

CHAPTER 17

INTEREST GROUPS

What do members of the American Frozen Food Institute and the National Hot Rod Association have in common? Probably very little as far as their groups' interests are concerned. They do, however, have at least one common trait—they are both members of interest groups.

Like a team or club, interest groups are made up of members who have common goals and—often—intense concerns. Unlike teams or clubs, however, interest groups' goals often are far-reaching and political. In this chapter you will learn about the different types of interest groups, as well as the ways in which they promote their goals.



Government Notebook

In your Government Notebook, write a list of the kinds of groups you think qualify as interest groups. What do these groups have in common? Write your answer in your Notebook.



SECTION 1

ROLE OF INTEREST GROUPS

Political Dictionary

agribusiness
trade association
labor union
public interest group



Objectives

- ★ What is an interest group?
- ★ What are the functions of interest groups?
- ★ What are the types of interest groups?

Throughout history, people have organized groups to promote their views on issues that concern them. As noted in Chapter 15, some such groups were made up of African Americans who came together to fight for their civil rights.

Such organized groups, or interest groups, give people a way to work together toward their common goals. As noted in Chapter 5, an interest group is a collection of people acting together to advance a shared concern in the political process. Interest groups serve several key functions in the United States and take several forms.

Functions of Interest Groups

As noted in Chapter 8, public opinion represents the voice of the majority in the political process. Interest groups, however, provide a means by which one segment of the population—typically a minority—can have its intensely held concerns represented in political decision making. They do so in three main ways—by

- ★ organizing people who share a concern,
- ★ providing a means of political participation, and
- ★ supplying information to the public and to policy makers.

Organizing People Interest groups provide a means of organization for people who share strong opinions about an issue. The issue might be one that affects members of the group personally or one that group members believe needs to be addressed to promote the public good. People with strong opinions typically join an interest group in the hope that working with others who have shared concerns will strengthen their cause.

Groups that have banded together to promote their common concerns include farmers, businesspeople, workers, environmentalists, feminists, civil rights activists, and students. People in the fishing industry who disagree with environmentalists over how much commercial fishing should take place may participate in interest groups to make their views heard. Likewise, joining an environmentalist group gives another sector of the population—in this case, citizens concerned about commercial fishing—political strength that they may not have as individuals.

Providing for Political Participation Often when citizens feel strongly about political issues, they want to do more than merely vote for candidates who will represent their concerns. Joining an interest group gives these citizens another way



POLITICAL PROCESSES *Members of the United Farm Workers of America gather at a convention in Fresno, California, to discuss issues concerning their group. What are some of the other types of groups whose members have banded together to promote their common cause?*

to take part in the political process—particularly if they are part of a minority viewpoint that is not represented through majority-dominated elections. By working with like-minded people to make their views known to the public and to policy makers, interest group members can affect government actions. As you will learn in Section 2, interest groups have several ways of influencing the political process.

Supplying Information A third function of interest groups is to inform the public about their concerns. For example, if you are curious about a certain industry's effect on air quality, you can contact an environmental interest group. If you want to know what goods and services that industry provides, you can contact a business interest group that represents it. In both cases the interest groups are happy to provide information about their concerns. By doing so, groups that represent the concerns of a minority of the population can draw the attention of the majority to their viewpoints.

Interest groups supply information not only to the public but also to policy makers. In this way, interest groups hope to influence legislation that affects their areas of concern.

Types of Interest Groups

Thousands of interest groups operate in the United States. They range from small local groups to large national organizations, and they represent many concerns. Some seek to inform the public about the needs and concerns of museums, and some organize to support animal rights. These groups may have many members or only a few.

Many interest groups—such as agricultural groups, business groups, labor unions, and professional groups—are formed to address economic concerns. Others are based on social, cultural, or related causes.

Agricultural Groups Because government policies greatly affect agriculture, several interest groups have

formed to represent the nation's farmers and agribusinesses. **Agribusinesses** are large companies that run farms, make and distribute farm equipment and supplies, and process, store, and distribute farm crops. Some agricultural interest groups, such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, represent farmers as a whole. Others, like the National Cotton Council of America, represent a particular section of the agricultural industry.

Business Groups Another element of society that operates under heavy government regulation is business. For this reason, businesses—like farmers and agribusinesses—have formed interest groups to advance their own concerns. For example, the Chamber of Commerce of the U.S.A. and the Business Roundtable are nationwide organizations that represent general business interests.

In addition, many businesses maintain specialized interest groups to represent their specific concerns. These interest groups, called **trade associations**, are organizations of business firms within an industry. For example, the snack food and trucking industries both have trade associations that represent their concerns. Though trade



PUBLIC GOOD *Members of the Columbia, Missouri, Chamber of Commerce tour the construction site of a stadium being built on the University of Missouri campus. Why have businesses formed interest groups such as the Chamber of Commerce to advance their own concerns?*

associations participate in non-political activities, such as developing product standards, their major function is to represent the political concerns of their industries.

Labor Unions Workers also have formed interest groups to represent them. These **labor unions** are organizations of workers acting together to gain better wages and working conditions. Labor organizations include those for educators and for office workers.

Major union activities involve representing member interests at the workplace, but most unions also are involved in politics. The American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO) is a huge collection of many unions that was established in 1955 and currently has more than 13 million members. The AFL–CIO works on a national level to raise the minimum wage, for example, and to secure greater health and other benefits for workers.

Professional Groups Some professions, such as law and medicine, also maintain interest groups to represent their concerns. Among the well-known professional organizations are the American Bar Association (ABA), which works to protect the interests of those in the legal profession, and the American Medical Association (AMA), a group representing those who practice medicine.

Professional groups perform several key functions. In addition to creating standards for the profession, holding meetings, and publishing journals and reports, these groups represent their members' concerns in the political system.

Societal Groups Another type of interest group represents societal groups, such as various ethnic groups, women, and veterans. Societal interest groups include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF), the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the American Legion.



POLITICAL PROCESSES *The goals of interest groups, such as cause-based environmental groups, sometimes conflict with the goals of other groups. The cartoon above provides a humorous look at environmental groups' efforts. What tools do cause-based groups use to promote their views?*

These groups are often powerful. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), which represents older Americans, has 32 million members. It is the largest organization in the United States after the Roman Catholic Church.

Cause-Based Groups Some groups promote a broad cause, rather than the interest of a certain group of people or businesses. Such causes may include education, a particular field of research, and cultural goals. The National Association for the Advancement of Science promotes scientific research and funding for scientific endeavors. Like professional interest groups, such organizations often hold meetings and publish journals about their topics of concern. These organizations' political goals involve gaining funding for a project and influencing government regulation of the field in which they are interested.

