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Role and power of interest groups in politics

By the end of this section, you can: Analyze how interest groups provide a means of political participation to discuss recent changes in interest groups and how they operate in the United States to explain why citizens of low socioeconomic status are not well represented by interest groups to identify the barriers to participation the United States Interest Group offers people an important path to political participation. The Tea Party protests, for example, gave people nationwide the opportunity to express their opposition to government actions and control. Also, the Occupy Wall Street movement also gave voice to 7 people frustrated by economic inequality and the impact of large corporations on the public sector. Separately, protesters were unlikely to be given advance notice, but by joining others, they attracted significant attention in the media and lawmakers. While the Tea Party movement may not meet the definition of interest groups introduced earlier, its goals have been promoted by established interest groups. Other opportunities for participation that interest groups offer or encourage include voting, campaigning, appealing to lawmakers and not informing the public about the reasons. In 2011, a Occupy Wall Street protester emphasizes that the concerns of individual citizens are not always heard by those in the power seats. (Credit: Timothy Krause) Group participation as a civic engagement Joining interest groups can help promote civic engagement, allowing people to feel more connected to the political and social community. Some interest groups develop as grassroots movements, which often start from the bottom up among a small number of people at the local level. Interest groups can amplify the voices of such individuals through an appropriate organization and allow them to participate in ways that would be less effective or even impossible alone or in small numbers. The Tea Party is an example of a so-called astro-naturopathic movement that is not, Lortom, stressed, a grassroots movement. Many follow party sources to groups that support the interests of the wealthy like Americans for Prosperity and Citizens for a Sound Economy. Although many ordinary citizens support the Tea Party Hotel because of its opposition to tax raises, it attracts a lot of support from elite and wealthy sponsors, some of whom are active in lobbying. The FreedomWorks Political Action Committee (PAC), for example, is a conservative advocacy group that supports the Tea Party movement. FreedomWorks is the scion of citizens for a Sound Economy interest group, founded by billionaire industrialists David H. and Charles Koch in 1984. According to political scientists Jeffrey Berry and Clyde Wilcox, interest groups provide a means of representing people and serve as Between them and the government. Interest groups also allow people to actively work on the issue in an effort to influence public policy. Another function of interest groups is to help educate the public. Someone concerned about the environment may not need to know what an acceptable level of sulfur dioxide is in the air, but by joining an environmental interest group, he or she can stay informed when air quality is poor or threatened by legislative action. A number of education-related interests have been highly active following cuts in education spending in many states, including North Carolina, Mississippi and Wisconsin, to subvert some of them. Interest groups also help frame problems, usually in the most useful way in their cause. Abortion rights advocates often use the pro-choice term to frame abortion as a person's private choice to be made without government intervention, while an anti-abortion group may use the pro-life term to frame its position as a defense of the life of the unborn. Pro-life groups often label their opponents as pro-abortion, rather than pro-choice, a distinction that can affect how the public perceives the issue. Similarly, scientists and others who believe that human activity has had a negative impact on the temperature and weather patterns of the earth attribute phenomena such as the increasing frequency and severity of storms to climate change. Industrialists and their supporters regard changes in the global climate as global warming. Those who dispute that such a change is taking place can therefore point to blizzards and low temperatures as evidence that the Earth is not warming. Interest groups are also trying to find issues on the government agenda and oversee a variety of government programs. Following the passage of the ACA, many interest groups have been monitoring the implementation of the law, hoping to use successes and failures to justify their positions for and against the legislation. Opponents took advantage of the court system to try to change or overturn the law, or to use senior agencies or departments that have a role to play in implementing the law. Similarly, teachers unions, parent organizations and other education-related interests oversold the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act that was promoted and signed into law by President George W. Bush. The Latvian movement (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) owes much to the gay rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, especially the 1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village. These were a series of violent responses to a police raid on the bar, a popular meeting place for