

Special Interest Groups

GV351

Activity Introduction

Hey, (Name) here. Have you ever been out with your friends and seen someone you know walking down the street?

And you tried to get their attention by yelling their name, only they couldn't hear you?

So you got all your friends to yell their name all at once and the person you knew nearly jumped out of their skin because you scared the daylights out of 'em?

Video 1 - Introduction

Believe it or not, that's kinda like how interest groups work: People with similar ideas combine their voices so they have a better chance of being heard in government.

This video will show you a little more about how interest groups get stuff done.

Video 1

Have you ever felt like nobody is listening, that no one cared? If you have, then you are like many Americans who believe their elected representatives are not listening at all, even though your tax dollars pay their salary, and technically, they work for you.

Suppose you wanted the government to do something, raise the minimum wage, for example. By yourself, you might have a hard time getting a member of Congress even to pay attention, but how could you get your proposal signed into law?

The best chance of being heard would be if you joined with others who wanted the same thing. All of you as a group would probably be much more effective. So in politics, what would these groups be called? They're called interest groups, and interest groups are collections of people with common interests and a common goal of influencing public policy. Some commentators use the phrase "special interest groups," especially in a negative sense and as a term of abuse, but that's not necessary, since really they're all special.

Interest groups provide a way for us to combine our strength and compound our influence. For example, a single senior citizen protesting changes to Social Security probably won't get too far; however, the 38 million members of the American Association of Retired Persons, the AARP, can really get their attention and decisively influence major legislation. As you have probably guessed, the formation of interest groups is protected by the First Amendment's freedoms of assembly and petition. By seeking to influence the government, they are petitioning for a redress of grievances. Okay, we know what the interest groups are, but what do they have to do with politics?

Well, for one thing, they're a lot like political parties. Both are organized groups that try to influence the government. Both try to influence legislation and public policy, but the political parties are interested in the whole range of policy, whereas the interest groups

generally focus on one or two areas. Both are interested in electing people to office, but this is a primary goal of the parties and only a secondary goal of the interest groups. The decisions of political parties are approved or not approved by the voters during elections, but the actions of the interest groups, which are private organizations, are approved or not approved by their members.

Now there are thousands of interest groups in the United States, and what are they all trying to do? Well, interest groups try to make sure that they achieve their goals by doing many things such as trying to influence public policy, and public policy is any goal

that the government pursues such as speeding up the process of approving new medicines or providing money for financial aid for college students, and the list is almost endless. They work to reach their goals at all levels of government, national, state and local. For example, a Chamber of Commerce is an interest group made up of business professionals. Most cities and towns have a Chamber of Commerce, but these Chamber of Commerce also function at the state level, and the United States Chamber of Commerce is an influential national interest group. So interest groups try to influence the government, but what tools can they actually use?

To accomplish their goals, interest groups rely on a number of tactics and strategies. They raise awareness of the public affairs by bringing attention to the important issues of the general public. They give their members a national voice. Since most people's views are limited by where they live, interest groups serve to give people a national forum in which to act. They provide the government with specialized information by performing studies, making reports, and presenting the results to the government, but if these interest groups give false or misleading information they lose credibility, which is one of their chief assets.

They provide us with an avenue for political participation. By belonging to an interest group, people can feel connected to the government and its actions. They promote accountability by keeping a close eye on the officials and politicians whose actions matter to them, and they are quick to publicize any mistakes. They keep each other in check, because nearly every issue will attract opposing groups. This competition assures that no group gets its way all the time.

Interest groups allow us to make the government aware of our wishes and needs, to make sure they are listening to us, and for that reason, they are an intrinsic part of the United States political system. In the next lecture, we'll take a look at the different types of interest groups and some famous examples of each.

Video 1 – Recap

An interest group is a collection of people who all have a common political goal. By working together, they're able to make the changes they want to see in government.

Interest groups are protected under the First Amendment, which guarantees us the freedoms of assembly and petition.

There are literally thousands of interest groups in the U.S., each one trying to influence government action on their behalf.