C A S E S T U D Y

Students Against Drunk Driving

One growing cause-based interest group is Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD). This

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group works to prevent teenage drinking and driving by raising public awareness and by persuading teens to pledge not to drive under the influence of alcohol.

The organization was founded in 1982 by a high school coach and administrator in Wayland, Massachusetts, after two of his hockey players died in separate accidents. By the mid-1990s SADD had around 4 million members and 20,000 chapters in schools across the country.

Traffic accidents are the leading cause of death for 16- to 20-year-olds. In 1994 almost half of the automobile accidents that took the lives of people in this age group involved alcohol. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) statistics for 1995, an average of one alcohol-related traffic fatality occurs every 30 minutes. The NHTSA also estimates that about two in every five Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash at some point in their lives.

SADD chapters use a variety of strategies to prevent teen drinking and driving. Some chapters have staged public events such as mock crashes, with local police and emergency medical teams helping to simulate the aftermath of a car accident for a student audience. Many chapters sponsor alcohol-free events on prom or graduation night. One of the most important SADD strategies, however, is the Contract for Life. Under the rules of the contract, teens promise to call their parents for a ride home if they or other drivers have been drinking. Parents agree to provide a ride home with no questions or punishment until the following day.

SADD also works with other organizations, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), to influence public policy regarding teen drinking and driving. Members of MADD's Youth in Action program, a group within the organization for people under 21, work with adults to change laws, strengthen enforcement, and publicize efforts to stop teen drinking and driving.

These groups' efforts, combined with the establishment of a nationwide minimum drinking age of

21, appear to have helped save lives. In 1985 about 2,200 drivers age 16 to 20 were involved in fatal alcohol-related accidents. In 1995 that number had dropped to less than 1,000. The decrease in such fatalities was greater for 16- to 20-year-olds than for any other age group.

Other groups promoting particular broad causes include religious groups, environmental groups, gun control groups, anti-gun control groups, and antiabortion and abortion rights groups. The Christian Coalition, the National Rifle Association (NRA), Planned Parenthood, and the National Catholic Welfare Council are all groups that promote causes.

Some cause-based groups refer to themselves as **public interest groups**, or citizens' groups, believing that the policies they pursue would benefit the general public rather than a narrow minority. Public interest groups thus represent people with strong beliefs about what would promote the public good.

The Sierra Club, one of the nation's oldest public interest groups, was founded in 1892 by environmentalist John Muir to work for the preservation of wilderness lands. Today the Sierra Club lobbies for environmentalist causes across the nation.



PUBLIC GOOD *Yosemite National Park, one of the country's oldest national parks, was established as federally protected land in 1890, due in large part to the efforts of Sierra Club-founder John Muir. Why might environmental interest groups also refer to themselves as public interest groups?*

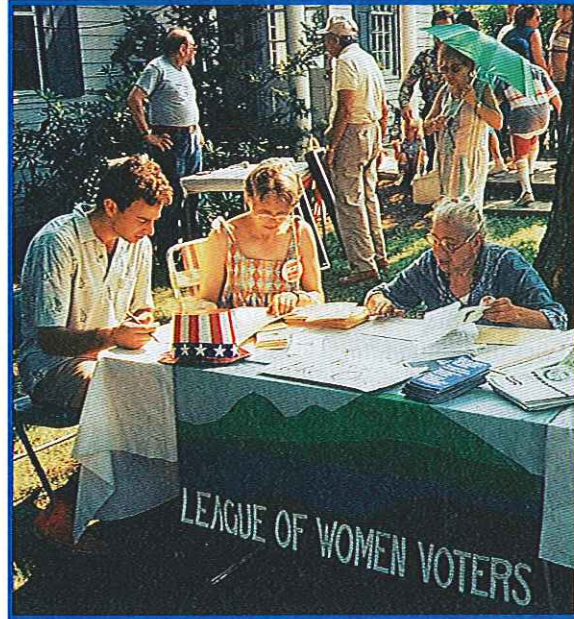
Government and Sociology

The Influence of Groups on Society

Do you closely follow the news about politics or other public issues? Have you ever passed out flyers or pamphlets to support a particular cause? Have you participated in a debate or discussion on an important political issue? Do you believe that once people reach the age of 18 they should register to vote and cast their ballot on election day? Your answers to these questions provide some insight into how you feel about political participation and how strong your opinions are on various issues that interest you. Why do you feel as you do? What factors are important in helping shape your political beliefs and behavior?

Sociologists believe that the groups we belong to have a strong influence on our attitudes and decisions. Sociologists define a group as two or more people who interact with each other, share expectations, and possess a degree of common identity. Sociologist Emil Durkheim believed that a group could be held together by one of two kinds of forces. The first type of group is held together by similarities, such as belonging to the same family. The second type of group is held together by complementary differences—for example, co-workers who each perform distinct tasks to achieve a shared goal.

Shared interests and desires also form the foundation for interest groups. Students, for example, might join together to support public policies that make it easier for them to afford a college education or to pursue certain degrees. They might try to persuade lawmakers to hold down tuition costs at public universities. They also might pressure Congress to provide more federal aid for those who want to attend college. One group of students at the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis–St. Paul formed Students Against Fee Excess. This organization works to influence school and public policy on



The League of Women Voters is a group of people who share the common goal of promoting political participation through voting.

student fees and tuition. It also educates students on fiscal responsibility in universities.

Groups influence the values, attitudes, and behavior of their members in a wide variety of ways. For example, parents who believe that voting is a civic duty often pass this belief on to their children. Friends planning to attend college may help one another with information about application deadlines or scholarships. The members of a soccer team might rally around a teammate to improve his or her performance.

People frequently do not share all the beliefs of their fellow group members. In addition, as people grow older and have more experiences, they may leave some groups and join others. Despite frequent changes in affiliation and disagreements among fellow members, groups do play an important role in shaping how people think and act.

What Do You Think?

1. Identify some groups to which you belong. How have members of these groups influenced your interests and attitudes?
1. How have your parents and other family members helped to shape your attitudes about government and political participation?

Some Environmental Public Interest Groups

Group	Year Founded	Membership In 1996	Purpose
American Rivers	1973	18,000	To preserve and protect America's river systems
American Wildlands	1977	2,800	To conserve the nation's wildland resources
Climate Institutes	1986	1,500	To act as an international link between the scientific community and policy makers
Coast Alliance	1979	N/A	To increase public awareness of coastal ecology and the value of coastal resources
Ducks Unlimited, Inc.	1937	515,000	To conserve critical wetlands habitat in North America used by waterfowl and a wide variety of other wildlife
Friends of the Earth	1969	35,000	To protect the earth from environmental disaster
National Audubon Society	1905	600,000	To conserve and restore natural ecosystems with a focus on birds and other wildlife
Nature Conservancy	1951	800,000	To preserve biological diversity
Outdoors Unlimited	1965	4,000	To promote multiple-use resource management
Sierra Club	1892	550,000	To promote natural resource protection and conservation of wild areas
Trout Unlimited	1959	85,000	To conserve, protect, and restore trout (and other fish) by influencing the activities of governmental agencies

Source: *Encyclopedia of Associations*

Public interest groups, such as the environmental organizations listed in the chart above, work to promote interests that they believe benefit the majority. **What are some of the interests promoted by the groups listed in this chart?**

Several citizens' groups have been formed by Ralph Nader, a consumer rights supporter. Nader became nationally known in the 1960s for writing *Unsafe at Any Speed*, a book that documents

unsafe features of American automobiles. Later, he pioneered the consumer protection organization by forming groups such as the Center for Auto Safety and Public Citizen.

