

Interest Groups and the American Political System



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Interest groups' high level of involvement in American elections stems, in part, from distinctive characteristics of American government, political parties, and elections. First, governmental decision making offers multiple incentives and opportunities for influencing policy. Second, the major U.S. parties are permeable to outside interests, enabling interest group activists to obtain powerful positions within local, state, and national party organizations. Third, American elections are unique: they are much more frequent than those of most other Western democracies, and far smaller percentages of citizens vote. Moreover, American elections are candidate centered: candidates must decide to run, raise their own funds, assemble their own coalitions, and reach voters with carefully targeted messages—all of which occurs outside the formal party structure.

Characteristics of American Government

At the same time that our federal system creates incentives for interest group involvement, it also places demands on interest groups, which must work within the system in order to successfully influence policy. First, because policy can be made at the national, state, and local levels, interest groups are generally called upon to be active at all three levels. . . .

Second, interest groups are well aware that local councils and state legislatures constitute a “pipeline” of potential candidates for the House of Representatives. Thus, they often participate in state and local races with the intention of cultivating and training potential candidates for national office.

Third, the division of powers between the executive and legislative branches means that interest groups must try to cultivate access to both the president and Congress. Given that the executive and legislative branches have different constituencies, timetables, and interests, this is a difficult enough task, but it has been

made even more complex during the past forty years because the two branches have often been under the control of different parties. . . .

Fourth, because members of Congress are not bound to vote for the policies of party leaders but are independent actors, even those of the minority party are in a position to help or hurt an interest group's policy agenda. Any member of the House or Senate can introduce a bill drafted in consultation with an interest group and offer amendments in committee or on the floor to make the bill more palatable to interest groups. When a bill is up for a vote, members of Congress may vote however they choose. In the Senate, any member can put a “hold” on a bill, delaying a vote perhaps indefinitely.

[I]nterest groups often bolster their lobbying efforts by engaging in electoral activities. By helping members of Congress win elections, interest groups hope to establish relationships with senators and representatives and to get some return on their investment in the form of public policy actions. On occasion, relationships cultivated through electoral activity enable interest groups to build coalitions in support of their policy positions, even over the objections of party leaders.

Finally, the U.S. government is perhaps more willing than that of many other countries to distribute particularistic economic benefits to interest groups. Appropriations, tax, and even substantive bills such as highway bills are generally filled with specific language benefiting one or more companies or interest groups. Corporations get government contracts, special tax provisions, and exemptions from regulations (or, more commonly, delays in implementing regulations), all of which can affect their profits. In addition, members of Congress and occasionally even presidents intercede with the bureaucracy in an attempt to win favorable treatment for particular groups. The opportunity to obtain specific economic benefits is yet another incentive for interest groups to develop close relationships with policy makers—and one important way to do so is through electoral politics.

Characteristics of American Parties

Like the American government, American political parties differ from their counterparts in other democracies. In many countries, parties are closely linked with one or a few interests that they can be said to represent. In Europe, labor unions are represented by labor or social democratic parties, the Catholic Church speaks through Christian democratic parties, environmentalists have formed “green” parties, and very conservative citizens are represented by “new radical right” parties. In Israel, orthodox religious groups have their own political parties. In some countries, interest groups are represented by distinct sectors of a party. In Mexico, for example, the Partido Revolucionario Institucionalizado (PRI) has separate sectors representing agriculture, workers, and students.

In the United States, however, the parties have established relationships with a variety of interest groups that make up their core constituencies, but they also interact with groups that are nonpartisan or that are willing to back candidates of either party. . . .

