

# INTEREST GROUPS, POLITICAL PARTIES, MASS MEDIA

## INTEREST GROUPS

### Historical Background of Interest Groups

Interest groups have often been viewed with suspicion. In *Federalist #10*, James Madison warned against the dangers of "factions." Although Madison was opposed to the elimination of factions, he believed that the separation of powers under the Constitution would moderate their effect.

### Functions of Interest Groups

Interest groups serve several important functions. They:

- ◆ raise awareness and stimulate interest in public affairs by educating their members and the public
- ◆ represent their membership, serving as a link between members and government
- ◆ provide information to government, especially data and testimony useful in making public policy
- ◆ provide channels for political participation that enable citizens to work together to achieve a common goal

### Types of Interest Groups

#### ***Economic Interest Groups***

Most interest groups are formed on the basis of economic interests.

- ◆ Labor groups promote and protect the interest of organized labor. Examples include the AFL-CIO and the Teamsters Union.
- ◆ Business groups promote and protect business interests in general. The Chamber of Commerce of the United States and the National Association of Manufacturers are examples.
- ◆ Professional groups maintain standards of the profession, hold professional meetings, and publish journals. Some examples are the National Education Association (NEA), the American Medical Association (AMA), and the American Bar Association (ABA).
- ◆ Agricultural groups, such as the National Grange and the National Farmers' Union, promote general agricultural interests.

#### ***Groups that Promote Causes***

- ◆ specific causes
  - American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
  - National Rifle Association (NRA)
- ◆ welfare of specific groups of individuals
  - American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)
  - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
  - Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)
- ◆ religion-related causes
  - National Council of Churches
  - American Jewish Congress

#### ***Public Interest Groups***

Public interest groups are concerned with issues such as the environment, consumer protection, crime, and civil rights.

- ◆ public interests
  - Common Cause
  - League of Women Voters
  - Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)

### Strategies of Interest Groups

- ◆ **influencing elections** - encouraging members to vote for candidates who support their views, influencing party platforms and the nomination of candidates; campaigning and contributing money to parties and candidates through political action committees (PACs)
- ◆ **lobbying** - attempting to influence policymakers, often by supplying data to government officials and their staffs to convince these policymakers that their case is more deserving than another's
  - direct lobbying - using personal contacts between lobbyists and policymakers
  - grassroots lobbying - interested group members and others outside the organization
  - write letters, send telegrams, e-mails, and faxes, and make telephone calls to influence policymakers
  - coalition lobbying-several interest groups with common goals join together to influence policymakers
- ◆ **litigation** - groups often take an issue to court if they are unsuccessful in gaining the support of Congress; this strategy was used successfully by the NAACP to argue against segregation during the 1950s
- ◆ **going public** - appealing to the public for support by bringing attention to an issue or using public relations to gain support for the image of the interest group itself

### **Political Action Committees (PACs)**

The campaign finance reforms of the 1970s prohibited corporations and labor unions from making direct contributions to candidates running for federal office. Political action committees (PACs) were formed as political arms of interest groups. Federal law regulates PACs; they must register with the federal government, raise money from multiple contributors, donate to several candidates, and follow strict accounting rules.

### **Regulation of Interest Groups**

The first major attempt to regulate lobbying came in 1946 with the passage of the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act, requiring lobbyists to register with the clerk of the House of Representatives and the secretary of the Senate if their principal purpose was to influence legislation. This law was directed only at those who tried to influence members of Congress. In 1995 Congress passed the Lobbying Disclosure Act, creating much stricter regulations by requiring registration if lobbying was directed at members of Congress, congressional staff, or policymakers within the executive branch. It also required the disclosure of more information concerning the activities and clients of lobbyists.