members of the LGBT community. The riots culminated in several arrests, but also raised awareness of the struggles faced by gay and lesbian members. Stonewall Inn was recently granted landmark status by the Landmark Preservation Commission of New York City. The Stonewall Inn in New York's Greenwich Village was the site of the 1969 arrests and riots that, like the building itself, became an important milestone in the LGBT movement. (Credit: Stephen Damron) Castro County in San Francisco, California, was also home to a significant benefit community at the time. In 1978, the community was shocked when Harvey Milk, a gay local activist and sitting member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, was assassinated by a former city supervisor for political differences. This resulted in protests in San Francisco and other cities across the country and the mobilization of interests relating to gay and lesbian rights. Today, advocacy interested organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the Human Rights Council are at the forefront of supporting organizations in the LGBT community and the popularity of a number of relevant issues. They played an active role in the effort to legalize same-sex marriage in individual states and later across the country. Now that same-sex marriage is legal, these organizations and others face issues related to ongoing discrimination against members of this community. One of the current debates focuses on whether an individual's religious freedom allows him or her to deny services to members of the LGBT community. What do you feel there are ongoing issues for the LGBT community? What approaches can you take to help increase attention and support for gay and lesbian rights? Do you think someone's religious beliefs should allow them the freedom to discriminate against members of the LGBT community? Why or not? Trends in the establishment and activity of the Public Interest Group A number of changes in interest groups have occurred over the past three or four decades in the United States. The most significant change is the huge increase in both the number and type of groups. Political scientists often examine the diversity of registered groups, in part to determine how much they reflect the diversity of interests in society. Some areas may be controlled by some industries, while others may reflect a wealth of interests. Some interests seem to have increased at higher rates than others. For example, the number of institutions and corporate interests has increased in both Washington and the states. Telecommunications companies like Verizon and AT&t will solicit Congress into laws that benefit their businesses, but they also target states because state legislators make laws that can benefit or harm their activities. There has also been an increase in the number of public interest groups representing the public as opposed to economic interests. The U.S. PIRG is a public interest group that represents the public on issues including public health, Environment and consumer protection. Public Interest Research Groups Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) have grown in recent years, and many now exist at the national and state levels. PIRGs represent the public in a multitude of themed areas, ranging from consumer protection to the environment and, like other interests, they provide opportunities for people to make a difference in the political process. PIRGs try to promote the common good or the public, and most of the issues they prefer affect many or even all citizens. Student PIRGs focus on issues important to students, including tuition costs, textbook costs, new voter registration, sustainable universities, and homelessness. Consider the cost of a college education. You may want to explore how education costs have increased over time. Are cost increases similar between universities and colleges? Are they similar between countries? What could explain similarities and differences in tuition costs? What solutions might help address the rising costs of higher education? How can you be involved in a drive for affordable college education? Consider why students might be involved in this and why they can't do so. Several states have made tuition free or virtually free. Is it possible or desirable in the United States? Why or not? Take a look at the student PIRGs website. What issues does this interest group address? Are these issues important to you? How can you be involved? Visit this part of their site to learn more about their position on higher education funding. What are the reasons for the increase in the number of interest groups? In some cases, it simply reflects new interests in society. Forty years ago, stem cell research was not an issue on the government agenda, but as science and technology progressed, its techniques and possibilities became known to the media and the public, and a number of interests began to solicit and against this type of research. Medical research firms and medical associations will lobby in favor of greater spending and increased research on stem cell research, while some religious organizations and anti-abortion groups will oppose it. As social attitudes change and new issues evolve, and when the public becomes aware of them, we can expect to see the rise of interests that give them. The slowdown in power also explains some of the increase in the number and type of interests, at least at the state level. As power and responsibility moved to state governments in the 1980s, states began to address