

[PDF File](#)

## GOVERNMENT ACTION THROUGH INTEREST GROUPS



Justice for Janitors Rally

### Overview

Along with political parties, interest groups offer opportunities for citizens to form and to challenge public policies. They use a variety of tactics to connect with officials and to draw attention to their causes. As the number of these organizations increases, their effect on American politics becomes more controversial. Are they a help or a hindrance to good government? When you have completed this unit, you will have formed your own answer to this question.

### What is an Interest Group?

The First Amendment gives Americans the right to speak freely about causes and issues that concern them. However, getting decision-makers to listen and creating public awareness can be difficult. Interest groups are organizations that work to connect with government officials and strive to make their views known to the general population. Their long-term goal is to shape public policy. Over 100,000 interest groups exist within the United States, and they cover a wide variety of topics. To accomplish their tasks, they require skilled leaders, adequate funding and dedicated members. The more successful the interest group is, the more influential it becomes.



Activities of Greenpeace International

## Political Parties and Special Interest Groups

At first glance, interest groups do not seem too different from political parties. Both organizations consist of people with definite opinions in common. They also aim to influence public policy, elections and government officials. Yet, there are crucial differences between them. While political parties attempt to bring various groups together through compromises and coalitions, interest groups usually form around certain problems or issues, such as the preservation of the environment, tax reform and employment practices. As a result, the focus of an interest group is much narrower than that of a political party. The intent of an interest group is to affect a specific area of public policy, and this goal does not change. A political party, on the other hand, can make changes in its platform and still maintain its purpose.



Go to Questions 1 through 3.

## Types of Interest Groups

Even though they address a wide range of issues, interest groups have one thing in common—they exist to advance the concerns of their members. Based on their focus, they can be divided into three broad categories, which sometimes overlap. These include economic interest groups, social action interest groups and single-issue interest groups.



Special Interest Groups (04:38)

## Economic Interest Groups

Economic interest groups dedicate themselves to influencing how the government spends its money and from whom it collects taxes. Business and trade associations, like the National Association of Manufacturers, try to create a favorable climate for the growth and prosperity of businesses. Professionals, including teachers, actors and lawyers, rely on interest groups to protect and advance their fields. Certain groups also speak on behalf of the American farmer. Some of the best-known and most active groups are sponsored by labor unions. Police, firefighters and other public employees are represented by the American Federation of Government Employees and other similar organizations. The chart below lists several additional examples.

<b>Examples of Economic Interest Groups</b>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
United Farm Workers of America	To gain collective bargaining rights and to improve working conditions for U.S. farm workers
American Medical Association	To represent the medical profession on all levels of government and to set standards for hospitals
International Brotherhood of Teamsters	To promote the interests of truck drivers and other workers
Chamber of Commerce of the United States	To represent the interests of small businesses
National Education Association	To improve the quality of education and to increase teachers' salaries

### Social Action Groups

Some interest groups try to bring about changes in society based on the principles and values of their members. A number of organizations have continued the struggle to extend the promises made by the Constitution to all Americans. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) have large membership bases and work to improve conditions for minorities. The American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars have successfully pressured Congress to increase funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs. This action has provided health care, loans and educational opportunities for those who have performed military service. Although the United States has a long tradition of separating church and state, religious groups have become increasingly involved in politics and public policy. For example, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops uses its status as an interest group to protest government policies that are inconsistent with Catholic doctrine. Interest groups also promote participation in government through organizations like the League of Women Voters. The Sierra Club and other environmental groups encourage government programs to preserve the wilderness and to protect wildlife. The chart below shows some additional examples interest groups devoted to social action.

<b>Examples of Social Action Interest Groups</b>	
<b>Groups</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
League of Women Voters	To promote participation in government and the education of voters
National Congress of American Indians	To serve the legislative interests of Indian tribes and to protect their lands
American Baptist Black Caucus	To encourage educational and employment opportunities for minorities
American Civil Liberties Union	To protect First Amendment rights and equal protection under the law
National Audubon Society	To promote the conservation and protection of American's wildlife

### Single-Issue Interest Groups

People who join single-issue interest groups have strong feelings on a particular subject and support the cause with forceful determination. In recent years, these types of organizations have increased. This has happened, in part, because, when one group supports a controversial issue, another group forms to counteract it. For example, the National Rifle Association, which upholds the right of people to bear arms for self-defense and sport, is opposed by Handgun Inc., which promotes more government regulations on firearms. Other single-issue interest groups are listed below.

