

3

Interest Groups at Work

Section Preview

OBJECTIVES

1. **Explain** interest groups' three major goals in influencing public opinion.
2. **Describe** how interest groups use propaganda to persuade people to their point of view.
3. **Analyze** how interest groups try to influence political parties and elections.
4. **Examine** how lobbying brings group pressures to bear on the process of making public policy.

WHY IT MATTERS

Flip through a newspaper or magazine and you will no doubt see examples of interest groups at work—that is, using propaganda aimed at influencing public attitudes. Interest groups also work through political action committees and lobbyists to influence political parties and public policy.

POLITICAL DICTIONARY

- ★ **propaganda**
- ★ **single-interest group**
- ★ **lobbying**
- ★ **grass roots**

Interest groups exist to influence public policies. That is why they are good illustrations of the saying that politics is all about “who gets what, when, and how.” Today, most interest groups use a wide variety of techniques as they try to influence public opinion, work to affect the outcome of elections, and lobby those who make public policy.

Influencing Public Opinion

Public opinion is the most significant long-term force in American politics. It is abundantly clear that, over the long run, no public policy can be followed successfully without the support of a sizeable portion of the population—and interest groups know this.

Interest groups regularly reach out to the public to accomplish one or all of three major goals:

1. To supply the public with information an organization thinks the people should have. This information is presented to support that group's interests. Thus, Handgun Control, Inc. often runs full-page magazine ads keyed to one fact: the number of Americans who are killed by handguns each year.

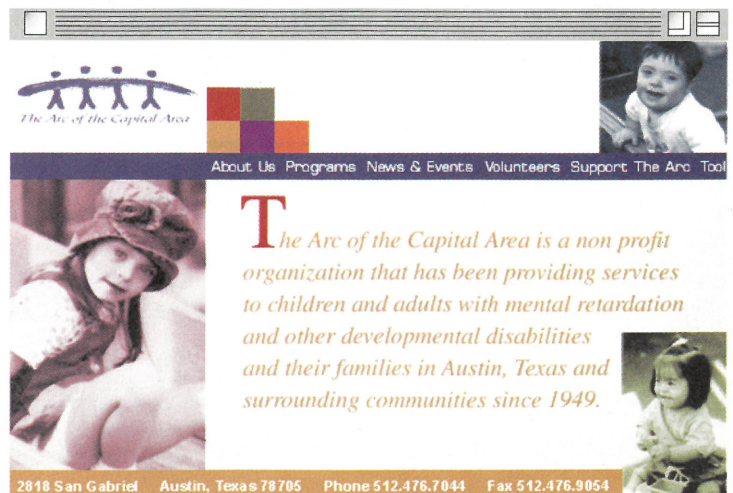
2. To build a positive image for a group. Thus, the National Rifle Association frequently runs ads

that feature the NRA's gun-safety programs and the many shooting tournaments it sponsors.

3. To promote a particular public policy. This, of course, is the purpose of most interest groups' efforts.

Propaganda

Interest groups try to create the public attitudes they want by using **propaganda**.⁶ Propaganda is a technique of persuasion aimed at influencing individual or group behaviors. Its goal is to create a particular belief. That belief may be completely true or false, or it may lie somewhere



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The Arc of the Capital Area is a non profit organization that has been providing services to children and adults with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities and their families in Austin, Texas and surrounding communities since 1949.

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⁶The term comes from the Latin *propagare*—to propagate, to spread, to disseminate. It has been a part of the American political vocabulary since the 1930s.

▲ Like Austin Arc, an advocacy group for people with developmental disabilities, many interest groups reach out to supporters on the Internet.

between those extremes. Today, people tend to think of propaganda as a form of lying and deception. As a technique, however, propaganda is neither moral nor immoral; it is amoral.

Propaganda does not use objective logic. Rather, it begins with a conclusion. Then it brings together any evidence that will support that conclusion and disregards information that will not. Propagandists are advertisers, persuaders—and occasionally even brainwashers—who are interested in influencing others to agree with their point of view.

The development of the mass media in this country encouraged the use of propaganda, first in the field of commercial advertising, and then in politics. To be successful, propaganda must be presented in simple, interesting, and credible terms. Talented propagandists almost never attack the logic of a policy they oppose. Instead, they often attack it with name-calling. That is, they attach such labels as “communist” or “fascist.” Other labels include “ultraliberal,” “ultraconservative,” “pie-in-the-sky,” or “greedy.” Or, they try to discredit a policy or person by card-stacking; that is, presenting only one side of the issue.

