals is genuine.

Of course, some political entrepreneurs do have ulterior motives. They may be aspiring politicians who see an opportunity to use new groups as the basis of future constituencies. Candidates for city and state offices often emerge from neighborhood associations and local protest groups. Perhaps these individuals were just swept along by political tides; on the other hand, their local work may have been a way to position themselves for future election campaigns.

In addition to wealthy patrons and dedicated or self-interested political entrepreneurs, the government itself did much to organize the new groups of the 1960s and 1970s. As the role of government expanded, federal bureaucracies needed new ways to implement programs through a decentralized federal system that mixed both public and private elements. One strategy was to stimulate and subsidize organizations: state and local elected officials; state and local employees such as social workers, police officers, and firefighters; public- and private-sector professionals such as educators, health providers, environmental engineers, and so forth. Once formed, the groups could be used to help develop standards and regulations and to publicize them and carry them out. These groups are politically as well as administratively useful, however. Not surprisingly, groups and associations that receive federal funds are more than twice as likely to support expanded government activity—and, by implication, the elected officials who expand it—as groups that do not.21

Note, incidentally, that although government has been a prominent source of support for the groups established since 1960, this is by no means a new governmental role. The Grange (discussed earlier) was founded by an employee of the U.S. Agriculture Department in 1867. The first local chapter was Potomac 1 and was composed of government workers and their wives.

The available evidence suggests that the top-down activities of patrons and political entrepreneurs are a more important means of overcoming the free-rider problem than the provision of selective benefits, AARP notwithstanding.22 Wealthy individuals, government agencies, corporations, and private foundations have been important sources of support for non-profit-sector groups, especially citizens groups. About 90 percent of the latter have received such subsidies.

Section Summary

Groups that attempt to deliver public goods face the free-rider problem, the fact that individuals who do not support the group can still enjoy the benefits the group delivers. The free-rider problem can be overcome through coercion (as with picket lines of strikers); emotional or moral commitment to the group’s cause (as in social movements); offering selective benefits (as does AARP); and patrons and political entrepreneurs (Ralph Nader, foundations, and Ross Perot, for example). Thus general interests as well as special interests are represented in American politics. Still, there is little doubt that the free-rider problem creates a bias in the interest-group system. Political scientists have long found that the interest-group system is dominated by business interests, and this remains true today. Indeed, despite the large increase in the number of groups active in politics, including many citizens groups, a thorough analysis suggests that business dominance of the Washington interest-group universe is even more pronounced than it was several decades ago.23
How Interest Groups Influence Government

The variety of groups, associations, and institutions that make up the interest-group universe engage in a wide array of political activities. We first discuss these political activities, which include government lobbying, grassroots lobbying, electioneering and political action committees, persuading the public, direct action, and litigation. Then we focus on why groups choose particular tactics over others.

Lobbying

Many interest groups attempt to influence government the old-fashioned way: by lobbying public officials. **Lobbying** consists of interest-group activities intended to influence directly the decisions that public officials make. Groups and associations draft bills for friendly legislators to introduce, testify before congressional committees and in agency proceedings, meet with elected officials and present their cases (sometimes at posh resorts where the official is the guest), and provide public officials with information. In these and other ways, group representatives try to influence those who make governmental decisions. Corporations account for the lion’s share of traditional lobbying, spending upwards of $1.5 billion per year.24

People who engage in lobbying are called **lobbyists**, although the term is usually reserved for those who do it as their primary job. Some lobbyists are so-called hired guns, people who will use their contacts and expertise in the service of anyone willing to pay their price, but some of the best known are closely associated with one party or the other. Many large groups and associations have their own staff lobbyists. Smaller groups and groups not often involved in politics may hire lobbyists on a part-time basis or share a lobbyist with other groups. Some groups simply have their own leaders engage in lobbying, although these individuals typically are not called lobbyists. There are federal and state laws that require lobbyists to register, but because of disagreement about what lobbying is and who is a lobbyist, as well as lack of enforcement, those who register are only a fraction of those engaged in lobbying.25 For example, the American Lobbyists Directory lists 65,000 legally registered federal and state lobbyists, but estimates are that in Washington alone, there are upwards of 90,000.26

Guilt

AARP announces its advertising program designed to persuade California state legislators to reform the state’s nursing homes. The slogan, “It could be your Mom’s last Home...” was fairly successful, as California did pass legislation.

- What emotions and fears are most common in interest group appeals? Are these tactics good or bad for political discourse?
The term lobbyist has negative connotations (we doubt that many parents would want their child to grow up to be one). Movies, novels, and even the newspapers often portray lobbyists as unsavory characters who operate on the borders of what is ethical or legal—and often step across them. Research suggests that this is an exaggeration. Although there are examples of shady or corrupt behavior by lobbyists, given the number of lobbyists and the amount of lobbying that goes on, such transgressions are hardly the norm. Certainly, most analysts believe that corrupt behavior by interest-group lobbyists is less widespread today than in previous eras of American history. Numerous conflict-of-interest laws and regulations, along with an investigative media ever on the lookout for a hint of scandal, make outright corruption in today’s politics relatively rare.

