

Pressure groups are an important tool in a pluralist democracy. Through pressure groups, ordinary members of the public may engage freely with the political process on a single issue or many different causes, without being tied to a particular political party whose views on many issues they may not necessarily agree with.

In the case of the United States, some people argue that it is through pressure groups, such as the NAACP, that change has happened in society. By bringing issues, such as the unfair discrimination of black people, to the fore, pressure groups can influence decision makers at all levels of government.

According to Wikipedia, pluralism "holds that political power in society does not lie with the electorate but is distributed among a wide number of groups". This means, in effect, that a pluralist society is one in which the electorate are heavily active in politics through groups such as political parties or pressure groups and, of course, through voting.

Pressure groups are greatly important: they are needed to represent the views of their members, of which the NRA has over four million and the AARP over 38 million, and present those views to the government. At both State and Federal level, all branches of government may be targeted by pressure group activities, the executive, judiciary and legislature.

Political parties, particularly at federal government level, have difficulty in representing the widely diverse views of the electorate and often policy decisions of the parties are made on the back of a simple majority at their National Conventions. It is therefore up to pressure groups to ensure that the views of the minority of members, which may, in fact, be a representation of the majority of the electorate, to campaign for them.

On face value, then, pressure groups appear to be immeasurably helpful in the operation of pluralist democracy in the US. However, just like every other democratic institution, there are flaws. And like many flaws in American politics, it mostly comes down to manpower and money.

Success of pressure groups in the United States depends on their strength and their strength depends on the amount of money they have at their disposal. The NRA had a total income of \$205.4 million in 2004. It then successfully opposed renewal of the federal assault weapons ban of 1994, which then expired on September 13, 2004.

This, though, presents disadvantages of pressure groups, arguments for the idea that they hinder the operations of a pluralist democracy. All it would take to ensure a pressure group was successful in its campaign, even if they only represented a minority of the public, would be a handful of millionaire backers pumping money into the campaign.

On the other hand, though, there is evidence to suggest that an abundance of money is not a guarantee of victory. Mitt Romney, who was running for the Republican presidential candidacy amassed \$88.5 million by the end of 2007, yet pulled out of the race in February 2008 having not won enough support. In contrast, John McCain had just \$41.1 million by the end of 2007, more than half that of Romney, yet was announced presumed winner in March 2008.

The strength of pressure groups is also dependent on their methods, and how well they are able to carry them out. Typical activities include lobbying bureaucrats and politicians, or even donating money to politicians' campaigns. This is done by using groups known as Political Action Committees, or PACs.

PACs are groups set up to influence the outcome of an election or the path of certain legislation through Congress. Individuals may donate up to \$5000 to PACs and may donate no more than \$5000 per candidate per election or \$15,000 per political party per year. There is, however, no limit how much many PACs may donate to a person or party and pressure groups may set up many PACs in order to donate as much money as possible to influence their chosen politician or politicians.

In 2004, the EMILY's List PAC helped to elect five pro-choice Democratic women to the United States House of Representatives by spending a total of almost \$23 million – the highest amount spent by a PAC in 2004. Most of this would have been soft money (money not given directly to a candidate and which does not blatantly advocate the election or defeat of a candidate, mainly by 527 groups who are

not regulated by the Federal Electoral Commission) rather than hard money (regulated donations to candidates' campaigns).

There is no doubt that pressure groups offer a good alternative to political parties when it comes to allowing the public to engage in politics. The fact that in the United States members of Congress don't vote along party lines too often means that they are open to persuasion from pressure groups and popular support.

The problem is that the two aren't always linked. A pressure group may not always have popular support and in such cases hinders the operation of a pluralist democracy in the United States. However, I would say that the majority of successful pressure groups flourish because they have both popular support and money – meaning that members of Congress can count on both campaign finance and votes at election time.