Policies that propagandists support receive labels that will produce favorable reactions. They use such glittering generalities as “American,” “sound,” “fair,” and “just.” Symbols are often used to elicit those reactions, too: Uncle Sam and the flag are favorites. So, too, are testimonials—endorsements, or supporting statements, from well-known television stars or professional athletes. The bandwagon approach, which urges people to follow the crowd, is another favorite technique. The plain-folks approach, in which the propagandist pretends to be one of the common people, gets heavy use, too. (For more information on propaganda techniques, see Skills for Life on page 17.)

Propaganda is spread through newspapers, radio, television, the Internet, movies, billboards, books, magazines, pamphlets, posters, speeches—in fact, through every form of mass communication. The more controversial or less popular a group’s position, the more necessary the propaganda campaign becomes. Competing groups will likely be conducting campaigns of their own.

Influencing Parties and Elections

As you know, interest groups and political parties are very different creatures. They exist in the same environment, however, and their paths often cross.

For their part, leaders of interest groups know that political parties play a central role in selecting those people who make public-policy decisions. They are quite aware, too, that much of the government’s policy-making machinery is organized by and through political parties.

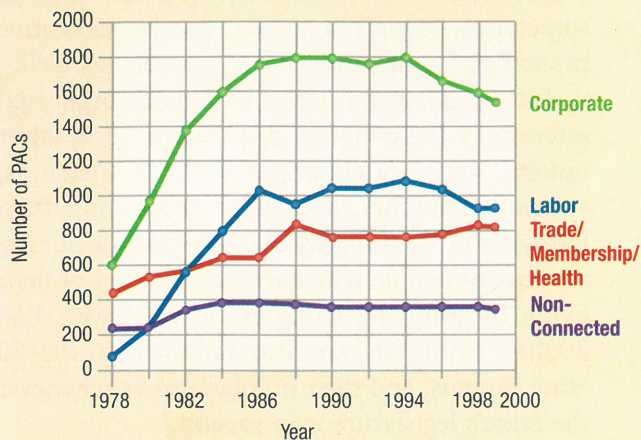
Interest groups thus try to influence the behavior of political parties, and they do so in a number of ways. Some groups keep close ties with one or the other of the major parties. Most hope to secure the support of both of them. Several urge their members to become active in party affairs and try to win posts in party organizations.

An interest group’s election tactics often have to involve some very finely tuned decisions. The group must consider how its actions on behalf of or against a candidate might affect its overall goal of influencing policy.



▲ Pro- and anti-gun control groups use billboards as one way to get their messages across to the public. **Critical Thinking** Which forms of mass communication do you think are the most effective in helping interest groups spread their messages? Explain your answer.

Growth of PACs



SOURCE: Federal Election Commission



Interpreting Graphs The total number of PACs has increased dramatically since the 1970s.

(a) How would you describe the growth of PACs during the 1990s? (b) What does the growth of PACs suggest about the way political campaigns are financed?

If, for example, a group supports the Democratic candidate for a seat in the U.S. Senate, it may not want to help that candidate by attacking the Republican nominee in the race, especially if the Republican has some chance of winning. If the Republican does win the race, the group will not only have failed to advance its cause, but likely will have created an enemy. The interest group might also be concerned that another Republican candidate who wins some other office might be offended by attacks on a party colleague, even if he or she agrees with the group's policy aims.

Campaigns for public office cost a great deal of money. Interest groups are quite aware of this fact, and they are a major source of campaign funds today. Much of their financial help now goes to parties and their candidates through political action committees (PACs). As you know, PACs raise and distribute money to candidates who will further their goals. (See Chapter 7, Section 3.)

The number of PACs has grown dramatically over the past 20 years or so. One particular variety, often called **single-interest groups**, has grown most rapidly. These organizations are PACs that concentrate their efforts on one issue, such as abortion, gun control, or health care. They work for or, more often, against a candidate solely on the basis of that candidate's stand on that one

issue. For them, all other considerations—the candidate's record on other questions, his or her party identification or political experience, and so on—are of little or no importance.

Most interest groups focus on the public policy-making process. Any part they play in the electoral process is an offshoot of that primary concern. The efforts of single-interest groups stand as a notable exception to that rule.

Lobbying

Lobbying is usually defined as those activities by which group pressures are brought to bear on legislators and the legislative process. Certainly, it is that, but it is also much more. Realistically, lobbying includes all of the methods by which group pressures are brought to bear on all aspects of the public policy-making process.

What happens in a legislative body is often of deep concern to several different, and competing, interests. A bill to regulate the sale of firearms, for example, excites the interest of many individuals and groups. Those companies that make guns, those that sell them, and those that produce or sell ammunition, targets, scopes, hunting jackets, sleeping bags, and related products have a clear stake in that bill's contents and its fate. So, too, do law-enforcement agencies, hunters, wildlife conservationists, such groups



▲ **Making Their Views Known** Lobbyists make their interests known in a variety of ways, including direct contact with legislators (top). The League of Women Voters, which often works at the grassroots level, promotes active participation in government (bottom).

as the National Rifle Association and the American Civil Liberties Union, and many others. These groups all seek to influence legislators as they consider the passage of that bill.