I can get that video cued back up for you, or we can move on to a question.

Video 2 - Introduction

So, obviously, not every interest group is gonna focus on the same issues.

Let's take a look at a video that'll cover some of the many, many reasons interest groups form. We'll also be introduced to a couple of the biggest interest groups in the country.

Video 2

Remember, interest groups are collections of people with common interests. Those interests can cover just about any topic from trying to make Puerto Rico the 51st state, to trying to get a particular person's image on a postage stamp. We're going to take a look at the main source of interest groups and some examples of each, but because there are thousands of interest groups, we're going to focus mainly on those that operate at the national level. Interest groups form for some basic reasons like economics, single issues, group identity, religion and politics, so let's look at a few.

Some of the largest and most powerful interest groups have been formed around economic interest in order to get laws passed to help them meet their economic needs and concerns. These include professional groups which can be composed of doctors with the American Medical Association; or lawyers, the American Bar Association; or teachers with the National Education Association and bankers with the American Bankers Association. But business groups represent large segments of the business community such as the National Association of Manufacturers, or the United States Chamber of Commerce, and the National Federation of Independent Businesses.

Trade associations represent groups of specific types of business such as National Restaurant Association or the Motion Picture Association of America. Labor groups such as the American Federation of Labor, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and the Communications Workers of America, or the Teamsters, deal with labor issues. Agricultural groups try to influence agricultural policy, and these include the National Grains, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Farmers Union or the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and many others.

A second large category of interest groups are those that organize around a single, overriding issue. These groups can exert a lot of influence, because they constantly

hammer on just one topic. Some of the best known are the National Rifle Association that tries to protect gun ownership rights, and then the Mothers Against Drunk Driving has become extremely powerful and has successfully gotten tougher laws dealing with people driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Environmental groups that try to get tough environmental protection laws passed include the Sierra Club, the Greenpeace or the National Wildlife Federation. And then groups working to stop particular diseases try to get funding for the medical research needed like the American Cancer Society, or the Muscular Dystrophy Association, or the American Diabetes Association.

Groups concerned with women's issues try to make sure that women's concerns and needs are met, and these include NARAL the Pro-Choice America, Planned Parenthood, Concerned Women for America and many others. Then there are groups formed to promote the interest of particular identity groups. Now identity groups are based on permanent and undeniable characteristics such as race or sex, but Veteran status is a similar characteristic; once a Veteran, you're always a Veteran.

Some of the best-known identity groups include those organized to support African Americans, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or Mexican Americans with the League of United Latin American Citizens. The Native Americans have the American Indian Movement, and Veterans have the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Women have the National Organization of Women, and senior citizens have American Association of Retired Persons. Homosexuals have the Human Rights Campaign, and disabled persons have the American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit.

So interest groups also form around the concerns of particular religions, but a church by itself is not an interest group, but they can form together to form them. For example, you have the National Council of Churches, the Christian Coalition of America, the

Unites States Catholic Conference, and the American Jewish Council. And since interest groups try to influence the government, plenty of them have been formed around political concerns, and some of the best known are the League of Women Voters or the National Governors Association.

Some of these political groups can be characterized as conservative like the American Enterprise Institute, or the Cato Institute, or Americans for Tax Reform. And then others are known for being more liberal like the Americans for Democratic Action, or even the American Civil Liberties Union, and even MoveOn.org.

As you can see, there are interest groups for just about every interest. If you do not already belong to one or several, the chances are that you will some day. Belonging to these groups provides you with a way of making sure that the people you elect pay attention to you and your concerns.

Video 2 - Recap

Wow, it seems like there's an interest group for just about every interest you can think of!

Interest groups form for all kinds of reasons. Some interest groups deal with broad issues like economics, others focus on single issues, like gun control.

Some groups form around a group identity, others are all about religion. And, of course, there are interest groups focused on politics.

If you don't already belong to an interest group, chances are that one day you will.

You can see the video again, or we can keep on truckin'.