



This is “Interest Groups”, chapter 9 from the book [21st Century American Government and Politics \(index.html\)](#) (v. 1.0).

This book is licensed under a [Creative Commons by-nc-sa 3.0](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) license. See the license for more details, but that basically means you can share this book as long as you credit the author (but see below), don't make money from it, and do make it available to everyone else under the same terms.

This content was accessible as of December 29, 2012, and it was downloaded then by [Andy Schmitz](#) (<http://lardbucket.org>) in an effort to preserve the availability of this book.

Normally, the author and publisher would be credited here. However, the publisher has asked for the customary Creative Commons attribution to the original publisher, authors, title, and book URI to be removed. Additionally, per the publisher's request, their name has been removed in some passages. More information is available on this project's [attribution page](http://2012books.lardbucket.org/attribution.html?utm_source=header).

For more information on the source of this book, or why it is available for free, please see [the project's home page](#) (<http://2012books.lardbucket.org/>). You can browse or download additional books there.

## Chapter 9

### Interest Groups

#### Preamble

The media often depict interest group lobbyists negatively in the news and in entertainment. One particular episode of *The Simpsons* provides an extreme example. Lisa Simpson writes an essay titled “The Roots of Democracy” that wins her a trip to Washington, DC, to compete for the best essay on patriotism award. She writes, “When America was born on that hot July day in 1776, the trees in Springfield Forest were tiny saplings...and as they were nourished by Mother Earth, so too did our fledgling nation find strength in the simple ideals of equality and justice.”

In Senator Bob Arnold’s office a lobbyist proposes to raze the Springfield National Forest. Arnold responds, “Well, Jerry, you’re a whale of a lobbyist, and I’d like to give you a logging permit, I would. But this isn’t like burying toxic waste. People are going to notice those trees are gone.” The lobbyist offers a bribe, which Arnold accepts.

Lisa sees it happen and tears up her essay. She sits on the steps of the Capitol and envisions politicians as cats scratching each other’s backs and lobbyists as pigs feeding from a trough. Called to the microphone at the “Patriots of Tomorrow” awards banquet, Lisa reads her revised essay, now titled “Cesspool on the Potomac.” A whirlwind of reform-minded zeal follows. Congressman Arnold is caught accepting a bribe to allow oil drilling on Mount Rushmore and is arrested and removed from office. Lisa does not win the essay contest. Matt Groening, James L. Brooks, Sam Simon, and George Meyer, “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington,” *The Simpsons*, Season 3, Episode 2, originally aired September 26, 1991. This episode is loosely based on the movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

Congressman Arnold is corrupt, but the cartoon’s unpunished instrument of corruption is the lobbyist.

## 9.1 The Interest Group System

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this section, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What are interest groups?
2. What are the main types of interest groups?
3. What are the most important elements of interest groups?
4. What incentives encourage interest group membership?
5. How do interest groups recruit members?
6. How do the media portray unions and union activity?
7. How do interest groups influence elections?

**Interest groups**<sup>1</sup> are intermediaries linking people to government, and lobbyists work for them. These groups make demands on government and try to influence public policies in their favor. Their most important difference from political parties is that they do not seek elective office. Interest groups can be single entities, joint associations, and have individual members. The University of Texas at Austin is an educational institution. Its main purposes are teaching and research. Like other educational institutions, it is an interest group when it tries to influence government policies. These policies include government funding for facilities and student grants, loans, and work study. It may also try to influence laws and court decisions applying to research, admissions, gender equality in intercollegiate sports, and student records. It may ask members of Congress to earmark funds for some of its projects, thereby bypassing the normal competition with other universities for funds based on merit. James D. Savage, *Funding Science in America: Congress, Universities, and the Politics of the Academic Pork Barrel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Jeffrey Brainard and J. J. Hermes, “Colleges’ Earmarks Grow, Amid Criticism,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 28, 2008.

Single entities often join forces in associations. Associations represent their interests and make demands on government on their behalf. The University of Texas belongs to the Association of American Universities. General Electric (GE) belongs to over eighty trade associations, each representing a different industry such as mining, aerospace, and home

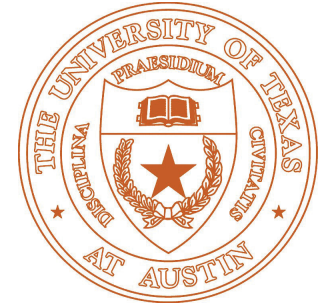
*Figure 9.1 University of Texas Logo (“Disciplina Praesidium Civitatis,” translated as “The cultivated mind is the*

1. Organizations that, on behalf of an interest or ideal, try to influence politics and public policies.

appliances. Kay Lehman Schlozman and John T. Tierney, *Organized Interests and American Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 72–73.

*guardian genius of democracy”*

Many interest groups have individuals as members. People join labor unions and professional organizations (e.g., associations for lawyers or political scientists) that claim to represent their interests.



## Types of Interest Groups

Interest groups can be divided into five types: economic, societal, ideological, public interest, and governmental.

*Devoted to education (and sports), universities try to influence government policies that affect their interests.*

### Economic Interest Groups

The major economic interest groups represent businesses, labor unions, and professions. Business interest groups consist of industries, corporations, and trade associations. Unions usually represent individual trades, such as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Most unions belong to an association, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).

Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ostraconlist/5261743505/>.

Economic interest groups represent every aspect of our economy, including agriculture, the arts, automobiles, banking, beverages, construction, defense, education, energy, finance, food, health, housing, insurance, law, media, medicine, pharmaceuticals, sports, telecommunications, transportation, travel, and utilities. These groups cover from head (i.e., the Headwear Institute of America) to toe (i.e., the American Podiatric Medical Association) and from soup (i.e., the Campbell Soup Company) to nuts (i.e., the Peanut Butter and Nut Processors Association). Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, *The Lobbyists: How Influence Peddlers Work Their Way in Washington* (New York: Times Books, 1993), 36.

### Societal Interest Groups

Societal interest groups focus on interests based on people’s characteristics, such as age, gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as religion and sexual preference. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is one of the oldest societal interest groups in the United States.

## Ideological Interest Groups

Ideological interest groups promote a reactionary, conservative, liberal, or radical political philosophy through research and advocacy. Interest groups that take stands on such controversial issues as abortion and gun control are considered ideological, although some might argue that they are actually public interest groups.

## Public Interest Groups

**Public interest groups**<sup>2</sup> work for widely accepted concepts of the common good, such as the family, human rights, and consumers. Although their goals are usually popular, some of their specific positions (e.g., environmental groups opposing offshore drilling for oil) may be controversial and challenged.

## Government Interest Groups

Government interest groups consist of local, state, and foreign governments. They seek to influence the relevant policies and expenditures of the federal government.

## Life Stages of Interest Groups

Interest groups commonly experience a life cycle of creation (or birth), growth and change (or evolution), and sometimes death.

### Creation

As the United States has become more complex with new technologies, products, services, businesses, and professions, the US government has become more involved in the economy and society. People with common interests organize to solicit support and solutions to their problems from government. Policies enacted in response to the efforts of these groups affect other people, who then form groups to seek government intervention for themselves. These groups may give rise to additional groups. This is known as disturbance theory. It was developed by David B. Truman in *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), chap. 4; and it was amplified by Robert H. Salisbury in “An Exchange Theory of Interest Groups,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 13 (1969): 1–32.

Some interest groups are created in reaction to an event or a perceived grievance. The National Right to Life Committee (NRLC) was founded in 1973 in response to the US Supreme Court’s *Roe v. Wade* decision earlier that year legalizing abortion.

2. Organizations that work for the common good as they define it, such as, for consumers, the environment, or the family or reform of government.

However, groups may form long after the reasons for establishing them are obvious. The NAACP was not founded until 1909 even though segregation of and discrimination against black people had existed for many years.

## Link

Oral Arguments in *Roe v. Wade*

Listen to oral arguments in the *Roe v. Wade* at [http://www.oyez.org/cases/1970-1979/1971/1971\\_70\\_18/arguments](http://www.oyez.org/cases/1970-1979/1971/1971_70_18/arguments).

**Interest group entrepreneurs**<sup>3</sup> usually are important in the creation of groups. Often they are responding to events in their lives. After a drunk driver killed one of her daughters, Candy Lightner founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) in 1980. She thereby identified **latent interests**<sup>4</sup>: people who could be grouped together and organized to pursue what she made them realize was a shared goal, punishing and getting drunk drivers off the road. She was helped by widespread media coverage that brought public attention to her loss and cause.