responsibilities under the authority of the federal government. Several federal welfare programs, for example, are typically administered at the state level. That means interests may be better targeting their lobbying efforts in Albany, Raleigh, Austin, or Sacramento, and not just Washington. As countries became more active in other policy areas, they became primary targets for interests looking to influence policy in their favor. We have also seen increased expertise by certain interests and even a fragmentation of existing interests. While the American Medical Association may take a stand on stem cell research, the issue is not critical to the day-to-day operations of many of its members. On the other hand, stem cell research is very prominent to members of the American Neurological Association, an interest organization representing academic neurologists and scientists. Accordingly, different interests represent the more special needs of different specialties within the medical community, but fragmentation can occur when such a large matter has diverse needs. This was also the case when several unions separated from the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor Organizations-Congress of Industry), the nation's largest union federation, in 2005. Improved technology and social media development have made it easier for smaller groups to create and attract and interact with friends. Using the internet to raise money has also allowed small groups to even get funding. All this does not indicate that an unlimited number of interests can exist in society. The size of the economy has an impact on the number of interests, but only up to a point, after which the number has grown at a declining rate. As we will see below, the limit on the number of interests depends on available resources and competition levels. In recent decades we have also witnessed an increase in professionalism in lobbying and sophistication of lobbying techniques. That wasn't always the case, because lobbying wasn't considered a serious profession in the mid-20th century. Over the past three decades, there has been an increase in the number of contract lobbying firms. These companies are often effective because they bring significant resources to the table, their lobbyists are well versed in issues where they lobby, and may have existing ties to lawmakers. In fact, relations between lobbyists and lawmakers are often ongoing, and these are crucial if lobbyists want access to lawmakers. However, not every interest can afford to hire high-priced contract lobbyists to represent it. As the table suggests, a lot of money is being spent on lobbying activities. This table lists the top 10 U.S. lobbying companies in 2014 as determined by total lobbying revenue. (March 1, 2016). The leading lobbying companies in 2014 are lobbying the company which includes annual income lobbying in Akin, Gump et al. \$35,550,000 Caddie Patton Boggs \$31.54 million Podesta Group \$25.07 million Brownstein, Hyatt et al. \$23.4 million van Scoyoc Assoc. Netherlands & Knight \$19,250,000 Capitol Consultant \$17,930,000 K&; L Gates \$17,420,000 Williams & Jensen \$16,430,000 BGR Group \$15,470,000 Peck Madegan Jones \$13,395,000 Cornerstone Government Affairs \$13,380,000 Ernest & Young \$12,440,000 Fair Lovells \$12.41 million Capitol Tax Partners \$12.39 million Cassidy & Assoc. \$12,090,000 goat, Aizkovich and Bellock \$11,970,000 Covington and Burling \$11,537,000 Melman, Castagnetti et al. The \$11.18 million Alpine Group \$10.95 million we also saw greater limits on lobbying activities within. In the past, many lobbyists were described as good children who often provided gifts or other favors in exchange for political access or other considerations. Today, restrictions limit the types of gifts and benefits lobbyists can give lawmakers. There are certainly fewer good-boy lobbyists, and many lobbyists are now full-time professionals. The regulation of lobbying is addressed in more detail below. How much does the Interest Group system represent? Participation in the United States was never equal. Wealth and education, components of socioeconomic status, are strong predictors of political engagement. We have already discussed how wealth can help overcome collective action problems, but a lack of wealth also serves as a barrier to participation more generally. These types of barriers pose challenges, making it less likely for certain groups to participate. Some institutions, including large corporations, are more likely to participate in the political process than others, simply because they have enormous resources. And with those resources, they can write a check for a political campaign or hire a lobbyist to represent their organization. Writing a check and hiring a lobbyist are unlikely options for an inferior group. A protester at a Occupy Times Square rally in October 2011. (Credit: Jeff Stearns) Separately, poor people may not have the same opportunities to join groups. They may work two jobs to make ends meet and lack the free time needed to participate in politics. Furthermore, there are often financial barriers to participation. For someone punching a time clock, spending time with political groups may be expensive and paying dues may be distressing. Certainly, the poor cannot hire expensive lobbying firms to represent them. Structural barriers like voter ID laws may also disproportionately affect people of low socioeconomic status, though the effects of these laws may not be fully understood for some time. The poor may also have