Because interest groups have resources—mailing lists, newsletters, conventions, and volunteers—that can help political parties reach out to group members and other voters, parties often rely on interest groups to help them communicate with voters, often working closely with particular groups to develop and distribute distinctive messages targeting group members. When GOP leaders want to get the word out to white evangelical voters that theirs is the party of moral conservatism, they ask the Christian Coalition to carry the message in its publications, to distribute voters' guides in conservative churches, and to allow party leaders to speak at the organization's annual convention. Similarly, Democratic officials rely on unions to reach workers, on feminist organizations to reach working women, and on environmental groups to reach voters who are concerned about pollution.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of American parties and elections is that party leaders play only a small role in selecting candidates. Through party primaries, caucuses, and conventions, interest groups can help to determine which candidates win nomination and can even work to nominate activists and members from their own groups. Although party officials are usually neutral in intraparty contests, interest groups both individually and in coalition with others are extremely active in aiding one candidate over another. . . .

Finally, unlike many European parties, which receive most or all of their campaign money from the government, American parties must raise their own money from individual and group contributions. Interest groups provide much of the money for parties through a variety of legal mechanisms. Money from interest groups helps fund party electoral activities, as well as buildings, computers, and party workers' salaries. Interest groups also contribute to party foundations and think tanks that develop policy proposals for party leaders.

Characteristics of American Elections

Elections are a necessary component of democracy, but democracies implement elections in very different ways. In most countries, elections are held at regular intervals and generally occur at the same time, both for national executive and legislative offices and for regional and local government posts. Moreover, campaigns in most countries are relatively short: in Britain, for example, the 1996 campaign lasted six weeks and included all the seats in the national legislature and most local races.

In the United States, in contrast, elections are held almost continuously. . . .

Because members of the House of Representatives stand for election every two years, representatives are constantly running for reelection—raising money, addressing voters, refining their images and their messages. And their challengers sometimes begin campaigning more than a year before the election. Senators, who are elected for six-year terms, generally campaign for at least two years, and some focus on fund raising throughout their terms. Even before a new president is sworn into office, prospective candidates from the other major party may drop in on the early presidential caucus and primary states of Iowa and New Hampshire to “test the political waters.”

Another distinctive characteristic of American elections is that they are candidate centered. . . .

The difficulties of running a candidate-centered campaign render interest groups obvious allies. Interest groups can recruit candidates and encourage them to run, help finance their campaigns, and assist them in selecting campaign themes. By providing access to special communication channels such as newsletters and group gatherings, interest groups can also help candidates reach interest group members effectively and inexpensively. . . .

A third unique characteristic of American elections is the low rate of voter turnout. . . .

Low levels of voter turnout create opportunities for organized groups to greatly influence election outcomes. . . .

Finally, American elections are nearly always winner-take-all contests in single-member districts. To see why this creates an incentive for interest groups to participate in elections, consider the consequences of a 2 percent shift under two different systems: if German labor unions succeeded in increasing by 2 percent the vote share of the German Social Democratic Party, that party would gain approximately 2 percent of the seats in the Bundestag, the German parliament, because a party's share of seats in the legislature is proportional to its percentage of the popular vote. In the United States, where representation is not proportional but is based on single-member districts, a 2 percent increase in the Democratic Party's share of the vote for the U.S. House would likely enable Democrats to regain control of that body, because the increase would allow a number of Democratic candidates in close races to win the seats. Thus, a modest aggregate swing in votes may allow one party to capture most of the close contests in the United States, resulting in a much larger swing in seats. In 1994, the Republicans won control of the House by a net swing of less than 2 percent of the popular vote. . . .

Taken together, the distinctive features of American government, parties, and elections give interest groups many opportunities and incentives to participate in election campaigns. . . .

Money, PACs, and Elections

Political campaigning has become increasingly expensive at all levels of government. Only presidential campaigns are publicly funded, although candidates in presidential primaries have to garner a certain amount of private contributions to qualify for federal matching funds. The rise of political action committees, which the campaign finance laws of the 1970s recognized as legitimate, has enhanced the influence of private money and interest group power in the political process. Money and politics go together in the contemporary political environment, and political action committees are a major source of campaign funds. While PACs are perfectly legitimate organizations, authorized and even encouraged by the campaign finance laws of the 1970s, they are often portrayed as the bad guys of American politics. They are the modern-day “factions” of the James Madison attack in *Federalist 10*. The author of the following selection suggests that PAC-bashing is overdone.