

# **POLITICAL INTEREST GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES**

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Group action has proved to be the key to success in the modern political world for many people in the United States. One of the first statements regarding American political interest groups was written in 1788 by James Madison, who observed that "... 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. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation".

Various terms or phrases have been employed to describe the private organizations or groups that attempt to influence government. In the past the most commonly used term was pressure groups, but a number of writers have contended that this is misleading, for it implies that such groups necessarily use questionable methods and have objectionable goals, which, as a matter of fact, is not the case. The tendency in recent years has been to refer to these organizations as political interest groups, interest groups, organized interest groups, and special interest groups. These terms refer to any private, non-partisan group of people who seek collectively to influence some phase of public policy. Hence, legislative bodies or political parties are not political interest groups even though they influence public policies.

## *Tehran University Law Review.*

In the United states political interest groups perform several functions. First, political interest groups help to crystallize opinion and to stimulate discussion of political issues.

Second, organized interest groups provide a type of group representation. Because of the great diversity and complexity of many electoral districts in the United States, it is impossible for elected representatives to know the problems and opinions of all their constituents. Moreover, the primary interests of many individuals today are related more to occupational, fraternal, or ideological associations than to the specific problems of the geographic electoral district in which they live.

Third, political interest groups provide a channel of communication between their members and public officials. Many legislative and administrative officials readily admit that organized interests are a valuable source of much specialized and detailed information. John F. Kennedy, when serving in the Senate, once stated: "Lobbyists... because of their familiarity with the problems of the interests they represent, and because of their ability to accumulate and supply information frequently not available from any other source... can be extremely useful. In many instances they... provide an important link between Congress and the particular economic or other special interest that they represent."

Fourth, political interest groups help check on the activities of other interest groups and public officials. If an interest group makes extreme or unreasonable demands, it may be opposed by other groups. Interest groups also scrutinize the activities of public officials and help insure that they perform their tasks in a responsible fashion.

### **Methods Employed by Political Interest Groups**

The manner in which political interest groups operate in the United States today is determined basically by the political environment: the federal form of government; separation of powers; electoral system; political parties; technological development; and the economic, social, ethnic, and religious composition of the population<sup>1</sup>. Individual interest groups generally function in a pragmatic and opportunistic fashion, using any method or technique which they believe will serve their purpose effectively, perhaps guided by the precept of taking whatever action will produce the maximum desired result with the minimum expenditure of time and resources. The techniques and tactics which any particular group employs will be determined largely by such factors as the size and geographic distribution of the membership, cohesion of membership, financial resources, prestige position of the organization, quality of leadership and staff, and relations with the political parties and other organized groups.

Where do organized interest groups attempt to exert influence? Depending on the goals and characteristics of the particular group, it may attempt to influence its own members, other organized interest groups, the public at large, legislators, executive and administrative personnel, and the courts.

One characteristic of virtually every large organization is the tendency for a few individuals to gain effective control of the group. In some associations the officers may enjoy near permanent tenure, and in others they may

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1) In the United States political interest groups tend to be more successful in some state capitals than in others. Harmon Zeigler and Michael A. Baer, *Lobbying: Interaction and Influence in American State Legislatures*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1969.

be selected from a relatively small elite. These officers and the paid bureaucracy in many instances literally run the organization. Hence, from the standpoint of the origination of policy, they become the organization.

In some organized groups, a considerable portion of the time and energy of the staff may be expended to influence the members of the group and potential members. Most associations wish to retain and enlarge their membership - - if, for no other reason - - in order to increase the political strength of the group. In group meetings, publications, and direct communications to the membership, efforts are also directed toward producing greater group cohesion, to "educating" the membership to accept and support the policies of the organization, and to inducing the members to engage in desired political activity. Types of activity urged on group members include: registering and voting; working in political campaigns and making financial contributions; and communicating by way of personal conversations, letters, telegrams and telephone calls to public officials and those who control the mass media of communication.