For the most part, lobbyists provide public officials with information and supporting arguments. They tend to deal with officials already sympathetic to their position and to support those officials’ activities. Lobbyists have little incentive to distort information or lie; to do so would destroy their credibility and undermine their future effectiveness. Of course, they emphasize arguments and information favorable to their viewpoint, but they do not want to hurt their political allies by lying, concealing information, or otherwise exposing them to an embarrassing counterattack. (See Table 7.1.) Many political scientists think that lobbyists serve a useful purpose, injecting valuable information into the legislative process. As former Senator and President John Kennedy observed,

> Competent lobbyists can present the most persuasive arguments in support of their positions. Indeed, there is no more effective manner of learning all important arguments and facts on a controversial issue than to have the opposing lobbyists present their case.\(^{27}\)

With the explosive growth of interest groups during the past generation, there is undoubtedly more old-fashioned lobbying than ever before. The number of corporate and trade association offices in Washington doubled between 1970 and 1980. Membership in the District of Columbia Bar Association more than tripled between 1973 and 1983. Registered lobbyists increased sixfold between 1960 and 1980.\(^{28}\) In part, such developments were stimulated by the democratization of Congress and the expansion of government. Whereas in 1950 a group might lobby only one powerful committee chair or a key staffer, by 1980 it had to lobby numerous subcommittee chairs as well as the rank and file and many of their staff.

**Grassroots Lobbying**

Today, Washington lobbying is often combined with so-called grassroots lobbying: inside-the-beltway persuasion is supplemented with outside-the-beltway pressure. Whereas lobbying consists of attempts to influence government officials directly, grassroots lobbying consists of attempts to influence officials indirectly through their constituents. The home schooling example that opened this chapter illustrates the process. A Washington association communicates with its grassroots supporters, who in turn put pressure on their elected representatives. As one health care lobbyist put it recently,
One of the perceptions about lobbying is that you go out drinking, and the guy’s your buddy so he does you favors. . . . Those days are long gone. That sort of thing may work on tiny things like a technical amendment to a bill, but on big, important issues personal friendships don’t mean a thing. I’ll bet we could have done just as good a job as we did [on influencing health care reform] without ever going to the Hill or ever talking to a member of Congress. It is knowing when and how to ask the troops in the field to do it.29

For several reasons, grassroots lobbying probably is more prevalent today than it was in the past. First, as we have noted, Congress is more decentralized. When only a few leaders need to be persuaded, an inside-the-beltway strategy of influence may suffice, but when dozens need to be persuaded, reaching out and touching their constituents may be more effective. Second, government in general is more open than in the past. It is not so easy for Washington insiders to make private deals; it is more important than ever to show that there is popular support for your group’s position. Third, as the home schooling example vividly illustrates, the advent of modern communications technology makes grassroots mobilization easier than ever before.

One of the newest innovations in grassroots lobbying is "grass-tops” lobbying.30 In this variation, an interest group makes an ad featuring a prominent local personality—especially one who is an important supporter of a member of Congress—and then plays the ad in the member’s district. Such ads signal members in no uncertain terms that their actions are being closely watched by people who have the power to help or hurt them electorally.

By no means should anyone think that grassroots lobbying is a new tactic, however; it has been around for a long time. In a classic study of the Anti-Saloon League (a prohibition group), Peter Odegard noted that this group had more than 500,000 names on its mailing list nearly a century ago—long before dependable long-distance telephone service, let alone computers, the fax, and e-mail!31 Influencing government officials’ views by reaching out to their constituents is nothing new, but the decentralized political institutions of the contemporary United States, along with rapid advances in communications technology, have made such a strategy more attractive than ever.

**Political Action Committees (PACs)**

PACs are specialized organizations for raising and contributing campaign funds. They are not simply extensions of business or labor organizations. Here, Latino state legislators announce the formation of a PAC to encourage Latino participation in politics.

- Does the fact that this PAC represents a historically disadvantaged group cause you to see PACs more favorably?

Personal lobbying and grassroots lobbying are attempts to influence the views of public officials on specific matters. Another way to exert group influence is to affect the views of public officials in general by influencing who gets elected in the first place. Groups have always been involved in the electoral process, supporting some candidates and opposing others, but as the role of party organizations in campaigns and elections has eroded, and as campaigns have become more expensive, groups have become more active than ever before. (See the accompanying On the Road to the Permanent Campaign.) Electioneering is probably the fastest-growing group tactic, and a principal vehicle of this tactic is the political action committee.

**Political action committees (PACs)** are specialized organizations for raising and spending campaign funds. Many are associated with an interest group or association. They come in as many varieties as the interests they represent.32 Some, such as the realtors’ RPAC and the doctors’ AM PAC, represent big economic interests, but they represent thousands of smaller interests as well—the beer wholesalers, for example, have SixPAC. Numerous PACs represent interests that are at least partly noneconomic. Supporters of Israel donate to AIPAC and NATPAC. Supporters of abortion rights send money to NARAL-PAC, while their pro-life adversaries send money to National Right to Life PAC. (Pro-choice Republicans uncomfortable with the liberal positions of NARAL can give money to WISH LIST.) Gun control supporters contribute to Handgun Control Inc. PAC, whereas gun control opponents contribute to Gun Owners of America Campaign Committee. In addition to interest-groups PACs, scores of individual politicians have established personal PACs.33 Like interest groups in general, PACs have enjoyed explosive growth in the past few decades. From a mere handful in 1970, they proliferated rapidly in the 1980s, as Figure 7.2 shows. Reflect-
Milestone on the Road to the Permanent Campaign
The Advocacy Explosion

Upon hearing a reference to “interest groups” in 1950, most people would have thought of a few well-known organizations: the AFL-CIO, a nationwide labor federation; the National Association of Manufacturers and the Chamber of Commerce, large business organizations; the National Farm Bureau, the largest farm organization; and perhaps the American Medical Association, the doctors’ association. But as we noted earlier, the last half of the twentieth century saw an explosion in the number and variety of interest groups. This development is intimately related to the rise of the permanent campaign.