low levels of efficiency, which refers to the belief that you can make a difference or that the government cares about you and your opinions. People with low levels of efficacy are less likely to participate in politics, including voting and joining interest groups. Therefore, they are often represented in the political arena. Minorities We also participate less frequently than the majority population, although when we control levels of wealth and education, we see fewer differences in participation rates. Still, there is a bias in participation and representation, and this bias extends to interest groups as well. For example, when fast food workers across the U.S. went on strike to demand a pay rise, they could do little more than take to the streets with signs, like the protesters shown in the picture below. Their rivals, restaurant chain owners and others who pay their employees minimum wage, can hire groups like the Employment Policy Institute, which paid for billboard ads in New York's Times Square. The billboards implied that raising the minimum wage was an insult to people who worked hard and discouraged people from getting an education to get their lives better. Unlike their opponents, minimum-wage workers in Minnesota have limited ways to make their interests known to the government. However, they were able to increase their political efficiency by joining fast food workers in a nationwide strike on April 15, 2015, to call for a \$15-an-hour minimum wage and improved working conditions. (Credit: Fibonacci Blue/Flickr) Finally, people don't participate often because they don't have the political skill to do so or believe it's impossible to influence government actions. They may also be uninterested or can be indifferent. Participation usually requires some knowledge of the political system, candidates or issues. Young people in particular are often cynical about the government's response to the needs of non-elites. How do these observations translate into how different interests are represented in the political system? Some pluralistic scholars like David Truman suggest that people naturally join groups and have a lot of competition for access to decision-makers. Scholars who subscribe to this pluralistic view assume that this competition between diverse interests is good for democracy. Political theorist Robert Dahl argued that all active and legitimate groups have the potential to voice themselves. In many ways, this is an optimistic assessment of representation in the United States. However, not all researchers accept the assumption that recruitment is natural, that all groups have the potential to access decision-makers. Elite criticism suggests that certain interests, usually businesses and the wealthy, are advantageous and that policies more often reflect their will than anyone else's. Political scientist A. A. Stieschneider noted that the flaw in pluralistic paradise is that the heavenly refrain sings with a strong upper-class accent. Some researchers have suggested that businesses and other wealthy interests are often overrepresented to the government, and that Interests are at a comparative disadvantage. For example, as we've seen, wealthy corporate interests have the means to hire expensive in-house lobbyists or salaried lobbyists to represent them. They can also afford to donate money to politicians, who may at least grant them access. The ability to overcome collective action problems is not evenly divided between groups; As Manson noted, small groups and those with economic benefits were better in this regard. Inferior interests face many challenges, including lack of resources, time and skills. A study of nearly 1800 policy decisions published over a 20-year period found that the interests of the wealthy have a far greater impact on government than those of average citizens. The approval or disendor of the policy changes proposed by average voters had relatively little impact on whether the changes occurred. When wealthy voters didn't agree to a particular policy, it was almost never enacted. When wealthy voters favored certain policies, the chances of the policy proposal passing to more than 50%. Indeed, the preferences of those in the top 10 of the population in income terms had a 15 times greater impact than those of the average income. In terms of the impact of interest groups on policy, Gillens and Pines found that business interest groups have a double impact on public interest groups. The graph below shows contributions of interests from a variety of different sectors. We can draw some notable observations from the table. First, large sums of money are wasted by different interests. Second, many of these interests are business sectors, including the real estate industry, the insurance industry, business and the whole. The chart above shows the dollar amounts donated from PACs, soft money (including directly from within the Corporate Treasury and the Union), and individual donors to Democratic (blue) and Republican (red) federal candidates and political parties during the 2015-2016 election cycle, as the Federal Election Commission reported. Interest group politics is often characterized by whether groups have access to decision-makers and can participate in the policy-making process. The Iron Triangle is a hypothetical arrangement between three elements (corners of the triangle): a group of interest, a member of a congressional committee or a shooter, and an agency within the bureaucracy. Each element has a symbiotic relationship with the other two, and