

**Essay US-5 - Produce an essay which answers the following question: 'Assess the view that pressure groups are too powerful in the USA. Provide theory and examples to illustrate.'****Plan:**

- Ø Briefly define pressure groups and the distinction made between pressure groups; (seek to influence government and not control it)
- Ø Arguments in favour of the question; constitution is considerably favourable to pressure groups, perhaps because they enhance democratic legitimacy? Numerous and effective access points available. The constitution particularly increases the power, as well as the decentralised Federal Government etc.
- Ø Arguments against the question; pressure groups' power dependent on external factors such as wealth etc, and access to lobbyist does not mean that laws and acts will be made.
- Ø Conclude that the arguments in favour of the question outweigh and the decentralised nature and weak party systems make pressure groups very powerful.

**Introduction**

Pressure groups are indeed too powerful in the USA because of the pluralist political system which has given a substantial number of pressure groups the power to exert influence in the many levels (Congress, Supreme Court and the Executive Branch) of government. A pressure group can be best defined as an organisation with members who foster common values and beliefs and therefore, in some cases, seek to influence government and raise awareness for their particular cause. They are too powerful because of the arguably favourable codified US Constitution, as well as a number of factors which can be 'broken down' to constitutional and institutional, and political and social. US pressure groups are inherently more influential and I intend to support this view by exploring the impact of pressure groups such as the NRA, the revolving door theory as well as Singh's 'Iron Triangle' criticism.

**The different types of Pressure Groups**

There is a distinction that is made between US Pressure Groups, and they are divided into two key groups; *institutional* pressure groups and *membership* pressure groups. Institutional pressure groups seek to represent organisations and groups, representing a wide variety of organisations such as the American Bar Association (ABA), who give ratings on selected Supreme Court nominees, and the National Association of Manufacturers, an example of a business and trade group which seeks to enhance the competitiveness between car manufacturers (Daimler Chrysler and Ford) through legal, constitutional means. Membership pressure groups, on the other hand, are groups whose key aim is to represent individual Americans. The pressure group Mothers against Drunk Driving (MADD), is an example of a single issue membership pressure group which tries to prevent drunk driving, underage drinking, as well as offering support to the victims of drunk driving. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the American Conservative Union (ACU) are examples of ideological pressure groups.

**Arguments in favour of the idea that pressure groups are too powerful**

The power of US pressure groups is greatly enhanced by the fact that they have always been effective in exploiting the codified US constitution. The 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment in the Constitution which safeguards the freedom of speech, press, the right to assemble and petition the Government, has effectively provided pressure groups with constitutional means to influence political bodies at federal, as well as state level. This has therefore, made the constitution favourable to the existence of pressure groups in the US, thus supporting the argument that they are indeed too powerful. In addition, the decentralised approach to government laid down in

the US constitution, has ensured that there is no single, dominant branch of government and this is also inherent to the idea of the separation of powers, where the powers and roles of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government are distinct and detached. The political scientist, Neustadt, also, defined the principle of separation of powers as 'separate institutions sharing powers.' The decentralised political system has given way to many channels of influence, which therefore, means that the decentralised nature within the US political system allows pressure groups to have many legislative 'access points' to government. Pressure groups are indeed too powerful because of their exploitation of the many political access points the constitution has provided, especially the local/state access points which elevate the power of pressure groups to some degree. This is seen in the 1990's when pressure groups in California were given the opportunity to withdraw a number of benefits available to illegal immigrants. The fact that the pressure groups were able to influence and shape the spending of public money (which is an important state power) effectively supports the argument that pressure groups are too powerful because they can access the different levels of government enabling them to advance their particular cause. For example, the National Rifle Association (NRA) helped fund former president George W. Bush's re election campaign in 2004, and in return Bush would promise not to intervene with gun control laws. Furthermore, the effectiveness and power of pressure groups is elevated by the weak party system within the two main parties in the US. The weaker party whips (60% of votes go along party lines, whilst in 95% the UK do) contribute to the importance of pressure groups in the sense that the Democrat and Republican parties are more likely to be influenced by external factors such as pressure groups, than they are to be by party lines. This argument also ties in with the fact that Congressmen are not policy specialists – it is the Congressional Committees that are. This enables Congress to be susceptible to bias information in favour of a pressure group's ideology/cause thus leading to a democratic deficit.