Interest groups always have had party associations and have worked to elect sympathetic candidates, but as the party era gave way to candidate-centered politics, groups took on a more important role in the process. Today candidate organizations are built around groups. Democratic candidates build on unions, environmental groups, pro-choice groups, and other groups that support various liberal causes. Republican candidates build on business groups, pro-life groups, religious groups, and others supporting conservative causes. Indeed, candidates often emerge from the leadership of interest groups. Fifty years ago, parties nominated candidates in recognition of their experience and their service to the party. Today, groups support candidates on the basis of policy agreement. This means that elected officials today generally have stronger policy views (or must pretend they do) than did candidates a half-century ago.

Groups also have become more important because campaigns have become more expensive. Groups constitute preexisting networks of people whose views are fairly obvious. Thus candidates know whom to approach for contributions and whom to avoid. Group leaders in turn become more influential with candidates because of their ability to signal approval or disapproval of a candidate—and thus to encourage or discourage contributions.

Not only do today’s groups take on a more active and visible role in campaigns, but they have become increasingly active between campaigns as well, with grass-roots lobbying and issue advocacy. Elected officials today rarely have the luxury of “down time” between campaigns. They never know when a group might launch an issue advocacy campaign against them even if an election is far away. For example, during the California energy crisis in the spring of 2001, a group representing energy companies and Republicans ran attack ads against Governor Gray Davis, even though Davis was barely halfway through his term! They were attempting to “soften him up” long in advance of the Republicans even choosing a candidate to oppose him.

This sort of tactic has become increasingly common, and not merely for high-profile offices. In early 2001 the American Road and Transportation Association joined with several state groups to advertise against environmental protection lawsuits—the ultimate goal being to persuade local elected officials. Presidential politics now sees campaign-style advertising almost three years before the primaries. For example, in May 2001 President Bush proposed an energy plan that relied on increased oil exploration and drilling. The Sierra Club launched a series of advertisements against the plan, recycling a 2000 campaign theme of Bush being “beholden to oil companies.”

Almost every controversial policy initiative in the future—at all levels of government—is likely to draw some level of advertising advocacy, and this means that public officials must campaign for both office and policy almost all the time.

were in the majority in Congress, some of their members became highly dependent on business contributions, and critics charged that this dependence affected their legislative judgment. When Democrats became a minority after the 1994 elections, they became much more favorably disposed toward campaign finance regulation that restricted PACs. (See Table 7.2.)

At the risk of sounding complacent, we suggest that, like interest-group corruption in general, the PAC problem in particular is somewhat exaggerated by the popu-

![Figure 7.2](image)

**Figure 7.2**

**PACs Formed Rapidly After the 1974 Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) Reforms**


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**Table 7.2**

**Business PAC Contributions Tend to Follow Political Power—When Control of Congress Changed, So Did the Pattern of Business Contributions**

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<tr>
<td>American Dental Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Bankers Association</td>
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<td>81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ameritech</td>
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<td>AT&amp;T</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Institute of CPAs</td>
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<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Builders</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realtors</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RJRNabisco</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Parcel Service</td>
<td>55</td>
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Democratic Dilemma

Is It Constitutionally Permissible to Regulate Interest-Group Spending in Election Campaigns?

Of all the things that contemporary Americans find unsatisfactory about their politics, campaign finance ranks near the top. People feel that free-spending special interests exercise too much influence over government actions and that free-spending candidates are able to buy elections. John McCain was able to capitalize on such sentiments to give Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush a scare in the early 2000 primaries.

Despite widespread dissatisfaction, however, and despite the efforts of public interest groups, little reform has occurred. For one thing, any reforms have to be approved by elected officials whose electoral self-interest is at stake. This gives them a view of reform very different from that held by reformers! But another important part of the problem is that proposed reforms seem to be at least partly in conflict with constitutional freedoms. For example, in 1996 a proposal to ban PACs attracted considerable support in the House of Representatives, but opponents claimed that such a ban was patently unconstitutional.

In an important 1976 decision, Buckley v. Valeo, the U.S. Supreme Court held that Congress could not limit spending by either candidates or interest groups: Because it costs money to publicize one’s views, limiting spending was equivalent to limiting expression. Others disagree. Presidential candidate Bill Bradley argues that “I do not believe that a rich man’s wallet is in free-speech terms the equivalent of a poor man’s soapbox.” And an expert campaign finance lawyer discounts constitutional arguments and characterizes the contemporary system of campaign finance as “felonious bribery.”

In 2002, to the surprise of many observers, the U.S. Congress passed and President George Bush signed a campaign finance reform act that among other things, restricted interest-group spending in federal campaigns. Opponents of the legislation immediately filed suit, charging that it was an unconstitutional violation of free speech. The Supreme Court is expected to issue its decision in the summer of 2003.

