

Consider whether the activities of pressure groups help or hinder the operation of a pluralist democracy in the USA.

Interest groups seek to influence decision makers in to vote in a way that benefit's the group's interests such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the American Medical Association (AMA). The US is a pluralist democracy which means that there is more than one centre of power, this means that there are many access points that interest groups can target. Many interest groups have offices on Washington DC's "K Street" giving easy access to the Capitol which is the centre of US Federal Government. There are varying views on interest groups and their effects on democracy, the main viewpoints are those of pluralists, neo-elitists and elitists.

The Pluralists are of the opinion that interest groups are good for society and act as a safety valve, as expressed by Robert Dahl in his book "Who Governs".

Interest groups allow groups of people who share the same ideals to come together and act towards furthering their views and representing those without representation, be it through disenfranchisement, lack of awareness or the dominance of another social group within their Congressional District/State (Their elected representative is not representative of them). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was set up to promote civil rights for African-Americans, many of whom were excluded from politics due to the literacy tests required to be able to vote. The Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) also lobbies extensively, protecting the rights of Irish-Americans and Irish immigrants with the US, such as the fight against the deportation of Paul Brennan after his escape from H.M.P. Maze during the Troubles.

The numerous access points, afforded through the pluralist democracy of the US, also mean that if counsel is refused at one point than a substitute is more than likely available. This means that discrimination against groups from certain individuals in power need not spell the end of their efforts in lobbying. The whole system is similar and there are no barriers against a group organising and enjoying representation through an interest group. The result of which is the large and varied number of interest groups which operate in the US, ranging from the veritable behemoth of the American Association of Retired People (AARP) with it's 35m members to the more obscure Sons of Norway.

It could be argued that the freedom to set up such groups could easily lead to activists influencing decision makers to the detriment of those who don't agree with their views. However, no group operates without opposition from another interest group meaning that potentially exclusive views can't be left unchallenged ; the disputes which inevitably arise often help to form the policies that eventually created. This is a perfect example of democracy in action with everyone expressing their views, no group can dominate completely. The Christian Fundamentalist Liberty Foundation is counteracted by the National Abortion Federation (NAF) and the National Organisation of Women (NOW) over the issue of abortion; the NRA is opposed by the Coalition to End Gun Violence (of which the Brady Group is a member.)

Threats to democracy can be posed by the wide ranging influence of wealthy and powerful groups, but these are kept in check by the actions of the groups which oppose them. The NRA, despite its large membership and fund raising abilities, failed to stop the passage of the School Gun Free Zones Act (1990) and the Brady Handgun Violence Protection Act (1993) through Congress.

The Federal Assault Weapons Ban (1994) also was passed into law despite NRA opposition. In the 1960's, the AMA vehemently campaigned against Medicare and Medicaid being introduced through Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" programme, enlisting the help of, then actor, Ronald Reagan to produce an EP arguing against socialized medicine. Their efforts were in vain as the Bill was passed. The late 1980's also campaigning from the alcohol lobby against the raising of the minimum drinking age, however, G.H.W. Bush's National Minimum Drinking Age Act (1984) was forced through by linking failure of states to comply with a 10% decrease in their annual federal highway apportionment (Federal Aid Highway Act (1987)).

Interest groups also look to protect the vulnerable in society, giving power to those who have none and not looking to serve and increase their own interests. The NAACP fought for equal rights for African Americans through the case of Brown v. Board of Education (1957) and supported the Civil Rights Movement throughout the 1950's and 1960's, eventually leading to the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965). Common Cause is dedicated to "~~...ensuring that government and political processes serve the general interest, rather than special interests...~~" and has supported greater transparency in campaign finance, backing the Federal Election Campaign Act (1971) and the McCain/Feingold Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (2002). 2000 and 2004 Presidential Candidate, Ralph Nader, is an active automobile safety campaigner, having taken on General Motor's over the unsafeness of their Corvair model. Further campaigning also led to the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act (1966) and the creation of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Despite the evidence above of the good those interest groups do, Elitists, believe differently, as demonstrated by C. Wright Mills in "The Power Elite"; "~~a small elite with interconnected interests govern America and powerful and wealthy interest groups dominate decision making.~~" Meanwhile, Neo-Elitists view Pluralists as naïve, stating that interest groups use their influence to shape public opinion by arguing that their interests coincide with basic American values (Individualism). For them, the political system isn't open to all, only those who have the resources and influence can set up a group that is truly effective, therefore excluding the poor and vulnerable at the expense of the powerful and wealthy groups who are an unrepresentative minority.