SECTION 1

REVIEW

1. Define the following terms: agribusiness, trade association, labor union, public interest group.
2. What are interest groups, and what role do they play in the political process?
3. In what way does joining an interest group enable people to participate more fully in the political process?
4. What are the differences between the major types of interest groups? Identify one interest group for each of the major types.

5. Thinking and Writing Critically

Consider a school group whose concerns could be addressed by forming an interest group. How might an interest group be better able to achieve results than the school group alone?

6. Applying **POLITICAL PROCESSES**



Conduct an Internet search for information about an issue that concerns you. Are there interest groups on the Internet that address this issue? Write a brief paragraph describing the information you find.

SECTION 2

HOW INTEREST GROUPS WORK

Political Dictionary

endorsement
single-issue voting
lobbying
grassroots lobbying
class-action suit



Objectives

- ★ In what ways are interest groups involved in the electoral process?
- ★ What is lobbying?
- ★ How do interest groups attempt to influence the political process through the legal system?
- ★ How do interest groups try to shape public opinion?

How might you try to change a school policy that you have concerns about, such as one that keeps students from leaving campus during lunchtime? You might join with a group of students and approach the principal, other school administrators, or the student council.

Interest groups work in a similar way to make their political concerns known. Unlike other political players—such as members of Congress, the president, heads of government agencies, and judges—interest groups do not have the authority to make government decisions themselves. Instead, they seek to *influence* decisions others make. They do this by

- ★ participating in the electoral process,
- ★ lobbying members of Congress and government agencies,
- ★ addressing their concerns through the legal system, and
- ★ trying to influence public opinion by using the media, demonstrating, and protesting.

Participating in the Electoral Process

One way that interest groups seek to influence the political system is by participating in the electoral process. Their political efforts include endorsing candidates with shared ideas and giving money to campaigns through political action committees.

Endorsing Candidates Interest groups' traditional method of influencing the political process has been through the **endorsement** of—or public declaration of support for—a certain candidate. An interest group will often make these endorsements with the expectation of gaining some influence over the decisions of legislators it helps elect. Interest groups also may withhold their support from and even work to defeat a candidate. This tactic was pioneered as early as 1917 by women's suffrage organizations that targeted a number of senators who were against giving the vote to women.

An interest group commonly keeps track of which elected officials vote for or against legislation that affects its concerns. Then, during elections, the group may tell its members which candidates to vote for—that is, which ones the interest group endorses. One study found that 44 percent of interest groups make congressional voting records known to the members.

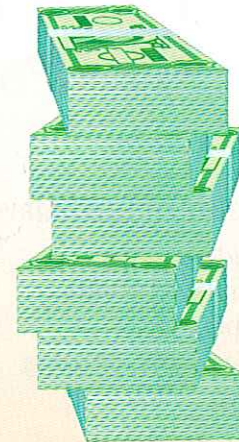
How successful are interest group endorsements? Many interest group members do indeed vote for or against a candidate solely because of his or her view on an issue of great concern to the group. This practice is called **single-issue voting**. For example, members of the National Right-to-Life Committee oppose candidates who do not support a ban or limits on abortion, regardless of the candidates' positions on other issues. Members of the National Abortion Rights Action League also practice single-issue voting, opposing candidates solely because they support banning or limiting abortion.

Political Action Committees Interest groups also support political candidates by giving money to their campaigns. With the exception of labor unions, however, interest groups cannot use their own funds, such as members' dues, for campaign contributions. Instead, they contribute through political action committees (PACs).

Top 10 PAC Contributors to Federal Candidates in 1995–1996

1. Democratic Republican Independent Voter Education Committee	\$2,611,140
2. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—PEOPLE	\$2,505,021
3. United Auto Workers Voluntary Community Action Program	\$2,467,319
4. Association of Trial Lawyers of America PAC	\$2,362,938
5. Dealers Election Action Committee of the National Automobile Dealers Association (NADA)	\$2,351,925
6. National Education Association PAC	\$2,326,830
7. American Medical Association PAC	\$2,319,197
8. Realtors PAC	\$2,099,683
9. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Committee on Political Education	\$2,080,587
10. Active Ballot Club, a department of United Food and Commercial Workers International Union	\$2,030,795

Source: Federal Elections Commission



POLITICAL PROCESSES PACs donate money to the campaigns of candidates who share their views. What is the maximum amount that a PAC may contribute to a candidate's campaign?

As noted in Chapter 5, a political action committee is a separate political branch of an interest group that is set up to participate in politics and give money to candidates. Many interest groups now have PACs. By giving money to candidates through a PAC, interest groups hope to elect more officials who share their views. Again, this money is donated in the hope that the legislators an interest group helps elect will attempt to pass legislation favorable to its views.

Though PACs existed as early as the mid-1940s, they grew in number in the 1970s after a change in campaign finance laws. The new legislation limited individual campaign contributions to candidates in an attempt to prevent one person from having too much political influence. At the same time, however, the legislation authorized corporations and interest groups to set up PACs that could give more than individuals could. PACs thus became an attractive source of campaign funding for candidates.

As a result, interest groups' importance in campaign fund-raising increased dramatically. Whereas PACs had contributed about 25 percent of the funds received in 1976 by winners of House races, the figure had increased to about 41 percent by 1988. This number has slowly begun to fall, however. In

1996, PACs contributed around 31 percent of the funds received by the winners of House races.

Individual PACs do not lavish vast sums of money upon single candidates. In fact, even though the maximum PAC donation is set at \$5,000, the average donation by PACs in the 1992 congressional election was \$1,600. In addition, given huge television fees and other campaign costs, even \$5,000 is not a large amount of money. If many companies in the same industry each contribute \$5,000 through several PACs, however, the total donations from that industry could be significant.

PACs tend to donate more money to incumbents because they have a greater chance of winning. In some elections, PACs have even paid off campaign debts of candidates who oppose their views, hoping to win these people's support.

