

Interest Groups and Social Movements



In the American political system, elected officials represent the people. If the people do not like the official then they can vote that person out of office. However the voters are not the only people who represent the citizens.

Interest Groups are voluntary associations of people who come together with the goal of getting the specific policies that they favor passed within the government.

In contrast, **Social Movements are loosely organized groups that educate the public and put pressure on policy makers in an effort to bring about social change.**

An example to better understand the difference between the two is as follows:

Social movements tend to be larger and more spread out than interest groups. Interest groups tend to focus on specific issues. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is an interest group that initially focused its efforts on filing lawsuits to end legal segregation and now continues to advocate for equality for people and communities of color. The NAACP is also part of a larger social movement in the struggle for civil rights.

No matter what you are passionate about, there is probably an interest group that advocates for your cause. The link below opens to the USA Political Database and shows a very extensive list of National Interest Groups.

<https://usapoliticaldatabase.weebly.com/list-of-interest-groups.html>

The First Amendment protects Americans' rights to organize and petition the government for change. Specifically, it states "***Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech....or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.***"

In **Federalist No.10**, James Madison described **factions** in a similar way to interest groups. A **faction** is “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or a minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”

Madison believed that factions were potentially dangerous as their actions risk trampling upon the rights of others or damaging the community. However, the freedoms protected under the Constitution almost guarantee that factions will form. Madison said that factions can be stopped by preventing individuals from coming together and asking the government to address their concerns. Unfortunately, such restrictions upon liberty would go against the principle of a representative democracy. Madison further commented that the challenge is not how to eliminate factions but how to make sure that no one faction can do too much damage. He believed that by having many factions, they would compete with each other making one faction less of a danger to the nation as a whole.

Theories of Interest Group Formation

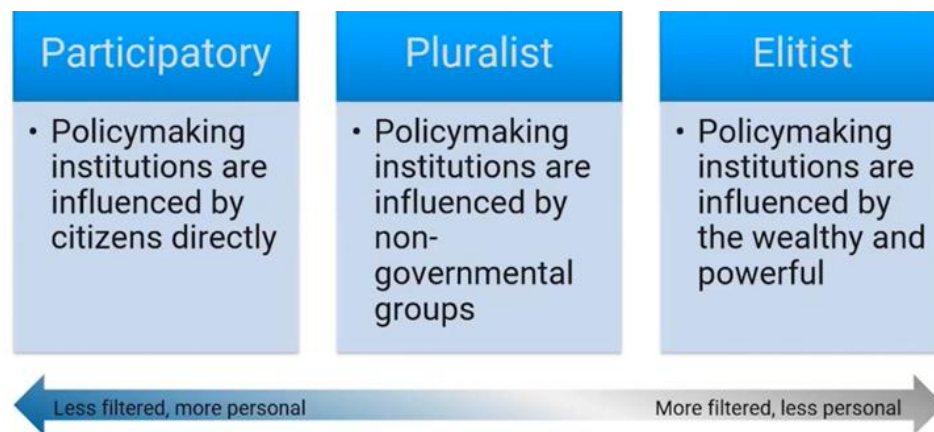
As mentioned in one of the earliest lessons, there are **three main theories** that explain the impact of groups on the political process.

Under the theory of **Participatory Democracy - a theory that individual participation in politics and civil society is essential to a democratic government**, citizens will impact policy through their involvement. Furthermore, **Civil Society Groups, independent associations outside the government’s control**, will form.

Under the **Pluralist Theory – a theory of democracy that emphasizes the role of nongovernmental group-based activism in an effort to impact the policymaking process**, the distribution of political power among many competing nongovernmental groups serves to keep each group in check. Groups that lack one resource, like money, may have other resources, such as a large number of members, enabling them to compete in the political process.

In contrast to the Pluralist Theory, the **Elite Theory – a theory of democracy based on the premise that participation in politics and civil society is limited because elites have a disproportionate amount of influence in the policymaking process**, as they often hold the top positions in industry and government. This limits participation in other groups that only have a few resources.