it's hard for those outside the triangle to break into it. Members of the congressional committee, including the shooter, rely on the interest group for campaign contributions and policy information, while the interest group needs the committee to consider favorable laws for its appearance. The interest group and the committee need the agency The law, while the agency needs the interest group for information and the Finance and Autonomy Committee in implementing the law. An alternative explanation for the debt settlement carried out in a given policy area by agency interest groups, legislators and bureaucrats is that these players are the experts in this given policy area. Therefore, perhaps they are the ones most capable of processing policies in the given area. Some people see the iron triangle idea as obsolete. George Mason University's Hugh Heclo has sketched out a more open pattern he calls a problem network that includes a number of different interests and political actors who work together to support one issue or policy. Some interest group researchers have questioned the relationship between interest groups and many political actors, including former elected officials, how some interests form coalitions with other interests, and the way they compete for access to decision-makers. Some coalition is longstanding, while others are temporary. Joining coalitions comes with a cost because it can dilute preferences and hand out potential benefits that teams are trying to gain. Some interest groups have even aligned themselves with opposing interests if the Alliance achieves its goals. For example, left-leaning groups may oppose a state lottery system because it disproportionately harms the poor (participants in gambling in this way at higher rates), while right-leaning groups may oppose it because they see gambling as a sinful activity. These opposing groups may actually join forces in an attempt to defeat the lottery. While most scholars agree that some interests have advantages, others have questioned the overwhelming dominance of some interests. In addition, neoforelist researchers argue that there is no doubt that some interests are in a privileged position, but those interests don't always get what they want. Instead, their influence depends on a number of factors in the political environment such as public opinion, political culture, competition for access, and the relevance of the issue. Even wealthy interests don't always win if their position goes against the wishes of an attentive public. And if the public cares about the issue, politicians may hesitate to disobey their constituents. If a prominent manufacturing company wants fewer regulations on environmental pollutants, and environmental protection is a prominent issue for the public, the manufacturing company cannot win any replacements, despite its resource advantage. We also know that when interests are mobilized, conflicting interests are often again recruitment, which can reduce the benefits of certain interests. Hence, the conclusion that businesses, wealthy and elites win in any situation is exaggerated. A good example is the recent dispute between fast food chains and their employees. During the spring of Workers at McDonald's restaurants across the country went on strike and marched in protest at the low wages the fast food giant paid its employees. Despite opposition from restaurant chains and claims by the National Restaurant Association that raising the minimum wage would result in job losses, in September 2015, New York State raised the minimum wage for fast food workers to \$15 an hour, an amount that should be phased in over time. Following this success, fast-food workers in other cities continued their campaign to boost wages, and many low-wage workers promised to vote for politicians planning to raise the federal minimum wage. Visit the websites of the Secretary of State of California or Michigan, the state election commissions, or relevant government industry and ethics websites where lobbyists and interest groups must register. Some examples are provided but do not understand the corresponding Web page in your situation. Spend time looking at the lists of interest groups listed in those countries. Do registered interests seem to reflect the important interests within the countries? Are there any patterns in the types of interests listed? Are some interests above or underrepresented? Concluding interest groups give people the opportunity to get more civily involved. Socioeconomic status is an important predictor of who will most likely join the groups. The number and types of groups actively lobbying to get what they want from the government have grown rapidly. Many business and public interest groups have emerged, and many new interests have evolved due to technological developments, increased industry expertise and splitting interests. Lobbying has also become more sophisticated in recent years, and many sophistications now hire lobbying firms to represent them. Some researchers assume that groups will compete for access to decision makers and that most groups can be heard. Critics argue that some groups are exploited by their access to economic resources. However, others acknowledge the benefits of these resources, but suggest that the political environment is just as important in determining who will be heard. What does group participation provide for citizens? Why don't low-income groups participate in the interest rate group system anymore? What are some barriers to participation? Participation?