

“Assess the view that pressure groups are too powerful in the USA. Provide theory and examples to illustrate.”

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Introduction

America is largely dominated by pressure groups, groups of like-minded individuals which seek to influence government. There is a wide variation of pressure groups, they can differ in terms of size, influence, causes and aims, and they may be present at national level or at local level. The main distinction between pressure groups however, is whether they are insider or outsider. Insider groups are those which have direct contact with government and are consulted on policy areas relating to their issue or the section of society they represent. Groups like the American Association of Retired Persons and the American Bar Association are examples of insider pressure groups.¹ Outsider groups operate outside the government, they are the groups which usually participate in acts of protests, and they do not have a close relationship with the government.² Another key distinction between pressure groups is that of institutional and membership. Institutional groups are those which represent businesses, organisations and professions. Groups like the National Association of Realtors and the American Medical Association. Membership groups are often single-issue groups, such as, the National Rifle Association and Mothers Against Dangerous Driving.

The enormous amount of pressure groups and the distinctions between them suggests that pressure groups are a crucial part of US politics. There is perhaps a pressure group for almost every issue, group, and section of society. Some of which are incredibly powerful in terms of size and wealth; which brings about the claim, that some pressure groups are perhaps too powerful in the US. This essay will submerge into the theories and examples of pressure groups to assess this view accurately.

Influence and Power

The existence of pressure groups means that there is a channel of easy access where ordinary citizens can voice their opinions, have their views represented, and their grievances articulated.³ Through the first amendment, which prohibits the Congress from restricting the basic freedoms of speech, association and petitioning the government from pressure groups, allows them to actively pursue their views and influence the government. But of course, some pressure groups are more powerful than others, shown by the simple fact that some succeed while others fail. A successful pressure group is defined by how they influence government policy, their agenda-setting power and how well they aid citizen participation.⁴ There are many important factors in determining how powerful a pressure group is; perhaps the most important is size and wealth.

The amount of members a pressure group has is an important factor in determining its influence, and consequently, how powerful it is. There are a number of US pressure groups which have a colossal amount of members, such as

¹ Lawblog. 2008. *Assess the view that pressure groups are too powerful in the USA* [Online]. Available at: www.peterjepson.com/law/US-5%20Newman.pdf [Accessed 01 November 11]

² Lawblog. 2008. *Assess the view that pressure groups are too powerful in the USA* [Online]. Available at: www.peterjepson.com/law/US-5%20Newman.pdf [Accessed 01 November 11]

³ Anthony J. Bennet, *US Government & Politics* (Oxfordshire: Hodder Education, 2009), p. 152.

⁴ Breaking Perceptions. 2010. *To what extent are the largest pressure groups the most powerful?* [Online] Available at: www.breakingperceptions.com/to-what-extent-are-the-largest-pressure-groups-the-most-powerful/ [Accessed 01 November 11]

the National Rifle Association which has over 4.5 million members. On a much wider scale, the American Association of Retired Persons have more than 35 million members over the age of 50, giving them a strong political backing.⁵ For instance, take the issue of prescription drug provision, due to the AARP's large size; even politicians who disagree with their policy positions cannot ignore its political weight. In fact, the AARP was claimed to have changed the results of the 2008 election, the AARP sent the two candidates for North Carolina a list of questions to answer. Larry Kissell who chose the same answers as the members of the AARP won the election in that area by 5% where he had lost it by less than 1% in the previous election.⁶ Moreover, the more members a pressure group has the more donations it will receive, which will greatly assist pressure groups as we will find out.

Perhaps the most important factor in determining the influence and power of a pressure group is wealth. How wealthy a pressure group is, decides how much money they can use campaigning, lobbying etc. all of which has a direct link to how well they influence government policies. The American Association of Retired Persons had a total revenue of \$1 billion in 2006, spending \$23 million of it lobbying. This suggests that wealth is a key element to success. Senator Edward Kennedy once remarked that America has "the finest Congress that money can buy" and that "you have to pay to play" referring to the significant relationship between wealth and pressure groups.⁷ According to the Center for Responsive Politics, in 1999, \$1.45 billion was spent on lobbying activities. In exchange for the money, lobbyist offer a "disproportionate level of influence" as critics would argue.⁸

Throughout history we have seen that pressure groups have significantly impacted on a number of major policy areas. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was not only behind the 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka*, but also the later civil rights legislations.⁹ The Sierra Club and the preceding Wilderness Society and the National Wildlife Federation have been behind the push towards stricter laws for environmental protection.¹⁰ Not to mention, the National Rifle Association, arguably the one of the most powerful pressure groups in US politics have sought to uphold the strictest interpretation of the 2nd Amendment "right to keep and bear arms".¹¹ From these examples, we can see that there is a pressure group for almost every issue, and that they significantly impact policy areas.

Iron Triangles

Many political scientists have used the term "iron triangle" to describe the strong policy-making relationship between the Congress, the bureaucracy, and pressure groups.¹² This notion suggests that agencies and departments will usually keep close contacts with pressure groups who want to influence their actions. These pressure groups may provide valuable statistics to government agencies, and they are motivated to have their point of view heard.¹³ This relationship guarantees that policy outcomes benefit all of the three parties involved, creating an "iron" or "cosy" triangle of power. This suggests that pressure groups are too powerful in the US. After all, pressure groups and the Congress should be overseeing and scrutinising the government departments, not exchanging with it. An example of this notion can be demonstrated in the "veteran's iron triangle". At one point of this triangle, there are the veterans' pressure groups; such as the Vietnam Veterans of America, the Disabled

⁵ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.*, p. 153.