According to the Elite Theory, the elites control the **policy agenda – the set of issues to which government officials, voters, and the public are paying attention to**. This theory is based on the claim that the wealthy class have more access to the policy makers than the average citizens. The Elite Theory argues that competition among interest groups is not equal because interest groups with large memberships and strong financial backing have more clout in getting the attention of the members of Congress.



Members of Congress and their staff have limited time so they are more than likely to spend time with lobbyists and wealthy donors rather than the general public. Ironically, this also means that the wealthy and powerful interest groups often compete against each other.

Challenges Facing Interest Groups

Differences in size, wealth, and political power shape the strategies of interest groups. Some interest groups work for a **collective good** (the public good), such a strong national defense, clean air or a city beautification project. The problem with a collective good is that people can often enjoy the benefits achieved by this organization without being a contributor to the cause so there is no incentive to joining the group for these people.

People who benefit from the actions of interest groups without joining are called **free riders** and they pose a serious challenge to the interest groups working for the collective good.

The free-rider problem also occurs in states with the “right-to-work” laws, where employees of unionized companies have the right not to join the union. If the union negotiates for higher salaries and better benefits, all employees will benefit, including those who did not join the union.

Interest groups have ways of overcoming free-riders. One way is through **selective benefits which are benefits available to those who only join the group**. Some of these selected benefits may include items such as travel benefits, reduced rates on rental cars and publications. One such organization is AARP, formerly the Association for the Advancement of Retired People. Other types of similar organizations may provide their members with credentials needed to operate in their professions such as the trade unions mentioned earlier.

There are several broad categories of interest groups:-

Economic Interest Groups advocate on behalf of the financial interests of their members. These are the largest number of interest groups as well as large donors to political campaigns.

Business Groups advocate for policies that favor their firms or broader corporate interests, such as tax reform or reducing the rights of labor unions.

Labor Groups, such as trade unions, advocate for their workers and sometimes for policies that will benefit the working class in general.

Farm Groups have a long tradition in American politics and they support subsidies and trade policies that benefit agriculture.

Public Interest Groups work on behalf of a broad group of individuals and not just their members. They educate the public and government officials in areas such as civil rights, civil liberties, social welfare, education, and the environment.

Single-Interest Groups are associations that focus on one specific area of public policy, often a moral issue about which they are unwilling to compromise. For example, the right-to-life organizations strongly believe that abortion is the murder of an unborn baby. On the other side, prochoice organizations believe that women have the right to decide whether to have an abortion. Single-Interest Groups are less likely to compromise because of their belief that they are right and the other side is wrong.

Government Interest Groups act on behalf of a state, regional, local or even foreign government. Groups representing state and local governments are often concerned about laws and regulations that affect their regions. State government interest groups work to obtain grant monies from the federal government, money that is allocated through the appropriations process in Congress.



The First Amendment guarantees the right of any citizen “to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” Interest Groups use **Lobbying, the interaction with government officials to advocate for a group’s public policy goals**. Lobbying attempts to shape policy across all three branches of the government. Lobbying organizations must register with the Clerk of the House of Representatives and the Secretary of the Senate.

In the first six months of 2024, interest groups spent more than \$ 2.2 billion lobbying the federal government.

Functions of Interest Groups	Description of Functions
<p>inside lobbying</p> <p>direct contact with policy makers</p>	<p>⇒ legislative testimony</p> <p>⇒ assistance in bill writing</p> <p>⇒ direct contact of executive agencies</p>
<p>outside lobbying</p> <p>indirect methods to influence decisions</p>	<p>⇒ educate members on key issues</p> <p>⇒ increase general public awareness on key issues through media efforts</p> <p>⇒ organize and coordinate ‘grassroots lobbying’ efforts to contact policy makers to influence decision making</p> <p>⇒ engage in political process to elect supportive candidates; donate</p>
<p>monitor government programs</p>	<p>⇒ evaluate effectiveness</p> <p>⇒ suggest changes</p>

Sometimes lobbyists contact members of Congress or their staff directly to advocate for their position. Interest groups draft bills, then persuade members of Congress to introduce their legislation. Lobbyists also focus on the levels of funding that Congress appropriates for agencies and programs. To bring more attention to their issues, lobbyists will also prepare research reports and briefing papers.