## **ROLES OF POLITICAL PARTIES**

- ♦ party in the electorate-all of the people who associate themselves with one of the political parties
- ♦ party in government-all of the appointed and elected officials at the national, state, and local levels who represent the party as members; officeholders
- ♦ party in organization-all of the people at the various levels of the party organization who work to maintain the strength of the party between elections, help raise money, and organize the conventions and party functions

## **PARTY SYSTEMS**

### **One-Party System**

In a one-party system only one party exists or has a chance of winning election. Generally, membership is not voluntary and those who do belong to the party represent a small portion of the population. Party leaders must approve candidates for political office, and voters have no real choice. The result is dictatorial government.

### **Two-Party System**

In a two-party system there may be several political parties but only two major political parties compete for power and dominate elections. Minor parties generally have little effect on most elections, especially at the national level. Systems that operate under the two-party system usually have a general consensus, or agreement, among citizens about the basic principles of government, even though the parties often differ on the means of carrying them out. The use of single-member districts promotes the two-party system. Voters are given an "either-or" choice, simplifying decisions and the political process. The two-party system tends to enhance governmental stability; because both parties want to appeal to the largest number of voters, they tend to avoid extremes in ideology.

### **Multi-Party System**

Multi-party systems exist when several major parties and a number of minor parties compete in elections, and any of the parties stands a good chance of winning. This type of system can be composed of from four to 20 different parties, based on a particular region, ideology, or class position, and is often found in European nations, as well as in other democratic societies. The multi-party system is usually the result of a proportional representation voting system rather than one with single-member districts. The Idea behind multi-party systems is to give voters meaningful choices. This does not always occur because of two major problems: in many elections, no party has a clear majority of the vote, and not receiving a majority forces the sharing of power by several parties (coalitions). The multi-party system tends to promote instability in government, especially when coalition governments are formed.

## **WHAT DO POLITICAL PARTIES DO?**

- ♦ **Recruit candidates** - find candidates interested in running for public office, especially if no incumbent is running
- ♦ **Nominate and support candidates for office** - help raise money and run candidate campaigns through the party organization
- ♦ **Educate the electorate** - inform the voters about the candidates and encourage Voters to participate in the election
- ♦ **Organize the government** - The organization of Congress and state legislatures is based on political party controls (majority vs. minority party); political appointments are often made based on political party affiliation

## **PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND MEMBERSHIP**

Membership in American political parties is voluntary. There are no dues to pay; membership is based on party identification. If you believe you are a member of a particular political party, then you are. Most people choose to belong to a political party that shares their views on issues or the role of government. Several factors may influence party identification:

- ◆ ideology
- ◆ education
- ◆ income
- ◆ occupation
- ◆ race or ethnicity
- ◆ gender
- ◆ religion
- ◆ family tradition
- ◆ region of the country
- ◆ marital status

## **THE TWO-PARTY TRADITION IN AMERICA**

The Constitution did not call for political parties, and the Founding Fathers at first did not intend to create them. James Madison, in Federalist #10, warned of the divisiveness of "factions." George Washington was elected president without party labels and in his farewell address warned against the "baneful effects of the spirit of the party." During the process for ratification of the Constitution, Federalists and Anti-Federalists conflicted over ideals concerning the proper role of government. This conflict resulted in the development of the first political parties: the Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans, or Democratic-Republicans as they were later called.

### **Why a Two-Party Tradition?**

Although there have been numerous minor parties throughout its history, why has the United States maintained the two-party tradition?

- ◆ historical roots - British heritage, Federalist and Anti-Federalist divisions
- ◆ electoral system - single-member districts mean that only one representative is chosen from each district (one winner per office)
- ◆ election laws - vary from state to state, which makes it difficult for minor parties to get on the ballot in many states

### **Rise of Political Parties: Party Development (1789-1800)**

The earliest political parties began to develop under the administration of George Washington. Alexander Hamilton, secretary of the treasury, supported a strong national government; his followers became known as Federalists. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson supported states' rights and a less powerful national government. The dash between these two individuals and their supporters led to the development of political parties. In the election of 1796, Jefferson challenged John Adams, the Federalist candidate, for the presidency but lost. By 1800 Jefferson was able to rally his supporters and win the presidency.

