

Influencing Government

Interest Groups

Interest Groups

What is an interest group? “special interest groups”

- An organization of people who share a some common interest who have united in order to influence government decisions.
- Advocate (or promote) the wants and needs of the members of their group.
- The 1st Amendment guarantees “the right of the people peaceably to assemble and petition the government.”

Types of interest groups

1. Economic

- Business, labor, and trade organizations promote the economic interests of their members.
- Examples: U.S. Chamber of Commerce: promotes free enterprise
AFL-CIO: the largest alliance of labor unions in the U.S.

2. Professional

- Interest groups that advocate for people who belong to a particular profession, such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers.
- Examples: American Medical Association

Interest Groups

3. Ideological

- Interest groups that promote policies that are centered around a set of core political or religious beliefs.

4. Single-Issue (special causes)

- Interest groups that narrow their focus to promote a special cause.
- Examples: the Sierra Club promotes environmental protection and the NRA which promotes the interests of gun owners.

5. Public

- Interest groups that focus on issues that affect the general public. The work for the benefit of society as a whole.
- Example: the League of Women Voters tries to educate voters.

6. Other

- Some interest groups organize in order to promote a specific ethnic group, age group, or religious group.
- Examples: NAACP and AARP

Influence of Interest Groups

What is the goal of interest groups?

- To influence public policy
- Public Policy: the position the government takes regarding a certain issue (a problem or an idea for improvement).

How do they influence public policy?

- **Persuade government officials** to support proposed laws or enforce laws that already exist which benefit their members. Also, the work to persuade government officials to oppose laws that may harm the interests of it members.
- **Influence public opinion** by educating the general public about an issue that concerns the interest group and by presenting their group's point of view.

Influence of Interest Groups

How do interest groups influence public policy?

1. Lobbying the government

- Interest groups hire **lobbyists** to meet with government officials in order to discuss various issues and concerns that the group has.
- They work to persuade government officials to pass laws that favor the group's interests.
- They also supply legislators with information about the issues and even help them write various bills.

2. Courts

- Interest groups bring to court cases that argue against a law of government policy; trying to prove that its unconstitutional.
- They also bring to court cases with the hope of ensuring that certain laws that concern them are enforced.
 - Example: the Sierra Club bringing to court a case about protecting national forests from logging.

Influence of Interest Groups

3. Elections

a. Endorse candidates

- During elections, many special interest groups chose to support several candidates for various political offices.
- People fear that once a candidate is in office, he/she might become more concerned with pleasing the interest group than representing the people who elected him/her.

b. Raise money

- Interest groups form **political action committees (PAC)** in order to contribute money to a campaign.
 - Hard money – donated directly to a candidate
 - Soft money – donated to political parties for general party building purposes

c. Run political advertisements

- Interest groups use the media to run political advertisements meant to influence public opinion on a candidate or issue.

Influence of Interest Groups

4. Influencing the public opinion

- 1) To increase membership
- 2) Government officials pay close attention to public opinion in order to see which issues the people consider to be the most important.

Methods used by interest groups to influence public opinion:

- Organize public events
- Stage public protests
- Direct mail campaign
- Advertise using the mass media

Why do interest groups use the media to run advertisements?

- The mass media allows interest groups to reach a large portion of the population.
 - To educate the public about certain issues
 - To persuade the public to support the group's position on certain issues.
 - To assist political candidates who share the same positions on certain issues to win elections

Regulating Interest Groups

- Several laws have been passed in order to limit the amount of money PAC's are allowed to donate to a particular candidate.
 - Example: Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002
- Lobbyists are required by law to register with congressional officials. These officials have the authority to monitor the lobbyist's activities.
- Lobbyists are also required to disclose who hired them, how much they are being paid, as well as how they spend money related to their job.
- The law requires that a waiting period to be observed before a former government official is allowed to become a lobbyist.

Interest Groups

Pros

- Interest groups provide Americans with a means to organize in order to pressure the government for change.
- They assist the government in being more responsive to the people.
- They assist the people in communicating their will to the elected officials who represent them.

Cons

- Many people fear that interest groups may have too much influence over the government.
- Many people also fear that by supporting candidates' election campaigns interest groups are able to illegally buy power from legislators.
- Interest groups do allow some groups of people who are more vocal and wealthier than others to acquire too much power. As a result the will of the majority of the people can be ignored.

References

- Clayton, G. E., Patrick, J. J., Reny, R. C., Saffeli, D. C., & Zike, D. (2010). *Civics today: Citizenship, economics, and you*. Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill, Inc.