Lobbying

A second way that interest groups participate in the political system is by trying to persuade government policy makers to make particular decisions regarding legislation. This **lobbying** is typically carried out by individual lobbyists who represent an interest group's concerns. Lobbyists' actions are protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution,

Careers in Government



Interest Group Director

Many interest groups rely on volunteers or part-time employees to do much of their work. To organize and direct the personnel and resources of an interest group, however, often requires full-time professional managers. Such individuals must be knowledgeable about current politics, skilled at coordinating group efforts, and committed to the causes of the interest groups that employ them. Many start their careers by working for political organizations as interns and participating actively in local political events.

Kirk Clay works for People for the American Way (PFAW), a liberal interest group based in Washington, D.C. There, he helps to advance civil rights issues and other causes. As a regional field coordinator in 1997, the 25-year-old graduate of the University of Cincinnati monitored issues important to PFAW and organized activists in a dozen states. He prepared for his job in part by working as a college intern in the White House. He also worked for the Democratic National Committee, where he helped teach would-be activists how to run political campaigns.

People for the American Way is only one of many organized interest groups whose work is done by paid staff and thousands of volunteers. Many such groups are based in the nation's capital. The executives of these organizations look for job candidates



Kirk Clay, organizer for People for the American Way, gained experience for the job by working for other political organizations.

who are dedicated to the principles of the organization and have the education and training necessary to carry out its work. For example, when the Christian Coalition—a conservative interest group that promotes public policies that support families and traditional values—needed a new executive director in 1997, it hired 31-year-old Randy Tate.

Tate earned a bachelor's degree in economics and political science from Western Washington University. At 22, he was elected to Washington State's House of Representatives, where he served for six years. He then served one full term in the U.S. House from 1995 to 1996 as a Republican in the 104th Congress. Tate sees his job at the Christian Coalition as an opportunity to pursue causes in which he deeply believes.

which gives people the right to request that the government address their complaints.

History of Lobbying *Lobby* became a political term in the United States around 1830. It originated to describe the behavior of people who waited in the lobbies of government buildings to talk with legislators. Historically, lobbying has been a negative term, referring to secret meetings in which interest groups try to unfairly influence legislative decisions. Early political cartoons portrayed lobbyists as sinister people who held legislatures in their control. In the 1800s and early 1900s several states enacted strict regulations on lobbying.

Lobbying Today Today the interaction that lobbyists have with congressmembers and their staff takes place both in private and during public meetings, or hearings. In both settings, lobbyists provide information about the legislation in which they are interested. Hearings often are critical for lawmakers to obtain detailed information previously unknown to them. Most lobbyists are experts on their subjects of concern and have large staffs to perform their research.

In addition to meeting with lawmakers, interest groups also lobby government agencies. After all, laws give only general guidance, leaving the agencies to hammer out the specifics. An



POLITICAL PROCESSES Lobbyists often wait in the halls of capital buildings for an opportunity to speak with certain legislators about policies concerning their group. What are some of the tools that lobbyists use to influence public opinion?

environmental law passed by Congress, for instance, sets general targets for clean air standards. Congress directs the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the executive branch, however, to determine how much nitrogen dioxide may be given off by coal-fired power plants or how much benzene may be given off by automobiles. Lobbyists thus talk not only to members of Congress about the legislation but also to officials at the EPA about its implementation.

Grassroots Lobbying In addition to providing information, many interest groups organize supporters to help further their cause. Much of this support is gathered through **grassroots lobbying**, an organized effort to urge local citizens to try to influence the decisions of Washington policy makers, particularly congressmembers. Because a district's residents choose whether or not to re-elect someone, congressmembers tend to listen to them.

Over the past 20 years, interest groups have become increasingly sophisticated at orchestrating grassroots efforts. This has resulted largely from technological advances. National organizations frequently use computers to forward information to citizens, urging them to contact their representatives about key issues. Lobbyists may even provide targeted "form letters," which computer users can print, sign, and send to their representatives with little effort. Form letters, however, are not considered as effective as other techniques.

Employing the Legal System

A third way interest groups try to influence public policy is through the legal system. In many instances, they file lawsuits regarding their issues of concern. Beginning in the mid-1930s, for example, civil rights interest groups tried to help bring an end to states' racist Jim Crow laws, such as those segregating schools, by filing lawsuits in state courts. (Jim Crow laws are more fully explained in Chapter 15.)

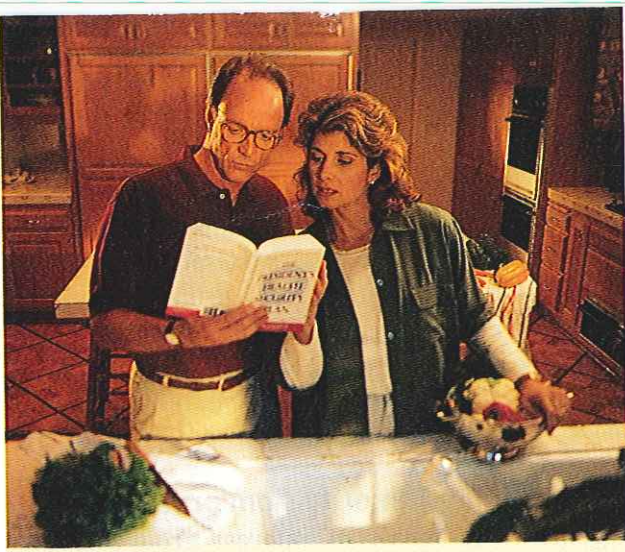
These efforts culminated in the early 1950s, when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its legal arm, the Legal Defense and Education Fund, helped bring suit to integrate a racially segregated school district. The case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, involved an African American student who was prevented from attending an all-white school. In its 1954 ruling the Supreme Court declared racial segregation of schools to be illegal.

Some legislation passed since the late 1960s, such as the Clean Air and the Clean Water Acts, has contained provisions allowing interest groups to sue government agencies. Typically, suits can be brought when an agency fails to perform some action the law requires it to perform. In a case regarding the habitat of the endangered spotted owl, an interest group called the Oregon Natural Resources Council sued the U.S. Forest Service for supposedly violating the Clean Water Act and other laws.

Interest groups also may initiate class-action suits. **Class-action suits** are brought by one or more plaintiffs on behalf of themselves and all others affected similarly by a particular wrong. Class-action suits allow individuals—each of whose suffering from an injury might be too small to go to court over—to band together to seek compensation. In a famous case in the 1980s, Vietnam War veterans claiming they were harmed by herbicides used by the U.S. Army won a class-action suit against the government and several chemical companies. In the mid-1990s cases were filed against tobacco companies on behalf of people with diseases thought to be linked to cigarette smoking.

