

36 Interest Groups

Interest groups are associations composed of individuals or organizations that come together to promote some good or benefit for their members or for the public in general by influencing government policy. While elected legislators provide one form of representation to constituencies, interest groups may be said to provide another form of representation. Many interest groups are "local" in character, with geographically defined "constituencies." Many other interest group constituencies are widely dispersed across society. These constituencies consist of groups and individuals, such as those who have similar occupations or those who share particular views on a policy issue that will benefit from interest group activity. Such representation is often referred to as "functional representation."

- **Interest groups and free societies** The existence of interest groups is the result of the liberty found in all liberal democracies, since freedom of association is basic to democracy.
 - ▶ Since their existence is a manifestation of a free society, interest groups have been called "the embodiment of democracy." Free individuals will form different opinions and interests, and tend to form associations with others who share their interests or opinions.
 - ▶ By the same token, interest group activities have been called a "threat to democracy." Interest groups often attempt to promote the benefit of their members at the expense of the public good; they may attempt to undermine democracy's fundamental principle of the equality of all citizens by promoting the interests of a few at the expense of the many.
- **Kinds of interest groups** Interest groups can be distinguished by the nature of their *membership* and also by their *purpose*.
 - ▶ **Membership** Some interest groups are *composed of organizations*, such as labor unions or manufacturing organizations; others are *composed of individuals*, who share some common characteristic (e.g., age, gender, occupation, perspective on a public policy issue, or a common concern).
 - ▶ **Purpose** The purposes of interest groups can generally be distinguished by whether they describe themselves as representing a segment of society or the public as a whole. Those that represent a segment of society invariably maintain that the interests of their members coincide with the public interest, which may or may not be the case. By the same token, groups that claim to represent the public interest may or may not do so; no group, however well-intentioned, necessarily accurately identifies the public interest or good.
 - **"Special interest" groups** One type of interest group is one that promotes some interest of a segment of society, such as the interests of trade unionists, business corporations, teachers, retired persons, or of any other occupation or social group. Nearly every person in

society is a member of at least one such group, though that does not mean that one or more interest group represents each social segment equally. For example, the poor are a group often chronically under-represented.

- **“Public interest” groups** A second type of interest group consists of those who describe themselves as representing the public at large, rather than a part of it.
 - Such groups are often called “public interest groups” and pursue goals that their members view as good for the entire society. Such groups may be organized to protect the environment or to promote consumer interests, political reforms, and the like.
 - Because such groups describe the policies they advocate as furthering the public good or interest does not mean these policies necessarily do in fact further the public interest.
- **Functions and activities of interest groups** Interest groups:
 - ▶ Advocate particular views and propose courses of action regarding public issues, problems and concerns. In this way, they help educate the public about policy problems and bring attention to certain policy areas.
 - ▶ Promote the interests of those they represent by interacting with public officials, both those that make laws and those that implement laws.
 - ▶ Provide information to policy makers and the public at large pertinent to the interests they represent or to the public interest.
 - ▶ Work to develop legislative proposals and policy solutions to address issues of concern to the group.
 - ▶ Employ representatives known as “lobbyists” to meet with legislators, their staffs, and members of government bureaucracies in order to promote their constituents’ interests.
 - ▶ Monitor the implementation of government programs to determine their effectiveness.
 - ▶ Sometimes contribute money to legislators for their reelection, perhaps providing funds to competing candidates as well.
- **Democracy and interest groups**

Interest groups may be seen as fulfilling democracy or as a threat to democracy.

 - ▶ **Interest groups as fulfilling democracy** Among its other characteristics, democracy requires freedom of association—freedom to form groups for all lawful purposes, including those to further the interests of its members or of the public at large. Democracy can be seen as the free competition of such groups and any attempt to eliminate them is an attempt to eliminate liberty itself.

▶ **Interest groups as threatening democracy** On the other hand:

- **Inequality** Interest groups may pose a problem to democracy in that all social groups are not equally represented. Groups with the most resources may be able to advance their interests at the expense of weaker groups such as the poor or other unorganized people.
- **Money and elections** Interest groups may pose a threat to democracy by distorting election results through monetary contributions to candidates. Unless limits are placed on such contributions, and all political contributions and expenditures are subject to full public disclosure, the legitimacy of democratic elections may be endangered, since citizens may consider elections to have been bought.

■ **Interest groups and the Common Good**

In the final analysis, it is up to legislators and the constituents that elected them to ensure that public policy is not controlled by interest groups to the detriment of most people—that the public good is not perpetually sacrificed to interests that oppose it. There is, however, no magic formula by which this objective can be fulfilled other than the conscientious monitoring of public policy by citizens and the news media, and the basic sense of fairness and honesty of those who represent them.

What do you think?

- 1 What are some types of interest groups?
- 2 Are interest groups inevitable in a free society? Why or why not?
- 3 What functions do interest groups play in democratic government?
- 4 What are the dangers of the influence of interest groups in democratic government? Might interest groups pose a danger to democracy if they have substantial control over public policy? Why or why not?
- 5 Are public interest groups superior to private interest groups? Can it be assumed that public interest groups in fact express the public good?
- 6 Does everyone have access to one or more interest groups to defend their interests? If not, what are the consequences?