Campaign finance reform proposals raise difficult questions:

- Should some rights of speech and expression be sacrificed to ensure the integrity of the electoral process?
- If the courts continue to strike down good-faith efforts, should the Constitution be amended to allow regulation of campaign spending?
- What criteria might we use to distinguish between constitutionally protected contributions to candidates who support the groups’ viewpoint and the tendering of illegitimate bribes?


Persuading the Public

This interest-group strategy overlaps somewhat with grassroots lobbying; the home school story was an example of interest groups persuading ordinary Americans that congressional actions directly threatened their interests. In recent years, what has

lar media. Most PAC contributions are small and are intended as a way of gaining access to public officials. Most research has failed to establish any significant relationship between contributions and votes. Moreover, there is evidence that politicians extort PACs, pressuring them to buy tickets to fund-raisers and otherwise to make contributions as a condition of continued access. For example, a former congressional staffer told one of us the following story:

In our office we loved the FEC [Federal Election Commission] reports. We’d comb through them and list all the business groups who had contributed to our opponent. Then we’d call them up and say, “Hey, we noticed that you contributed to our opponent’s campaign. The Congressman just wants you to know that there are no hard feelings. In fact, we’re holding a fund-raiser in a few weeks; we hope you’ll attend and tell us your concerns.”

Thus influence runs in both directions; elected officials are not just pawns to be moved around by interest groups. Campaign finance is a big question, and we will say more about it in later chapters.
Good Corporate Citizens
Persuading the public that you take care of migratory birds is part of being a good corporate citizen in this more environment friendly world.

Who is this advertisement aimed at? The public? Legislators?

issue advocacy
Advertising campaigns that attempt to influence public opinion on an issue.

direct mail
Computer-generated letters, faxes, and other communications to people who might be sympathetic to an appeal for money or support.

direct action
Everything from peaceful sit-ins and demonstrations to riots and even rebellion.

Direct Action
As we noted in Chapter 2, the original 13 colonies cast off British authority in a violent revolution, the Constitutional Convention was in part stimulated by Shays’s Rebellion, and the newly established federal government was tested by the Whiskey Rebellion. But these early conflicts were by no means the end of direct action by citizens opposed to government policies. In 1859, John Brown led an abolitionist raiding party against the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia. Urban workers rioted against the Civil War draft in 1863. In the 1880s and 1890s, state or federal troops battled strikers from West Virginia to Idaho and from Michigan to Texas. In 1932, more than 20,000 veterans marched on Washington and were dispersed by federal troops. Protest—even violent protest—against social and economic conditions and related government policies is as American as apple pie.

Seen against this background, the boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and demonstrations by civil rights, antiwar, feminist, environmentalist, gay rights, pro-choice, pro-life, and other activists are just more recent examples of a long tradition—and for the most part mild ones at that. As these examples suggest, forms of direct action are often used by social movements, partly because their members have previously not been organized and lack the access to power and the resources to use other strategies. Direct action typically is used in combination with attempts to persuade larger constituencies. The media—TV in particular—find direct action newsworthy and thus communicate the protests to locales far beyond where they occur. (See the accompanying Democratic Dilemma.)
**Litigation**

As we shall see in detail in Chapter 17, the modern civil rights movement followed a careful legal strategy, selecting cases to litigate that eventually led to the landmark ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. Drawing lessons from the success of the civil rights movement, environmentalists, feminists, and advocates for the handicapped, poor people, and other groups followed suit. But litigation strategies are by no means limited to groups ordinarily thought of as liberal. In the 1970s the Pacific Legal Foundation was set up to oppose environmental protection groups. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce established a National Chamber Litigation Center to support business interests in the courts. And the religious right founded the Christian Legal Society, which focuses on issues of church and state. Liberal groups continue to be more active in the courts, perhaps because of the difficulty of constructing electoral majorities in support of their positions.

In addition to actually litigating cases, which is an expensive activity, interest groups also engage in other activities intended to influence the course of litigation. Although it is improper to lobby judges directly, groups stage demonstrations in front of courthouses, generate letters and telegrams to judges, and file *amicus curiae* (a Latin term meaning "friend of the court") briefs in cases in which they are not otherwise directly involved.

**Why Groups Use Particular Tactics**

Different groups use different strategies or mixes of strategies. How they decide to allocate their resources depends both on their own characteristics and on the characteristics of the situation in which they are operating.

**Group Characteristics** How a group decides to deploy its resources depends on what kind of group it is, how much it has in the way of resources, and what kind of resources it has. A trade association representing profitable corporations will have a Washington office with a full-time staff of experts. This gives such associations the wherewithal to maintain close personal contact with government decision makers. A mass-membership group may find grassroots lobbying a more effective use of its resources. A public-interest law firm with no citizen membership will naturally follow a litigation strategy; indeed, the group may have been formed by lawyers precisely because they wished to engage in such activities. A social movement representing a disadvantaged constituency such as the poor may find that direct action is the only means of calling attention to its cause. Wealthy groups of any size or type may find campaign contributions and media campaigns to be useful investments.

Some suggest that groups with a federal structure—local chapters under a national leadership—have a fund-raising advantage because contributions are solicited by people personally known to members rather than by an impersonal mailing. In addition, such groups have chapters in many communities and therefore are constituents of a large number of representatives, and this may give them an advantage in grassroots lobbying. Interest groups representing realtors, doctors, and banks are good examples.

In sum, size, composition, wealth, organizational structure, and other factors affect the activities in which groups engage; each group allocates its resources in the way it considers most efficient.