Influencing Public Opinion

Another way in which interest groups work to achieve their goals is by influencing public



POLITICAL PROCESSES *The 1994 television ad featuring Harry and Louise tried to persuade viewers that President Clinton's proposed health-care plan was flawed. What other means do interest groups use to influence public opinion?*

opinion. Legislators frequently respond favorably to goals that have the support of the majority of the general public. The two main ways in which interest groups try to influence the public are by sending out information through the media and by conducting demonstrations and protests.

Using the Media Interest groups commonly try to influence public opinion through the media, often through advertising. Business interest groups use newspaper and radio advertisements, mailings, and even inserts into monthly electric utility bills.

Today, television is the primary means of advertising. In 1994 an interest group representing health insurance companies used television advertising to combat President Bill Clinton's plan for rebuilding the nation's health-care system. One ad featured a couple named Harry and Louise. In the ad, Harry and Louise expressed concern that the Clinton plan might create several new levels of government. The ad helped defeat national health-care insurance.

Interest groups also encourage favorable stories about their issues of concern. This is called using "free media" (news stories) as opposed to the "paid media" (advertising).

Demonstrations and Protests Television airtime is expensive, so only around one third of all interest groups buy time on television as a means of reaching the public. Other groups stage demonstrations and protests in hopes that the media will cover their actions and bring their cause to the attention of the public.

For example, antiabortion activists have demonstrated in front of clinics that perform abortions. Likewise, environmentalists have made headline news by chaining themselves to trees to block logging trucks. Farmers gained significant media attention by parading down a major avenue in Washington, D.C., on their tractors. Such efforts are commonly rewarded with television news coverage, thus enabling interest groups to share their concerns with millions of viewers.

SECTION 2

REVIEW

1. Define the following terms: endorsement, single-issue voting, lobbying, grassroots lobbying, class-action suit.
2. How do interest groups try to promote their concerns through the electoral process?
3. Why is lobbying an important tool for interest groups?
4. How does the use of lawsuits help further interest groups' concerns?
5. What means do interest groups use to try to influence public opinion? Have you noticed anything in the media, such as television

commercials, that might be linked to an interest group?

6. Thinking and Writing Critically

If you were to try to change a school policy, which one would it be? In what ways would you try to make your views known?

7. Applying **POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS**



Conduct an Internet search for interest groups' home pages. For instance, you might check listings for U.S. dairy farmers or the U.S. steel industry. What do these groups include in their home pages? Why do they want to publicize this information?

INTEREST GROUPS AND THE PUBLIC GOOD

Objectives

- ★ What are the benefits of interest groups?
- ★ Why are interest groups criticized?
- ★ How is interest groups' influence on the political system limited?

As noted in Chapter 16, public opinion is the collective opinion of the majority of the population. You may think that in a democracy, majority opinion should always win out over minority views. What if the *majority* view, however, does not represent what is best for the public good, which covers everyone?

Fearing unfair rule by the majority, the framers of the Constitution set up a framework preventing minority rights from being violated. A key to this framework is the establishment of specific protections for all people—for example, laws guaranteeing property rights and providing for religious freedom. In addition, the framers designed institutions to make it difficult for any group, even a majority, to establish unfair control over government. To accomplish this goal, the framers created a system that would be open to input from many sources. Thus, even interest groups that represent only a small minority have the opportunity to exert a significant influence on government actions. This gives interest groups the opportunity to promote the public good by pushing government to address minority concerns.

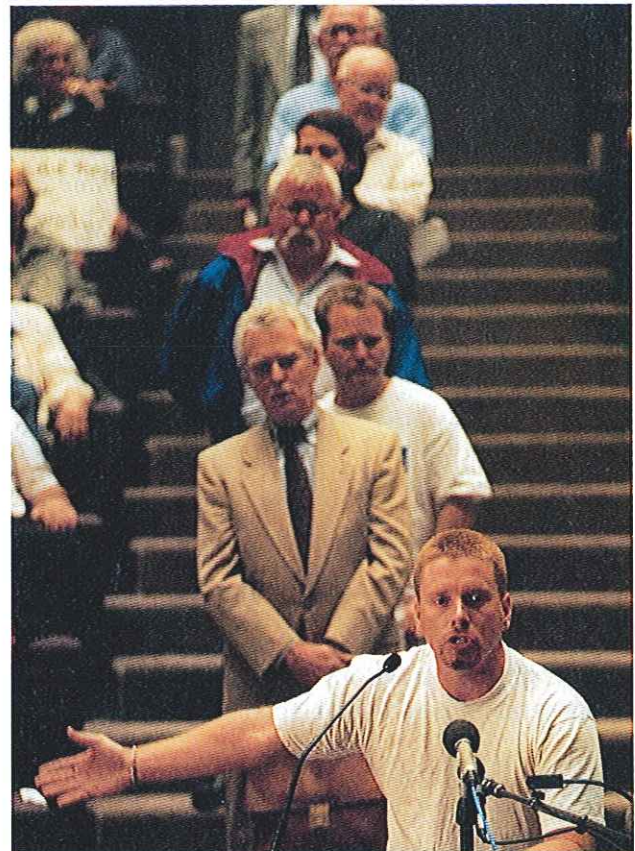
As you will see, however, interest groups do not always promote the public good. They sometimes attempt to advance the narrow interests of just a few at the expense of the general population. For this and other reasons, many citizens are critical of interest groups' role in the U.S. political system.

Benefits of Interest Groups

Interest group participation brings two main benefits to the U.S. political system. The first, as stated above, is that interest groups provide a voice for minority concerns in the political system. The second is that they supply information that lawmakers and the general public can use to make informed decisions about policies.

Representing Minority Concerns The major argument on behalf of interest groups is that majority views should not be the only factor that shapes public policy. Why might it be important that minority views be heard in the political system?

Suppose that a city is planning to build a highway. Much of the Oak Heights neighborhood would have to be destroyed to make room for the highway. Though the highway would make life more convenient for many commuters, it also would



PUBLIC GOOD People representing minority interests can express their views in public meetings such as government hearings. What is one major argument on behalf of interest groups?

significantly disrupt the lives of the people living in Oak Heights. The number of commuters (the majority) is much greater than the number of neighborhood residents (the minority).

Even so, most citizens would probably say that the Oak Heights residents should have their views on the building of the highway considered. Forming an interest group, such as Save Oak Heights, allows the residents to try to convince policy makers and the majority of the public of the importance of protecting their homes.

In such a case, interest groups can perform a key role in promoting the public good, just as they have done throughout U.S. history. Civil rights leaders during the 1950s and 1960s, for example, created groups to bring the injustices of discrimination to the attention of the majority. During the years when it was dominated by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s leadership, the basic strategy of the civil rights movement was to use demonstrations in the South to focus the attention of the country on the injustices of segregation. By giving minority concerns a voice in the political process through lobbying, filing lawsuits, and protesting, interest groups can temper majority rule with appropriate attention to minority concerns.

