

How Interested Are Interest Groups in Democracy?

For as long as democratic governments have existed, there has been ambivalence about political interest groups. On the one hand, democratic theory is grounded in the idea that individuals can and should form political interest groups to influence the selection of officials and to promote public policies that serve their goals. On the other

hand, the press, the public, and even some governmental officials are often heard blaming a country's problems on "special interests," which are effective in influencing government to enact policies that serve the interests of specific groups but are not in "the public interest." Do interest groups hinder the democratic process or facilitate it?

Interest Groups Facilitate Democracy

- Interest groups are a fundamentally important set of actors in a democratic system because they enable citizens to organize into groups of sufficient size to communicate their concerns and demands in a clearer, more amplified voice to policy makers, especially to the national government.
- Interest groups are especially valuable in representing and supporting those groups whose views are not effectively represented by any of the political parties.
- In a single country, thousands of interest groups can operate at the same time, representing the interests of different groups of people. Because there are so many groups whose voices are heard, no one interest group will go unchecked and become too powerful and influential relative to the others.
- Financial contributions from interest groups enable candidates to purchase the expensive media that allow them to communicate their ideas to many citizens and thus enhance the citizens' capacity to participate knowledgeably in the democratic process.
- Interest groups play a very beneficial role in the public policy process. They provide public officials with an enormous amount of relevant, specialized information that public agencies might not be able to gather efficiently and that supports good policy making.
- Interest groups serve as an expert watchdog over legislation or policies that public officials might try to implement but that are based on error or are self-serving. By articulating such concerns, interest groups add a valuable level of accountability and monitoring to the process of democratic governance.

Interest Groups Hinder the Democratic Process

- Most interest groups work to garner support for a single or narrow set of goals, often at

the expense of the interests of the broader society.

- Many interest groups have large professional staffs that work 24/7 to promote their goals. Ordinary citizens rarely have this level of expertise and time commitment for political action, and thus the interests of these ordinary citizens are not as well promoted in the policy process as those of special interests.
- Interest groups have specialized information and data that they provide to government officials. Although such information can be quite influential in the policy process, it can also be heavily biased in favor of the interest group's position on issues.
- Special interest groups are the major source of funds to many political actors. Campaign contributions and other "goodies" can be the source of considerable corruption as they purchase access to and influence with public officials. Meanwhile, most other citizens, who lack such financial resources, are seriously disadvantaged in gaining access and influence.
- Interest groups form an unnecessary layer that insulates citizens from their government and discourages them from engaging in direct democracy.

More questions . . .

1. Can you think of any effective interest groups whose actions are a positive force in making your government work in a more democratic manner? Can you think of any effective interest groups that actually undermine democracy? Are your choices closely linked to *your own* interests and values?
2. Does a system of strong and active interest groups increase or decrease the effectiveness of political parties?
3. Can you imagine an effective political system that has no organized interest groups?