⁶ Lawblog. 2010. *Assess the view that pressure groups are too powerful in the USA* [Online]. Available at: www.peterjepson.com/law/US-3%20Gadd.pdf [Accessed 01 November 11]

⁷ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.*, p. 157.

⁸ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.*, p. 158.

⁹ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.*, p. 162.

¹⁰ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.*, p. 163.

¹¹ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.*, p. 164.

¹² Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit.*, p. 173.

¹³ Wakey Politics. 2011. *Iron Triangles* [Online]. Available at: www.wakeypolitics.blogspot.com/2011/03/iron-triangle.html [Accessed 01 November 11]

American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. At another end, there are the Veterans' Affairs committee's of the House and the Senate. And the final point of the triangle is made up of the Department of Veterans'. Such an 'iron' triangle can become so powerful that it constitutes its own sub-government.¹⁴ Creating a situation where pressure groups have far too much influence on the government. Bringing about the claim that pressure groups are too powerful in US politics. The iron triangle shares a close link with the revolving door syndrome as we'll see.

The revolving door syndrome

Perhaps the most effective method of campaigning used by pressure groups is lobbying; where pressure groups offer detailed, up-to-date information to those who need it. This is very effective due to the busy schedules and high demands of legislators and bureaucrats, who have limited time and resources. Yet they must appear knowledgeable and take a position on a large number of policy issues, thus pressure groups are a great source and often their only source of information.¹⁵ Most successful pressure groups will have the initiative to hire professional lobbyists; these lobbyists are often former members of Congress or former congressional staff members, this brings about the notion of the "revolving door syndrome", whereby former members of the executive branch take up well-paid jobs with Washington-based lobbying firms, using their expertise and contacts to lobby the institution they were once part of.¹⁶ According to Anthony J. Bennet, on face value, it is as if people walk out of the political door, and immediately re-enter it. The revolving door syndrome allows pressure groups to become too powerful due to the abuse of public service; ex-congressmen exploit their knowledge of contacts in order to further the interest of their clients and in doing so, making a large sum of money for themselves. In fact, the starting salary for a professional lobbyist is around \$300,000, suggesting that the pressure groups which are too powerful are those which are the wealthiest.¹⁷ Although Federal Law forbids former members of the executive branch from becoming lobbyists for a year after they leave office, this is hardly satisfactory in tackling this injustice, because once this time has been reached, ex-congressmen are free to do as they wish.¹⁸

Clientelism

The campaign finance reforms of the 1970s brought about substantial changes to the role of pressure groups regarding political fundraising. The reforms limited the amount that any pressure group could give to a candidate in a federal election. But what was alternatively encouraged, was the setting up of political action committees that could make heavier donations. Political action committees are pressure groups which raise and give campaign funds to candidates for political office. The establishment of PAC's demonstrates the frightening massive amount of money that a pressure group can raise in such a short time. Larry Sabato conducted a study in 2006, he found that PAC spending exceeded \$1 billion, and has grown in number and importance since the McCain-Feingold law with over 400 new PACs created in the first four years following the law's enactment.¹⁹ The biggest PAC contributor overall in 2006 was the National Association of Realtors which donated a total of \$3 million to federal candidates. Of course, pressure groups do not just donate a few million dollars and expect nothing in return. This brings about Robert Singh's criticism of clientelism, the notion that pressure groups act as clients, they are paying for a service,

¹⁴ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 174

¹⁵ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 159.

¹⁶ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 173.

¹⁷ Lawblog. 2010. *Assess the view that pressure groups are too powerful in the USA* [Online]. Available at: www.peterjepson.com/law/US-3%20Gadd.pdf [Accessed 01 November 11]

¹⁸ Lawblog. 2008. *Assess the view that pressure groups are too powerful in the USA* [Online]. Available at: www.peterjepson.com/law/US-5%20Newman.pdf [Accessed 01 November 11]

¹⁹ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 156.

in this case, to have their policies initiated by the candidate they fund.²⁰ Therefore, special interests of the pressure group are being protected at the expense of the wider public interest. This demonstrates that pressure groups in the US have too much power. They can in essence, buy their policies, provided that the candidate they fund triumphs in the election.

Conclusion

Although we cannot generalise the findings to all pressure groups, it is clear that some have far too much power in US politics. Pressure groups like the National Association of Realtors have the ability to buy political influence through their large donations to candidates; this is otherwise known as clientelism. Other groups are subject to the revolving door and the iron triangle syndrome, meaning that pressure groups are already too integrated in US politics. Instead of campaigning and protesting, pressure groups, especially those which are wealthy, have the ability to buy their political influence. In fact, it is relatively easy for them to get what they want through lobbying. As Senator Edward Kennedy once remarked “you have to pay to play” this is certainly true. Because for now and the foreseeable future, the largest and wealthiest pressure groups will persist to exert a massive amount of power over the US government, thus they are too powerful.

²⁰ Anthony J. Bennet, *op.cit*, p. 243.

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