### **Democratic Domination (1800-1860)**

The Democratic-Republicans dominated the government from 1800 to 1824, when they split into factions. The faction led by Andrew Jackson, the Jacksonian Democrats or Democrats, won the presidency in 1828. The major opposition to the Democrats during this time was the Whig Party. Although the Whigs were a powerful opposition party in the U.S. Congress, they were able to win the presidency only twice, in 1840 with the victory of William Henry Harrison and in 1848 with that of Zachary Taylor. From that election until the election of 1860, Democrats dominated American politics. The Democratic Party became known as the party of the "common man," encouraging popular participation, and helping to bring about an expansion of suffrage to all adult white males;

### **Republican Domination (1860-1932)**

The Republican Party began as a third party, developed from a split in the Whig Party. The Whigs had been the major opposition to the Democrats. By 1860 the Whig party had disappeared and the Republican Party had emerged as the second major party. The Republican Party was composed mostly of former members of other political parties, appealing to commercial and antislavery groups. The Republican Party was successful in electing Abraham Lincoln president in 1860, and by the end of the Civil War had become a dominant party. Sometimes called the Grand Old Party or GOP' the Republican Party often controlled both the presidency and Congress.

### **Return of Democrats (1932-1968)**

With the onset of the Depression, new electoral coalitions were formed and the Republicans lost their domination of government. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was able to unite blacks, city dwellers, blue-collar (labor union) workers, Catholics, Jews, and women to create a voting bloc known as the New Deal coalition. The election of 1932 brought the Democrats back to power as the dominant party in American politics. Roosevelt was elected to the presidency an unprecedented four times. From 1932 to 1968 only two Republican presidents (Eisenhower and Nixon) were elected. Not until 1994 did the Republicans gain control of both houses of Congress.

### **Divided Government (1968-Present)**

Since 1968 divided government has characterized American institutions, a condition in which one political party controls the presidency and the opposing party controls one or both houses of Congress. This division creates a potential gridlock when opposing parties and interests often block each other's proposals, creating a political stalemate. In the election of 2000, George W Bush won the presidency and the Republican party won control of the House of Representatives and Senate (until Jim Jeffords changed affiliation to Independent). In the mid-term election of 2002, the Republicans again gained control of the executive and legislative branches, creating a unified government. In the 2006 off-year election, the Democrats won control of both houses of Congress, returning divided government to U.S. politics.

### **Electoral Dealignment**

When significant numbers of voters no longer support a particular political party, dealignment has occurred. Often, those voters identify as independents and believe they owe no loyalty to any particular political party.

### **Electoral Realignment**

Historically, as voting patterns have shifted and new coalitions of party supporters have formed, electoral realignment has occurred. Several elections can be considered realigning elections, where the dominant party loses power and a new dominant party takes its place. The elections of 1860 and 1932 are examples.

## **THIRD OR MINOR PARTIES**

Although the Republican and Democratic parties have dominated the political scene, there have been minor, or third, parties throughout U.S. history. Minor parties usually have great difficulty in getting candidates elected to office, although they have been more successful at the state and local levels. A few minor party candidates have been elected to Congress, but no minor party candidate has ever been elected president. Minor parties have been instrumental in providing important reforms that have been adopted by the major parties. Success rather than failure often brings an end to minor parties, as the major parties often adopt popular reforms or ideas, especially if they appeal to the voters.

### **Types of Third Parties**

Some third parties have been permanent, running candidates in every election; however, many third parties disappear after only a few elections. Several types of minor parties have emerged:

- ◆ **ideological** - those based on a particular set of social, political, or economic beliefs (communist, socialist, libertarian)
- ◆ **splinter/personality/factional** - those that have split away from one of the major parties; usually formed around a strong personality who does not win the party nomination; may disappear when that leader steps aside (Theodore Roosevelt's "Bull Moose" Progressive, Strom Thurmond's States' Rights, George Wallace's American Independent)
- ◆ **single issue** - parties that concentrate on a single public policy matter (Free Soil, Right to Life, Prohibition)
- ◆ **protest** - usually rooted in periods of economic discontent; may be sectional in nature (Greenback, Populist)

## **STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES**

A political party must have an effective organization to accomplish its goals. Both of the major parties are organized in much the same manner. Both parties are highly decentralized, or fragmented. The party of the president is normally more solidly united than the opposition. The president is automatically considered the party leader, while the opposition is often without a single strong leader. Usually one or more members of Congress are seen as the opposition leaders.