## Evolution and Demise

Interest groups can change over time. The National Rifle Association (NRA) started out as a sports organization in the late nineteenth century dedicated to improving its members' marksmanship. It became an advocate for law and order in the 1960s, until its official support for the 1968 Gun Control Act brought dissension in its ranks. Since the election of new leaders in 1977, the NRA has focused on the Second Amendment right to bear arms, opposing legislation restricting the sale or distribution of guns and ammunition. Scott H. Ainsworth, *Analyzing Interest Groups: Group Influence on People and Policies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 87–88.

Interest groups can also die. They may run out of funds. Their issues may lose popularity or become irrelevant. Slavery no longer exists in the United States and thus neither does the American Anti-Slavery Society.

3. People who see the need for and create an interest group.

4. Shared goals that an interest group can organize people to pursue.

## How Interest Groups Are Organized

Interest groups have leaders and staff. They control the group, decide its policy objectives, and recruit and represent members.

### Leaders and Staff

Leaders and top staff usually run the interest group. They do so because they command its resources and information flow and have the experience and expertise to deal with public policies that are often complex and technical. Almost a century ago, Robert Michels identified this control by an organization's leaders and staff and called it "the iron law of oligarchy." Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1959; first published 1915 by Free Press).

This oligarchy, or rule by the few, applies to single-entity interest groups and to most associations. Their leaders are appointed or elected and select the staff. Even in many membership organizations, the people who belong do not elect the leaders and have little input when the leaders decide policy objectives. Scott H. Ainsworth, *Analyzing Interest Groups: Group Influence on People and Policies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 114–15. Their participation is limited to sending in dues, expressing opinions and, if membership is voluntary, leaving when dissatisfied.

### Voluntary Membership

People join membership interest groups voluntarily or because they have no choice.

When membership is voluntary, interest groups must recruit and try to retain members. Members help fund the group's activities, legitimize its objectives, and add credibility with the media.

Some people may not realize or accept that they have shared interests with others on a particular issue. For example, many young adults download music from the Internet, but few of them have joined the [Future of Music Coalition](#), which is developing ways to do this legally. Others may be unwilling to court conflict by joining a group representing oppressed minorities or espousing controversial or unpopular views even when they agree with the group's views. Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, "Appearances Can Be Deceiving: Self Selection, Social Group Identification, and Political Mobilization," *Rationality and Society* 9 (1977): 132–33.

People do not need to join an interest group voluntarily when they can benefit from its activities without becoming a member. This is the problem of collective goods. Laws successfully lobbied for by environmental organizations that lead to cleaner air and water benefit members and nonmembers alike. However, the latter get a free ride. See Mancur Olson Jr., *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

There are three types of incentives that, alone or in combination, may overcome this **free-rider problem**<sup>5</sup>. A **purposive incentive**<sup>6</sup> leads people voluntarily to join and contribute money to a group because they want to help the group achieve its goals. Membership in the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) increased by one hundred thousand in the eighteen months following the 9/11 attacks as the group raised concerns that the government's antiterrorism campaign was harming civil liberties. Eric Lichtblau, "F.B.I. Leader Wins a Few at Meeting of A.C.L.U.," *New York Times*, June 14, 2003, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/14/us/fbi-leader-wins-a-few-at-meeting-of-aclu.html?ref=ericlichtblau>. In addition, people may join groups, such as the Union of Concerned Scientists, because of a **solidary incentive**<sup>7</sup>. The motivation to join the group stems from the pleasure of interacting with like-minded individuals and the gratification of publicly expressing one's beliefs.

People may also join groups to obtain **material incentives**<sup>8</sup> available only to members. AARP, formerly the American Association of Retired Persons, has around thirty-five million members. It obtains this huge number by charging a nominal annual membership fee and offering such material incentives as health insurance and reduced prices for prescription drugs. The group's magazine is sent to members and includes tax advice, travel and vacation information, and discounts.

### Recruitment

One way interest groups recruit members is through media coverage. The appealingly named Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a consumer organization that focuses on food and nutrition issues, produces quality research, and has media savvy. It is a valuable source of expertise and information for journalists. The frequent and favorable news coverage it receives brings the group and its activities to the public's attention and encourages people to support and join it.

News coverage of an interest group does not always have to be favorable to attract members. Oftentimes, stories about the NRA in major newspapers are negative. Presenting this negative coverage as bias and hostility against and attacks on gun owners, the group's leaders transform it into purposive and solidary incentives. They use e-mail "to power membership mobilization, fund raising, single-issue voting and the other actions-in-solidarity that contribute to [their] success." Brian Anse Patrick, *The National Rifle Association and the Media: The Motivating Force of Negative Coverage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 9.

Groups also make personalized appeals to recruit members and solicit financial contributions. Names of people who might be sympathetic to a group are obtained

- 5. A situation in which people can benefit from an interest group's accomplishments without joining it.
- 6. When people join a group to accomplish its goals.
- 7. When people join a group for friendship and belonging.
- 8. When people join a group for the goods and services it provides.



by purchasing mailing lists from magazines, other groups, and political parties. Recruitment letters and e-mails often feature scare statements, such as a claim that Social Security is in jeopardy.

Interest groups recruit members, publicize their activities, and pursue their policy objectives through the new media. The Save Our Environment Action Center consists of twenty national environmental groups pooling their databases of supporters and establishing a website. Through this network, people can receive informational newsletters via e-mail, sign petitions, and contact their representatives.

### Required Membership

Employment in most automobile plants requires that workers are members of the International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW). Workers fought to establish unions to improve their wages, working conditions, and job opportunities. One way of achieving these objectives was to require all workers at a plant to be union members. But union membership has plummeted as the United States has moved from a manufacturing to a service economy and employers have effectively discouraged unionization. Many jobs do not have unions for workers to join whether they want to or not. Today only about 12 percent of workers belong to a union compared to a high of 35.5 percent in 1945. Only 7 percent of private sector workers belong to a union. A majority of union members now work for the government.

### Media Depictions of Unions

One reason for the decline of unions is their mainly negative portrayal in the mass media. William J. Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1992). There are hardly any labor-beat reporters in the news media, so union officials are infrequently used as sources and are consequently unable to frame union news to their advantage.

Strikes are the union action most often shown in the news. These are usually framed not as legitimate collective tactics to improve wages and working conditions, but as hurting or inconveniencing consumers by disrupting services (e.g., suspending classes in elementary and high schools) and causing the cancellation of events (e.g., professional sporting games). For an exception, see Deepa Kumar, *Outside The Box: Corporate Media, Globalization, and the UPS Strike* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

Unions are rare in movies. *Norma Rae* (1979), *Matewan* (1987), and the documentary *Harlan County, USA* (1977), favorably portray workers' struggles to organize and strike for better working conditions, wages, and security, against exploiting employers. But in the classic union film, the Academy Award-winning *On the Waterfront* (1954), the union is corrupt, violent, and linked to organized crime; the union leaders exploit members to enrich themselves.

### Representation

Groups claim to represent the interests of their members or constituents, but these interests may conflict. In an extensive study, Dara Z. Strolovitch found that civil rights organizations prioritized the interests of their middle-class members over the interests of the poor and working class. For example, they pushed for affirmative action rather than welfare and antipoverty policies. *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

A problem for AARP is that, aside from being fifty or over, its members may have little in common. In 1988, AARP supported legislation setting up a catastrophic health insurance plan in Medicare to provide insurance for elderly people faced with huge medical bills for major illnesses. After the plan went into effect, many seniors objected to the increase in their Medicare premiums and an annual surtax of as high as \$800. Their complaints were widely covered in the media. Congress repealed the program the next year.

Even when members share a group's general goals they may reject some of its policy proposals or tactics. In 2009, Apple quit the US Chamber of Commerce because the chamber opposed global-warming legislation.

### Interest Groups and Elections

Interest groups become involved in elections to influence policymakers. They may contribute funds, make independent expenditures, advocate issues, and mobilize voters. Wealthy groups help pay for the presidential nominating conventions and the presidential inauguration. They give funds to political parties because "by helping party leaders retain or regain control of the House or Senate, policymaking rewards...follow." Michael M. Franz, *Choices and Changes: Interest Groups in the Electoral Process* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008), 7.

## Endorsing Candidates

Interest groups may endorse candidates for office and, if they have the resources, mobilize members and sympathizers to work and vote for them. President Bill Clinton blamed the NRA for Al Gore losing the 2000 presidential election because it influenced voters in several states, including Arkansas, West Virginia, and Gore's home state of Tennessee. Had any of these states gone for Gore, he would have won the election.