Providing Information As you learned in Section 1, a key interest group function is to provide information. In this way an interest group may promote the public good by increasing the awareness of officials and the public about its issues of concern. Without such a voice, these issues might not be heard, and the majority might not have the opportunity to lend support to a just minority cause.

As you also learned, members of interest groups often are experts on their subjects of concern and are able to provide detailed information that policy makers and the general public may not otherwise obtain. By providing information, interest groups enable policy makers and the general public to make more informed decisions about public policies.

Criticisms of Interest Groups

Perhaps you have heard someone in your family, your community, or the media say that a certain politician is overly influenced by "special interests." What that person means is that the politician gives interest groups too much control over

Comparing



Governments

Restricting Interest Groups

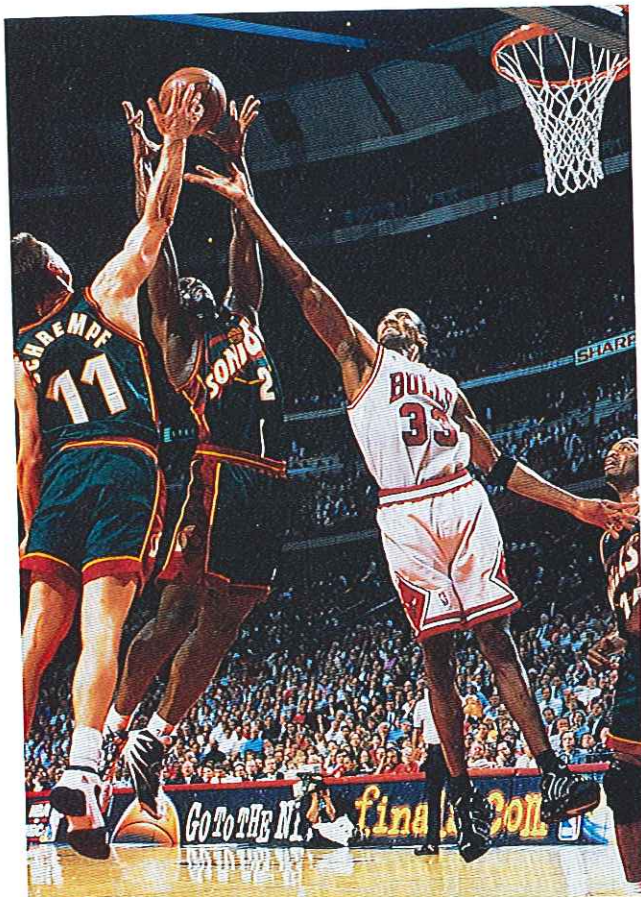
In the United States, interest groups have relatively few government-ordered restrictions. In contrast, authoritarian governments often place tight restrictions on interest groups. Such restraints are usually an attempt to limit opposition to the government. Consider, for example, the experiences of interest groups under the communist governments of Poland and China.

Before the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, Polish workers could not legally join unions that were not sponsored by the government. In the 1980s, however, millions of workers defied this law and joined the independent Solidarity union. Union members demanded freedom of political and religious expression and the right to form free and independent unions. When Poland's first free elections in decades were finally held in 1989, Solidarity candidates received enough votes to take control of the government.

The recent efforts of prodemocracy interest groups in the People's Republic of China were less successful. In 1989 China's communist government ordered the military to put down massive student demonstrations calling for democracy and other reforms. In 1997 China also limited the influence of interest groups in the former British colony of Hong Kong, which had been turned over to Chinese control that year. The Chinese government-appointed Hong Kong legislature approved a law disbanding Hong Kong interest groups that receive political funds from overseas.

his or her policy decisions. Indeed, interest groups often are criticized for having too much sway over the political system. Critics believe that some of these groups gain this control through financial influence.

Financial Influence Interest groups have long been accused of attempting to improperly influence



POLITICAL PROCESSES *Some critics accuse interest groups of trying to influence government officials by providing them with entertainment such as tickets to sporting events. Why does entertaining no longer play a central role in lobbying?*

officials through favors, entertainment, and financial support. Many people believe that lobbyists actually get their way by buying congressmembers out-of-town trips, tickets to sporting events, and expensive meals. (During the 1800s a lobbyist supposedly remarked that “the way to a man’s ‘Aye’ [vote of support] is through his stomach.”) Along with these benefits supposedly come threats of retribution at the next election if members do not give in to the lobbyist’s demands. Entertaining, however, played a more central role in earlier lobbying than it does today.

Interest groups’ activities today more often come in the form of campaign contributions. Many people see this type of influence as more subtle and dangerous than entertainment. Specifically, many people resent what they see as businesses’ and other wealthy groups’ practice of providing financial support to elected officials in

exchange for political influence. Wealthy and well-educated people can more easily form interest groups than can the disadvantaged, who may feel strongly about an issue but lack the resources to organize.

For example, even with the large increase in interest groups over the last three decades, no powerful interest groups exist exclusively for poor people. For this reason, critics charge that the disadvantaged do not receive the proper voice in the political process.

Excessive Power Many critics also believe that interest groups’ financial and ideological influence gives them too much control over government. They believe that the balance between minority and majority views gets lost in U.S. politics. A small interest group that is wealthy, well organized, and vocal about its intense concerns might gain more political power than the majority. Part of the reason for this is that the majority often does not speak out as loudly as a focused minority. On many issues, critics argue, the voice of the majority hardly is heard at all, leaving *only* interest groups to exert influence. What would be a valid input if it were one voice among many, sometimes becomes the *only* voice.

According to some critics, the public policy-making system in the United States enables organized groups to gain excessive influence. For every major policy issue there is a congressional committee legislating on the subject, a government agency implementing the legislation, and one or more interest groups representing people and businesses with an intense concern in the subject. The congressmembers involved joined the committee because the issue at hand is important to them and their constituents. The government agency is staffed largely by people whose life’s work centers on the subject. Of course, the interest group also is very concerned with the issue. With these three groups working together to create most public policy, the majority’s viewpoint sometimes goes unheard.

An example is the price-support system for farm products such as corn, sugar, and peanuts. The agricultural committees in Congress are dominated by members from rural districts who want to help farmers. The mission of the Department of Agriculture is also to help farmers. Each price support program is backed by an organized farm interest group. These three groups work together

to make agricultural policies, while consumers who may want lower food prices (the majority) have trouble being heard.

In such situations government officials certainly hear from several interest groups, but are unlikely to hear from many ordinary citizens. As a result, critics claim, the intense concerns represented by the interest groups gain more weight than the majority concerns represented by public opinion and elections.