**Situational Characteristics** One of the reasons why the civil rights movement adopted a litigation strategy was that more traditional strategies were unavailable. African Americans were disenfranchised in much of the South and were politically discriminated against elsewhere. In the Congresses of the 1940s and 1950s, the path of civil rights legislation was blocked by senior committee chairmen from the South.
As we noted in Chapter 4, politics sometimes makes for strange bedfellows. A recent example came in the “Battle for Seattle” in December of 1999. The World Trade Organization (WTO), an organization dedicated to removing barriers to free trade, scheduled its “millennium round” of talks in Seattle. The meetings were expected to produce further trade agreements that would be a public relations boon to the Clinton administration, which lobbied behind the scenes to have the talks called “the Clinton round.” By the time the meetings adjourned in a shambles, however, they had become a public relations disaster. Some suggested that they should be remembered as the “Tear Gas Round.”

Ten thousand protesters disrupted the meetings, and a few ran wild in the streets of Seattle, smashing windows and looting stores. The protesters were mobilized by an extremely diverse set of groups. Labor unions claimed that trade agreements resulted in the export of American jobs to low-wage countries where workers were exploited. Though often opposed to labor, some environmental groups now joined forces with unions, contending that free-trade agreements in practice operated to override domestic environmental protection laws. Both attacked the WTO as a secretive international organization that operated in the shadows and threatened American sovereignty. This sort of argument normally is made by groups on the right wing of American politics, who at various times have charged that the United Nations, the Brookings Institution, and the Trilateral Commission are fronts for international conspiracies aimed at subjugating the United States. The WTO meetings brought all these strange bedfellows together. One militia member commented on the strangeness:

“I’ll be honest— I don’t really know many people like the ones here,” said Butch Razey, commander of the Yakima county Militia, who attended the protest on orders from superiors in Montana. “We’re willing to die for our Constitution, and the patriots are all coming out because they know this is the beginning of world government. But I’ll be honest— this will be the first time I’ll be holding hands with a bunch of tree-huggers.”

Wrote one observer,

As militia members milled with black-clad anarchists and topless environmentalists . . . , and trade unionists marched under “FREE MUMIA!” posters, it was clear that American protest had entered uncharted territory.

Encouraged by their success in Seattle, leaders of environmental and labor groups began planning to collaborate again when Congress considers future trade legislation. The militias’ plans are unknown, but the protesters’ Web site—www.al6.org—can be checked for future activities.

- Does the diversity of this coalition present any challenges to either of the major parties?
- Could this constituency be organized into an effective third party?
- Does this kind of protest represent democracy working (as politicians usually say) because people are expressing their opinion? Or does it represent democracy breaking down (as politicians may privately wonder) because the fringe can occasionally turn violent?


\(c\) Ibid.

African Americans as a group were not wealthy, and they were a small minority of the population. By choosing to litigate, they made a virtue out of necessity. Then, as the movement expanded and gained support, it was able to engage in direct action, and later in electioneering, to advance its goals further.

In contrast, an industry or corporation interested in the fine details of a bill or regulation may find it better to send an expert representative to discuss the matter with members of Congress and their staff or with regulators. Studies show that corporations spend much more on lobbying than they do on campaign contributions,
probably reflecting their interest in legislative detail as opposed to their interest in the
general ideological position of the legislator.44

Direct mail and other modern advertising and persuasion techniques were devel-
oped largely by conservative groups, perhaps because for 40 years Congress was con-
trolled by Democrats who had little sympathy for their demands. Republicans have
controlled the House since 1994, and for six years the Senate, so perhaps conserva-
tive groups are engaging in more direct lobbying. Conversely, having lost some of
their access to the congressional leadership, liberal groups may be forced to shift their
resources to alternative methods of exerting influence.

In sum, various situational characteristics—party control of Congress and the
presidency, the economic situation, the mood in the country, what the interest group
seeks to achieve—interact with characteristics of interest groups to determine what
mix of strategies is adopted.

Section Summary

Interest groups have a variety of tactics for influencing government, ranging from the
highly personal one-on-one contacts of high-powered Washington lobbyists to the
impersonal electronic grassroots campaigns that are growing in frequency. Other
methods include electioneering; moving public opinion through issue advocacy;
direct action such as marches, demonstrations, and sit-ins; and litigation. Some
groups aim primarily at Congress, some at the courts, some at the executive, and
some at public opinion. The tactics that groups use depend both on their own char-
acteristics and on the political situation in which they operate.

How Influential Are Interest Groups?

The answer to this question is a matter of enormous disagreement. On the one hand,
some critics believe that interest groups dominate American politics. One critic charges
that the United States suffers from “demosclerosis,” a condition in which interest
groups clog the veins and arteries of the body politic.45 Another claims that Americans
have the best Congress money can buy.46 Certainly the number of groups, the volume
of their activities, and their massive expenditure of resources amount to strong circum-
stantial evidence that groups and associations are very influential in politics.

On the other hand, academic research yields less clear conclusions. Indeed, some
of the most expert students of interest-group politics contend that a great deal of
what groups do is canceled out.47 There are so many groups, and so many opposed
groups, that the efforts of one association’s high-priced lobbyist only offset the efforts
of another’s, one group’s media campaign only counteracts the effects of another’s,
one group’s direct-mail barrage only neutralizes the effects of another’s, and so on.