Research by an interest group may save congressional staff valuable time and funds. Lobbyists can also testify at committee or subcommittee hearings which provide a public showcase and a time to persuade Congress to support their proposed legislation.

The movement of individuals between positions in government and lobbying positions is called the **revolving door**. Many former government officials become lobbyists, consultants and strategists and their past experiences is very valuable to all parties concerned. Critics of the revolving door worry that paying large sums to hire well-connected lobbyists tilts public policy in favor of the wealthy and powerful. More than half of the members of Congress who left in January 2019 became lobbyists!

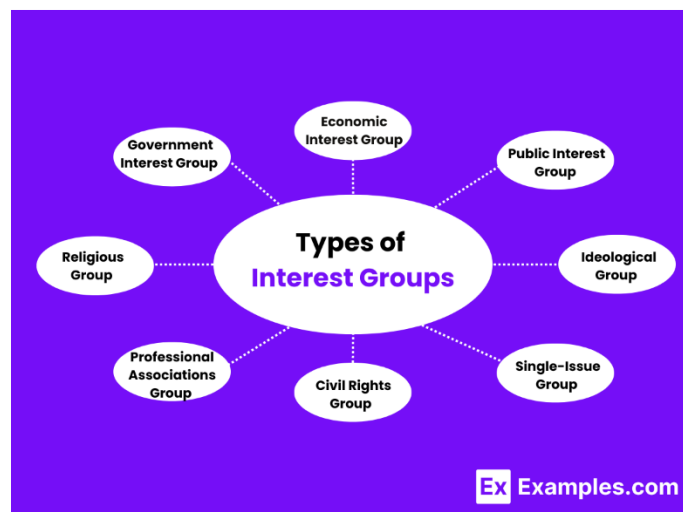
Interest groups take advantage of federal laws requiring **executive branch** agencies to notify the public and solicit input when establishing rules and procedures. Proposed regulations are often complicated. Interest groups generate data and hire experts with knowledge of regulations and politics. Interest groups encourage agencies to provide benefits, such as loans to farmers to help them buy equipment and seeds to the organizations they represent and to issue favorable regulations.

Interest Groups also try to shape how the nation’s laws are interpreted by the **judiciary**. They may file lawsuits but litigation is expensive and time-consuming even if it goes in the interest group’s favor. The Supreme Court Case of **Brown v. Board of Education** in 1954 saw the Legal Defense Fund of the NAACP spend a lengthy and expensive case that was a risky strategy in using the federal judiciary to end legal segregation in public schools in America.

Interest Groups have other tools besides lawsuits to influence the judiciary. They are allowed to weigh in on a case filed by other parties by filing a brief as a “friend of the court,” also known as **amicus curiae brief – by definition - a brief filed by an individual or a group that is not a party to a case but is acting as a “friend of the court” to provide additional information for justices to consider when reviewing the case.**

Supreme Court cases serve as precedent for future cases so by filing amicus curiae briefs, interest groups attempt to influence how the laws in their policy areas will be interpreted well into the future.

Interest Groups also try to influence judicial appointments, either through the presidential nomination process or through the Senate confirmation process. They are able to pressure senators to confirm or reject nominees for the federal judiciary.



