

Influencing Government

Most Americans would like to be able to **influence** or have an affect on, government decisions. We all have opinions about government actions such as the closing of military bases, raising taxes, controlling gun purchases, or allowing prayer in school. As individuals, we can try to influence decisions such as these by voting for candidates who feel the same way we do or by writing our Congressmen or President.

Interest Groups

When we join forces with others who have similar concerns, we become part of an **interest group**. An interest group is a group of people who share common beliefs or goals and who may try to influence government decisions affecting those beliefs. Members of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), for example, work to get harsher penalties for drunk drivers. The National Rifle Association (NRA) tries to stop Congress from passing laws that would make purchasing guns more difficult.

Members of interest groups use many tactics to influence decisions. Any organized effort to influence government decisions is known as **lobbying**. The people who carry out these tactics—and particularly those who are paid to do so—are known as **lobbyists**. What kinds of people are lobbyists? Many lobbyists are former government officials. They usually have friends in high places. Many other lobbyists are lawyers and public relations experts. All lobbyists must be able to convince the people in power of the point-of-view of the interest group they represent. Some strategies lobbyists use to pass or kill legislation include the following listed below.

- providing information to legislators about their cause
- using publicity such as bumper stickers, pamphlets, and TV and radio ads
- staging rallies or demonstrations
- campaigning for candidates sympathetic to their cause
- staging letter-writing campaigns

One way to influence **public opinion** is the use of **propaganda**. Propaganda is the systematic spread of ideas or beliefs by individuals or groups in order to influence people's behavior or political choices. Mass media, which includes TV, radio, and newspapers, is often used to spread certain ideas or points-of-view. The tremendous growth of mass media means that ideas can be spread even farther and faster. Mass propaganda has been used for good and bad purposes in an attempt to change people's ideas or opinions.

Kinds of Interest Groups

Interest groups generally fall into one or more categories. They all have the same basic wish. They wish the government to make decisions which are in keeping with their beliefs to help them reach their goals.

The chart below gives examples of some types of interest groups.

Categories of Interest Groups		
Kind of Interest Group	Focus	Example
Business and Industry	represents companies in the same line of work	American Dairy Association, National Association of Real Estate Brokers
Labor	represents companies in the same field	American Postal Workers, United Mine Workers, United Steelworkers of America
Ethnic	represents members of particular race or ethnic group	Japanese-American Citizens League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), National Association of Italian Americans
Issue-Oriented	focuses on a particular issue or area of concern	Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), National Cancer Society, Right to Life, Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD)
Environmental	works to save endangered animals, stop pollution, etc.	Friends of the Earth, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club
Consumer	works for consumer and product safety	Alliance for Consumer Rights
Professional	represents persons in specialized fields of employment	American Bar Association, American Medical Association, National Education Association

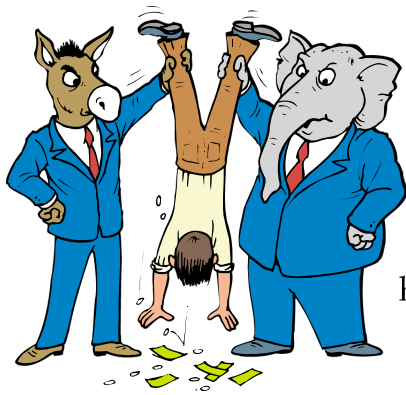
Pressure Groups

An interest group becomes a **pressure group** when it decides to try to influence the government, usually by using lobbyists. Pressure groups may unite for added strength. Two or more pressure groups joined together are known as a **coalition**.

Political Action Committees

One of the factors which determines the success of interest groups in furthering their causes is the amount of money they have to spend. A **political action committee (PAC)** may be set up by any interest group to raise money and donate it to candidates who favor a certain position on an issue. Business groups, labor groups, or any other interest groups may set up a PAC.

There is at least one serious problem with PACs. Because PACs can raise large amounts of money for a candidate, a PAC can sometimes exert too much influence over the candidate's campaign.



Successful political campaigns cost thousands—sometimes millions—of dollars to run. A candidate has to accept contributions from individuals and interest groups in order to meet the expenses of his or her campaign. It may be very hard for candidates to forget about the groups that helped them win once they are in office.

There are laws limiting political contributions by individuals. A person cannot contribute more than \$1,000 to a candidate for each election the candidate enters. This means a candidate running first in a primary and then a general election can receive no more than \$2,000 from any one person. PACs, however, are not subject to the same limits. Some people believe that tighter limits should be placed on PAC contributions.

Recognizing Bias

Bias is the personal slant of a writer or speaker. Learning to recognize bias allows you to distinguish the facts from the opinion of the person presenting them. It will help you to evaluate different points of view. A *fact* can be proven by evidence such as records, documents, or unbiased sources. An *opinion* may contain some truth, but also contains personal bias or value-based statements. We are constantly being bombarded with commercials and political advertisements that contain bias. It is important to be able to recognize bias and make clear decisions.

The following checklist will help you recognize bias.

- What ideas does the writer or speaker want you to accept?
- What statements are being used to communicate or support the idea?
- What are the basic facts of the message?
- How can these statements be verified or proven?
- Are there words or phrases that color the facts in a negative or positive light?
- Are there subtle words like *still* and *always*?

For example:

1. Do you think interest groups *still* have too much influence on Congress?
2. Do you think interest groups have too much influence on Congress?

The first question invites people to say *yes* because the word *still* makes it seem as if there is an existing problem with interest groups.