Also, it is likely that particular interests were more influential in the past than most
individual interests are today. This is because changes in American politics have under-
mined the classic “subgovernments” that were dominated by particular interests.

Subgovernments

Observers of American politics in the 1940s and 1950s developed the subgovernment
model as a common pattern of policy making in America.48 In the idealized sub-
government, policy was largely determined by three collective actors working hand
in hand. A congressional committee provided an executive agency with program
authorization and budgetary support, the agency produced outcomes favored by the
interest-group constituency, and the interest groups provided the members of the
congressional committee with campaign contributions and votes. Agriculture, public
works, and business regulation were viewed as policy areas dominated by subgovern-
ments. In the most extreme cases, subgovernments were called “iron triangles” (see
Chapter 14) in recognition of the difficulty faced by outsiders who wished to influence the decisions of a powerful subgovernment.

The subgovernment model assigns to interest groups an important, if not dominant, role in the policy process. Interests control what members of Congress need most (electoral support) and provide it if the agencies controlled by Congress provide what the interest groups most need (favorable policies).

Whatever their importance in the past, subgovernments are less important today. First, as we shall see in Chapter 12, Congress has changed. The party caucuses and leadership are stronger and the committees weaker; particular committees no longer have strangleholds on their jurisdictions. Second, there are many more groups now, including many who oppose other groups. In particular, citizens groups representing consumers, environmentalists, and taxpayers are much more active now than they were a half-century ago. They oppose the excesses of special-interest politics and publicize their opposition. Third, as we discuss in Chapter 9, the media are different today. In particular, they are very much on the lookout for stories of special-interest profiteering at the expense of general interests. In the spring of 1996, for example, the media helped kill an attempt by the House Agriculture Committee to aid milk producers in raising prices by quietly including a helpful regulation in the agriculture bill then under consideration. Dan Rather discussed the “attempted rip-off of the consumer” on his evening news program, and in the wake of the publicity, the attempt collapsed. Subgovernments thrive when they operated behind the scenes; they shrivel in the glare of publicity.

**Issue Networks**

In the view of many scholars, subgovernments have been superseded by issue networks—bigger, broader, and much looser connections of interest groups, politicians, bureaucrats, and policy experts who have a particular interest in or responsibility for a policy area. Given the enormous number and variety of interest groups today, the proliferation of legislative staff and other policy experts, and the interactions between policies in one area and those in another, issue networks are much more open than subgovernments and much less stable in their composition. In the network model, interests are only one type of actor. They must compete with elected and appointed officials and experts in an effort to influence public policy.

The academic consensus today clearly leans toward the network model, but not everyone agrees with the consensus, or with each other. On the one hand, some scholars suggest that even the term network may exaggerate the degree of organization that characterizes interest-group activity in Washington today. But on the other hand, some scholars suggest that the demise of many traditional subgovernments should not make us overlook the influence of organized interests in new policy areas such as energy and social regulation. They go so far as to characterize the role of organized interests in these areas as “quasi-corporatist” and “neocorporatist,” a reference to European corporatist systems in which important interest groups are given official representation in government decision-making bodies. In short, judgments about the general importance of interest groups remain as divided as ever.

Probably the safest conclusion about the influence of interest groups is that influence is conditional: It ranges from weak to strong, depending on the conditions under which groups try to influence politics. Schlozman and Tierney conclude that groups are most influential when they act on low-profile issues, when they attempt to block action rather than originate it, when they are unopposed by other groups or politicians, and when they have plentiful resources. Once again, the real world of American democracy is more complicated than many popular commentators suggest.

**Section Summary**

Some accounts of interest groups portray them as decisive in the political arena. Older theories about interest groups described policy making as dominated by subgovernments, or iron triangles, where interest groups played a vital role. More recent
perspectives view interest groups simply as one part of an issue network that includes a lot of actors and political interests. Because there are so many interest groups contending on both sides of an issue, the extent of interest-group influence probably depends on the situation.

Interest Groups and Democratic Politics

Even the generic term interest group has a negative connotation, and terms like pressure group, vested interest, and special interest have pronounced negative connotations.54 Why do contemporary Americans hold interest groups in such low regard? After all, the Constitution protects the rights of citizens to form groups and to try to influence the government. Remember that the First Amendment not only guarantees freedom of religion, speech, and the press but also prohibits any law abridging the “right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Americans have exercised that right since the very beginning of the republic.

Political scientists generally have not held interest groups in as low regard as ordinary citizens have. In fact, one mid-century school of thought, pluralism, assigned groups a central place in American politics.55 The pluralists believed that American politics consists of an interplay of numerous interests. In this view, virtually everyone is represented in a dense network of groups, no single interest is dominant, and all are required to bargain and compromise. Moreover, groups exercise countervailing power; if one interest or set of interests becomes too powerful, others mobilize to counteract it. As a consequence, public policies tend to be moderate and to change incrementally. Thus the system tends toward an equilibrium that is representative of the broad range of interests in the country.

Pluralism is out of fashion today. Critics cite several problems with the pluralist account. We have already discussed the first, the unrepresentativeness of the interest-group universe. As critic E. E. Schattschneider once observed, “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.”56 Because of the free-rider problem, small special interests have an advantage over large general interests. In particular, economic groups procure narrow economic benefits at the expense of the broader population of consumers and taxpayers. This is probably one reason why the term interest group has negative connotations in the popular mind; people see that most groups do not represent the general interests of Americans.

