Role of Interest Groups

• Interest groups are collections of people who share certain views on public matters and work to shape public policy to their benefit.
  – Members of a environmental group (right) express their support for a “greener” city.
Roles of Interest Groups, cont.

• This kind of organized effort is a key part of the democratic process.

• A public policy issue can include anything that involves government action or regulation.

• Interest groups operate at every level of government in every community in the United States.
Political Parties

• Parties and interest groups have some key differences:
  
  – Parties **nominate candidates** for office, but interest groups do not.
  
  – Parties need to appeal to enough people to win elections. Interest groups simply want to **influence government policy**, no matter who is in office.
  
  – Parties are concerned with a wide **range of issues**, whereas interest groups tend to concentrate on a small set of key issues.
Early Views

- James Madison feared that interest groups would harm democracy.
  - In *Federalist No. 10*, he argued that without separation of powers and checks and balances, such groups would dominate the government.

- Alexis de Tocqueville thought the formation of interest groups was a positive American custom.
  - He was impressed by the many different groups he found in America, representing every sort of interest.
• Interest groups have always sought a wide variety of goals. The people shown here fought for equality, labor, and economic reforms.
Benefits of Interest Groups

• Interest groups stimulate awareness of public affairs.
  – They do so by developing and promoting policy positions they support and opposing policies that harm their members.

• Interest groups are based on beliefs, not geography.
  – They can represent the interests of people who live in many different voting districts but who share the same attitudes and concerns.
Benefits, cont.

• Interest groups act as sources of information on specialized topics.

  – They provide government agencies and officials with economic, social, and scientific data that is hard to get from other sources. They also share data from government sources with their members.
Benefits, cont.

• Interest groups encourage people to participate in politics.

  – People who do not want to be politicians can still take political action by being part of an interest group and promoting issues.
• Interest groups keep an eye on the behavior of government agencies and elected officials.
  – They help keep the public aware of the way in which government does its work.

• Interest groups compete with each other.
  – There are often interest groups that take opposing stands on key issues. This helps keep any one interest group from abusing its influence.
**Cons of Interest Groups**

- Some interest groups have unfair influence.
  - The groups with the most money and the best organization can often gain great influence over government, even if their ideas are not widely popular.

- It is hard to tell how many people an interest group really represents.

- Interest groups do not always promote the views held by a majority of their members.
Cons of Interest Groups, cont.

- Some interest groups use unfair or illegal tactics.
- These include acts such as bribery—in the form of money, gifts, and jobs—and threats.
- The Abramoff scandal exposed bribes given to get politicians to write laws that favored some interest groups.

Analyzing Political Cartoons
AARP is a well-known interest group for people over 50; it responds to the needs of older Americans. **What is this cartoon saying about AARP and similar interest groups?**
Interest Groups A-Z

• There are thousands of interest groups in the United States operating at all levels of society.

• They vary greatly in size. Some have millions of members, others only a handful.

• The majority of interest groups are based on promoting or protecting economic interests.

• The sheer scope and diversity of interest groups means that people may belong to one without even realizing it.
Business Groups

– Business groups ask government to enact policies that promote and protect their economic interests.

– Trade associations represent segments of the business community.
  • These include industry groups formed by oil, natural gas, and pharmaceutical companies.

– Different business groups often disagree about preferred government policies.
Labor Groups

• Labor unions push for government policies that benefit their members.
  – The AFL-CIO is the largest U.S. labor group, made up of 56 unions with a total of 10 million members.

• The decline of American manufacturing has weakened labor unions.
  – Membership has dropped. Unions look for new members as government workers and service employees unionize.

• Organized labor is often united, but can be divided by regional or economic differences in the labor force.
Changing State of Labor

- Union membership has declined as the economy has shifted from manufacturing to services.

- However, the voice of unions remains strong politically with education, training, and library occupations having the highest rates of union membership.

- Unions have also become increasingly diverse demographically.
The Changing State of Labor

**Manufacturing**

Manufacturing jobs, like at this automobile plant, employed half of all unionized workers in the 1950s.

**Union Membership in 1955:** 28%

**Service**

Two in five public sector employees, including teachers and other government employees (shown at left), belong to a union.

**Union Membership Today:** 12%
Agricultural groups still have great influence on government farm policy.

- The Farm Bureau and the National Farmers Union are major agricultural groups.
- There are many other groups organized around specific producers of goods such as beef, milk, and wheat.
Professional Associations

- Professional associations represent highly trained and/or licensed professionals.
- Most are smaller than other business groups.
- Examples include doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, etc.
- Not all members of a profession belong to an association.
Disagreements

• Some industry interest groups may compete for customers in the same market.