Interest groups can promote candidates through television and radio advertisements. During the 2004 presidential election, the NRA ran a thirty-minute infomercial in battleground states favoring President George W. Bush and calling his opponent "the most anti-gun presidential nominee in United States history." In 2008, the NRA issued ads endorsing Republican presidential candidate John McCain and his running mate, Sarah Palin.

Endorsements do carry risks. If the endorsed candidate loses, the unendorsed winner is likely to be unsympathetic to the group. Thus relatively few interest groups endorse presidential candidates and most endorsements are based on ideology.

## Funding Candidates

Made possible by the 1971 Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA), **political action committees (PACs)**<sup>9</sup> are a means for organizations, including interest groups, to raise funds and contribute to candidates in federal elections. Approximately one-third of the funds received by candidates for the House of Representatives and one-fifth of funds for Senate candidates come from PACs. The details of election funding are discussed further in Chapter 11 "Campaigns and Elections".

However, in January 2010 the Supreme Court ruled that the government cannot ban political spending by corporations in candidate elections. The court majority justified the decision on the grounds of the First Amendment's free speech clause. The dissenters argued that allowing unlimited spending by corporations on political advertising would corrupt democracy. The case is *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, No. 08-205. See also Adam Liptak, "Justices, 5-4, Reject Corporate Spending Limit," *New York Times*, January 21, 2010, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/22/us/politics/22scotus.html>.

Many interest groups value candidates' power above their ideology or voting record. Most PAC funds, especially from corporations, go to incumbents. Chairs and members of congressional committees and subcommittees who make policies

9. Organizations for raising and contributing campaign funds.

relevant to the group are particularly favored. The case of Enron, although extreme, graphically reveals such funding. Of the 248 members of Congress on committees that investigated the 2002 accounting scandals and collapse of the giant corporation, 212 had received campaign contributions from Enron or its accounting firm, Arthur Andersen. Don Van Natta Jr., “Enron’s Collapse: Campaign Finance; Enron or Andersen Made Donations to Almost All Their Congressional Investigators,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2002, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/25/business/enron-s-collapse-campaign-finance-enron-andersen-made-donations-almost-all-their.html>.

Some interest groups do fund candidates on the basis of ideology and policy preference. Ideological and public interest groups base support on candidates’ views even if their defeat is likely. Pro-life organizations mainly support Republicans; pro-choice organizations mainly support Democrats.

The interest group–candidate relationship is a two-way street. Many candidates actively solicit support from interest groups on the basis of an existing or the promise of a future relationship. Candidates obtain some of the funds necessary for their campaigns from interest groups; the groups who give them money get the opportunity to make their case to sympathetic legislators. A businessman defending his company’s PAC is quoted as saying, “Talking to politicians is fine, but with a little money they hear you better.” Mark Green, “Political PAC-Man,” *New Republic* 187, no. 24 (December 13, 1982): 18.

Much better. The [Center for Responsive Politics](#) shows correlations between campaign contributions and congressional voting. After the House of Representatives voted 220–215 in 2003 to pass the Medicare drug bill, the organization reported that “lawmakers who voted to approve the legislation have raised an average of roughly twice as much since 1999 from individuals and PACs associated with health insurers, HMOs [Health Maintenance Organizations] and pharmaceutical manufacturers as those who voted against the bill.” Center for Responsive Politics, “Money and Medicare: Campaign Contributions Correlate with Vote,” *OpenSecrets Blog*, November 24, 2003, [http://www.opensecrets.org/capital\\_eye/inside.php?ID=113](http://www.opensecrets.org/capital_eye/inside.php?ID=113).

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Interest groups are diverse in membership and purpose. They are created, may evolve in composition and goals, and sometimes die out. Interest group entrepreneurs may be integral to the creation of interest groups. Different types of incentives encourage interest group membership, and organizations use various methods to recruit new members. The media are particularly critical of labor unions. Interest groups try to influence elections in order to advance their policy objectives.

### EXERCISES

1. Why do you think some interest groups have a bad reputation? What social purpose do interest groups serve?
2. Do you support any interest groups? What made you decide to support them?
3. What are the different ways interest groups can influence policies? Do you think interest groups should be allowed to contribute as much as they want to political campaigns?

## 9.2 Lobbying: The Art of Influence

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this section, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What is lobbying?
2. How do lobbyists gain access to public officials?
3. What is grassroots lobbying?
4. How do lobbyists attempt to influence Congress, the president, the bureaucracy, and the courts?
5. How is lobbying regulated?

Interest groups employ **lobbyists**<sup>10</sup> to protect and advance their interests. Lobbyists do this through **lobbying**<sup>11</sup>: informing, persuading, and pressuring policymakers to support the group's objectives.

The more policies the government proposes, the more lobbyists become involved. In response to the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Obama administration proposed to overhaul the regulation and increase oversight of the financial system. This generated a bonanza of business for lobbyists. Lobbyists represented banks, mutual funds, hedge funds, and credit card companies as well as companies in manufacturing, retail, and service who could be affected by changes in the laws.

### The Lobbyists

There are as many as eighty thousand lobbyists in Washington, DC. John R. Wright, *Interest Groups and Congress* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 9–10. Some of them go through a revolving door between government service and lobbying. Former presidential aides are prominent and powerful among them. More than two hundred lobbyists are former members of Congress. Others have worked for congressional committees or the agencies they now lobby. These former public servants have expertise, access, and contacts among policymakers.

This move from public service to private enrichment, cashing in on connections, is grist for the news media. The *New York Times* reported that Wall Street's financial firms had more than 125 former members of Congress and congressional aides

10. Representatives of interest groups who try to influence public officials.

11. Activities that lobbyists perform, such as informing, persuading, and pressuring in order to influence policymakers to support a group's interests.

working to limit the policies proposed by the Obama administration and the Democratic majority in Congress to overhaul and intensify regulation of the industry. They included Richard H. Baker, a former chairman of a subcommittee of the House Financial Services Committee. As president of the hedge funds' Managed Funds Association, Baker led the fight to prevent government oversight of hedge funds. The association spent \$3.7 million in 2009 lobbying federal officials. Eric Lichtblau, "Lawmakers Regulate Banks, Then Flock to Them," *New York Times*, April 13, 2010, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/14/business/14lobby.html>.

The *Times* later reported that the government agencies (such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, the Office of Thrift Supervision, and the Federal Reserve) that were deciding on the at least 243 regulations to implement the new, 2,300-page banking law were being lobbied by 148 of their former employees, who had recently been hired away from the agencies. Asked by the *Times*' reporter if he had an edge in lobbying, one of them replied, "The answer is yes, it does. If it didn't, I wouldn't be able to justify getting out of bed in the morning and charging the outrageous fees that we charge our clients, which they willingly pay." Eric Lichtblau, "Ex-Regulators Get Set to Lobby on New Financial Rules," *New York Times*, July 27, 2010, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/28/business/28lobby.html>.

Lobbyists also take positions in the federal government. They bring expertise from their jobs and usually take a pay cut. They are familiar with and may be sympathetic to their industry's policy agenda. Before he became President George W. Bush's chief of staff, Andrew Card was General Motors' chief lobbyist in Washington, DC.

## What Lobbyists Do

Lobbying is done by members of the group's or association's staff, a law or lobbying firm that specializes in representing clients before government, or both. In addition to lobbying, firms may offer such services as public relations, research, polling, direct-mail, and grassroots campaigns. The Center for Responsive Politics has compiled a comprehensive database of lobbyist activities. "Lobbying Database," Center for Responsive Politics, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.opensecrets.org/lobbyists/index.php>.

## Gaining Access

12. The opportunity to meet with and communicate with policymakers.

Lobbyists need **access**<sup>12</sup> to policymakers in order to make their cases. But public officials are not obliged to meet with lobbyists, take their telephone calls, or look at

their e-mail messages. Access is granted when the policymaker has received campaign contributions from the group, is sympathetic to its interests, or the group's policy objectives are important to constituents back home.

Ensuring access often involves building relationships. Lobbyists attend elected officials' fund-raisers and receptions and hand over campaign checks from their groups. They meet policymakers informally at dinners, golf games, sporting events, parties, and weddings. They enable lawmakers to fly on corporate jets at discounted rates and then join them for the ride. However, legislation has limited some of these benefits.

### Providing Information

After being granted access, lobbyists try to convince public officials to support or accept or, at least, not oppose the interest group's policy positions. They provide three types of information. First, they provide information about current or proposed laws and regulations that are relevant to the group's interests. Second, they supply political information about whether the policymakers' constituents would be affected by a new policy and whether public opinion would support or oppose a policy change. Third, they offer technical information about the implications and possible effects of policy proposals.