This problem, however, usually develops only in fields of public policy that provide large benefits to a small group while the majority loses only a little. For example, tax dollars fund property development subsidies that provide significant new business for the real estate and construction industries in central cities, but cost each taxpayer only a few dollars a year. In such situations, government officials will most likely hear from an interest group in favor of such subsidies but are less likely to hear from many ordinary citizens. With a highly publicized issue that the public cares deeply about, elected officials are more likely to bow to the majority.

Campaign Finance Reform In recent years these criticisms of interest groups' influence over politics have led to demands for campaign finance reform. Congress has been working on campaign finance reform for years, but as of mid-1997 the House and the Senate still had not agreed on a substantive bill.

Some proposals limit the amount of money candidates can spend in campaigns. One problem here is that challengers cannot mount an effective campaign against a current officeholder without spending a great deal of money. Spending limits thus favor officeholders by making it more difficult for challengers to win. Many people believe that officeholders already enjoy many advantages in re-elections and that such legislation would unfairly strengthen their position.

Other proposals support financing elections with public funds, raised through the income tax on U.S. citizens. Public financing, however, has been criticized in light of government's already tight budgets.

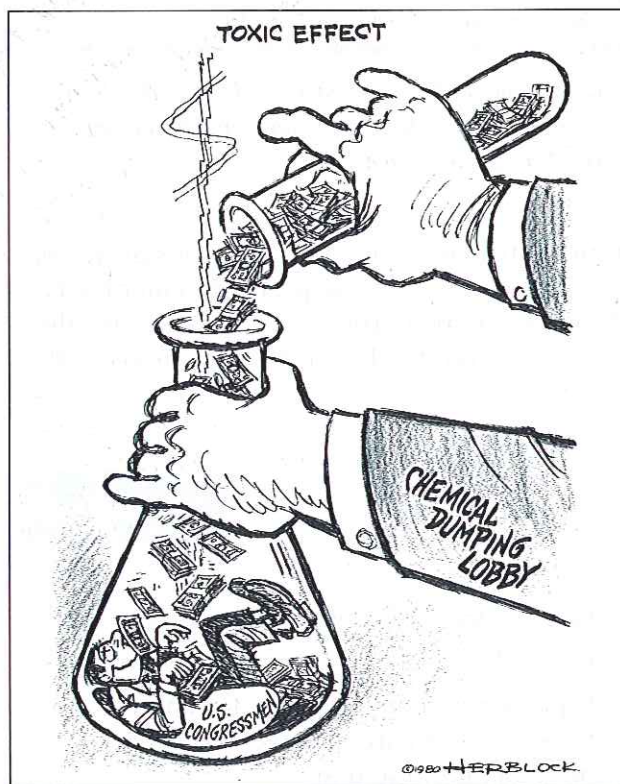
Limitations on Interest Groups

Even though few campaign finance reform laws have been passed, there are limitations to interest

groups' influence. First, though interest groups may donate money to a politician's campaign, elected officials often worry that support for "special interest" policies will hurt them with voters. For example, a politician who receives money from the tobacco industry but whose home state is passing significant antismoking legislation will likely be less concerned about tobacco interests than those of his or her state's registered voters.

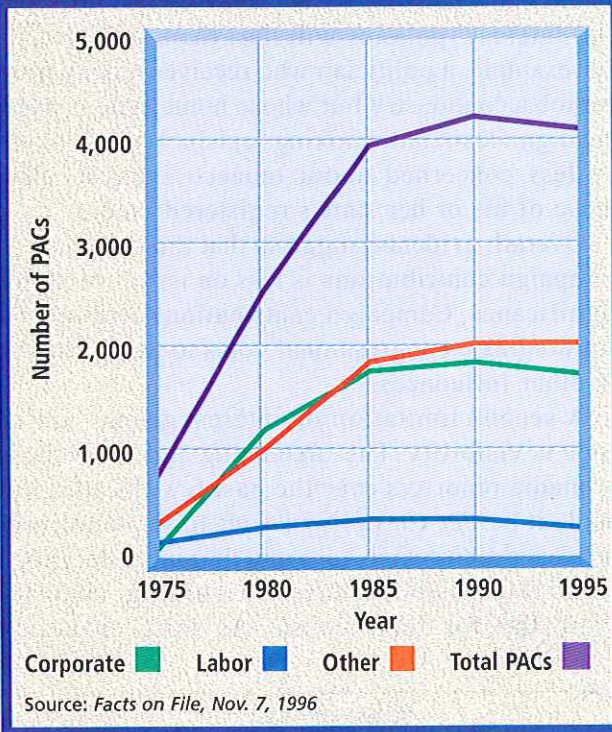
Overall, evidence suggests that the influence of campaign contributions is less on issues of major significance. Campaign contributions certainly do not dominate congressional votes to the exclusion of other influences.

A second limitation on interest groups' influence is visibility. The increasing aggressiveness of media reporters over the past few decades has made it harder for policy issues to go unnoticed. Interest groups often can only dominate decisions on highly visible issues by gaining majority sympathy for their cause. As long as policy



POLITICAL PROCESSES Congress has been working for years to pass a campaign finance reform bill that would limit interest groups' ability to influence policy by contributing large amounts of money to politicians' election campaigns. What is one of the criticisms of public financing of election campaigns?

Number of Political Action Committees, 1975–1995



The number of PACs has increased dramatically over the last 20 years. What has happened to the total number of PACs since 1990?

arguments must be justified in terms of the public good and the debate proceeds completely in the open, interest groups will have trouble dominating the political system with purely selfish

concerns. When issues are visible, the ability of interest groups to control legislative decisions depends greatly on their ability to arouse public sympathy for a just cause. When a group is able to make a case for its position, the public will be much more likely to listen to the debate and go on to support that group's position.


Third, interest groups' influence is limited by the competition among them. The dramatic growth in the number and variety of interest groups over the past 30 years has meant that congressional committees and government agencies now hear from many more interest groups in more policy areas.

For example, if the U.S. government decides to set a tariff on imported luxury automobiles, many interest groups will become involved in the debate over the issue. Not only domestic car makers but also businesses who import and sell foreign cars will get involved on different sides of the issue. Even the foreign country where the automobiles are made may become involved in the debate.

Because of this kind of competition, some people believe that the enormous growth in interest groups has actually *decreased* individual groups' influence over U.S. politics. When fewer groups operated, they had more influence because they had less competition for policy makers' attention. As the number of groups competing in a policy area has increased, the ability of any one group to have significant influence over the system has declined.

SECTION 3

REVIEW

1. In what way do interest groups promote the public good?
2. Explain why some people believe that interest groups are a negative influence on the political system.
3. What serves to limit interest groups' influence?
4. **Thinking and Writing Critically**  Suppose an interest group in your state wants to change the school week from Monday through Friday to Monday through Saturday. Its lobbyists are trying to influence state

lawmakers by taking them to expensive dinners to talk about the issue. What do you think about this situation? Why might some people think that lobbyists' attempts to influence policy makers are unfair?