• White-collar and blue-collar labor groups may want different social welfare policies.

• Producers of the same agricultural good in different states may compete for market share through their interest groups.
• Economic interest groups of all types often compete with each other for federal aid or tax breaks.

• Government regulation may help members of one business group compete while hurting members of another.
Issue-Oriented Groups

- Issue-oriented groups promote a cause or an idea rather than economics.
  - There are many such groups working for or against causes across the political spectrum.
  - There are groups supporting and opposing legal abortion and gun control.
  - Many groups fight for conservation issues.
Other Interest Groups

• There are hundreds of interest groups that promote policies favoring specific segments of society.

  – The American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars support veterans’ interests.
  – Americans of various ethnic or racial backgrounds are represented by a wide range of groups such as the NAACP, the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, or the National Association of Arab Americans.
  – There are also many religious groups that seek to shape government policy.
Public-Interest Groups

• Public-interest groups seek to work for broader government policies that will benefit the general public, including those who do not belong to or support the interest group.

  – These groups have become more common in the past few decades.
  – Examples include Common Cause and the League of Women Voters.
Chapter 9: Interest Groups
Section 3
Lecture Notes
Lobbyists and Lobbying

- Lobbying involves special interest groups influencing the decisions and actions of public officials.

  - Lobbying occurs at **all levels of government** and most interest groups use it. There are an estimated 30,000 lobbyists dealing with Congress alone.

  - Most lobbyists are **professionals**. They must register with the clerk of the House and the secretary of the Senate. They must also report regularly on their income and activities.
Today, members of Congress may not accept gifts from lobbyists. Former senators and top executive branch officials must now wait two years before they can become lobbyists. Former House members must wait one year.
Lobbying Congress

- Lobbyists concentrate on influencing congressional committees.
  - In this picture, lobbyist Jack James of the AFL-CIO (right) speaks with Bernie Thompson (D., Miss.), chairman of the House committee on Homeland Security.
Lobbying Congress

- Lobbyists concentrate on influencing congressional committees.
  - They **testify before committees** and provide them with useful information on specialized topics, and even draft legislation for lawmakers.
  - The goal is to **move bills** that lobbyists support out of committee and get them approved and to block bills they oppose.
  - It is in the best interest of lobbyists to **provide accurate information** to Congress, to avoid harming their own reputations.
Lobbying the Executive Branch

– The executive branch makes many of the detailed, day-to-day decisions about how to implement public policy.

– Lobbyists want the President to appoint officials sympathetic to their views and to have agencies adopt regulations that favor their interests.
Lobbying the Courts

• Interest groups lobby the courts by bringing lawsuits.
  – The goal is to change the legal interpretation of certain laws to fit with the policy goals of the groups.
  – Interest groups also file *amicus curiae* briefs to support one side in a legal case, hoping to influence the outcome in favor of their goals.

• In addition, interest groups try to get federal judges sympathetic to their views appointed to the courts.
Grass-Roots Lobbying

• Grass-roots lobbying encourages the public at large to pressure elected officials to support certain policies.

• Common tactics include writing or phoning officials and staging demonstrations or protests.

• Interest groups may also publish rankings of members of Congress that rate how those lawmakers vote on issues.

• The AARP is particularly effective at grass-roots lobbying.
Digital Lobbying

• Groups such as liberal MoveOn.org have turned to the Internet as a tool for grass-roots lobbying.

  – The Internet is used to make appeals, to collect members, for petitions, for fundraising, and as an organizing tool.

  – Most organized interest groups now have web sites and email lists. Many also use blogs to reach members.
Interest groups try to gain support for their goals.

- Groups encourage the news media to report on their activities, all with the goal of promoting their policies.
- They often use celebrities, like Michael J. Fox and Muhammad Ali, who support Parkinson's research, to endorse their proposals.
Propaganda

• Propaganda is a method of persuading people to adopt a particular belief, whether the belief is true or false.

  – Propaganda starts with a conclusion and then gathers data to support it.
  – A common tactic is to attach positive or negative labels to people, depending on who the interest group supports.
  – Other tactics include urging people to follow the crowd and “jump on the bandwagon” or convincing the public that the interest group is just like them.
• Getting candidates elected to office is a good way to influence government policies.
  – Interest groups use political action committees (PACs) to contribute money to candidates who share the same or similar views on key issues.
  – They also help conduct campaigns by providing consultants, volunteers, and information for speeches.