THE INTEREST GROUP UNIVERSE

* **What Is Lobbying?**

**Lobbying** involves persuasion—using reports, protests, informal meetings, or other techniques to convince an elected official or bureaucrat to [help](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/09/outline.aspx) enact a law, craft a regulation, or do something else that a group wants. **Interest groups** are organizations of people who share common political interests and aim to influence public policy by electioneering and lobbying. Interest groups and political parties share the goal of changing what government does, but there are three critical differences:

* + Political parties run candidates for office and coordinate activities of elected officials. While interest groups also electioneer, they do not run candidates.
  + Major political parties hold certain legal advantages over interest groups when it comes to influencing policy, such as guaranteed positions on electoral ballots.
  + The elected members of political parties have a direct influence over government activity because they propose, debate, and vote on policies. Interest groups have an indirect influence: they must either persuade elected officials to support their point of view or help elect candidates who already share their goals.

Pluralism refers to the idea that Americans exercise political power through participation in interest groups rather than as individuals. Thus, interest groups are America’s fundamental political actors. America has also been described as an **interest group state**, a government in which most policy decisions are determined by the influence of interest groups.

* **The**[**Business**](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/09/outline.aspx)**of Lobbying**

Lobbying is heavily regulated. Annual reports must be filed by lobbying firms and interest groups to detail expenditures for lobbying activities. The number of [registered](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/09/outline.aspx) lobbyists doubled between 2000 and 2005. The number of interest groups has also increased in recent years, in correlation with the large size and widespread influence of the federal government.

While some organizations lobby independently, other join a **trade association**, an interest group composed of companies in the same business or industry (the same “trade”) that lobbies for policies intended to benefit members of the group. In spite of the growth and increasing clout of organized interests, many like-minded groups in America remain **latent** or unorganized, without an organization to represent them.

* **Types of Interest Groups**

Interest groups can be divided into three categories based on the types of concerns that drive their lobbying efforts: economic groups, citizen groups, and single-issue groups.

* + **Economic groups** seek public policies that will provide monetary benefits to their members. Labor organizations fall under this category.
  + **Citizen groups** seek change in spending, regulations, or government [programs](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/09/outline.aspx) concerning a wide range of policies (also known as public interest groups). Issues of interest may vary from legislation that defines marriage between a man and a woman to the elimination of estate taxes.
  + **Single-issue groups** form around a narrowly focused goal, seeking change on a single [topic](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/09/outline.aspx), government program, or piece of legislation. For example, the National Right to Life campaign lobbies for regulations on abortion rights.

Historically, economic interest groups outnumbered citizen groups and single-issue groups. While the number of all types of interest groups has increased in recent years, the increase in citizen groups has far outpaced the growth in economic groups. This may be attributed to the increased role of the government in citizens’ everyday lives.

* **Organizational Structures**

There are two main models of interest group structure: centralized groups and confederations.

* + **Centralized groups** are interest groups with a headquarters, usually in Washington, DC, as well as members and field offices throughout the country. In general, these groups’ lobbying decisions are made at headquarters by the group leaders. Most well-known organizations like the [AARP](http://www.wwnorton.com/college/polisci/american-politics-today2/core/ch/09/outline.aspx) and the NRA are centralized groups.
  + **Confederations**are interest groups made up of several independent, local organizations that provide much of their funding and hold most of the power.

Both structures have advantages and disadvantages. A centralized organization controls all of the group’s resources and can deploy them efficiently, but it can be challenging to find out what members want. A confederation has the advantage of maintaining independent chapters at state and local levels, so it is easier for the national headquarters to learn what members want. Conflict, however, is more rampant in confederations because when chapters send funds to headquarters, they can specify how the funds must be used.

* **Staff**

Interest group staff falls into two categories: experts on the group’s focal policy areas, and people with useful government connections and knowledge of procedures. The practice of transitioning from government positions to working for interest groups or lobbying firms is known as the **revolving door**. Over 40 percent of representatives leaving the House or Senate join a lobbying firm after their departure. The term **K Street**, named for the street in DC where lobbying firms were once concentrated, refers collectively to Washington lobbyists.

* **Membership**

Interest groups can be distinguished on the basis of the size of their membership and the members’ role in the group’s activities.

* + A **mass association**is an interest group that has a large number of dues-paying individuals as members. Not all mass associations give members a say in selecting a group’s leaders or determining its mission.
  + A **peak association**is an interest group whose members are businesses or other organizations rather than individuals.
  + Some interest groups have no members at all. Sometimes it makes more sense for interest groups to seek funding from foundations, corporations, or a few wealthy individuals rather than from broad-based membership.
* **Resources**

Interest groups use resources including people, money, and expertise to support their lobbying efforts.

