

Video

Interest Groups: Organizing to Influence

http://www.learner.org/courses/democracyinamerica/dia_14/dia_14_video.html

Before viewing the video, answer the following questions:

1. According to Madison, how should factions be controlled?
2. What kinds of activities do interest groups use to influence policy-making?
3. The general impression of interest groups is that they are the domain of big business and organized labor. Is this true?
4. Think about your own interests. Are they represented by any organized group? What are they?

Section 1. The Battle Over Crusader

Most long-lasting interest groups focus on advancing the economic interests of their members. Because their members have a strong economic incentive to band together, they are likely to be well-funded professional organizations that can employ lobbyists and mount sophisticated public relations campaigns. The battle over the Crusader weapons system presents an example of how one economic interest used its resources to influence the policy process. In the end it was decided that Crusader would remain "canceled," but United Defense would still retain a \$475-million contract to continue the development of Crusader's cannon. That contract would employ workers in several congressional districts, which was a major concern of Congress members. The Army gained progress toward a new weapons system, while the consultants, lobbyists, and public relations specialists who worked on behalf of United Defense got nice commissions for their work.

Viewing Questions

5. Why did members of Congress come to the defense of United Defense?
6. What kinds of tactics did United Defense use to fend off efforts to kill the Crusader?
7. In the end, was United Defense successful?
8. What is the iron triangle?

Section 2. Organizing from the Heart: The Battle over Reauthorization of the 1996 Welfare Reform Law

Citizen action groups advocate on a wide range of social and environmental issues, and use many of the same tactics as economic groups to reach decision makers. But often they must rely more on mobilizing their

membership to act in an organized and concerted way. The battle over reauthorization of the Welfare Reform Act illustrates the mobilization efforts of one citizen action group.

Viewing Questions

9. Who does the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support represent?

10. What motivated Ladon James to become involved in the campaign?

11. Since this is a citizen action without large cash reserves, what tactics did the group utilize to influence policy-makers?

Section 3. David and Goliath Go at It Again: The South Pasadena Freeway Fight

Sometimes the most effective groups are local grassroots organizations dedicated to a single cause. Lacking financial resources and permanent organizations, these groups rely on committed citizens to write letters, make phone calls, and sometimes to demonstrate, all in pursuit of their cause. The fight over a freeway plan in the Los Angeles suburb of South Pasadena is a good example of a grassroots organization in action.

Viewing Questions

12. How is the grassroots organization in this story different from a citizen action group?

13. What kinds of tactics did the Anti-Meridan group use to fight the freeway?

14. What do you think has motivated these people to keep up the fight over a couple of generations?

To What Interest Group do YOU Belong?

Special interest groups, sometimes also described as pressure groups, advocacy groups or lobbyists, play a significant role in the political system of the United States. Such groups can shape elections by verbally endorsing candidates or contributing financially to campaigns with Political Action Committee (PAC) money. Once candidates are elected to office, members of these organizations commonly contact them to encourage support or opposition to legislation. A more generic definition of a special interest group is a group of people that come together for a common purpose. Not all special interest groups are set up for a political cause. There are special interest groups for many purposes, and you likely belong to one without even knowing it.

Let's find out a little more about you. The following questionnaire asks you a series of personal questions. The answers are not recorded, so please be honest.

Follow the link below, then select the Begin button when you are ready to begin.

http://www.learner.org/courses/democracyinamerica/dia_14/dia_14_ct.html

What Exactly Is a "Special" Interest?

In "Federalist No. 10," James Madison developed a theory of interest groups that he believed supported the cause of constitutional ratification. Responding to past political philosophers who contended that a democratic republic could only thrive on a small scale in societies with few competing interests, Madison advanced a new and radical conception of organized interests. According to Madison, the causes of faction are "sown in the nature of man." Thus, to try to prevent factions from expressing themselves would be against human nature, and ultimately would undermine the basic liberty that we value as free people. Instead of removing the causes of factions, Madison proposed that we control their negative effects. One way to do this is to encourage the formation of many types of interests, so that by opposing each other they prevent one or more factions from violating the rights of all others, and ultimately the public interest. Madison wrote, "Extend the sphere [of interests], and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens."

One frequently hears complaints about "special interests" that seek unfair influence in the democratic process to promote their particular agenda. Such complaints are not new, but instead can be found in all periods of American history. In many cases it is clear that one person's special interest is another's public interest. Try to develop a definition of a "special" versus "public" interest, and include real examples. What factors can we use to determine the difference between special and public interests?