A second objection to the pluralist account would still apply even if interest groups were more representative: The interest of the whole nation is not equal to the sum of the interests of the parts. In our discussion of public opinion, we pointed out that majorities of Americans want to cut government spending and reduce government regulation, but majorities oppose specific cuts and reductions. Thus, if Congress heeds the wishes of the individual constituencies, it will displease the entire country by maintaining a bigger budget and more intrusive government than a majority desires. Trade is another example. If the government erected a system of trade barriers to protect every American industry from foreign competition, the result would be retaliation against American exports, higher prices for consumers, and slower economic growth, if not worse. As Schattschneider long ago pointed out, a Congress operating according to pluralist principles enacted just such a trade policy in 1930—the Smoot-Hawley tariff, a policy that deepened and lengthened the Great Depression.57 Simply adding up group interests is not enough. Ideally, politics harmonizes and synthesizes particular interests and incorporates them into the general interest of the nation. (See the accompanying Election Connection.)

A third criticism of pluralism is that a politics dominated by interest groups distorts political discussion and (ultimately) the political process. The reason is that group processes reinforce extremism and undercut moderation. Ordinary citizens have multiple attachments and affiliations, which generally serve to moderate their outlooks. A retired couple, for example, might naturally favor higher social security
In the summer of 1983, President Ronald Reagan was not a sure bet for reelection. The country was recovering from a serious recession, and most of the robust economic growth of Reagan’s first term was yet to come. Moreover, the front runner for the Democratic nomination was former Vice-President Walter “Fritz” Mondale. Experienced and respected, Mondale was widely regarded as one of the bright spots of the Carter administration. As the primary season approached, the Mondale campaign busied itself by piling up endorsements from all the groups associated with the Democratic party. Mondale was endorsed by the American Federation of Teachers, the National Organization for Women, and the AFL-CIO. Environmental groups and peace groups offered their support. Civil rights groups came out in favor of their long-time ally, as did newer groups representing other ethnic minorities and gays. The party’s elected officials were solidly behind Mondale. By the start of the primary season, the race for the nomination looked to be all but over.

Such impressions proved premature. Mondale stumbled badly; indeed, the Mondale bandwagon almost ran off the road. Senator Gary Hart did better than expected in the Iowa caucuses and, on the strength of the momentum developed there, beat Mondale in New Hampshire. Hart won in Maine, Wyoming, and Vermont and for a brief time became the front runner. Finally, Mondale staged the bleeding with crucial primary victories in Alabama and Georgia. He recovered to win the nomination but thereafter ran as a damaged candidate. President Reagan buried him in November, a third of Hart’s primary supporters voted for Reagan.

Many Democrats were well aware that the party had an image problem. Finally, Edward Kennedy (D-MA), a senator with impeccable liberal credentials, felt it necessary to face the negative public perception squarely. In a widely reported speech, he appealed to fellow Democrats:

As Democrats we must understand that there’s a difference between being a party that cares about labor and being a labor party. There’s a difference between being a party that cares about women and being a women’s party, and we can and must be a party that cares about minorities without being a minority party. We are citizens first and constituencies second.

In the late 1980s, some “new” Democrats launched an organized effort to position the party closer to broad middle-class interests. In 1992 candidate Bill Clinton kept his campaign focused on the national economy and deliberately picked fights with some of the party’s traditional constituency groups. In November he ended the party’s 12-year exile from the White House.

Both parties managed to keep their intense constituency groups under control in the 1986 campaigns, but in 2000, each party had some difficulties with their core groups, especially in the primaries. Some Democrats felt that Gore ran too far to the left because of liberal group pressures, and only by temporarily abandoning his “compassionate conservative” theme and appealing to conservative groups did Bush beat back the McCain primary challenge.

- Why should a large number of interest-group endorsements ever be a political negative? Don’t they indicate that a candidate has a broad range of support?
- Although most people would agree that the tobacco companies and the oil companies are special interests, in what sense can minorities, feminists, the handicapped, and similar groups be labeled special interests?
- Is the Republican party a party of special interests?

elderly than will many of its members. For example, AARP has been attacked as an organization composed of “tax-loving former teachers and government employees” who favor an “age-based welfare state.” This attack was used by the National Taxpayers Union, an opposing interest group concerned with taxes.

This crowding out of moderate demands by more extreme ones is reinforced by the tendency of group activists and leaders to be more zealous in their views and more committed to group goals than are nonmembers or even rank-and-file members; an example is shown in Table 7.3. Thus they push their demands beyond the point where ordinary members and sympathizers would stop. Activist supporters of the ERA agreed with the charges of the opponents that it would send women into combat on the same basis as men: “[C]ombat duty, horrendous as it might seem to all of us, must be assigned to persons on a gender-neutral basis.” Most American women and men preferred something less than such full equality. Today, environmental groups speak of a world on the brink of desolation, while their opponents scoff about imaginary threats. The minorities on the extremes of the pro-choice and pro-life debate polarize the debate and drown out the three-quarters of the population who could satisfactorily compromise on it. And the Home School Legal Defense Fund accuses Congress of plotting a “nuclear attack” on home schoolers.