* + People are among the most important resources an interest group can utilize. Group members write letters to elected officials, send e-mails, travel to Washington for demonstrations, and so on. They may also offer expertise or advice. Interest groups’ ability to use people as a resource is limited by two major challenges: it is expensive to recruit members, and it is difficult to motivate members’ participation.
  + Money is important because virtually everything interest groups do can be purchased as services. Well-funded groups can purchase resources they lack.
  + Expertise can take many forms. Areas of expertise may include knowing members’ preferences, or having information on policy questions and legislative proposals. This information is an asset group leaders can use to negotiate with elected officials or bureaucrats. Not all interest groups utilize expertise. Some groups focus on mobilizing people outside government, expecting that elected officials will respond by developing policy solutions.

GETTING ORGANIZED

An interest group’s first task is to raise money to get organized. Then, they must continue to attract funds for ongoing operations.

* **The Logic of Collective Action**

Groups of individuals stand to benefit through the provision of public goods, which for many interest groups amounts to changes in government policy. Securing and providing such goods requires coordination among many different people and organizations—it requires **collective action**. Even when people generally agree on the desirability of the public good, and when the costs of producing the good are negligible, cooperation is neither easy nor automatic.

* + The logic of collective action can be explained by the **prisoner’s dilemma**. In this situation, all participants will be better off if they cooperate or coordinate their behavior, but each individual participant also has an incentive to defect or refuse to cooperate, in hopes of enjoying the benefits of the other participants’ efforts without contributing themselves.
  + Regardless of how many other people join a collective effort, any given individual is better off **free riding**—refusing to join an organization, and still enjoying the benefits of any success the group might have. But, if everyone acts on this calculation, no one will join the group and the organization will be unable to lobby for grants or anything else.
  + Collective action problems involving interest groups are usually more difficult to resolve than the prisoner’s dilemma because there are typically more participants, and there is no way for each participant to know whether others are free riding.
* **Collective Action Problems**

One class of real world collective action problems involves **common pool resources**, situations where people can exploit a renewable resource such as a forest or fishery. The problem is that each participant can maximize his/her profits by taking as much as he/she can from the resource area without worrying about whether it can sustain this activity. However, if everyone behaves this way, the common pool resource will be destroyed—all the trees will be cut down, all the fish will be caught.

* **Solving Collective Action Problems**

Some interest groups have developed mechanisms to engender cooperation:

* + Some organizations offer immaterial benefits for participation:
    1. **Solidary benefits** include the satisfaction derived from the experience of working with like-minded people, even if the group’s efforts do not achieve the desired impact.
    2. **Purposive benefits** include the satisfaction derived from the experience of working toward a desired policy goal, even if the goal is not achieved.
  + **Coercion** is a method of eliminating nonparticipation or free riding by requiring participation. For example, workers in certain industries are required to join their respective union.
  + **Selective incentives** are benefits that can motivate participation in a group effort because they are available only to those who participate, such as member services offered by interest groups.
  + **Interest group entrepreneurs** play a critical role in successful collective action. They are leaders of an interest group who define the group’s mission and its goals and create a plan to achieve them.
* **Implications of the Logic of Collective Action**

Unless people see benefits from participating in an organization, group leaders must worry about finding the right mix of coercion and selective incentives to get people to join. Economic groups are generally easier to form than citizen groups. Since economic groups generally involve a small number of corporations or individuals, the costs of free riding are relatively high; one actor’s efforts significantly boost the probability of success. Thus, economic groups can often form on the strength of their shared policy or monetary goals, without coercion, selective incentives, or solidary benefits. Citizen groups, on the other hand, with many more potential members, typically need to incentivize people to join.

* **Interest Group Strategies**

Having formed an interest group, lobbying goals must be identified. In most interest groups, the leaders make such decisions; they can lobby on issues that their members are not interested in or take positions that a majority of their members oppose. Members often have little input; quitting the organization is their only recourse if they disagree with the group’s goals.

Once a group has determined its goals, the next step is to determine how to lobby. There are a number of possible tactics that fall under two categories: inside strategies and outside strategies.