The **Iron Triangle** is a classical depiction of the connections between interest groups and the government. **The Iron Triangle is a mutually beneficial association of bureaucratic agencies, congressional committees, and interest groups, all working in specific policy areas.**

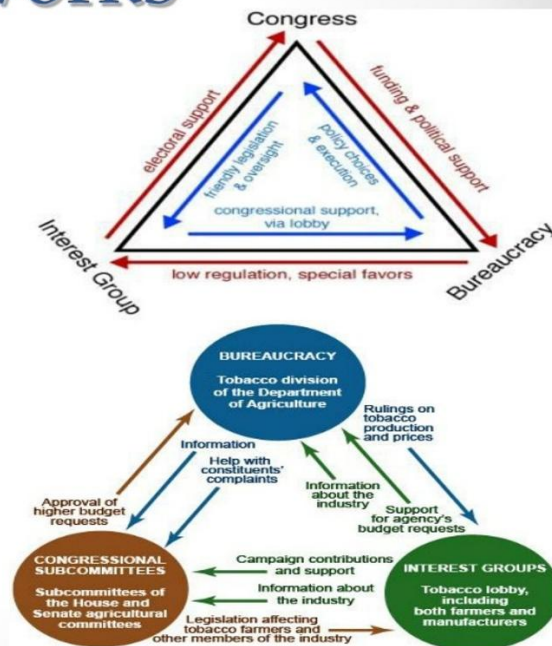
It consists of three parts; **Interest Groups, Congress, The Bureaucracy.**

For example an iron triangle involving tobacco includes congressional committees and subcommittees, such as the Tobacco Education and Research Oversight Committee; bureaucratic departments or agencies, such as the Tobacco Division of the Department of Agriculture, and companies that manufacture tobacco products, such as Philip Morris USA, Inc.

Some political scientists believe that the iron triangle model is rigid and simplistic. They prefer the more broad and flexible term **issue network: a temporary association of bureaucratic agencies, congressional committees, and interest groups formed to address a specific policy, common issue or agenda.** Complicated issues may give rise to competing issue networks, each of which advocates for a different side of the issue. In both the iron triangle and the issue network models, interest groups work directly with coalitions in each party to influence policymaking.

Iron Triangles and Issue Networks

- Iron triangles are formed in specific policy areas among congressional committees, agencies, and interest groups.
- Issue network may be replacing iron triangles.
- Issue networks are groups that are connected through a policy issue.



Issue networks may unite groups that are normally on different sides of most issues. The effort to legalize recreational marijuana has united some states' rights advocates, who tend to be conservative, with legalization advocates, who tend to be liberal. The immigration reform effort unites some business groups who look for skilled and unskilled labor that tend to be conservative and immigrant rights groups that tend to be liberal.

The Iron Triangle model emphasizes the power of special interests to work with government officials to achieve their goals, the issue network represents pluralism, with multiple groups participating in the political process.

Money and Campaigns.

Interest groups are often heavily involved in the election process. Money is a powerful strategy tool that can pay for media coverage, a solid ground campaign, and research. Money can also act as a weapon to discourage underfunded candidates from running for election.

Political Action Committees (PACs), which are allowed to donate money directly to candidates, have limits on how much they can contribute directly to a campaign or candidate. The Supreme Court decision in the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* saw the rise of **Super PACs** who can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money as long as they do not coordinate with a campaign. An interest group may form a PAC to give money directly to a candidate. However, it would have to form a Super PAC to run its own ads independent of a candidate or campaign.