### Lobbying Congress

Some interest groups encourage their members and others to contact their legislators on behalf of a policy position the group advocates. This is called **grassroots lobbying**<sup>13</sup>. Hired firms use data banks, telephone banks, and direct mail to contact people likely to be responsive to the group. Messages are crafted through focus groups and surveys. All this costs money. So grassroots lobbying is mainly done by amply funded interest groups on major public policy issues like the minimum wage.

Lobbyists may have extensive involvement with members of Congress and their staff in personal, committee, and leadership offices. Some lobbyists intervene from the start of the congressional policymaking process, encourage or discourage the introduction of proposed legislation, and try to influence its contents. They may draft a bill and work with congressional staff to sign up cosponsors. They may help organize congressional hearings, decide on the timing of the hearings, identify people to testify, write testimony for some of them, and provide questions for legislators to ask witnesses. Rogan Kersh, "Corporate Lobbyists as Political Actors: A View from the Field," in *Interest Group Politics*, 6th ed., ed. Allan J. Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2002), 227.

13. A strategy pursued by interest groups to influence elected officials by having their constituents contact them.



Lobbyists may be involved with the subcommittee or committee markup of a bill. They may attempt to modify its language, add amendments, and work to have the bill approved or defeated by subcommittee or committee vote. They try to persuade members to vote for or against the bill on the floor.

These activities take place in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as the House-Senate conference committee held to reconcile and resolve differences between bills passed by each chamber, and in the final House and Senate votes.

Lobbyists can also try to influence the amount of money Congress appropriates for agencies and programs. After the US Department of Justice brought an antitrust lawsuit against Microsoft in October 1997, the company called upon lawmakers to approve the lowest possible budget for the department. Its objectives were to punish the Justice Department and reduce its enforcement funds.

### **Lobbying the President**

Depending on personal preferences, ideological inclinations, and political needs, the president may be in contact with business, industry, labor, and other interest group leaders. Normally, however, communications with interest groups are made on the president's behalf by individual members of the White House staff and by the White House Office of Public Engagement and, on occasion, Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

Presidents can cater to interest groups they favor or that have supported them or whose support they seek by pushing policies the interest groups desire. Usually, these are policies the president favors anyway. For example, President George W. Bush imposed restrictions on stem cell research, while President Barack Obama removed these restrictions shortly after taking office.

Interest groups supporting a presidential proposal can try to convince members of Congress with whom they have influence to vote in its favor. The White House may solicit such support as the George W. Bush administration did to gain the endorsement of AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) and an expensive advertising campaign in support of the bill adding drug coverage to Medicare. But interest groups may not be permanent or even reliable allies. For example, in 2005 AARP opposed President Bush's proposal to "reform" Social Security.

## Lobbying Governmental Agencies

Bureaucrats are important to interest groups because they usually have leeway to decide what laws mean and how to administer and implement them. For example, the guidelines bureaucrats issued to carry out the Medicare drug benefit determined which drugs and medical devices would be covered. Lobbyists for doctors, hospitals, insurers, drug companies, pharmacies, and medical equipment manufacturers contacted bureaucrats directly about these decisions. Robert Pear, "Medicare Law Prompts a Rush for Lobbyists," *New York Times*, August 23, 2005, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/23/politics/23health.html>.

In a dramatic example of the importance of regulators' discretion and the influence of groups, Toyota saved roughly \$100 million by negotiating with regulators at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to limit the recall of 2007 Toyota Camry and Lexus ES models for sudden acceleration. Toyota was allowed to recall the floor mats it claimed could become lodged under the accelerator pedal. Micheline Maynard, "House Panel Says Toyota Misled Public on Safety," *New York Times*, February 23, 2010, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/23/business/global/23toyota.html?ref=michelinemaynard>.

## Lobbying the Courts

Interest groups are affected by court decisions. It matters to them who the judges are in terms of their legal philosophy, policy preferences, and partisan affiliation. Interest groups who have the attention of the White House seek to influence the president's selection of federal judges by suggesting candidates and screening those on the short list.

Groups for or against nominees lobby senators to approve, delay, or reject confirmation. Media-oriented tactics include testifying at hearings of the Senate Judiciary Committee, feeding negative or positive information about nominees to senators and reporters, sponsoring radio and television advertisements, and organizing grassroots campaigns. Lauren Cohen Bell, *Warring Factions: Interest Groups, Money, and the New Politics of Senate Confirmation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002).

Interest groups pursue their goals in court. For the advantages and disadvantages of going to the courts, see Julianna S. Gonen, *Litigation as Lobbying* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003). They may challenge a policy, appeal adverse decisions by other branches of government, and file suits against public officials to require them to take or refrain from taking some action. The US Chamber of Commerce's

National Chamber Litigation Center represents the interests of business before the courts.

Certain interest groups use the courts as the main way to try to achieve their objectives. For example, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) often brings cases before the courts to assert and protect constitutional rights. During the 1970s the ACLU's Women's Rights Project, headed by Ruth Bader Ginsburg (later to be appointed to the Court by President Clinton), filed the majority of cases that challenged discrimination against women and were heard by the Supreme Court.

Interest groups may also go to court when they lack influence in the legislative and executive branches. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) mounted a litigation campaign against segregation laws, culminating in its notable victory in the Supreme Court's 1954 unanimous school desegregation decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

### Link

*Brown v. Board of Education*

For more information on *Brown v. Board of Education*, see [http://www.oyez.org/cases/1950-1959/1952/1952\\_1](http://www.oyez.org/cases/1950-1959/1952/1952_1).

## Regulation of Lobbying

As the opening anecdote from *The Simpsons* illustrates, interest groups in general and lobbyists in particular receive bad press. The media send out a drumbeat of criticism featuring stories of corruption and scandals in the relations of policymakers and lobbyists.

The media's negative depictions of lobbying and the concern of members of Congress to refute accusations of being beholden to "special interest groups" (a derogatory term) have produced proposals to regulate lobbyists and lobbying. These are designed to correct abuses, placate the media, and reassure the public. They increase the amount of information about and the visibility of lobbying, eliminate the appearance of corruption, and may reduce lobbyists' influence over the policymaking process.

## Comparing Coverage

Jack Abramoff

Jack Abramoff's meteoric rise began in 1995, soon after the Republicans took over Congress and interest groups and lobbying firms hired lobbyists connected to Republican legislators and conservative organizations. His lobbying successes started with keeping the government of the Northern Mariana Islands, an American territory in the Pacific, exempt from American labor laws; the islands' factories could pay their workers a pittance yet still label their products "Made in America." Then he saved a Native American tribe, the Mississippi Band of Choctaws, hundreds of millions in possible taxes by helping defeat a proposal to tax casino revenues. Other Native American tribes hired him, as he worked to defeat legislation to subject them to state taxes.

Initial media coverage of Abramoff was favorable. On July 3, 2000, the *Wall Street Journal* published a front-page story describing his "money, methods and results" as "exceptional." Jim VandeHei, "Rain Dance: Mississippi Choctaw Find an Unlikely Ally In a GOP Stalwart...," *Wall Street Journal*, July 3, 2000. On April 2002 the *New York Times* published a similar front-page story, with quotes such as "I call Jack Abramoff, and I get results" and, from the lobbyist himself, "All of my political work...is driven by philosophical interests, not by a desire to gain wealth." David E. Rosenbaum, "At \$500 an Hour, Lobbyist's Influence Rises with G.O.P.," *New York Times*, April 3, 2002, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A01E6DC103AF930A35757C0A9649C8B63>. Both stories included criticisms of the lobbyist but depicted the man and his power and accomplishments positively overall.

On February 22, 2004, a front-page story in the *Washington Post* exposed Abramoff in the first of a series of investigative reports that would continue over three years. Susan Schmidt, "A Jackpot from Indian Gaming Tribes," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2004, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A60906-2004Feb21?language=printer>. According to an article in *Vanity Fair*, "Abramoff believes the media's negative coverage, leading to his downfall, began with competing Republican lobbyists who coveted his clientele and fed damaging information about him to the newspaper." David Margolick, "Washington's Invisible Man," *Vanity Fair*, April 2006, 247.

The stories revealed that Abramoff had exploited the Native American tribes. Casino-rich tribes had paid him and a public relations firm more than \$45 million over three years. Abramoff had used some of the money to bribe members of Congress, make campaign contributions, hold fundraising events, and provide lavish trips, seats in sports boxes, and dinners for members of Congress as well as jobs for their relatives.