<b>Examples of Single-issue Interest Groups</b>	
<b>Group</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
Mothers Against Drunk Driving	To prevent drug-and alcohol-related accidents through laws and education
National Right-to-life Committee	To make abortion illegal
National Abortion Rights Action League	To support the right of all women to a legal abortion
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals	To eliminate the suffering of animals
National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare	To secure income and social security benefits for the future



Go to Questions 4 through 7.

## How Interest Groups Accomplish Their Goals

To accomplish their mission, interest groups must attract the attention of the American public and government officials. They accomplish this by incorporating a number of tactics. These include lobbying, electioneering, grassroots campaigns, public demonstrations and legal action.

### Lobbying

In the 1830s, citizens gathered in the lobby of the United States Capitol in an attempt to influence congressional votes on proposed laws. The practice also carried over into state capitols as legislators prepared to discuss certain bills. The custom became known as lobbying, and today, professional lobbyists represent interest groups, foreign businesses, foreign governments and U.S. corporations. They contact government officials and try to shape public policy by explaining the positions of their clients. This involves supplying well-researched information, testifying at congressional hearings and doing favors. All of this is powered by large amounts of money. The list below shows the biggest spenders on this service in recent years.

<b>Top Ten Spenders on Lobbyists (1998-2013)</b>	
<b>US Chamber of Commerce</b>	\$983,735,680
<b>General Electric</b>	\$289,750,000
<b>American Medical Association</b>	\$286,377,500
<b>American Hospital Association</b>	\$239,479,136
<b>Pharmaceutical Research and Manufactures of America</b>	\$237,883,920
<b>National Association of Realtors</b>	\$228,338,568
<b>AARP</b>	\$224,952,064
<b>Blue Cross/Blue Shield</b>	\$209,461,772
<b>Northrop Grumman</b>	\$195,355,253
<b>Exxon Mobil</b>	\$187,232,742

Unfortunately, some lobbyists also resorted to bribery, and this led to several regulations on lobbying. In an attempt to control corruption, any person or group attempting to sway federal lawmakers must register with the House of Representative and the Senate. It is mandatory that, under oath, they provide their correct names, addresses, employers and salaries. Foreign governments

and companies are required to register with the Justice Department. Each professional lobbyist files a quarterly report listing income and expenditures. Failure to comply with these laws can result in stiff penalties, including a \$10,000 fine and a five-year prison term.

## Electioneering

Electioneering is another tactic that interest groups apply to gain influence. These organizations look for candidates that are likely to support their positions on key issues. An interest group gathers information through surveys, voting records and public statements to determine the politicians that are the most likely to advocate its philosophy on key issues. Then, it supports those candidates by offering financial contributions, access to mailing lists and other assistance. Interest groups work equally hard for the election of candidates who favor their views and for the defeat of those who disagree with them.

## Grassroots Campaigns

Some special interest groups rely on movements that are carried out by ordinary people rather than professionals. A special interest group may ask its members to write letters, to call legislators, to send emails, to sign petitions and to come out to vote in large numbers. Although preprinted postcards are often used for this purpose, the technique is the most effective when supporters write messages in their own words. Because it demonstrates strength through numbers, this gives the appearance of momentum for or against a particular policy. Grassroots campaigns have been used successfully by the National Rifle Association whenever gun control laws have been introduced in Congress. Other groups, such as the One Million Moms for Gun Control, have created a strong presence through the Internet and social media to reach large numbers of people.

## Public Demonstrations

Public demonstrations are another way that some groups attempt to increase public awareness. Successful peaceful protests, including marches, pickets, boycotts, sit-ins and rallies, can provide powerful visual statements and generate a significant amount of publicity. Extensive planning, however, is critical. An event that is poorly attended may actually do more harm than good. Knowledge of local laws and rules of assembly are also necessary. This helps to prevent illegal activity, ugly confrontations and violence that may result in drawing negative attention. American history includes many examples of public demonstrations. For example, American Agricultural Movement organized a parade of over 2,000 tractors through the streets of Washington D.C. during rush hour in 1979. Occasionally, several interest groups join together to mount a major protest like the one pictured below. Although this technique generates publicity, it has proven less effective than other measures in the long term.



