

# 10

## Interest Groups

### ▣ Chapter Overview

Interest groups have long been central to American politics. During the debate over ratification, James Madison discussed the role of “factions” in a democratic polis. His writings, particularly in *The Federalist No. 10*, outlined a vision of a political system that checked the power of factions. Today, we generally refer to these “factions” as “interest groups,” the topic of this chapter. We begin our analysis of interest groups by describing the role of interest groups in American politics and contrasting the three leading theories of interest group politics: pluralism, elitism, and hyperpluralism. Then, we analyze the factors that make some interest groups more successful than others in the political arena and assess the four basic strategies that interest groups use to try to shape policy. Next, we contrast the various types of interest groups. We conclude by evaluating ideas to limit the reach and influence of interest groups. By the end of the chapter, students should have a good understanding of the nature and role of interest groups in the United States.

### ▣ Study Outline

**10.1** Learning Objective 10.1: Describe the role of interest groups in American politics. (p. 332)

#### ***The Role Interest Groups***

- Interest groups may pursue any kind of policy, in all levels and branches of government.
- They differ from political parties in several ways.

- They pursue their agenda through the **political process**, whereas parties advance their agendas through elections.
- Interest groups specialize in one or two policy areas, whereas parties focus on general policies to win a majority.

## 10.2

### **Learning Objective 10.2: Compare and contrast the theories of pluralism, elitism, and hyperpluralism. (p. 333)**

#### ***Theories of Interest Group Politics***

- **Pluralist theory:** Interest groups are important to democracy because they allow people to organize themselves to change policies.
- Because hundreds of interest groups must compete for influence, no one group will dominate the others.
- Groups put up a fair fight; they do not engage in illegal activities to surpass other groups. Groups are equal in power because they have different resources at their disposal.
- **Elite theory:** There may be hundreds of interest groups, but only a select few have any real power.
  - The interests of only a handful of elites, usually business people, are almost always favored over other interests.
  - The policy battles that smaller interests do win are usually minor.
  - Power rests mostly with large multinational corporations.
  - The system of elite control is maintained by a well-established structure of interlocking policy players.
- **Hyperpluralist theory or interest group liberalism:** Subgovernments, or **iron triangles**, form around specific policy areas.
- These are composed of an **interest group**, a **federal agency**, and any **legislative committees** or **subcommittees** that handle the policy area.
- By avoiding having to choose between policy initiatives, the government creates conflicting policies that waste time and money.
- Groups have too much political influence because they usually get what they want.
- Competing subgovernments only add to the confusion.

**10.3**

**Learning Objective 10.3: Analyze the factors that make some interest groups more successful than others in the political arena. (p. 336)**

***What Makes an Interest Group Successful?***

- **Smaller groups** are more effective than large groups because they can organize more easily.
- A member of a small group is more likely to experience the group's success and, therefore, is more likely to work harder than a member of a large group.
- However, groups do experience the **free rider problem**, where individuals can benefit from the work of the group without actually joining the group.
- According to Olson's law of large groups, this problem is greater with larger groups.
- Intensity is another important factor.
- **Single-issue groups** form around a specific policy and tend to pursue it uncompromisingly.
- Single-issue groups often deal with moral issues that people feel strongly about and members of single-issue groups often vote according to a candidate's stand on the group's issue.
- Politicians are most likely to serve the needs of people or groups with money.
- Money allows groups to mobilize, conduct research, and maintain an administration.

**10.4**

**Learning Objective 10.4: Assess the four basic strategies that interest groups use to try to shape policy. (p. 339)**

***How Groups Try to Shape Policy***

- **Lobbying:** Professional lobbyists attempt to persuade lawmakers to act on behalf of their group.
- The more helpful a lobbyist is, the more power he or she has with a politician.
- Lobbyists serve as policy experts in their interest area, act as consultants who advise legislators on how to approach policy issues and debates, mobilize support for politicians during reelection, and suggest innovative policy ideas.

- **Electioneering:** Interest groups endorse a candidate who supports their interests and work to get that candidate elected.
- The groups encourage people to vote for the candidate and help finance the candidate's campaign through **PACs**.
- Congressional candidates have become largely dependent on PAC money, and most PAC money goes to **incumbents** rather than challengers.
- **Litigation:** Interest groups use lawsuits to change policies that have already gone through the legislative process.
- Even the threat of a lawsuit may be enough to influence policymaking.
- Groups can file *amicus curiae* briefs to state their side in a court case and to assess the consequences of the decisions the court might make.
- Groups can also file **class action lawsuits**—suits on behalf of a larger group in the electorate.
- **Mobilizing public opinion:** Interest groups try to influence the public because they know that politicians' careers depend on public opinion.
- Groups cultivate a positive image of themselves in the eyes of the public and they encourage public participation to advance interests from the point of view of the constituency.

**10.5**

**Learning Objective 10.5: Identify the various types of interest groups and their policy concerns. (p. 347)**

### ***Types of Interest Groups***

- **Economic interests** such as business, labor, and farmers are often against regulations and tax increases, and want tax advantages, subsidies, and contracts for work.
- Organized labor is the second largest group (e.g., the AFL-CIO, the National Education Association).
- The interest group with the largest membership is the American Association for the Advancement of Retired Persons (**AARP**), which represents the interests of older Americans.
- Businesses are the most widely represented interests in Washington.

- **Environmental interests** are the fastest-growing type of interest group, favoring wilderness protection, pollution control, and energy alternatives, while opposing policies that damage the environment; examples include the Sierra Club and the Nature Conservancy.
- **Equality interests** such as civil rights, women's rights, and social welfare groups' concerns center on fair treatment in jobs, housing, and education.
  - Examples include the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Southern Poverty Law Center.
- **Consumers' interests** and **public interests** address issues in which the whole public benefits from certain policy actions, such as product safety, which was introduced by Ralph Nader, and also represent groups that cannot assert their interests themselves: children, the mentally ill, or animals, for example.
- Some groups advocate for fair and open government or government reform. Examples include Consumer Alert and the Children's Defense Fund.

### **For Additional Review**

Create a graphic organizer, in chart form, for interest groups. At the top of the graph, put the definition of interest groups and describe the entities through which interest groups work. Next, create 3 columns for the chart: Classification, Purpose, and Example. In the Classification column, list the TYPES of interest groups; in the Purpose column, describe the PURPOSE of that type of interest group; and in the third column, list EXAMPLES of the type of interest group identified in the first column. Use this organizer when studying for the unit test and the AP Exam.

Create a second graphic organizer, this time in diagram form, explaining how interest groups influence. In the center circle, place the main topic of the diagram. In smaller circles, write the methods by which interest groups exercise influence, including an explanation of each method identified. Use this organizer when studying for the unit test and the AP Exam.