Some political interest groups attempt to influence other groups. Organized interest groups seek the active support of their allies or potential allies, the endorsement of groups less directly interested, and the neutralization of opponents. Such co-operation may be achieved by one group merely activating another, by promising future assistance, or by making concessions or compromises. In some cases co-operating groups develop only informal working arrangements, but examples may be cited of groups cooperating through interlocking directorates or formal agreements.

For example, a Congressional committee investigating lobbying found that interest groups co-operate not only "within so obvious a functional area as an industry," but also on an ideological basis, for "there is a growing

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joint effort in lobbying by groups whose unity is philosophical rather than functional in character." The Committee added, "The general theme of combination rather than conflict grows bolder and more insistent every year."<sup>1</sup>

The idea that an organization with ample funds can sell any program to the general public has largely been disproved. Nevertheless, one of the noteworthy features of pressure-group activity has been the efforts to gain support for programs by using the mass media. Research on public opinion formation indicates that not all segments of the population are equally interested in every political problem. Instead, some special or attentive "publics" are interested in one issue, and different "publics" are interested in others. Public relations campaigns are directed primarily to the special publics likely to become concerned with a particular proposal and to other individuals referred to as "opinion leaders," who may influence many who might otherwise be uninterested in the issue.

Today, some organizations employ public-relations counsels to advise them and to direct public-relations and propaganda campaigns. The use of public-relations experts is a distinguishing characteristic of modern propaganda. The rise of the public-relations counsel in the United States has occurred along with the growth of pressure groups and the extraordinary development of the communications media.

Political-interest groups employ propaganda for both short-range and

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1) *General Interim Report*, House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, House of Representatives, 3138, 81st Congress, 2d Session (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), pp. 48-50. Since this report was issued, there has not been another thorough Congressional investigation of lobbying activities.

long-range goals; but, in either case, they attempt to make their programs appear synonymous with the "general welfare." The short-range goals of a public relations campaign may be to give the impression that there is such widespread support for a proposal that the campaign itself will provide the momentum necessary to secure the acceptance of the policy, or the purpose of the campaign may be to stimulate a sufficient number of persons to urge public officials to adopt the desired program.

The long-range or strategic aim of propaganda campaigns tends to be ideological, usually urging the public to accept a particular philosophy of government. In brief, the purpose of such campaigns is to condition the attitudes of the people so that they will respond almost automatically with favor toward programs desired by the group and will automatically reject programs that the group opposes. The National Association of Manufacturers has developed a strategic concept of propaganda that it refers to as its "bank account theory." In one of its publications, the Association explained that the theory requires "regular and frequent deposits in the Bank of Public Good-Will" in order that "valid checks can be drawn on this account" on the proper occasions.

A number of the larger interest groups disseminate press releases, clip-sheets, and prepared editorials to the press. The effectiveness of this type of propaganda is largely due to the fact that when it appears verbatim in newspapers or magazines, it gives the impression of straight reporting or editorializing by the staff of the periodical.

In the 1960s a method that came into widespread use to influence public attitudes toward a general problem was the mass demonstration. These were originally used extensively by civil-rights groups and pacifist movements, but demonstration politics later has been employed by middle-class and professional groups.

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Political interest groups do not themselves draft party platforms or nominate candidates for public office. They do, however, appear before the resolutions committees of the political parties to urge the endorsement of their programs as planks in the parties' platforms. They often attempt to secure the endorsement of both major parties and thus remove their program from partisan controversy. Many groups are also active in the nomination and election of party members to political offices.

Most interest groups which are active in election campaigns will support a candidate of either the Republican or the Democratic Party if his general outlook is similar to that of the group. Thus, organized labor has followed the policy, first prescribed by Samuel Gompers, an early American labor leader, of "rewarding friends and punishing enemies" by support or opposition in campaigns and at the polls. Apparently, however, some labor, business, farm, professional, and other organizations have found most of their "friends" in one party and most of their "enemies" in the other, for they have tended to align themselves with one or the other of the two major parties.