Adding to Abramoff's woes, Republican Senator John McCain held several days of media-covered hearings in 2004 and 2005 exposing his activities. According to Abramoff, McCain's aides heightened the negative media coverage by doling out embarrassing e-mails to the press in which the lobbyist ridiculed his Native American clients as "morons" and "monkeys" and threatened to crush rival lobbyists like bugs. David Margolick, "Washington's Invisible Man," *Vanity Fair*, April 2006, 200.

On January 3, 2006, Abramoff pled guilty to fraud, tax evasion, and conspiracy to bribe public officials.

The first comprehensive lobbying regulation was enacted in 1946. The Legislative Reorganization Act required lobbyists to register their affiliation and record their finances. US Government Printing Office, "Legislative Reorganization Acts: Provisions of the Legislative Reorganization Acts of 1946 and 1970 Applicable to Both Houses," accessed April 4, 2011, <http://www.gpo.gov/congress/house/hd106-320/pdf/hrm85.pdf>. Later, the 1995 Lobbying Disclosure Act required lobbying firms and lobbyists to register with Congress and file reports twice per year listing their compensation, clients, lobbying expenses, and issues they are following for each of their clients. US House of Representatives, Office of the Law Revision Counsel, "2 USC Chapter 26: Disclosure of Lobbying Activities," accessed April 4, 2011, <http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/02C26.txt>. Only trivial gifts from lobbyists to legislators are allowed. Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, Pub. L. No. 104-65, 109 Stat. 691-706 (December 19, 1995).

In 2006, a series of corruption scandals contributed to the Republicans losing control of Congress. During the election Democrats pledged to reform the culture of Washington, DC. In 2007, the Democrat-controlled Congress passed and President George W. Bush signed a law establishing new ethics and lobbying rules for Congress. Its main provisions bar members from accepting gifts, meals, or trips from lobbyists or the organizations that employ them, requires the filing of

lobbying reports on the Internet, and increases the civil and criminal penalties for failing to comply with lobbying laws.

When Barack Obama became president in 2009, he issued an executive order forbidding appointees in every executive agency from accepting gifts, participating for two years on any matter they had worked on in prior employment, lobbying Congress for two years after leaving the administration, and ever lobbying the Obama administration. “Executive Order—Ethics Commitments by Executive Branch Personnel,” January 21, 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Executive-Order-Ethics-Commitments](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Executive-Order-Ethics-Commitments). However, the manipulation of legal loopholes and a lack of stringent enforcement can undermine the effectiveness of any lobbying regulations.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Interests groups use lobbyists to influence public officials. Lobbyists seek access to public officials in all government branches. Lobbyists try to influence government officials by providing information regarding their group’s interests and through grassroots lobbying. Many lobbyists are former public officials. The media are often critical of lobbying, and various attempts have been made to regulate lobbyists and lobbying. The manipulation of legal loopholes and the lack of stringent enforcement sometimes undermine lobbying regulations.

### EXERCISES

1. Do you think it matters that so many government servants become lobbyists and vice versa? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a “revolving door” between lobbying and government service?
2. What makes lobbyists valuable to their clients? What can lobbyists do for groups seeking to influence politics?
3. How are lobbyists regulated? What can lobbyists still legally do under lobbying regulations?

## 9.3 Interest Groups and the Political System

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this section, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What factors determine an interest group's success?
2. What are the levels of influence that interest groups can possess in their relations with policymakers?
3. What is pluralism?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of business interest groups?

In the book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt argue that the activities of interest groups, notably the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, are one reason why, since World War II, the United States has provided more direct economic and military support to Israel than any other ally and pursues a policy of preserving and enhancing Israel's security. John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007). See also the critique by Robert C. Lieberman, "The 'Israel Lobby' and American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 2 (June 2009): 235–57; the rebuttal by John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Blind and the Elephant in the Room: Robert Lieberman and the Israel Lobby," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 2 (June 2009): 259–73; and the rejoinder by Robert Lieberman, "Rejoinder to Mearsheimer and Walt," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 2 (June 2009): 275–81. This raises the question of why interest groups succeed or fail to achieve their policy objectives.

### Why Interest Groups Are (or Are Not) Successful

The main factors determining an interest group's effectiveness are its assets, objectives, alliances, the visibility of its involvement in policy decisions, and its responses to political change and crises, plus, of course, the media's depiction of it.

#### Assets

Successful interest groups have prestige, respected leadership, political skills, and ample finances. The Business Roundtable, composed of the chief executives of the two hundred leading corporations, has them all and thus has access to and

influence on policymakers. Monetary assets allow groups to contribute to political campaigns through their political action committees (PACs).

The status and distribution of an interest group's members also contribute to its success. Automobile dealers are influential and live, as do their employees, in congressional districts across the country. After President Barack Obama proposed putting automobile loans under the oversight of a new federal consumer authority aimed at protecting borrowers from abusive lender, the dealers' lobbying arm, the National Automobile Dealers Association, organized opposition, including trips to Washington for some of the eighteen thousand dealers to meet and plead their case with their legislators. Eric Lichtblau, "Auto Dealers Campaign to Fend Off Regulation," *New York Times*, May 16, 2010, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/17/business/17dealers.html>. Congress exempted auto dealers from the regulation.

### Objectives

The ease or difficulty of achieving a group's goals can determine its success. Preventing legislation from being enacted is usually easier than passing it. In a comprehensive study of interest group activities during the last two years of the Clinton administration and the first two years of the George W. Bush administration, researchers found that although some advocates succeed eventually in changing policy, "[t]he vast bulk of lobbying in Washington has to do not with the creation of new programs, but rather with the adjustment of existing programs or with the maintenance of programs just as they are." Frank R. Baumgartner, Jeffrey M. Berry, Marje Hojnacki, David C. Kimball, and Beth L. Leech, *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 240. See also R. Kenneth Godwin and Barry J. Seldon, "What Corporations Really Want from Government: The Public Provision of Private Goods," in *Interest Group Politics*, 6th ed., ed. Allan J. Cigler and Burdett A. Loomis (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2002), 205–224.

Moreover, legislation enacted over the opposition of powerful interest groups, tends to be watered down. Or the political costs of its passage are so heavy that its proponents in the presidential administration and Congress are discouraged from challenging the groups again.

### Alliances

Interest groups sometimes cooperate with other groups to help them achieve a policy objective they could not accomplish alone. A coalition expands resources, broadens expertise, and adds to the credibility of the policy objectives. Alliances are



often of natural allies such as the National Restaurant Association, the American Nursery and Landscape Association, and the National Council of Agricultural Employers, who united to oppose restrictions on immigration and penalties on businesses that employ illegal immigrants. But they can be made up of strange bedfellows, as when the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the National Rifle Association (NRA) allied to oppose the US Department of Justice putting raw, unsubstantiated data into a national computer network. For the ACLU, it was a violation of people's right to privacy; for the NRA, it was a move toward denying people the right to bear arms. Jeffrey M. Berry, and Clyde Wilcox, *The Interest Group Society*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Longman, 2008), 188–190.

### Visibility of Policy Involvement

Interest groups are often most successful when their activities are unreported by the media, unscrutinized by most policymakers, and hidden from the public. Opposition to a group's activities is difficult when they are not visible. As one lobbyist observed, "A lobby is like a night flower, it thrives in the dark and dies in the sun." Jeffrey Goldberg, "Real Insiders," *New Yorker*, July 4, 2005, accessed March 23, 2011, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/07/04/050704fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/07/04/050704fa_fact).

In what are called **iron triangles**<sup>14</sup>, or subgovernments, policy on a subject is often made by a relatively few people from Congress, the bureaucracy, and interest groups. A classic iron triangle has been veterans' affairs policy. Members of Congress chairing the relevant committees and subcommittees and their aides, key agency administrators from the US Department of Veterans Affairs, and representatives from interest groups such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) have interacted and dominated policymaking. J. Leiper Freeman, *The Political Process: Bureau-Legislative Committee Relations*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 1965). This policymaking has taken place with low visibility and very little opposition to the benefits provided for veterans. In general, the news media pay little attention to iron triangles in the absence of conflict and controversy, and interest groups are likely to achieve many of their objectives.

### Political Change and Crises

Whether interest groups defend what they have or go on the offense to gain new benefits often depends on who is in control of the government. Some interest groups' goals are supported or opposed far more by one political party than another. A new president or a change in party control of Congress usually benefits some groups while putting others at a disadvantage. The Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in the 2010 election put a brake on new regulation of business by Congress, reduced funds for regulators to hire staff and enforce regulation, and limited investigations of industry practices.

14. Congressional committees or subcommittees, bureaucratic agencies, and interest groups that together dominate policymaking in a policy area oftentimes with little visibility.