In the end, the general interests of a moderate population can get lost amid the bitter fighting of intense and extreme special interests. No one can deny that groups have a useful and legitimate role to play in articulating the interests of all components of American society, but many feel that groups somehow must be constrained. One of the first pluralists, James Madison, thought factions could be constrained by creating the extended republic, as he explained in “Federalist 10.” He did not foresee several modern developments.

First is the tremendous expansion of society that contributed to the explosion of groups. The range of interests active today probably would shock someone like Madison, who thought in terms of broad interests such as land, labor and commerce, and debtors and creditors. Second is the prevalence of logrolling. Rather than check and

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**Table 7.3**

**Group Activists and Leaders Tend Toward More Extreme Views Than Nonmembers and Passive Members**

One study compared the views of 100 top leaders in environmental groups with the views of scientific experts—in this case, cancer researchers. Both sets of people were asked to rate various cancer risks on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. Relative to expert judgments, environmentalists systematically overstated the risks of cancer from environmental causes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Carcinogen</th>
<th>Environmentalists</th>
<th>Scientists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dioxin</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asbestos</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDB</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDT</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollution</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dietary fat</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food additives</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear power</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saccharin</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

balance each other, interest groups often cooperate, forming alliances and coalitions to exploit the general interests of consumers and taxpayers by getting higher prices and tax breaks. Logrolling among interests is facilitated by a third development, the rise of professional politicians who, in seeking reelection, broker the group deals in return for the electoral support that interest groups provide.

But what can be done? As the critics look over the experience of democratic governments, they see only one means of controlling group demands that is both democratic and effective. Ironically, it is the institution that George Washington warned the country about—political parties, the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Summary

Only half the American citizenry votes in presidential elections, and only small minorities engage in other forms of political participation. But most Americans participate indirectly in politics by joining groups that attempt to influence government. In fact, Americans are more likely to participate indirectly through groups than are citizens of other democracies who vote at higher levels.

In the past generation, there has been a major increase in the number of interest groups. Successful groups have found ways to overcome the free-rider problem, the tendency of people to benefit from group activity without contributing to its costs. Some of the groups rely on selective benefits that are available only to group members, while others depend on the efforts of dedicated or wealthy members who will bear a more than proportionate share of the costs of group maintenance. Some of the groups grew out of social movements composed of morally or emotionally committed members. Still others are not really groups but, rather, are the representatives of one or two major members who believe that maintaining a political arm is a sound investment.

Group characteristics and their situations lead them to adopt a variety of political strategies. Grassroots lobbying involves attempts to influence elected officials indirectly by mobilizing constituents; traditional lobbying involves attempts to influence elected officials directly by speaking personally to them. Increasingly, groups engage in electioneering—contributing money to candidates and spending money independently to elect officials sympathetic to their interests and views. Groups also attempt to persuade or educate the public, and some resort to direct action—demonstrations, protests, and the like—to call attention to their positions. Finally, some groups end-run the political process and attempt to influence government through the courts.

Despite extensive study of interest groups, there is wide disagreement about how influential they are. In general, popular commentators view them as more powerful than do academic researchers. There is no doubt that groups engage in an incredible amount of political activity and invest a great deal of money and other resources, but it is difficult to say how effective they are. For every issue where interest groups apparently dominated the decision, skeptics can cite another issue where interest groups seemed to be ineffectual or to offset each other’s efforts.

Although interest-group activity is constitutionally protected, many worry about its effects. First, special interests are better represented than general interests. Second, even if that were not so, the best interest of the nation as a whole is not merely the sum of the best interests of the particular parts. Third, interest groups overrepresent the extreme positions in political debate and thus polarize political discussion and inject excessive conflict into the political process.

Key Terms

amicus curiae, p. 209
clericalist, p. 212
direct action, p. 208
direct mail, p. 208
fiduciary, p. 214
free-rider problem, p. 196
grassroots lobbying, p. 203
interest group, p. 190

issue advocacy, p. 208
issue network, p. 212
lobbying, p. 202
lobbyist, p. 202
pluralism, p. 213
political action committee (PAC), p. 204
political entrepreneurs, p. 200
private goods, p. 197
public goods, p. 197
selective benefits, p. 200
social movement, p. 198
subgovernment, p. 211
As we have noted, the Internet has been a valuable tool for interest groups. It has reduced organization and communication costs tremendously. It is no exaggeration to say that an interest group is probably not much of an interest group until it has its own Web page (The reverse is not true, however; it’s so easy to have a Web page these days that merely possessing one does not qualify a group as an interest group). It would take too much space to list all of the interest groups with a presence on the Web.

www.aarp.org
www.aflcio.org
www.sierraclub.org
www.uschamber.org
www.now.org
www.cc.org

A sample of the most important interest groups with a presence on the Web are the American Association of Retired Persons, AFL-CIO, Sierra Club, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Organization for Women, and Christian Coalition of America.

www.vegan.org
www.deathwithdignity.org
www.anarchy.org
www.atheists.org
www.alien.org

A few less prominent groups, the very existence of which testifies to the power of the Internet to reduce organizational costs, are the Vegan Action (pro-vegetarian lifestyle), Death With Dignity National Center (pro-assisted suicide), Anarchy.org, American Atheists, and Society of Earthbound Extra-Terrestrials.

www.lobbydirectory.com

Lobbyists are less interested in advertising, but the National Lobbyist Directory gives a state-by-state listing for lobbyists. In fact, for $95 you can join this organization and become a certified lobbyist.