Interest Groups Protesting the Policies of the WTO, 1999

## Legal Action

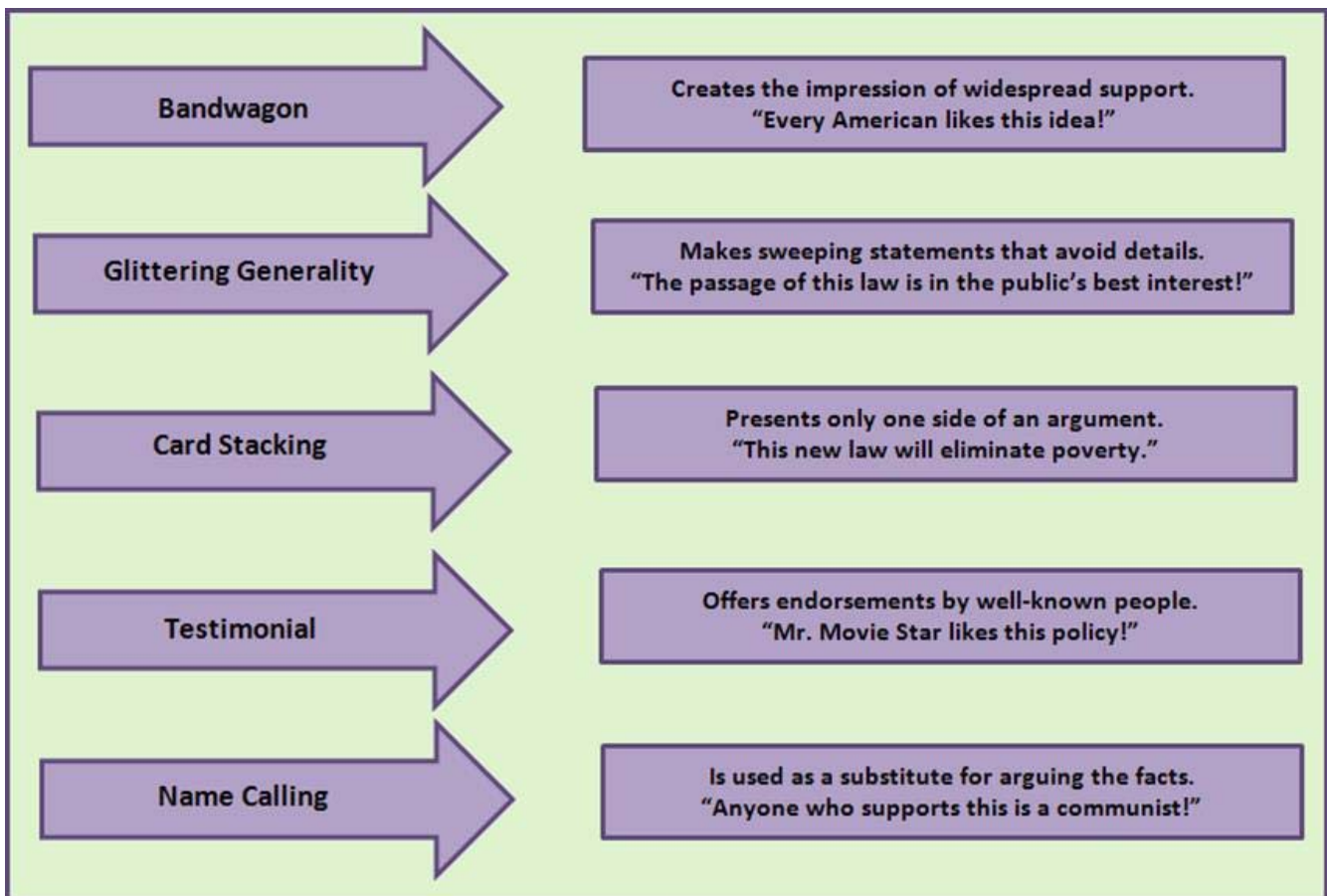
Interest groups first try to enact change by working through the legislative and executive branches of government. When this proves ineffective, they turn to **litigation** or lawsuits within the judicial branch. **Class action suits** are filed by one person on behalf of everyone who would benefit from the court's decision. Environmental, civil rights and consumer organizations often use this tactic. One of the most famous examples is *Brown v Board of Education*. This class action suit was initiated by the NAACP and ended school segregation. Interest groups frequently make their views known to the judicial branch by preparing *amicus curiae* (a Latin phrase meaning "a friend of the court") briefs for the court. These documents explain why a group is working for or against a particular ruling.



Go to Questions 8 through 15.

## Propaganda and the Art of Persuasion

The effectiveness of an interest group depends on the ability to convince others that its recommendations offer the best alternative. This results in the application of **propaganda**. The word has developed a negative connotation because it often refers to information that is misleading or false. In reality, propaganda is any type of persuasive communication that is used to sway opinions, actions or emotions. It includes everything from factual evidence to blatant lies. Not only interest groups but political parties, candidates for office and advertisers incorporate some degree of propaganda to generate support. Learning to recognize common propaganda techniques is part of being an informed citizen. A number of these can be found in the following diagram.