* **Inside Strategies**

**Inside strategies**are the tactics used within Washington interest groups to achieve their policy goals.

* + **Direct lobbying**, attempts by interest group staff to influence policy by speaking with elected officials or bureaucrats, is very common. Interest groups try to help like-minded legislators secure policy changes that they both want. Little time is spent trying to convert opposing legislators and bureaucrats, though such efforts are often inexpensive and can force interest groups with opposing views to engage in **counteractive lobbying**, which requires them to use some of their limited resources to maintain supporters.
  + Interest groups sometimes draft legislative proposals and regulations, which they then deliver to legislators and bureaucrats as part of their lobbying efforts.
  + Interest groups often prepare research reports on topics of interest to the group. Members of Congress are more likely to accept a group’s legislative proposal if they believe the group’s staff have some research to back up their claims.
  + Interest group staff often testify before congressional committees in order to inform members of Congress about important issues to the group.
  + Groups can sue the government on grounds that the government’s actions are not constitutional, or that the government has misinterpreted the provisions of the existing law. Even when an interest group is not directly involved in litigation, *amicus curiae* briefs provide some clues as to what position a given organization supports.
  + Interest groups can also work together in their lobbying efforts. Generally, such collaboration is short-term and aimed at achieving a specific outcome.
* **Outside Strategies**

**Outside strategies** are the tactics employed outside Washington by interest groups seeking to achieve their policy goals.

* + **Grassroots lobbying** is a strategy that relies on participation by group members, such as in a protest or a letter-writing campaign. This strategy is effective because elected officials hate to act against a large group of citizens who care enough about an issue to express their position.
  + The effectiveness of grassroots lobbying depends on perceptions of elected officials about how much a group has done to motivate participation. For example, **astroturf lobbying** is designed to look like the spontaneous, independent participation of many individuals when in fact those individuals’ behavior has been coordinated from the top down by some central organization. Astroturf lobbying is often ignored because it says more about a group’s ability to make participation accessible rather than the number of people who strongly support an issue.
  + Mobilizing public opinion is an attempt to change what the public thinks about an issue.
  + Electioneering involves supporting candidates for election. Federal laws limit groups’ electioneering efforts:
    1. Most interest groups are organized as a **501(c) organization**, a tax code classification that makes donations to the group tax deductible but limits the group’s political activities (the formal limit is 20 percent of the group’s activities or budget).
    2. Interest groups can get around these limits by forming either a separate **political action committee (PAC)**or a **527 organization**. PACs can raise money to contribute to campaigns or to spend on ads in support of specific candidates, but the amount of money a PAC can receive from each of its donors and the amount if can spend on federal campaigning are strictly limited. 527s, conversely, are not subject to contribution limits or spending caps. These tax -exempt groups form primarily to influence elections through voter mobilization efforts and issue ads that do not directly endorse or oppose a candidate.
  + Some interest groups use the strategy of **taking the late train** by donating money to the winning candidate after the election in hopes of securing a meeting with that person when he or she takes office.
  + Media coverage publicizes a group’s concerns without costing that group any money.
  + Interest groups may also propose policy by bypassing the government entirely:
    1. An **initiative** is a direct vote by citizens on a policy change proposed by fellow citizens or organized groups outside government. Getting a question on the ballot typically requires collecting a set number of signatures from registered voters in support of the proposal. The initiative process favors well-funded groups that can advertise their proposal, and no mechanism exists for a national-level initiative.
    2. A **referendum** is a direct vote by citizens on a policy change proposed by a legislature or another government body. Referenda are common in state and local elections, but no mechanism exists for a national-level referendum.
* **Choosing Strategies**

Most groups give testimony, do research, contact elected officials, talk with journalists, and develop legislative and regulatory proposals. Only a bare majority of interest groups engage in grassroots lobbying. Relatively few groups organize protests, endorse candidates, or provide campaign workers.

HOW MUCH POWER DO INTEREST GROUPS HAVE?

Despite criticism that interest groups have too much influence over political outcomes, scholarly evidence does not support this claim:

* Interest groups lobby their friends in government rather than their enemies, and tend to moderate their demands in the face of resistance.
* Some complaints about the power of interest groups come from losers in the political process.
* Many interest groups claim responsibility for policies and election outcomes regardless of whether their lobbying made the difference.
* The sizable amounts that groups spend to lobby Congress can easily overshadow the more important issue of what they got for their money.

WHAT DETERMINES WHEN GROUPS SUCCEED?

Two related factors determine the success of lobbying efforts: salience and conflict.

* Interest groups are more likely to succeed when their request has low **salience**, or attracts little public attention. Legislators and bureaucrats do not have to worry about the political consequences of giving a group what it wants if the issue is not well known.
* Conflict works against lobbying efforts. Lobbying is subject to two kinds of conflict:
  + Disagreements between interest groups, some preferring to spend more on a given program, some less
  + Differences between what a particular interest group wants and public opinions or preferences of the general public