More often than not, wealthy groups get their own way. They can afford to bid for ex-Congressmen to lobby for them and give them access to the decision makers. The "Revolving Door" is where the most effective lobbyists are drawn from; people who have finished their term in Congress are offered contracts to influence their former colleagues to change policy, they also make up one third of the Iron Triangles in Congress (The other two points being the executive department and the Congressional Sub-Committee) which effectively decide what legislation should cover and how its should be implemented. The NRA's campaigning has seen the striking down of the School Gun Free Zones Act (1990) and the Brady Handgun Violence Protection Act (1993) in US v. Lopez (1995) and the AWB expired as the Sunset Clause was not renewed. Their campaign whipped their support up, stating that any gun control would be an attack on civil liberties. Congress refused to pass any safety locks on whilst anything that passed Congress was struck down by the Supreme Court. In past years, the group also enjoyed support from the President himself; after the election of G.W. Bush in 2000, an NRA spokesman said that they'd be operating direct from the Oval Office. The AMA influenced a Democrat Congress to defeat Clinton's healthcare

reform bill despite having ran successfully on that promise. It used it's advertisements to show these reforms to be the first step on the road to a socialist state.

Professional lobbyists are an expensive resource; the wealthy groups that use them raise money through membership fees and Political Actions Committees (PAC's) which are used to gather donations which can then be used to pay for lobbyists and for donations to members of Congress. Understandably, groups representing the poor and vulnerable do not have a support who can afford to pay for such tools and often find themselves fighting from the lower ground. Politicians need donations to fund their re-election and are usually not willing to work for little or nothing.

~~"There are no food stamp, healthcare or welfare PAC's"~~ Bob Dole, G.O.P. Presidential Candidate, 1996.

In contrast to the meagre resources of some interest groups, the NRA spent \$8.4 million on donations to pro-gun Congressional candidate's campaigns between 1989 and 2000. The 2006 Congressional Mid-Terms saw lawyers and law firms give \$30 million in donations during the elections. Small groups such as those created by Nader couldn't hope to raise that money within such a limited time span.

Through registering 527 groups, interest groups can also create advertisements which can influence voters as to who they should vote for. These often have a major effect on elections. Moral Majority used 527 groups to attack liberal Senators through negative ads during the 1980 Congressional Elections. These attacks managed to unseat all those targeted, including Senator McGovern (D-SD), and replaced them with conservatives in the "Reagan Sweep". Negative advertising often doesn't portray the truth about candidates, constructing the language in a way to make them seem like they've said or done something they haven't, in no way does this positively contribute to the decisions of the electorate or to democracy in general.

Interest groups can also be seen as selfish, sectional interests often with no regard for others or, indeed, the common good. This certainly applies to economic interests, large businesses or corporations who can afford everything needed to successfully extend their views to the decision makers, leading to distortion of policy and the frustration of important measures. Oil and Gas industries attacked and killed off Carter's Energy Bill, influencing the Congressional committees to vote against it. More recently, large scale polluters have ensured that the US hasn't met their Kyoto Treaty obligations.

Interest groups supporting those without representation have certainly had their successes, NAACP and Civil Rights, which have helped the operation of the US's pluralist democracy; but their progress was painstakingly slow. The NAACP spent over 60 years fighting for civil rights for African Americans and even when the first legislation passed it wasn't sufficient and was ignored by many who mattered. Wealthy and powerful groups enjoy more effective and rapid success in gaining their aims; they have access to the decision makers and have the money to influence them. Unfortunately, money often has a greater bearing on people's decisions rather than their conscience, which sets back greatly those without the means of doing similar. The fight between interest groups is staged upon an uneven playing field with those who represent the minority influencing the decisions that govern the majority, most definitely a hindrance to the operation of a democracy.