

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

**Introduction**

This essay will show that pressure groups are too powerful within the USA. This will be done by explaining what the different types of pressure groups are and then outlining the ways that pressure groups are too powerful. It will say that these groups are undemocratic and do not represent the views for and against a certain topic. It will also say that the access to government is far too easy to gain and has allowed certain groups to influence policy and disguise it as the view of the majority.

**Key distinctions**

A pressure group is a group that seeks to influence those in power but never achieve or strive for power themselves. There are many different types of pressure groups too and the methods that these groups use to influence those in power can range from lobbying to forms of violence.

A distinction could be made within the issue that the pressure group is trying to draw attention to. This could show the difference between a *sectional* and *cause* group. A sectional group is for people to represent the ideas of a section of society but do not have a specific issue that they wish to change. These could be professionals, workers (unions) or others. A cause group is specifying a certain issue that they wish to change. These could be broken down into sectional cause, attitude (Greenpeace) or political. You can distinguish pressure groups into two categories by looking at the people within the group. This can either be *institutional* or *membership* groups. An institutional group is a group where membership is granted by being part of a separate organisation. They seek to represent the organisation as a whole such as American Bar Association (ABA) or American Medical Association (AMA). A membership group represents the individuals within the group. Examples of these include Mothers Against Drink Driving (MADD) and the National Rifle Association (NRA). There are two more distinct types of pressure groups which can be argued to have the most relevance when discussing power. This distinction is made between *insider* and *outsider* groups. An insider group is one that is already within government and has made significant contact with those in power. An outsider group is a group which is not within government, either by choice or ideology. This is possibly the most important distinction when discussing the power of pressure groups.

Although these pressure groups differ in size, issue and resources, the question remains the same. Are they too powerful in the US and are then undemocratic?

**Too powerful?**

In the US there is some concern, as there is in the UK, as to whether pressure groups are too powerful and become undemocratic. One of the factors to this power is the many 'access points' to government. This means that a pressure group can lobby many different people and places to have their message heard. This could be done at state legislatures, Congress, the Supreme Court or even the President. This means that a pressure group can have an impact in the many different levels of government business. A good example would be how the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) which saw a massive influence in the changes in the educational rights of black people that could not have been done through Congress or the state governments. This was prominent in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954. Another pressure group, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought the case *Reno v. ACLU* in front of the Supreme Court to overturn Congress's attempt to ban pornography on the internet. These examples show that pressure groups can have massive influence over the many levels of government by bringing a case in front of the Supreme Court. If it wasn't for the pressure groups, these cases would not have been brought to the Supreme Court and the ruling could not have happened.

Another key reason for pressure groups being so effective in the US is the lack of party discipline within the two main parties the Republicans and the Democrats. The members of these parties are very slack in their approach to voting along party lines. This means that they are far more likely to be influenced by outside pressure groups and vote against their party. However, it could be argued that pressure groups have caused this lack of discipline and not the other way round. This means that the pressure groups are actually the cause of the lack of party discipline and not a lack of party discipline resulting in more influence from pressure groups. The pressure groups have become so much of an influence that party discipline has fallen directly in relation to the increase of pressure group activism.

Another factor contributing to their overwhelming power is that members of Congress are not policy specialists. Congressmen will know limited facts about certain issues and will depend upon outside sources to give them their information. This could be from many sources but the main source would be pressure groups. These groups are a minority of people who are representing their view as if it were the majority. This means that they present very biased and unbalanced information to these individual members of Congress in order to make them believe that this is the view held by the majority of people. This could be seen as very undemocratic as it is then a minority that is given a voice beyond that of the general public and the rest of the electorate. Pressure groups have also been criticised for not being policy specialists themselves and often have wrong and/or misleading information which is then passed on as fact.

### **Are they weak?**

Despite the fears that pressure groups are far too strong, there is a lot of strong opposition that shows that pressure groups are actually quite weak. One point would be that with every 'pro' pressure group there tends to be an 'anti' group. This shows that there is balance between issues that are discussed and there being equality between issues and debates. However, one pressure group may be more overwhelmingly financed and supported than the other side of the coin is never shown. The NRA is a very good example of this. The NRA claim to have over 3,000,000

members and have Charlton Heston as their lead spokesperson. Not many people would know of a pressure group that is against the second amendment and this could be due to lack of funds and fame despite there being equal support. Another example would be there not being any pressure groups that are protesting against what the NAACP do. This is not done due to the fact that it would be frowned upon to be against civil rights for black people.

