

US Pressure Groups are Undemocratic, Discuss

A pressure group is an organised interest group in which members hold similar beliefs and actively pursue ways to influence government. Unlike political parties, which seek to win control of government, pressure groups are principally interested in influencing those who determine policy. Pressure groups in the US operate at all levels of government be it federal, state and local and seek to bring their influence to bear on all three branches of government.

There are wide ranges of views amongst the pressure groups that operate in the US. Many tend to hold firm beliefs that they are somewhat effective in disabling political dominance of all three branches of government. Others however, see them as adding to the splintering and atomisation of US society, employing different techniques that make them largely undemocratic.

Nevertheless, pressure groups, whether in the US or the UK are regarded as having important implications for a modern democracy. The arguments in favour of them tend to follow the functions they may usefully perform. Though them, citizens can participate in the political process between elections. Groups such as the National Organisation for Women (NOW) or the National Rifle Associations, despite holding single issue, still provide opportunities for ordinary people to participate in decision making. Without such group's existence, democracy would be out the window as far as some are concerned.

They are also an important link between the public and the politician, through pressure groups, citizens can have their views represented and their grievances articulated. As well as offering opportunities for minority views to be represented that would normally be ignored by the major political parties. Interest groups supporting those without representation have certainly had their successes; pressure groups can have a major impact on issues. The NAACP used its money and professional expertise to bring cases to court for people who could not otherwise afford it.

They too are able to enhance public education. Many suggest that they educate the public opinion, ensuring everyone is conscious of the dangers if the government does not deal issues of importance and the effects of decisions made by the governments too. For example, membership pressure groups such as think tanks have been particularly important in the US. They conduct research; publish reports, all to benefit the people at large. They attempt to bring together different parts of US society, to work together to achieve a common interest by providing useful information at the policy formulation stage.

Furthermore, they are able to scrutinise and hold government to account in the implementation of policies, to try to ensure that promises are fulfilled, policies are delivered and regulations enforced. Indeed in legal terms, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured people (NAACP) certainly proved influential in securing the success of the Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka decision. They managed to make it clear of all the inequalities that existed, that led to affirmative action by the ruling of the Supreme Court. As result, people claim that pressure groups are not merely there to cause injustice but to exert justice into the political world.

Groups can also enhance the two fundamental rights of freedom of speech and freedom of association. In a country like the United States, with a participatory tradition and an open form of government, pressure groups seem to take on added importance, and benefit from the numerous access points within the political system. Pressure groups may offer further benefits to its members such as material, purposive and solidarity advantages.

Although few people would deny that pressure groups play an important role in US politics, critics have argued that this role may not be the one suggested by the pluralist model. Pressure groups therefore can also threaten democracy in a number of ways, with some claiming that they are merely a 'necessary evil'.

Firstly, to begin, many argue that pressure groups are inherently undemocratic, due to the revolving door syndrome. This is the term used for when pressure groups work through professional lobbyists who are former members of congress or former congressional staff members. Critics argue that such methods employed by pressure groups constitute an abuse of public service. People exploit knowledge and contacts with branches of government, all just to represent their own interests as well as making substantial sums of money. Politicians may walk out of the political door perhaps due to loss in an election and emerge back into the political world as a Washington lobbyist. For example, former Ohio senator Howard Metzenbaum followed a career of 18 years in congress by becoming chairman of the consumer federation of America. Consequently, this potential method of pressure groups seems to some, as adding to the hindrance of democracy in the US.

A counter argument that can also be made in relation to a group's useful functions. It's fair to say they aid participation, but the methods they use for participation and achieving their agendas are clearly undemocratic. In the US they use fairly direct methods that are seen as unacceptable under circumstances. The use of violence or engaging in near terrorist activities to achieve their agenda is what people definitely see as crushing democracy further into ashes for the US. Such activities have been associated with groups' i.e. Christian rights or fundamentalist forms in Iraq /Iran. During the 1990s violence erupted in America where shootings, murders and bombings broke out around abortion clinics by pro-life groups. The activities went to such an extent that these radical movements also assassinated doctors who carried out abortions. Again, it is apparent that pressure groups are a cause to the shattering of democracy in the US.

Furthermore, many people may see them as representing public interest, but others subscribe to the fact that in the long run they are only really representing their own special interests. This can be in two different ways, firstly, through iron triangles and then through other methods. In terms of iron triangles, the term is used to describe the strong relationship between pressure groups, congressional committees and the relevant government department. All these three bind together in such a strong way that they guarantee the policy outcomes to benefit all three parties involved. Many argue that obviously they develop such a wall of resistance in order to benefit themselves and their members, abusing the triangle in reality. In short, people claim that they build relations with the congressional committees and departments to further pursue their own needs.

The existence of these iron triangles raises the question of whether pressure group activities are compatible with a pluralist society. A pluralist society, as expressed by Robert Dahl, is one in which political resources such as money, expertise and access to both government and the mass media are spread widely and are in the hands of many diverse individuals and groups. However, many, such as philosopher C. Wright Mills, see pressure groups as fostering an elitist view of society in which the aforementioned political resources are in the hands, not of the many, but of the few.

The other method was regarding how pressure groups tend to put the interest of a small group before the interests of the whole society. Again, this interlinks with the effects of pressure groups building iron triangles. Groups such as those that represent various ethnic Americans are good examples. These can include the American Jewish Congress or the Organisation of Chinese Americans. Critics view such groups as splitting society by accentuating 'me' rather than 'we'. It's argued that they spend a considerable amount of time fighting for their own special interests, whilst not adhering to the interests of the wider society.

Additionally, pressure groups are generally unrepresentative of the public because they are led by elitists and because companies dominate the lobbying process. Furthermore their boards are self appointed not elected and they are not normal working class people so they could be out of touch with public opinion and will be representing the more affluent American society. Those groupings that do have an open, democratic structure are dominated by the wealthiest sections of American society even college students and recent graduates dominate the groupings that champion the interests of the poor. This is essentially a 'alienation' of politics as it

means pressure groups are increasingly less democratic because they are so unrepresentative of the public and are dictated by wealthy sections of the American society.

Defenders of pressure groups would argue that no single group or interest holds a disproportionately powerful position for a sustained period of time or across a range of different policy areas. Political power regularly changes hands and this is the case with pressure groups. An influential organisation will therefore be soon displaced by another grouping if it becomes unrepresentative or if other groups are more representative of public opinion. 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.) This proves that pressure groups do not become too powerful and are therefore good for the democratic process.

Despite the evidence above, 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." They see this 'competition' as being one that is often unequal. There are a number of policy areas in which groups representing the opposing side of the argument are clearly unequal, for example the area of the environment. Many would argue that the resources of big business often outweigh the resources of the environmental protectionists.

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. 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. 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.

A final point to make, 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.

Pressure groups are an essential dimension of any democracy, yet they can endanger democracy if interest groups undermine the public interest or if the methods they use are corrupt or intimidating. In a democratic society, different forms of lobbying are essential to protect sections of society. The problem arises where greed and self-interest affects the rights of the public as a whole. To reach a firm conclusion, it is clear that pressure groups are to a degree very undemocratic, namely because of the methods they undertake. Yet, it must be made clear that they do perform key roles that seem to strengthen democracy rather than weaken it, and as long as power is not abused, pressure groups do not undermine the democratic process of the US.