5. Applying POLITICAL PROCESSES



Conduct an Internet search for listings of public interest groups. Do these groups have a bulletin board where you can leave comments? Do they list an address to which you can send your comments? Prepare a report of your findings.

SECTION 1

An interest group is a collection of people who have banded together to advance a shared political concern. Interest groups perform three main functions in the political process. They organize people who share strong opinions about an issue, they provide an outlet for political participation, and they supply information to the public and to policy makers.

There are several kinds of interest groups. Those that represent economic concerns include agricultural groups, business groups, labor unions, and professional groups. Interest groups that are not based on economic concerns often represent a certain societal group or promote certain causes. One type of cause-based interest group is a public interest group, which claims to represent the interests of society as a whole rather than those of a small group of people.

SECTION 2

Interest groups seek to influence decisions about public policy. One way they try to do this is by participating in the electoral process—by endorsing candidates and contributing money through political action committees.

They also try to gain support for their policy agendas through lobbying—trying to persuade government policy makers to make particular decisions regarding legislation. Today much of the interaction that lobbyists have with congressmembers and their staffs takes place during public meetings and hearings. At that time, lobbyists provide detailed information about the legislation in which they are interested.

Interest groups also use the courts to try to achieve their political goals. To advance or protect their issues of concern, they often file lawsuits, some of which may be filed against the government. The latter are typically brought when an agency fails to perform some action the law requires it to perform. Interest groups may also file class-action suits, which are

brought by one or more plaintiffs on behalf of themselves and others affected similarly by a particular wrong.

The fourth way in which interest groups try to influence policy is through public opinion. Legislators frequently respond favorably to goals that are backed by the majority of the general public. Two main ways in which interest groups try to influence the public are by sending out information through the media, often through advertising, and by conducting demonstrations and protests.

SECTION 3

The framers of the Constitution hoped to protect minorities from unfair rule by the majority. For this reason, the Constitution's framework enables interest groups to influence government actions. One benefit of interest groups, therefore, is that they represent minority concerns within the political system. The other benefit is that they provide information to government officials and the public.

Interest groups pose potential problems as well as provide benefits. Many people feel that the groups' financial resources allow them too much control over government policy making. There are limitations to their influence, however. Members of Congress often are more concerned about representing their constituents than about promoting interest groups' issues. In addition, interest groups' competition with one another and their visibility through the media serve to limit their influence.



Government Notebook

Review the list of interest groups that you wrote in your Government Notebook at the beginning of the chapter. Now that you have studied the chapter, would you revise your list? Why or why not?

REVIEW

REVIEWING CONCEPTS

1. What are interest groups? Why do people form them?
2. How do interest groups attempt to influence the political system?
3. What are the different types of interest groups?
4. What functions do interest groups fulfill in the political system?
5. How might interest groups be beneficial to the political system? How might they be harmful?
6. What are the limitations on interest groups' influence?

THINKING AND WRITING CRITICALLY



1. **POLITICAL PROCESSES** Have you ever lobbied for something you wanted? Give an example of a time when you explained your point of view to a parent, teacher, or friend to try to change his or her decision about something. What was the outcome?
2. **PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY** How can interest groups help their members become informed voters? Why do many interest groups spend their time and money educating citizens on legislative issues and candidates?
3. **POLITICAL PROCESSES** Recall the lobbying techniques discussed in Section 2. Which one of these techniques do you think is the most powerful tool for influencing policy makers' decisions? Explain your answer.
4. **PUBLIC GOOD** Do you think that financial resources play too large a role in politics? What limitations have been placed on interest groups' influence? Do you think that these

limitations promote the public good? Explain your answers.

CITIZENSHIP IN YOUR COMMUNITY



Working with a group, research the labor unions in your state. What are some of the major industries in your state? Do workers in these industries belong to labor unions? Are there regional offices for these unions in your state? What are some of the major issues that concern members of these unions? You might want to begin your research by checking local telephone directories and by reading your local newspaper. After you have completed your research, write an editorial on how you think labor unions serve the people in your community.

COOPERATIVE PORTFOLIO PROJECT



With a group, make a poster illustrating examples of various types of interest groups. You should include an example of each of the following groups: labor unions, business groups, agricultural groups, professional groups, societal groups, and cause-based groups. You will need to provide membership statistics and a statement of purpose for each group you select. You may want to contact each group to request photos or other visual information such as brochures or pamphlets to attach to your poster.

THE INTERNET: LEARNING ONLINE



Conduct an Internet search for an interest group you might wish to join. You might start by using

search words such as *interest groups* and the issue or type of group. When you find the home page of a group you wish to know more about, note the address where you can request information about the group. Is there a postal address or an e-mail address for the group's main office? Using e-mail—or regular mail if no e-mail address is available—write a letter requesting information about the group and how to join.

PRACTICING SKILLS: LEARNING FROM VISUALS



Examine the photograph below, which shows an interest group rallying in front of the Capitol. Then answer the questions that follow.



1. What type of interest group is rallying in this photograph?
2. What details in the photograph give you some clues about the issues in which these people are interested?
3. Why do you think that a member of the media took this photo? What are some techniques used by this interest group to get media coverage of its rally?

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES



CITIZEN HEARING ON CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM

The League of Women Voters of the United States, founded in 1920, is dedicated to educating

voters and encouraging public participation in government. Today this organization has more than 100,000 members. In June 1997 several of the organization's leaders testified at a congressional hearing on reforming the ways in which political campaigns are financed. Read the following excerpt from the testimony given by the league's president, Becky Cain, and answer the questions that follow.

“Do people discuss the independent expenditure loophole [law allowing interest groups to spend money in support of an election campaign without actually contributing money to a particular candidate] over coffee in the morning? No, probably not. But does this mean they don't care about campaign finance reform? The ballooning activity occurring on this issue at the grassroots level disproves the notion that people don't care.

They're joining coalitions [organizations], they're volunteering for initiative [proposed legislation] campaigns, they're voting for reform measures in large majorities: in short, citizens are engaging in the process of reforming how we finance campaigns. They care.

Indeed, as one reporter I know put it: voters are desperate for reform.

How is it then that campaign finance reform has stalled at the federal level while it's succeeding at the state level? Why should citizens expect less from the federal government than from state governments?

The answer is, they shouldn't. That's why we need campaign finance reform. . .

The message is that we, citizens, want reform. We deserve reform. We won't expect any less from Congress.”

1. Do you think that campaign finance reform is a major issue of concern to voters? Why or why not?
2. What are some citizens doing to work for campaign finance reform? Do you think that these are effective methods for influencing policy?
3. Why do you think that reform might be easier to achieve at a state level than at a federal level?