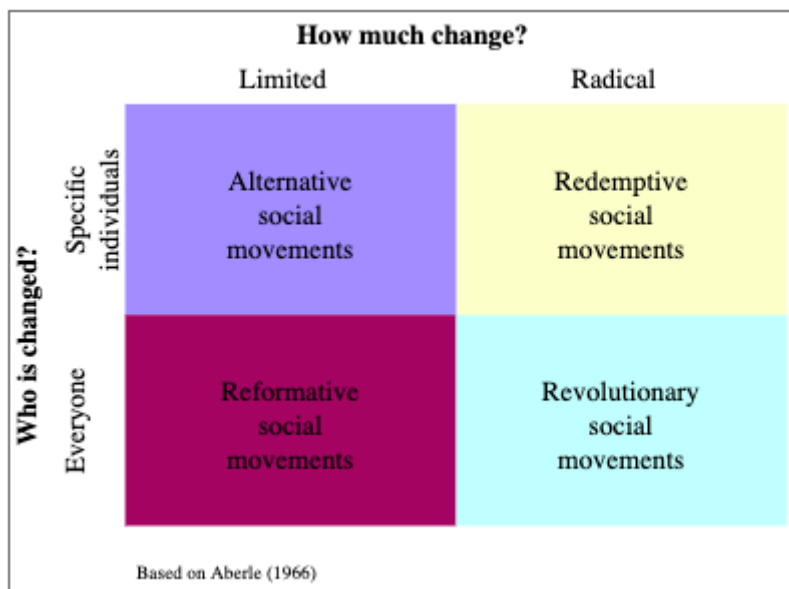
In addition to financial contributions and spending, interest groups try to influence elections by mobilizing voters to go to the polls and vote for those candidates endorsed by the interest group. Many interest groups keep scorecards on members of Congress on their voting records and they publicize these results to the general public and party members in an effort to influence the public's vote. For example, the National Rifle Association's Political Victory Fund website has an interactive map where members can click on their state to see how the organization has rated a candidate's support for gun rights. They are rated on a scale of A to F.

Interest groups may use grassroots lobbying to mobilize their members to pressure elected representatives directly through phone calls, emails, and social media. Interest groups that are not well funded may use this tactic because it is relatively inexpensive, and it can effectively get the attention of a member of Congress. Protests or rallies can be another relatively inexpensive way for an interest group to call attention to an issue. The media may cover the event and it would then inform the public about the groups issues and goals.

Social Movements



A Social Movement is a large group of citizens working for political change. They work on behalf of specific groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities women, the disabled and the LGBT people and have achieved major policy changes. They often lack an identifiable leadership structure or specific policy goals, which has contributed to their ability to spread and gather support with minimal resources. However, this lack of structure has also led to a historically mixed track record of success. Although social movements differ, they often employ similar tactics.



Social movements often uses **protests – public demonstrations designed to call attention to an issue.** Members of social movements also use **civil disobedience – intentionally breaking the law to call attention to an injustice.**

Protests and civil disobedience can be powerful tactics and they also draw a great deal of media attention which encourage policymakers to examine the issue.

Social movements arise under particular circumstances and are often short-lived. Protestors need to feel that the system has lost some legitimacy, and individuals who are normally pessimistic about change start to believe they can assert their rights and have the capacity to make a difference. The success of the social movement depends on the impact that protest has on the electoral system and upon whether elected officials accommodate the demands of the protestors or decide to reject or ignore their demands.

The **Black Lives Matter** (BLM) social movement put a national spotlight on racial injustice. According to a Pew research study conducted in June 2020, two-thirds of American adults supported the Black Lives Matter movement, and 38% strongly supported it. This social movement was successful in securing policy changes to the criminal justice system at the local, state, and federal levels, such as requirements for law enforcement officials to wear body cameras, take mandated training on the impact of implicit bias in policing, and bans on surprise “no-knock” warrants. The BLM movement also resulted in more concerted efforts to collect data about which policies are effective and which are ineffective in reducing racial disparities in the criminal justice system. This also led to the U.S. Justice Department conducting investigations on local police departments that were accused of violating citizens’ rights.



The BLM movement also led to calls to “defund the police,” seeking to cut budgets for law enforcement. These proposals resulted in a backlash from police unions and members of the public who believed budget cuts would increase crime rates. In some cities with Republican mayors or city councils, police budgets were increased due to the BLM movement.

Some social movements, like those that seek to reduce income equality, are successful in calling attention to the matter but they fail in getting policies changed. Social movements are maybe less likely to reach their policy goals compared to interest groups. Social movements may lack a single, strong leader or an organized structure. Interest groups often have more-well-defined, narrower, and clearer goals than social movements, which may have broader and unfocused goals.

Nevertheless, social movements, like the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Lives Matter movement can gain national attention and achieve many of their goals.