The most common method of aiding in a campaign is through financial contributions<sup>1</sup>. Labor unions and corporations are prohibited by law from making "a contribution or expenditure in connection with any election" at which a member of Congress or the President and Vice-President are

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1) An example of an organization which has contributed liberally to both political parties is the Associated Milk Producers, Incorporated, the largest dairy association in the United States. According to an investigation in 1974, the Associated Milk Producers, Incorporated had a "political treasury" of one million, four hundred thousand dollars. *Newsweek*, April 8, 1974, p. 33.

selected; but they have devised means for evading the spirit, if not the letter, of the law. Testimony before Congressional committees has revealed that both labor unions and corporations pay salaries to officers and employees working full-time for a party or candidate, publish political arguments in their house organs and purchase television and radio time and newspaper space to present political views. In addition, corporations have made political contributions by permitting party officials or candidates to use offices and equipment without charge, and have paid bonuses and permit expense accounts to be padded with the understanding that political contributions would be made from the bonuses or padded accounts.

In the past, organized groups in the United States concentrated most of their efforts on promoting and opposing legislative proposals. Although in recent years interest-group activities have expanded in other areas, the most obvious actions of pressure associations are still those in which they attempt to influence legislative decisions.

The terms "lobby" and "lobbyist" have long been used to designate the political interest groups and their representatives who attempt to secure the enactment or defeat of legislation. These names originated from the practice of these groups and individuals attempting to obtain the support of lawmakers in the corridors and lobbies of the legislatures. The representative role and influence of the lobby and their lobbyists are indicated by the practice of referring to them as *the third house*.

The principal organized interests maintain permanent staff of professional lobbyists, press agents, research personnel, and secretaries in the national capital, and have staff in state capitals during legislative sessions. Organizations that have only an incidental interest in legislative proposals do not usually have a full-time lobby staff, but may employ a professional



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lobbyist to represent them on occasions when legislative issues of interest arise .

Lobbying consists basically of communicating with the legislators, and political interest groups use every opportunity to inform legislators of their wishes. Although most major public politics are initiated by the President and his assistants or by Congressional committees, political interest groups originate a large proportion of the other measures introduced in Congress, as well as the great majority of bills in the state legislatures. Not uncommonly a bill sponsored by a special-interest group, if unopposed by other organized groups, will be enacted without opposition by the legislature.

As compared with interest groups in the United States, interest groups in great Britain, with its parliamentary form of government and centralized parties, have directed more attention to the Cabinet and less to individual legislators. However, in recent years in the United States, too, political interest groups have increased their efforts to influence the executive branch of the government. Aware of the expanded role of the chief executive as the chief legislator, pressure groups have urged the President and governors to incorporate or omit particular proposals from their legislative programs and to increase or decrease specific budgetary requests. After the legislature enacts a controversial bill, it is not uncommon for political-interest groups to inundate the President with letters and telegrams urging him to veto or sign the measure. Individual Presidents, because of their own backgrounds and sources of political support, have tended to be more amenable to the wishes of some groups than others.

In recent years, the government has played a greater role in regulating business and industry, and state legislatures as well as Congress have tended to invest administrative officials with broad discretionary powers. As

a result, organized groups have shown increasing interest in administrative agencies.

As groups are aware that administrators may vigorously execute or virtually nullify a statute, it is understandable that organizations often seek the appointment of their members or of persons friendly to their group to administrative positions of concern to them. Pressure groups with friends in high administrative posts sometimes find that they have advantages not available to others in securing subsidies, contracts, permits, licenses, favorable adjustments of tax problems and antitrust suits, and other favors and privileges.

Pressure groups may also seek to influence administrative actions by working through legislators. Groups may urge the legislature to amend the statutes under which an agency functions, and they may urge increases or decreases in an agency's budget in order to expand or curtail its operations. It is not correct to assume that a hostile relationship always exists between political interest groups and administrative agencies. On the contrary, it is not unusual to find political interest groups, governmental organizations, and legislators working together for the adoption of mutually desired policies.

American political interest groups devote less effort toward influencing policy through the courts than through the legislative or executive branches: however, a number of organizations - acknowledging the importance of the judiciary in the American political process - have turned their attention to the courts. Many groups realize that they may be affected by judicial actions: decisions that result from the power of judicial review, the interpretation of the Constitution, statutes, or treaties; the issuance of injunctions and other court orders; or decisions in civil or criminal cases

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affecting personal and property rights. Hence, whether judges are elected or appointed, various organizations scrutinize the records or prospective judges and oppose those believed to be biased against their group.