Crises, especially ones extensively depicted by the media, often involve politicians and interest groups trying to achieve or prevent policy changes. Looking to exploit the horrific BP (British Petroleum) oil spill of 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico (which was widely covered in the media and replete with images of the oil-infested waters and oil-coated beaches and wildlife), environmentalists and their congressional allies worked for “measures to extend bans on new offshore drilling, strengthen safety and environmental safeguards, and raise to \$10 billion or more the cap on civil liability for an oil producer in a spill.” Eric Lichtblau and Jad Mouawad, “Oil Companies Weigh Strategies to Fend Off Tougher Regulations,” *New York Times*, June 2, 2010, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/03/us/03lobby.html>. Opposing them were the oil and gas industry, which, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, spent \$174.8 million on lobbying in 2009, and its allies in Congress from such oil states as Texas and Louisiana.

### **Relations between Interest Groups and Policymakers**

When viewed overall, there is a hierarchy in the influence of relations between interest groups and policymakers. These categories come from Samuel J. Eldersveld, “American Interest Groups,” in *Interest Groups on Four Continents*, ed. Henry W. Ehrmann (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1958), 187.

- At the top, the interest group makes policy. This is uncommon.
- More common, the group maintains close political relations with policymakers.
- The group has an unchallengeable veto status over some governmental decisions, for example, over a presidential appointment.
- The group receives some attention from policymakers but mainly has a pressure relationship with them.
- The group has only a potential reprisal relationship with policymakers; it can threaten to oppose a member of Congress at the next election.
- At the bottom of the ladder, rejected by policymakers, the group is left to agitate and resist; its public demonstrations usually signify its inability to achieve its objectives by less visible means.

The relationships between interest groups and policymakers vary depending on the administration in power. Energy companies had a close political support and referral relationship with the George W. Bush administration but primarily a pressure relationship with the Obama administration. Relationships also vary by subject. For example, a Democratic president’s choice to head the US Department of Labor may have to be acceptable to the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), but the union organization has little influence over other cabinet appointments.

## Who Benefits from Interest Groups?

In Federalist No. 10, James Madison warns of the dangers of factions: “[A] number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” James Madison, “Federalist #10,” in Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (New York: New American Library, 1961), 78; see also Library of Congress, THOMAS, “Federalist No. 10,” accessed April 4, 2011, [http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed\\_10.html](http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fed_10.html). Madison believed that factions were inevitable, because their causes were “sown in the nature of man.” James Madison, “Federalist #10,” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: New American Library, 1961), 79.

Madison’s factions are not exactly today’s interest groups. Indeed, interest groups, by representing diverse segments of society, offset one of Madison’s concerns—the domination of the majority. Nonetheless, his warning raises important questions about the effects of interest groups.

### Pluralism: Competition among Groups

Briefly stated, **pluralism**<sup>15</sup> is the theory that competition among interest groups produces compromise and balance among competing policy preferences. For pluralists, the abundance of interest groups, the competition between them, and their representation of interests in society are inherent in American democracy. Bargaining between groups and ever-changing group alliances achieve a desirable dispersion of power or at least an acceptable balancing of the various interests in society. See Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); also Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908); and William P. Browne, *Groups, Interests, and U.S. Public Policy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1998).

15. The theory that interest groups’ competition leads to policy balance through compromise and negotiation.

16. The theory that when people belong to several interest groups, they encourage negotiation and compromise and thereby limit any one group from dominating areas in which its interests are paramount.

Pluralists acknowledge that some groups might dominate areas where their interests are paramount. But they believe two factors rectify this situation. In **overlapping membership**<sup>16</sup>, people belonging to several interest groups encourage negotiation and compromise. And underrepresented people will in time establish groups to assert their interests.

### The Advantage of Business

An argument against pluralism is that business has an advantage over other segments of society, particularly the poor and the working class. These Americans

lack the disposable income and political skills to organize. The issues that concern them are often absent from the policy agenda. Frank R. Baumgartner, Jeffrey M. Berry, Marje Hojnacki, David C. Kimball, and Beth L. Leech, *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 254–55. Business sponsors political advertisements, gives campaign contributions through PACs, donates to political parties, hires law and public relations firms, and funds research advocacy groups promoting free-market economics. A corporation can deploy multiple lobbyists and obtain access to various policymakers by joining several trade groups, belonging to business associations such as the US Chamber of Commerce, and using its CEO and other personnel from headquarters to lobby. Jeffrey M. Berry, and Clyde Wilcox, *The Interest Group Society*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Longman, 2008), 221.

Business and trade associations make up approximately 70 percent of the organizations with representation in Washington, DC. Kay Lehman Schlozman and John T. Tierney, *Organized Interests and American Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 67. Add interest groups representing professionals, and they account for approximately 85 percent of total spending on lobbying. Frank R. Baumgartner and Beth L. Leech, “Interest Niches and Policy Bandwagons: Patterns of Interest Group Involvement in National Politics,” *Journal of Politics* 63, no. 4 (November 2001): 1197. The figure is for 1996.

Quite often a policy appears only to affect specific corporations or industries and therefore does not receive much media or public attention. Mark A. Smith, *American Business and Political Power: Public Opinion, Elections, and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). The Walt Disney Company’s copyright on Mickey Mouse was due to expire in 2003 and those on Pluto, Goofy, and Donald Duck would expire soon after. In 2000, after lobbying and well-placed campaign contributions by Disney, Congress extended all copyrights for twenty more years. James Surowiecki, “Righting Copywrongs,” *New Yorker*, January 21, 2002, accessed March 23, 2011, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/01/21/020121ta\\_talk\\_surowiecki](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/01/21/020121ta_talk_surowiecki).

Business is not monolithic. Interests conflict between and among industries, individual corporations, and organizations representing professionals. Large businesses can have different objectives than small businesses. The interests of manufacturers, distributors, and retailers can clash. Moreover, even when business is united, its demands are not necessarily gratified immediately and absolutely, especially when the issue is visible and the demands provoke opposition.

### Negative Depictions of Business

The media often depict business interest groups negatively, which can limit the groups' influence. Witness, for example, stories about the dubious dealings and bankruptcy of corporations such as Enron, the trials of corporate leaders who have pillaged their companies, and the huge salaries and bonuses paid in financial and related business sectors.

Corporations and their executives are commonly the villains in popular films including *RoboCop* (1987), *Wall Street* (1987), *The Naked Gun 2 and ½: The Smell of Fear* (1991), and the documentaries of Michael Moore, particularly *Roger and Me* (1989). Television news stories oftentimes portray the big business sector as buying access and favors with lavish campaign contributions and other indulgences, wielding undue influence on the policy process, and pursuing its interests at the expense of the national interest. Lucig H. Danielian and Benjamin Page, "The Heavenly Chorus: Interest Group Voices on TV News," *American Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 4 (November 1994): 1056. Newspapers similarly frame business interest groups and their lobbyists as involved in dubious activities and exercising power for private greed. Typical is the *New York Times*' headline: "Vague Law and Hard Lobbying Add Up to Billions for Big Oil." Edmund L. Andrews, "Vague Law and Hard Lobbying Add Up to Billions for Big Oil," *New York Times*, March 27, 2006, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/27/business/27royalties.html>.

These stories could frame business interest groups more positively. They could point out that business lobbyists favor essential and deserving objectives, present information and valid arguments to policymakers, and make their proposals in a political arena (i.e., Congress) in competition with other groups. However, the negative view of business is incarnated in the enduring image of the chairman of the seven leading tobacco companies testifying before Congress (Note 9.27 "Enduring Image").

## Enduring Image

### Big Tobacco Testifies Before Congress

On April 14, 1994, the chief executives of the leading tobacco companies stood up, raised their right hands, and swore before members of the subcommittee on Health and the Environment of the House of Representatives' Committee on Energy and Commerce that nicotine was not addictive. The photograph of this moment, prominently featured in the US and foreign media, has become an enduring image of business executives who place the interests and profits of their corporations above the public interest even if it requires them to engage in self-deception, defy common sense about the dangers of their products, and give deceptive testimony under oath.



*The chairmen of the seven leading tobacco companies swear that nicotine is not addictive.*

*Source: Used with permission from AP Photo/John Duricka.*

Had one sat through the several hours of hearings, watched them on television, or read the transcript, the executives would have come across as less defiant and more reasonable. They agreed to give Congress unpublished research documents, acknowledged that cigarettes may cause various health problems including cancer and heart disease, and admitted that they would prefer that their children not smoke. For an account of the hearing, see Philip J. Hilts, "Tobacco Chiefs Say Cigarettes Aren't Addictive," *New York Times*, April 15, 1994, accessed on March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/15/us/tobacco-chiefs-say-cigarettes-aren-t-addictive.html>. But the photo and its brief explanatory caption, not the complicated hearings, are the enduring image.