Public policy is made by much more than the words in a statute, however. What happens after a law has been passed is often of real concern to organized interests, too. How is the law interpreted? How vigorously is it applied by the agency that enforces it? What position will the courts take if the law is challenged on some legal ground? These questions point to the fact that

interest groups often have to carry their lobbying efforts beyond the legislative arena. Lobbying is thus also often brought into one and sometimes several agencies in the executive branch and sometimes into the courts, as well.

Nearly all of the more important organized interests in the country—business groups, labor unions, farm organizations, the professions, veterans, churches, and many more—maintain lobbyists in Washington. Most estimates put the number of people who earn at least part of their living by lobbying Congress at no fewer than 20,000. Lobbyists are also stationed in the 50 State capitals, and their number grows whenever the State’s legislature is in session.⁷

Lobbyists at Work

Lobbyists themselves often prefer to be known by some other title—“legislative counsel” or “public representative,” for example. Whatever they call themselves, their major task is to work for those matters that benefit their clients and against those that may harm them.

A lobbyist’s effectiveness depends in large part on his or her knowledge of the political system. The competent lobbyist is thoroughly familiar with government and its procedures, with the facts of current political life, and with the techniques of “polite” persuasion. Some have been members of Congress or the State legislature. They know the “legislative ropes” and have many close contacts among present-day members. Many others are lawyers, former journalists, or men and women who have come into lobbying from the closely related field of public relations.

Lobbyists at work use a number of techniques as they try to persuade legislators and other policy makers to share their points of view. They see that articles, reports, and all sorts of other information favorable to their causes reach those officeholders. Many testify before legislative committees. If the House Committee on the Judiciary is considering a

⁷The “lobby” is actually an outer room or main corridor or some other part of a capitol building to which the general public is admitted. The term *lobby-agent* was being used to identify favor-seekers at sessions of the New York State legislature in Albany by the late 1820s. By the 1830s the term had been shortened to lobbyist and was in wide use in Washington and elsewhere.

gun control bill, for example, representatives of all those groups with an interest in firearms mentioned earlier are certain to be invited, or to ask for the opportunity, to present their views. The testimony that lobbyists give is usually “expert,” but, of course, it is also couched in terms favorable to the interests they represent.

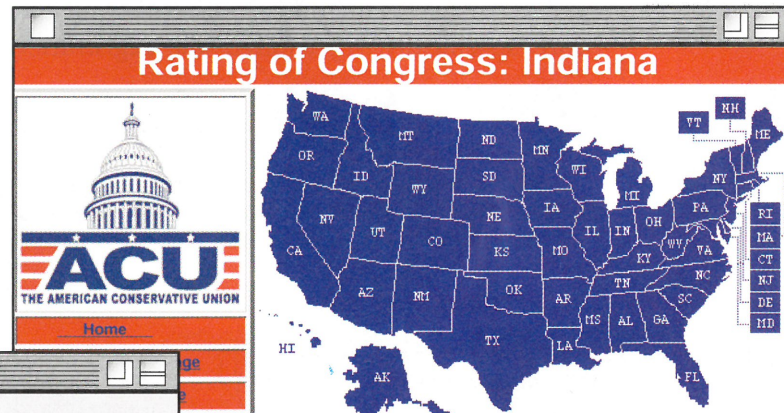
Most lobbyists also know how to bring “grass-roots” pressures to bear. **Grass roots** means of or from the people, the average voters. The groups that the lobbyists speak for can mount campaigns by e-mail, letter, postcard, and phone from “the folks back home”—and often on short notice. Favorable news stories, magazine articles, advertisements, radio and television appeals, endorsements by noted personalities: These and the many other weapons of publicity are in the arsenal of the good lobbyist.

Several interest groups now publish ratings of members of Congress. These rankings are based on the votes cast on measures that those groups regard as crucial to their interests. Among the most prominent of the many organizations that now compile and publish such ratings are the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the various State Public Interest Research Groups (PIRG), the American Conservative Union (ACU), the National Tax Limitation Committee (NTLC), and the Chamber of Commerce of the United States.

Each of these groups selects a number of key measures and then rates each member on the basis of his or her votes on those bills. In the usual rating scheme, each senator or representative is given a score that reflects how often he or she voted in accordance with the views of the interest group.

Interest groups see to it that the mass media publicize these ratings. They also distribute the ratings to the group’s membership. Their ultimate objective is twofold: either to persuade unfriendly legislators to change their voting behavior or to help bring about their defeat in future elections.

