

Main Idea

Interest groups are private organizations that try to influence public opinion and convince public officials to accept their goals and views. They give political power to segments of society that have similar views.

Reading Focus

1. What are interest groups, and what role do they play in the political process?
2. What different types of interest groups exist?
3. How do interest groups work?
4. Do interest groups serve the public good?

Key Terms

interest group
 political action committee
 trade association
 labor unions
 endorse
 lobbying
 grass roots

Interest Groups and What They Do (p. 255)

An **interest group** is an association of people who hold similar views and goals and try to influence public policy and the public agenda to achieve them. They work at the local, state, and national levels. They organize people who share concerns, provide a means of political participation, and supply information.

Many interest groups also have political action committees (PACs) that support candidates for political office. A **political action committee** is an organization created to raise and contribute money legally to the campaigns of political candidates.

Organizing Interests Some of the ways citizens can influence public policy are by writing letters to government officials, testifying at legislative hearings, and voting. They can also march in a demonstration. People can also join interest groups to help strengthen their cause.

Encouraging Participation Being a member of a group gives individuals a way to take part in the political process and helps the group to influence public policy.

In recent years, membership in interest groups has declined. However, financial contributions to such groups have increased.

Supplying Information Because interest groups have more money, they are able to hire experts and engage in new activities, such as lobbying campaigns. An interest group's influence often comes more from the information it provides than from the activities of its members.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea How are interest groups and public opinion related?

Types of Interest Groups (pp. 256–257)

Interest groups represent all types of issues. There are interest groups for economic

interests and political, social, cultural, and religious issues. There are also groups that focus on foreign policy issues.

Agricultural Groups Many interest groups represent the nation's farmers. Some represent farmers as a whole, while others focus on a particular type of farming.

Business Groups An organization such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is an example of a business interest group. Another type of business group, called a **trade association**, represents certain industries or parts of industries. Most business groups and trade associations also have PACs that make campaign contributions to political parties and candidates.

Labor Groups Most labor interest groups are also **labor unions**—groups of workers who do the same job or work in related industries. Like business and trade association groups, unions and union members contribute to political campaigns. Many unions have a committee on political education (COPE) that directs the union's political activities.

Cause-Based Groups Some groups, including many political interest groups, represent or promote a cause rather than the interests of a segment of society. An example is Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), a single-issue group devoted to fighting drunk driving and its causes.

Societal Groups Some groups represent religious, social, racial, ethnic, and other segments of the population. Examples of societal groups include the National Organization for Women (NOW) and AARP, which represents older Americans.

Professional Groups Some interest groups represent a particular profession. For example, the American Medical Association (AMA) represents doctors. Such groups

establish standards for their professions, influence the licensing and training of those who enter the profession, and educate the public and government about their professional interests and concerns.

Reading Check Contrasting How do cause-based groups differ from other interest groups?

How Interest Groups Work (pp. 257–258)

Interest groups' success depends on hard work, accurate and timely information, effective and frequent communication, and money. Interest groups support candidates and engage in lobbying to influence public officials and public policy.

Endorsing Candidates One way groups influence public policy and legislation is to help elect candidates who support their views. An interest group may **endorse**—publicly declare its support for—a particular candidate in an election. This support usually depends on the candidate's position on, and support for, the group's interests.

Interest groups also participate in elections by having their PACs contribute money to the campaigns of candidates. A PAC usually gives money to candidates who have supported the group's views in the past. Sometimes, they may give money to both candidates in a race, hoping that whoever wins will support the group's interests.

Lobbying Interest groups participate in government at every level by **lobbying**, or contacting a public official to persuade the official to support the group's interests. Groups lobby decision makers in government agencies as well as legislators. Lobbyists now use technology, such as e-mail campaigns, to inform and influence officials. Their most effective tools,

however, are telephone calls and face-to-face conversations.

Informing Public Opinion Interest groups often provide someone to testify at congressional or other public hearings to express and explain the group's interests. They hope to generate support for the group and influence lawmakers. Many groups and lobbyists also practice grassroots politics.

Grass roots is the name given to the lowest level of an organization or society. For example, a group may get a large number of individual voters to contact a legislator.

Filing Lawsuits Another way interest groups influence public policy is through the legal system. An example is the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, in which a group of parents successfully sued to end legal racial segregation in public schools.

Reading Check Summarizing What methods do interest groups use to influence public policy?

Interest Groups and the Public Good (pp. 258–259)

American democracy includes both the principle of majority rule and the requirement that minority rights be protected. There are interest groups that represent both majority and minority interests. All are trying to influence public policy and political issues.

Benefits of Interest Groups An important benefit of interest groups is that they give minority interests a voice in the political process. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s is a good example.

Criticism of Interest Groups There are several criticisms of interest groups. These include:

- They have too much influence. A well-funded group can have an impact even with a small membership.
- They focus on one narrow issue and ignore broader social needs and policies.
- They appeal to people's emotions rather than providing reasonable solutions to the problems they are addressing.
- Because there are effective interest groups on all sides of an issue, Congress may decide not to act on a particular issue.

Limits on Interest Groups In 2007, after a number of lobbying scandals, Congress passed ethics and lobbying reform legislation. The new laws tightened ethics rules for legislators and limited some activities by lobbyists. Critics worried that these measures would have only temporary success, because groups tend to find a way around new rules. As a result, citizens should learn what they can about who is supporting or opposing major public issues.

Reading Check Summarizing How do interest groups affect democracy?

SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

1. **Recall** What is an **interest group**, and what are its goals?
2. **Define** What is a **trade association**?
3. **Describe** How do interest groups influence elections?
4. **Explain** How and why did Congress try to limit the influence of interest groups in 2007?