### **National Convention**

The national convention serves as the party's national voice. Party delegates meet in the summer of every fourth year to select the party's candidates for president and vice president. They are also responsible for writing and adopting the party's platform.

### **National Committee**

The national committee manages the political party's business between conventions. They are responsible for selecting the convention site, establishing the rules of the convention, publishing and distributing party literature, and helping the party raise campaign contributions.

### **National Chairperson**

The party's national committee, with the consent of the party's presidential nominee, elects the national chairperson. The chairperson is responsible for directing the work of the national committee from their national headquarters in Washington, D.C. The chairperson is involved in fundraising, recruiting new party members, encouraging unity within the party, and helping the party's presidential nominee win election.

### **Congressional Campaign Committee**

Each party has a committee in the House of Representatives and Senate that works to ensure the election or reelection of the party's candidates by raising funds and determining how much money and support each candidate will receive. The committee often works to defeat an opposition party member who appears weak and might be open to defeat.

### **State and Local Organization**

State law largely determines state and local party organization. Differences exist from state to state; however, state and local parties are structured in much the same way as the national party organization. Generally, state parties today are more organized and better funded than in previous years. As a result of soft money, money that is distributed from the national political party organization and that does not have to be reported under the Federal Election Campaign Act (1971) or its amendments, state parties have become more dependent on the national party organization and are subject to their influence. In 2002, however, the use of soft money was significantly restricted by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, also known as the McCain-Feingold Act.

## **FUTURE OF POLITICAL PARTIES**

The future of political parties in the United States is uncertain. In recent decades, political parties have been in decline. This decline may be attributed to several factors:

- ♦ **third-party challenges** - In recent elections third-party challengers have taken votes from the major candidates, lessening their ability to win a majority of the vote.
- ♦ **loss of support by party loyalists** - An increase in the number of independent voters.
- ♦ **increase in split-ticket voting** - Many voters no longer vote a straight ticket (only for candidates of one political party) but rather split their vote among candidates from more than one party.
- ♦ **lack of perceived differences between the parties** - Voters often believe there are no major differences in the parties or their candidates.
- ♦ **party reforms** - Changes within the parties themselves to create greater diversity and openness have allowed for greater conflict within some parties.
- ♦ **methods of campaigning** - New technologies have allowed candidates to become more independent of parties and more directly involved with the voters.

## **MASS MEDIA**

Mass media refers to all forms of communication that transmit information to the general public. Although the mass media are not the only means of communication between citizens and government (political parties, interest groups, and voting are other means), they are the only linkage mechanism that specializes in communication.

### **Development of the Modern Media**

The development of the mass media in the United States reflects the growth of the country, new inventions and technology, and changing attitudes about the role of government.

#### *Newspapers*

The earliest American newspapers, operating during colonial times, were expensive, had small circulations, and were often prepared or financed by political organs or those advocating a particular cause. Improvements in printing, the telegraph, and the rotary press led to the growth of newspapers and newspaper circulations. By the 1890s almost every major city in the United States had one or more daily papers. Circulation wars led to "yellow journalism" and political consequences resulted. Since the 1950s newspaper competition has decreased.

#### *Magazines*

Magazines tended to have smaller circulations with less frequent publication. The earliest public affairs magazines were published in the mid-1800s. They often exposed political corruption and business exploitation with the writings of muckrakers such as Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, and Sinclair Lewis. In the 1920s and 1930s, three weekly news magazines, Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report attracted mass readership. Today, they often substitute for daily newspapers.

### *Radio*

The wide use of radio began in the 1920s and made celebrities of news personalities. Franklin Roosevelt successfully used radio to broadcast his "fireside chats" to the American people.