The typical lobbyist of today is a far cry from those of an earlier day, and from many of the fictitious ones still found on television and in novels and the movies. The once fairly common practice of bribery and the widespread use of unethical practices are almost unknown. Most present-day lobbyists work openly, and their major techniques come under the headings of friendliness, persuasion, and helpfulness.



Senate Votes for this state

1999 House Votes

	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	1999	1998	YOS	Life	
+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	12	15	11
+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	95	100	5	99
+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	36	44	9	34
A	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	91	88	7	92
A	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	95	96	17	97
+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	88	100	3	95
+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	96	92	5	91
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	16	NM	1	16
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▲ Some interest groups rate members of Congress on issues of concern to their members. **Critical Thinking** Why is using the Internet an effective way for interest groups to publish this kind of information?

PIRG Congressional Scorecard 2000

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Alabama | Louisiana | Ohio |
| Alaska | Maine | Oklahoma |
| Arizona | Maryland | Oregon |
| Arkansas | Massachusetts | Pennsylvania |
| California | Michigan | Rhode Island |
| Colorado | Minnesota | South |
| Connecticut | Mississippi | Carolina |
| Delaware | Missouri | South Dakota |
| Florida | Montana | Tennessee |
| Georgia | Nebraska | Texas |
| Hawaii | Nevada | Utah |
| Idaho | New | Vermont |
| Illinois | Hampshire | Virginia |
| Indiana | New Jersey | Washington |
| Iowa | New Mexico | West Virginia |
| Kansas | New York | Wisconsin |
| Kentucky | North Carolina | Wyoming |
| | North Dakota | |



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senate : senate no frames (printable)

Lobbyists are ready to make campaign contributions, provide information, write speeches, and even draft legislation. The contributions are welcome, the information usually quite accurate, the speeches forceful, and the bills well-drawn. Most lobbyists know that if they behaved otherwise (gave false information, for example) they would damage, if not destroy, their credibility and thus their overall effectiveness.

Lobbyists work hard to influence committee action, floor debate, and the final vote in a legislative body. If they fail in one house, they carry their fight to the other. If they lose there too, they may turn to the executive branch and perhaps to the courts, as well.⁸

Lobby Regulation

Lobbying abuses do occur now and then, of course. False or misleading testimony, bribery, and other unethical pressures are not common, but they do happen. The first major attempt to corral lobbying came in 1946 when Congress passed the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act. This law required lobbyists to register with the clerk of the House and the secretary of the Senate. More specifically, it required the registration

⁸Notice that various government agencies often act much like interest groups in their relations with Congress or with a State's legislature—for example, when they seek funds or when they offer testimony for or against a bill in committee.

of those individuals and groups who collected or spent money for the “principal purpose” of influencing legislation.

That vague phrase “principal purpose” proved to be a huge loophole through which many very active groups avoided registration. The 1946 law was also ineffective because its provisions applied only to lobbying efforts aimed at members of Congress, not at congressional staff members or at officials in the executive branch.

Congress finally responded to years of criticism of the 1946 law with a much tighter statute, the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995. That law eliminates the “principal purpose” standard. It requires registration by all individual lobbyists and organizations that seek to influence members of Congress, their staffers, or any policy-making official in the executive branch, from the President on down. Those who must register are required to supply such basic information as name, address, and principal place of business, plus a general description of their activities. They must also furnish similar information about their clients and describe in detail their lobbying activities in semiannual reports.

Each State also has its own law or laws regulating lobbying activities. The variations among them are extreme, however. Although most States have laws that are weaker than the federal statute, a few States have fairly rigorous laws. On the other hand, a few States condone virtually anything a lobbyist chooses to do.

Section 3 Assessment

Key Terms and Main Ideas

1. For what three reasons do interest groups reach out to the public?
2. (a) Why do interest groups use **propaganda**? (b) Identify at least three major propaganda techniques.
3. (a) Why do interest groups try to influence political parties? (b) What is a **single-interest group**?
4. How is **lobbying** used to influence public policy?

Critical Thinking

5. **Expressing Problems Clearly** Create a “Help Wanted” ad for a lobbyist. Include a job description as well as the preferred professional experience and abilities that a candidate should bring to the position.

6. **Recognizing Propaganda** Choose an issue of interest to students, such as year-round schooling or censorship of school publications. Then write a paragraph in which you use at least two of the propaganda techniques described in this section to persuade your audience to support your point of view.



Take It to the Net

7. Compare the contributions of various PACs to Republicans and Democrats. Which PACs primarily support Republicans? Which primarily support Democrats? Create a table to show your conclusions. Use the links provided in the Social Studies area at the following Web site for help in completing this activity. www.phschool.com