Another criticism against pressure groups being too powerful is the idea that it is the judges who actually make the final decision. It could be argued that pressure groups merely *influence* policy and do not make it. This is true in theory, but if there is a case that is very well publicised and argued for in a biased way, the judges are going to take notice and end up siding with the most popular argument. This could be a cynical way to look at the judicial system, but it would seem strange to have a judge voting against rights for disabled people when there is a clear majority for the other side of the argument.

Another clear argument against pressure groups being too powerful is that money spent on lobbying does not automatically equate to Acts being made. There is very limited proof to suggest that Congressmen will actually vote in favour of a bill if a lot of money has been spent on lobbying and on awareness campaigns. This means that the funds of a pressure group do not really matter because this money spent on lobbying does not actually equate to policy. However, it is quite clear to think that money does indeed speak. A pressure group with very little in the way of funds will find it much harder to have an impact with lobbying than a pressure group with big funds. This is because far less lobbying will be done with less money because lobbying costs. It is a very simple concept to understand that lobbying can not be done without money. The methods of leaflet dropping will be much harder to do with no money.

### **Are they strong?**

Despite these arguments made against pressure groups not being too powerful there are still some very convincing arguments that they are too powerful. One of these would be the effect of the *revolving door syndrome*. This term talks about how members of Congress come straight out of power then become affiliated with a pressure group and then become a full-time lobbyist. The main criticism of this type of behaviour is the exploit of public service. The ex-Congressmen use their knowledge and contacts from their days in Congress to further the interests of their pressure groups and in so doing make large sums of money for themselves.

There is also concern for the relationships between pressure groups, committees and the head of the relevant department. This is described as the *iron triangle syndrome*. This is so called because it is a relationship that will guarantee a certain policy outcome and is very difficult to break up. An example of this would be the 'veterans' iron triangle'. One side has groups such as Vietnam Veterans of America, the Disabled American veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. On another side are the Veterans' Affairs committees of the House and the Senate. The third side is taken up by the Department of Veterans' Affairs. This can become a very powerful relationship between three parties because; as Bennett says "it can create its own sub-government." This would show how a pressure group can obtain

insider status and maintain it by keeping up strong relations with the other sections of government.

Another argument that pressure groups are far too powerful is that they tend to put the interests of a small group before the interests of society as a whole. These groups such as the NAACP and the American Jewish Congress spend too much time fighting for their own special interest and little time working for the wider public interest. These groups do not stop until they are completely satisfied and this can lead to stereotyping of groups. If the NAACP is interested in a certain case, it makes people think that all black people think in the same way.

A further criticism of the powerful nature of pressure groups is the use of *direct action*. This has been deemed inappropriate for a group to use violence as a means of furthering their political agenda. This has led to murders, shootings and bombings within the US. This was very prominent around abortion clinics in the 1990s in order to stop abortions taking place. Patients and doctors were shot as a stance on the decision of the Supreme Court of it being pro-choice. However, these methods have not really shown the pressure groups to be too powerful as these methods are only used as a final and last stand against those in their way. These forms of direct action do not usually favour the pressure group and tend to taint the message that these groups are trying to put across.

### **Summary**

Pressure groups have been criticised by many in both ways. Some see them as being far too powerful and undemocratic. However, others see them as an effective check on government and provide participation between elections. However, it is seen that most seem to disapprove with many pressure groups as they silence any form of opposition to their particular policy stance. If a pressure group is against an issue, if it has many members, it will tend to drown out the views of the opposition by using its sheer numbers to overwhelm the opposition. Although a majority may be correct, it would be fallacious to say that the majority are correct because they are the majority. The use of direct action is a criticism of pressure groups as a whole but can show that these groups may be capable of doing atrocious things to get their voice heard but do not really achieve anything by doing so. If anything, it can belittle the pressure group by saying that this group is only capable of being heard by doing something outrageous. It diminishes their argument if they can only turn heads by acting illegally. Insider groups have also got an undemocratic position as they can influence government from the inside and have to be consulted with any policy ideas that are being put forward.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has shown that pressure groups are too powerful in the US. It has done this by showing that they are very undemocratic by allowing a small section of society to have their voices heard over the majority. These groups may also have little knowledge on the implications of their particular stance and are only interested in their own agenda. The inequality of groups is also an overwhelming factor. The fact that some groups have more money and fame than others does not show that they are more successful nor are they correct in what they believe. However, pressure groups can be seen as necessary for providing a check on government. These pressure groups

are there to challenge the government on policy not create them. The use of money and scare tactics do challenge the government but can also infringe upon the interests of the rest of society.

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