Why does this image of venal, almost criminal, tobacco executives endure? Simply put, television news' continuing coverage of the litigation by state attorneys general against the tobacco companies required vivid video to illustrate and dramatize an otherwise bland story. What better choice than the footage of the seven tobacco executives? Thus the image circulated over and over again on the nightly news and is widely available on the Internet years later.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Numerous factors determine the success or failure of interest groups in achieving their policy objectives. These include their assets, objectives, alliances, visibility of their involvement in policy decisions, responses to political change and crises, and depictions in the media. Relatedly, there is a hierarchy of interest groups' relations with policymakers. Pluralists regard interest groups as essential to American democracy; critics, however, believe that business interest groups are too dominant. Business interest groups have several advantages enabling them to achieve their policy objectives but also several disadvantages, including negative media depictions.

### EXERCISES

1. What makes an interest group effective? What do you think are the most effective interest groups in the United States?
2. Why might interest groups be more effective when their activities are not widely known? Why might publicity make lobbying less effective?
3. What advantages do business interest groups have in influencing politics? What factors limit the effectiveness of business interest lobbying?

## 9.4 Interest Groups in the Information Age

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this section, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. How do interest groups interact with the media?
2. How do the media depict interest groups?
3. What are the consequences of these depictions?

### Media Interactions

Many business interest groups try not to interact with the news media at all. They avoid media attention, particularly when it is likely to be negative. They prefer to pursue their policy preferences out of the media's and the public's sight and scrutiny.

### Public Relations

Other interest groups have the need or the resources to strive for a favorable image and promote themselves and their policy preferences. One way is through advertising. They place advertisements on the television networks' evening news shows in policymakers' constituencies, such as Washington, DC, and New York, where opinion leaders will see them and in prominent newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*. Even media outlets with tiny audiences may be suitable for advertisements. The Lockheed Martin Corporation has advertised in the policy-oriented *National Journal* in order to reach Washington insiders and policymakers.

Some interest groups engage in **public relations**<sup>17</sup> campaigns. Walmart paid \$10 million annually in order to counter lobbying groups that were funded by two unions. These unions were critical of the retail giant's low wages, inadequate health care, and discrimination against women. The public relations campaign promoted the company's positive activities and responded to criticisms. Jeffrey Goldberg, "Selling Wal-Mart," *New Yorker*, April 2, 2007, accessed March 23, 2011, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/04/02/070402fa\\_fact\\_goldberg](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/04/02/070402fa_fact_goldberg).

17. Techniques designed to promote an interest group's activities, image, and policy preferences positively.



Public relations is not confined to American interest groups. Approximately 160 foreign governments have US public relations consultants or lobbyists representing them in communicating with the US media, policymakers, and the public. The firms instruct their clients on how to deal with the media, arrange meetings for them with journalists, set up editorial briefings, pitch stories to reporters and editors, and try to create newsworthy events. These tactics usually succeed in increasing and improving the countries' news coverage and images. Jarol B. Manheim, *Strategic Public Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); also Jarol B. Manheim and Robert B. Albritton, "Changing National Images: International Public Relations and Media Agenda Setting," *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 3 (September 1984): 641–57; and Pat Choate, *Agents of Influence: How Japan's Lobbyists in the United States Manipulate America's Political and Economic System* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

Occasionally, the media expose this public relations activity. The *New York Times* revealed that, in part because fifteen of the nineteen terrorists involved with the attacks on 9/11 were Saudi Arabian, the Saudi "government has spent millions of dollars on well-connected lobbyists and national television advertisements since 9-11 in a drive to improve its image among Americans." Christopher Marquis, "Worried Saudis Pay Millions to Improve Image in the U.S.," *New York Times*, August 29, 2002, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/29/world/worried-saudis-pay-millions-to-improve-image-in-the-us.html>.

### Advocacy Campaigns

A few interest groups engage in advocacy campaigns through the media. A notable example took place during the 1994 attempt by the Clinton administration to change the US health-care system. Some \$60 million was spent on advertising, with opponents outspending supporters two to one.

The Health Insurance Association of America (now named America's Health Insurance Plans), representing small to medium-sized insurance companies, waged the most effective public campaign. Under the appealing name of the Coalition for Health Insurance Choices, it spent around \$14 million creating and showing television ads in which a woman (Louise) and her spouse (Harry) critically comment on alleged defects in the president's health-care proposal. "Having choices we don't like is no choice at all," says Louise in one ad. No direct reference was made to the health insurance industry behind the ad.

The ads were aimed at members of Congress and thus aired mostly in Washington, DC, and on CNN. They attracted news coverage, which amplified awareness about, attributed influence to, and enhanced their effects. This attention increased even

more when the Clintons made a parody version of the ad. By framing the administration's proposal in terms of high cost and big government, the ads contributed to its defeat in Congress. It would not be until 2010 that reform of health care would be achieved, as discussed in Chapter 16 "Policymaking and Domestic Policies".

### **Attracting Media Attention**

Most interest groups do not engage in advocacy campaigns. Indeed, they lack sufficient funds to advertise at all. Yet coverage in the news media is essential, especially for many public interest groups, if they are to recruit members, raise funds, improve their access to policymakers, and obtain public support for their objectives. Kay Lehman Schlozman and John T. Tierney, *Organized Interests and American Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), chap. 10; also Ken Kollman, *Outside Lobbying: Public Opinion & Interest Group Strategies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998). So they hold news conferences, issue press releases, release research studies, give interviews to journalists, and try to have their spokespeople appear on talk radio and television public affairs shows. Their problem is that there are far more groups seeking news coverage than the media can or do accommodate.

Interest groups deploy several techniques to attract media coverage. Among them are the catchy phrase, the telling statistic, the scorecard, and the poll. Charlton Heston embodied the catchy phrase. While he was president and spokesperson of the National Rifle Association (NRA), he held up a musket during its annual meeting and told members that the only way he would give up his gun is when they pry it "from my cold dead hands."

Figure 9.2 *Charlton Heston*



As its president, this hero of some of Hollywood's greatest epics brought the NRA even more prominence, especially when he uttered his defiant phrase.

Source: Used with permission from AP Photo/Ric Feld.

This media-attention-getting phrase became his trademark, which he repeated with other guns at subsequent conventions. They were the last words he uttered before he officially stepped down from the NRA's presidency in 2003.

Another technique is the telling statistic. A report titled *City Slickers: How Farm Subsidy Checks End Up in Big Cities* from the Environmental Working Group achieved widespread and prominent publicity when it revealed that \$1.2 million per year in agricultural subsidies was going to people living in the 90210 zip code, which is, as most Americans know from the television show of the same name, urban and affluent Beverly Hills. Ken Cook, Clark Williams, Andrew Art, and Chris Campbell, *City Slickers: How Farm Subsidy Checks End Up in Big Cities*, March 1995, accessed April 4, 2011, <http://www.ewg.org/reports/slickers>. Because farm subsidies are traditionally justified as preserving and protecting family farms, the report persuasively reframed the issue as government subsidies of wealthy corporate farm interests. Jeffrey M. Berry and Clyde Wilcox, *The Interest Group Society*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Longman, 2008), 235–36.

## Link

The *City Slickers* Report

Read *City Slickers: How Farm Subsidy Checks End Up in Big Cities* in its entirety at <http://www.ewg.org/reports/slickers>.

Some interest groups issue scorecards that enable journalists easily to report how policymakers have voted on issues of concern to the group's members and the public. The League of Conservation Voters has released a list to the press during election years of the “Dirty Dozen” members of Congress with the supposedly worst records on the environment. The legislators targeted are usually in close races and some 60 percent of them have been defeated.

Interest groups also pay for or conduct public opinion polls, sometimes with questions that frame the issue to push the public toward their point of view. During the California water shortage of 2001, the California Farm Bureau released a poll showing that 71 percent of those polled believed “that the federal government has a financial responsibility to help keep California’s farmers in agriculture production.” The actual question asked about “California family farmers” (the word “family” encouraged a positive response), the phrase “financial responsibility” is quite vague, and the 71 percent figure was achieved by adding the 44 percent “definite yes” response to the 27 percent “probably yes” response. California Farm Bureau Federation, “Farm leader calls for Federal action on farm crisis,” May 8, 2001.

## Disproportionate Coverage

Most news coverage of societal and public interest groups goes only to a few. According to an article by Lucig H. Danielian and Benjamin Page, “The media seize upon a few prominent individuals or groups to speak for broad sets of interests.” Lucig H. Danielian and Benjamin Page, “The Heavenly Chorus: Interest Group Voices on TV News,” *American Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 4 (November 1994): 1069.