### *Television*

Today, television claims the largest audience of the mass media. After World War II television increased the visibility of broadcast journalists, making them celebrities. Television promoted the careers of politicians such as Joe McCarthy, during hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and John Kennedy, during his campaign debates against Richard Nixon.

### *Internet as Media*

The rapid growth of Internet usage has led to media organizations using the Internet as a way to convey information. Newspapers, magazines, blogs, and radio and television stations have sites on the World Wide Web.

## **Roles of the Media**

The media perform several important functions:

- ◆ informing the public
- ◆ shaping public opinion
- ◆ providing a link between citizens and government
- ◆ serving as a watchdog that investigates and examines personalities and government policies, for example, the Trent Lott-Strom Thurmond Controversy
- ◆ agenda setting by influencing what subjects become national political issues; protests against the Vietnam Conflict are an example

## **Media Ownership and Government Regulation**

The mass media are privately owned in the United States, giving them more political freedom than in most other countries, where they are publicly owned, but also making them more dependent on advertising profits. Government regulation of the media affects the broadcast media (radio and television) more than the print media (newspapers and magazines).

Government regulation of the broadcast media falls into three categories:

- ◆ Technical regulations - The Federal Communications Act of 1934 created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as an independent regulatory agency to regulate interstate and foreign communication by radio, television, telephone, telegraph, cable, and satellite.
- ◆ Structural regulations-These control the organization and ownership of broadcasting companies; in 1996 the Telecommunications Act broadened competition.
- ◆ Content regulations-although the mass media are protected by the First Amendment, the broadcast media have been subject to regulation of content.

## **What Is News? Reporting the News**

"News" is any important event that has happened within the past 24 hours. The media decide what is news by deciding what to report. News is generally directed through gatekeepers - media executives, news editors, and prominent reporters - who decide which events to present and how to present them. Time limitations and the potential impact of the story are major elements in selecting what is news. In political coverage, "horse-race journalism" often focuses on which candidate is winning or losing, rather than the issues of the election.

## **Media and the President**

The major news organizations maintain journalists in major cities and government centers to report political events firsthand. Washington, D.C., has the largest press corps of any city in the United States, with one-third of the press assigned to cover the White House. News events may be staged as media events. The White House allows special access to the president, with the press receiving information through the Office of the Press Secretary.

Some ways that journalists receive information are:

- ◆ **news releases** - prepared texts to be used exactly as written
- ◆ **news briefings** - announcements and daily questioning of the press secretary about news releases
- ◆ **news conferences** - questioning of high-level officials, often rehearsed
- ◆ **leaks** - information released by officials who are guaranteed anonymity; may be intentional to interfere with the opposition or to "float" an idea and measure reaction

Reporters are expected to observe "rules" when talking to officials:

- ◆ on the record - the official may be quoted by name
- ◆ off the record - what the official says cannot be printed
- ◆ on background - what the official says can be printed but may not be attributed to the official by name
- ◆ on deep background - what the official says can be printed, but it cannot be attributed to anybody

**Media and Congress**

Fewer reporters regularly cover Congress, which does not maintain as tight a control over news stories as the White House. Most of the coverage of Congress concerns the House of Representatives, the Senate, or Congress as an organization, rather than individual members. News about Congress may cover confirmation hearings, oversight investigations, or scandals among members.

C-SPAN (Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network) was created to increase coverage of Congressional activities. The floor and some committee proceedings of the House of Representatives and Senate are now broadcast on C-SPAN and C-SPAN II. Members of Congress may also record radio and television messages to their constituents.

**BIASES IN THE MEDIA**

Critics of the media contend the media are biased in reporting. Reporters are said to have a liberal bias, while media owners, publishers, and editors are said to be more conservative. Studies confirm that reporters have a liberal orientation; however, the bias tends to be against incumbents and frontrunners. There is also a tendency for "pack journalism," with journalists adopting the viewpoints of other journalists with whom they spend time and exchange information.