Some groups have sought to advance their interests by testing the constitutionality or interpretation of legislation or the actions of public officials. Organizations with small membership or those representing minority groups may find that they more successful in taking their causes to the courts than to the legislative or executive branches. A noteworthy example is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which has for years employed litigation as a principal means for upholding Negro rights. In successful court cases the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people won political victories fully as important as any gained in Congress. Some organizations intervene in suits as *amicuis curiae*, or "friends of the court," which permits them to file briefs in a case in which they are not a party, and in this way to support other groups involved in litigation. There are also examples of articles being prepared for publication in law reviews with the expectation that they will be used in briefs or may be read by judges and possibly influence later decisions.

### **Political Interest Groups and Democracy**

The recent growth of political interest groups has been partly due to governmental policies and processes, which one perceptive scholar has labeled "interest group liberalism." According to him, the "operative principles" of interest group liberalism are: "Destroy privilege by universalizing it. Reduce conflict by yielding to it. Redistribute power by the maxim of each according to his claim. Reserve an official place for every major structure of power. Achieve order by worshipping the process... by which order

is presumed so be established.”<sup>1</sup> More than at any time previously in American history, the principal key to success in politics is organized group activity.

What problems arise from interest group activity? First, there is little doubt that some groups exert more influence and obtain more benefits than could be justified by the size of their membership or by their contributions to society. It is also well known that members of the upper and middle classes are more likely than the disadvantaged to be active in interest groups. Moreover, among those groups that are organized, some have more influence and resources than others, and as a consequence receive favored treatment from the government. As one student of interest groups has noted: “The fact that not all groups are organized and not all interests are represented has serious consequences. At the extreme, they involve the virtual exclusion of some elements of the population from effective voice in affairs that deeply concern them<sup>2</sup>.”

Second, it is sometimes difficult to know who is represented by an organized group. An organization may have a name that indicates that it represents hundreds of individuals, when it is actually a “front” group for others who do not want their identity known. Third, some groups employ methods and tactics - - such as efforts at intimidations, or making campaign contributions with the implied if not explicit expectation of future favors - - which, if used on a wide scale, would tend to undermine the political system.

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1) Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism*, New York: Norton, 1969, pp. 292-293.

2) Graat McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy*, New York: Knopf, 1966, p. 7.

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Political interest groups thus constitute a dilemma for democratic government. In order for a free society to flourish, individuals must be permitted to organize and take joint political action, and the First Amendment of the American Constitution, which provides for freedom of speech and press and the right to assemble and to petition government, guarantees this right; yet, if unrestrained, interest groups might subvert the political system.

As a partial effort to solve the dilemma involving political interest groups, laws have been enacted to require certain interest groups and their lobbyists to register with the government. The Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act provided that paid lobbyists and organizations that solicit, collect, and spend money for the "principal purpose" of influencing federal legislation must register and file quarterly reports<sup>1</sup>. All personnel employed as lobbyists or agents by foreign governments are required to register with the Department of State. Lobbying-registration laws, some based on the federal statute, have been passed by most states. The theory behind this legislation is that by disclosing information regarding those who are attempting to influence public policies, governmental decisions might be made more on the merits of the issues rather than on the amount of influence applied. Largely because of the defects in the phraseology of the laws and because there is no agency specifically charged with their enforcement, many groups that lobby do not register; and others that do register, do not file complete reports on their expenditures. Hence, the legislation has had relatively little impact on the activities of pressure groups.

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1) In addition, there are other federal statutes that require particular types of interest groups to register with the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Secretary of Commerce.

The principal safeguards concerning pressure group activity are not to be found in statutory regulations but in the total functioning of the political system in the United States. The political parties, elected officials, administrative personnel, other political interest groups and the mass media of communication all serve as checks against any specialized interest or combination of interests-- a "power elite"-- gaining sufficient power to dominate the political life of the nation.

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