Witness a study of 244 interest groups in fourteen major newspapers, two news magazines, and the top three television networks. A. Trevor Thrall, “The Myth of the Outside Strategy: Mass Media News Coverage of Interest Groups,” *Political Communication* 23, no. 4 (2006): 407–20. The single most-covered group in each of

four policy areas received around 40 percent of all the coverage in that area. These were the Sierra Club on the environment, the Council on Foreign Relations on national security and foreign policy, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for civil rights, and the Christian Coalition of America on broad matters of public policy. The figure reaches approximately 68 percent when the number of groups is raised to twelve (5 percent of the total number) to include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Greenpeace, and a few others. In contrast, 34 percent of the interest groups did not appear in a single story.

The larger a group's budget, the more likely it is to be covered. These groups have staff to communicate with the media, hold regular press conferences, provide the press with dependable information, stage events with dramatic visuals and symbolism, and make news by suing the government. They also are covered because reporters return repeatedly to sources that are familiar to them and their audiences.

Most news organizations are not inclined to incur the expense of investigating interest groups' organization and claims of accomplishments. Nor are they able to obtain easy access to the groups' records. For ten years, the Christian Coalition was the most prominent interest group of the religious right. Journalists took the claims of its leaders at face value. Only later did former national leaders who had left the group reveal to the press that the number of members had been inflated. Laurie Goodstein, "Debt and Leadership Turmoil Sap Christian Coalition's Political Strengths," *International Herald Tribune*, August 3, 1999, 3.

### Media Consequences

Media depictions matter. Favorable coverage of public interest groups seeking to protect the environment and consumers has helped get their issues on the policy agenda and some of their proposals enacted. Jeffrey M. Berry, *The New Liberalism: The Rising Power of Citizen Groups* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000). The breast cancer lobby is far more successful at shaping media coverage and thus influencing public opinion and determining public policy (including government funding) than the prostate cancer lobby, even though the diseases have almost identical morbidity and mortality rates. Karen M. Kedrowski and Marilyn Stine Sarow, *Cancer Activism: Gender, Media, and Public Policy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

Disproportionate coverage of a few societal and public interest groups enhances their importance and the impression that each one represents a policy area. Instead, there is often a spectrum of interest groups across areas. Sparse or nonexistent coverage of these interest groups means that the media do not bring

their demands, activities, and policy perspectives to the attention of policymakers and the public.

Unfavorable media depictions of labor unions reinforce their negative stereotypes. This coverage reduces public support for unions' organizing efforts and discourages people from voluntarily joining unions. It discredits striking as a desirable or even appropriate way for unions to achieve their objectives.

Media coverage of business interest groups conveys their power. It limits this power by framing it as excessive and adverse to the public interest and by exposing some of it as greed and exploitation. This coverage affects public opinion. Of the people polled about "the power of different groups in influencing government policy, politicians, and policymakers in Washington" and which groups had "too much" influence, 86 percent selected "big companies," 83 percent chose "political action committees which give money to political candidates," and 71 percent picked "political lobbyists." The Harris Poll, April 26–May 5, 2001. Overwhelmingly, people have the impression that government is run by a few big interests. 1995 poll cited in Jeffrey M. Berry and Clyde Wilcox, *The Interest Group Society*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Longman, 2008), 19. In November 2005, 90 percent of respondents to a Harris poll (up from 83 percent the previous year) said big companies had too much influence on government.

No wonder interest groups become issues in elections. Each party accuses the other of being beholden to "special interests" and of unsavory relationships with lobbyists. The media pursue stories about interest group contributions and of lobbyists holding prominent staff positions in candidates' campaigns. Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama refused in the 2008 presidential election to accept contributions from registered lobbyists and **political action committees (PACs)**<sup>18</sup>. Republican nominee John McCain established a conflict-of-interest policy that resulted in the resignation or dismissal of several members of his campaign staff who were registered as lobbyists.

18. Organizations for raising and contributing campaign funds.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Interest groups use a variety of techniques to interact with the news media and obtain favorable coverage. These include advertising, public relations, and advocacy. Despite the vast number of interest groups in existence, the news media tend to cover the activities of only a few leading organizations. Media depictions of interest groups can have a significant impact on public opinion about them and support for or opposition to their policy preferences. The media often depict big business groups negatively, while they usually portray other groups such as environmental organizations more positively. The overall effect of the media's depictions of interest groups is to give people the impression that government is run by a few big interests.

### EXERCISES

1. Why do you think some interest groups avoid media exposure? Why do others try to use the media to achieve their objectives?
2. Which interest groups do you view negatively? Which do you view positively? What do you think made you view those groups that way?

## Civic Education

### SAVE

Forming an interest group and keeping it going takes a strong commitment, but many young people have done just that. They recognize that there is power in numbers and that having a group of people unite behind a cause can be more effective than acting alone. Enterprising young people have established interest groups representing a wide range of causes and issues.

An example of a youth-focused interest group is the Student Association for Voter Empowerment (SAVE), a national organization of college students whose mission is to promote civic education in order to increase voter participation and help young people navigate the public policy process and interact with government. In addition to voter advocacy, SAVE lobbies government officials to pass legislation promoting jobs, health insurance, and college financial aid for young people. SAVE was founded by Kenyon College graduates Matthew Segal and Anna Salzberg and has over ten thousand members on campuses in fifteen states. The organization makes use of online media to facilitate its operations. Students wishing to start a chapter of SAVE on their campus can access an online tool kit with directions for creating a constitution, building an organization, and becoming active. The organization provides information about key issues, advertises its activities, including conferences and outreach projects, facilitates communication among its members, and fundraises through its [website](#). Group leaders also publish a blog on the *Huffington Post*. SAVE was instrumental in getting the House of Representatives to introduce the bipartisan Student Voter Opportunity to Encourage Registration (VOTER) Act of 2008, which requires colleges to take measures to register students to vote.



## 9.5 Recommended Reading

Ainsworth, Scott H. *Analyzing Interest Groups: Group Influence on People and Policies*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002. An analysis of interest groups and their activities using a theoretical approach.

Baumgartner, Frank R., Jeffrey M. Berry, Marie Hojnacki, David C. Kimball, and Beth L. Leech. *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. An account showing that because the entrenched Washington system favors the status quo, 60 percent of lobbying campaigns fail to change policy.

Berry, Jeffrey M., and Clyde Wilcox. *The Interest Group Society*. New York: Longman, 2008. A leading text providing basic information about most aspects of interest groups.

Cigler, Allan J., and Burdett A. Loomis, eds. *Interest Group Politics*, 7th ed. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2006. An informative and wide-ranging collection of research on interest groups in American politics.

Dahl, Robert A. *A Preface to Democratic Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956. The leading statement of the pluralist position and the democratic role of interest groups.

Olson, Mancur, Jr. *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965. An influential study using an economic approach to groups' organization, membership, and effectiveness.

Schattschneider, Elmer E. *The Semi-Sovereign People*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1960. A powerful critique of pluralism and American democracy.

Schlozman, Kay Lehman, and John T. Tierney. *Organized Interests and American Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. A comprehensive account of Washington-based interest groups in the early 1980s.

Truman, David B. *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*, 2nd ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971 (originally published 1951). This book revived

the study of interest groups as central to US politics and raised many subjects, concepts, and questions that are still important.

## 9.6 Recommended Viewing

*Casino Jack and the United States of Money* (2010). Droll documentary about Jack Abramoff, his confederates, and his victims.

*Citizen Ruth* (1996). A satire in which a delinquent, pregnant girl (Laura Dern) is exploited and then exploits the pro-life and pro-choice movements battling over her.

*Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1977). Powerful documentary about the strike of Kentucky mine workers against a mining company.

*The Naked Gun 2 and ½: The Smell of Fear* (1991). In one of the plots, oil, coal, and nuclear interests kidnap and replace the president's proenvironment energy policy appointee.

*Norma Rae* (1979). Southern mill worker becomes an independent woman as she protests working conditions and strives to organize a union.

*On the Waterfront* (1954). Marlon Brando is memorable as a man who accepts then fights against union corruption.

*The People and the Power Game: The Lobbies* (1996). A television program that analyzes the relationship between members of Congress and the lobbyists who seek to influence them.

*Roger & Me* (1989). A docucomedy in which Michael Moore pursues General Motors' president to show him how the closing of automobile plants and firing of workers affected Flint, Michigan.

*Thank You for Smoking* (2005). Comedy about the tribulations and triumphs of a public relations operative for big tobacco.