## Political Action Committees (PACs)

Most tactics used by interest groups to emphasize their causes require large amounts of funding. Historically, federal law did not permit corporations or labor unions to contribute to political parties and candidates. This began to change in 1944. That year, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a labor union, wanted to support the re-election of Franklin Roosevelt. They got around the law by encouraging their members to donate voluntarily to Roosevelt's campaign. This created the first political action committee. These committees, commonly referred to as PACs, are dedicated to raising and spending money. The funds, which they collect from corporations, unions and interest groups, are used to influence public policy by electing or defeating political candidates. With changes in federal election laws, the number of PACs has continued to increase. In 1974, about 600 PACs throughout the United States spent \$12,500,000 attempting to elect certain candidates to Congress. In 2012, over 4000 PACs spent nearly \$568,000,000 on state and national elections.



Go to Questions 16 and 17.

## The Pros and Cons of Special Interest Groups

Interest groups have certainly become a powerful force in American politics, but whether they affect the system in a positive or negative way is the subject of a heated debate. Small interest groups are sometimes criticized because they influence public policy by generating large amounts of publicity. This exaggerates the significance of causes which, in reality, are of little national importance. Critics point out that the financial resources of some groups create an unfair advantage. A well-funded organization, with relatively low number of members, can have greater impact on government decisions than a group with more members but fewer resources. The leadership of interest groups has also become a source of controversy. In some cases, small, active committees do not consult the membership as a whole when planning the agenda for the group. There is also a fear that interest groups put too much pressure on elected officials. Instead of moving government forward, this may result in a lack of action and weaker policies. Although it is rare, interest groups have been known to resort to violence, bribery, hacking and other unethical activities to accomplish their goals. All of these factors have led some Americans to conclude that interest groups distort the issues, make government less productive and engage in illegal practices.

However, some Americans see interest groups as a positive force. Like political parties, they enable people to accomplish collectively what they cannot do individually. Interest groups provide the means to share resources, to develop strategies and to form new ideas into workable plans. They also acquire and organize valuable information on a wide variety of topics. Although their material may only present one side of an issue, every branch of government relies on their expertise. These organizations also give citizens a reason to stay informed and to become active in politics. At the very least, they provide a basis for discussion and interaction. Competition among opposing interest groups is also beneficial. This prevents a few groups from exerting too much influence over the decision-making process and has a stabilizing effect on American politics. The example below represents the view of two groups that are opposite sides concerning gun control.

<p align="center"><b>Chris W. Cox</b>  <b>Representing the National Rifle Association</b></p>	<p align="center"><b>Shannon Watts</b>  <b>Representing One Million Moms for Gun Control</b></p>
<p>Despite our best efforts, we were not able to deny Barack Obama and Joe Biden another four years in the White House. However, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “The greatness of America lies...in her ability to repair her faults.” This year, five states—Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey and Virginia—will hold elections for statewide offices. Next year 20 Democratic and 13 Republican U.S. Senators, and all 435 members of the House of Representatives, will be up for reelection. Record turnouts among voters who care about the Second Amendment can solidify our position at the state level and in the House and Senate. A stronger Senate majority, in particular, could block Obama’s most anti-gun nominees to the federal courts and reject any U.N. treaty that threatens the individual right to arms. Most important, record turnout could set the stage for the election of a pro-Second Amendment president in 2016.</p>	<p>It wasn’t money that defined the outcome of the 2012 presidential election, but the collective power of women and mothers. The same will be true for the upcoming 2014 midterm elections. As mothers, we organize, cajole and protect. We are organizing ourselves to effectively cajole Congress into passing sensible gun laws now to protect our families. The momentum is with us, and we are in this for the long haul at both the federal and state levels. Like Mothers Against Drunk Driving helped change tax laws in the 1980s, One Million Moms for Gun Control will not rest until common-sense gun laws are put in place at both the national and state levels. We are the wave of change. In just one month alone, our organization alone has established 75 chapters across the United States. Our growing social media presence on Facebook, Twitter and the Internet combined with our ability to mobilize moms to act both virtually and in-person will help to ensure our success.</p>



Go to Questions 18 through 20.

### What’s Next?

Interest groups encourage government to address a wide array of issues and to take action. Meeting these demands involves the government’s authority to tax and to spend public funds. In the next unit, you will consider how this money is collected and allocated. Before moving on to the next unit, review Unit 13 and complete questions 21 through 28.



Go to Questions 21 through 28.





Below are additional educational resources and activities for this unit.

[Unit 13 Advance Organizer](#)

[Unit 13 Application Activity](#)