#### Social/Political factors

The 'open' nature of the federal and state institutions effectively increases the power of US pressure groups because *openness* means *access*. Americans have always been fearful of possible governmental institutions (seen through the low electoral turnouts) therefore making them more enthusiastic supporters and participants in local politics and issues where pressure groups might conflict with government institutions. This is seen through the significant and historic impact the civil rights pressure group, the NAACP which was the driving force behind the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court ruling. This ruling declared that de jure segregation was unconstitutional. In addition, the openness of the US institutions, seen through the Freedom of Information Act which requires federal agencies to disclose records requested by any persons, gives pressure groups the right to access documents which might further their cause, successfully increasing their power and importance in the political stage. Furthermore, because Congress (often regarded as an individual body with extensive powers) is dominated by their representative function, pressure groups arguably are too important in US elections. This is because their power and influence is heightened by Political Action Committees (PACs) which are pressure groups that collect money from their members and give it to candidates and political parties who support their interests. Because civil liberties are protected by the constitution, the principle of the freedom of individual, to some extent elevates the power of pressure groups because they are able to challenge governmental institutions, criticize government and the use of power. On a social aspect, because of the diversity in America, as well as the decentralised nature, pressure groups are very powerful in the sense that they can have a great impact where there is strong local support for particular values and policies. The decentralised (but arguably biased FOX, NBC) media outlets also ensure that political issues dominate, thus giving pressure groups the chance to advance their causes.

#### Arguments against the idea that pressure groups are too powerful

Despite the strong and convincing arguments supporting the question title, they may exaggerate the power of pressure groups; there are, therefore, a few examples which show the contrary. We wrongly assume that pressure groups do not face any opposition towards their particular

cause, when in fact, they do. Countervailing pressure groups on important issues such as abortion and gay rights is common in the US. In addition, external factors such as the size, access to resources, wealth, support and insider outsider status, greatly affect the importance and power a pressure group has. There is an unequal balance among pressure groups, in the sense that some pressure groups are better funded than others. This effectively allows them to raise awareness for their issue through campaigns, posters and rallies. Another criticism which supports the argument that pressure groups are weak is the fact that theoretically, pressure groups seek to *merely* influence government and not *control* it. Their constitutional political power is weak in the sense that nothing was written in the Constitution outlining their role and importance; the constitution merely *recognises* pressure groups as a potential obstacle, which can positively enhance the democratic credibility of the government. They do not make the final decision, but merely influence it via the many access points in government. Furthermore, pressure groups which spend a substantial amount of money on lobbying via the K Street lobbyists does not necessarily mean that Congressmen will vote in favour of a particular bill if a lot of money has been spent on a particular cause. Money and access to funds does not always mean that laws will be made and passed in favour of a particular cause or campaign – although money and funding does help (pressure groups with a lot of money will lobby more) advance a pressure groups cause.

However, despite my best efforts to create a strong and well balanced counter argument, it is difficult not to exaggerate the power of pressure groups especially when looking at the revolving door and iron triangles theory. The revolving door syndrome looks at the idea that former members of Congress often end up working with pressure groups, and inevitably become lobbyists for a particular cause/campaign. This then enables the former Congressmen to exploit and abuse their contacts within government in the hopes of achieving policy success for their particular campaign as well as advancing their particular cause. In addition, the iron triangles syndrome furthers the idea that pressure groups are indeed very powerful. This particular term describes the strong policy making relationship between the legislature (congressional committees), the executive (federal bureaucracy) and pressure groups, which arguably guarantees policy success for all three institutions involved. It is also arguable that iron triangles can become so powerful to the extent that they create their own sub government [A.J.Bennett], a term used to describe a stable alliance of convenience and necessity

### **Conclusion**

‘Are pressure groups too powerful?’ As the above evidence shows, pressure groups are ever omnipresent and ubiquitous, effectively exploiting the decentralised and weak party system of the US. The favourable codified constitution has enabled them to successfully utilise the numerous access points available in a federal system of government, thus raising awareness whilst advancing their cause via constitutional means.

### **Bibliography:**

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