

APGoPo Unit 4

INTEREST GROUPS PAST AND PRESENT

An interest group is an organization of people who enter the political process to try to achieve their shared goals. Almost from the beginning, Americans have joined political groups. Today, about 2/3 of Americans belong to such groups. However, Americans historically have distrusted the motives and methods of interest groups. James Madison called interest groups and political parties factions, and he saw federalism and separation of powers as necessary to control their "evils." Since the number of interest groups and the people who participate in them have increased greatly over the past half century, they appear to be even more important today than they have been in the past.

WHAT WERE INTEREST GROUPS ACCORDING TO JAMES MADISON?

- Madison called interest groups "factions"
- Madison's dilemma: allowing people the liberty to form groups and express their views could destroy the hope for an orderly society
- Political factions were inevitable → need to control their effects
- Madison addressed the problem of establishing a stable constitutional system that at the same time would respect liberty in *The Federalist, No. 10* (freedom but limit factions)

WHAT ARE INTEREST GROUPS TODAY?

- Interest group (special interests – term used in a negative way): organization of people whose members share policy views on specific issues and attempt to influence public policy to their benefit
- Interest groups are protected under the 1st Amendment of the Constitution

HOW DO INTEREST GROUPS LINK CITIZENS TO GOVERNMENT?

- Linkage institution (along with elections, political parties, and mass media) – link citizens to government
 - Express their members' preferences to government policymakers
 - Convey government policy information to their members
 - Raise and spend money to gain access to policymakers

WHAT ARE THE FUNDAMENTAL GOALS OF INTEREST GROUPS?

- Influence public policy (change laws)
 - Get legislation passed to benefit their members
 - Successful because constituency is narrow, but the costs are spread broadly across the population
- Gain access to policymakers
- Support sympathetic policymakers

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INTEREST GROUPS AND POLITICAL PARTIES?

- Parties nominate candidates, contest elections, and seek to gain control over government.
 - *In contrast, interest groups seek to support public officials and influence government policies.*
- Parties have positions on a wide range of public issues.
 - *In contrast, interest groups focus only on specific issues that directly affect their members. As a result, interest groups are able to articulate specific policy positions.*
- Political parties are public organizations that are accountable to the voters.
 - *In contrast, interest groups are private organizations that are accountable to their members.*

WHY DO INTEREST GROUPS KEEP GROWING?

- Economic developments
- Government policies, whenever government creates an agency, it creates an entry point for interest groups – more groups needed to form in order to protect their stakes in these agency activities
- Diversity of population – countless social, racial, economic and geographic cleavages
- Diffusion of power in government. Political power shared by many → plenty of places in which a group can argue its case. The more places there are to influence policy, the more organizations there will be to exercise that influence.
- Weakness of political parties
- Interest groups tend to beget interest groups (when one is formed, another may be formed to counter it)
- Technology, e.g., computerized mailing lists to solicit funds, use of communications media and Internet