

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

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Plan

NRA-powerful gun lobbyist group; part of an "iron triangle". Revolving door syndrome-new Obama executive orders may curb this somewhat.

Pressure groups do not create a pluralist or necessarily democratic society-they are unequal and the big ones have a lot of money, making them incredibly powerful. Political influence in Washington is being *bought* by pressure groups-if this isn't elitism then...

But pressure groups do fulfil several useful roles-representation, participation etc

Regulation-Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act; other legislation curbs lobbying; but laws are largely ineffective and aimed only at Congressional lobbying. Otherwise, pressure groups hold free reign.

Some iron triangles are almost like a force unto themselves-defense, agriculture, veterans' affairs etc!

Introduction

This essay will be arguing that pressure groups in the USA wield far too much power in relation to their lobbying of both Congress and the Executive. This power is a result of the 'iron' or 'cosy' triangle and the revolving-door syndromes so common in Washington D.C; a distinct lack of regulation; and because of an unequal distribution of power amongst pressure groups. I will be reinforcing these claims with reference to Robert Michels' 'Iron Law of oligarchy' and various other theories in order to substantiate my arguments.

Types of Pressure Groups

Pressure groups can be classified in a variety of different ways. The overarching definition of a pressure group is a group of like-minded individuals which seeks to influence government. This is in contrast to a political party, which seeks to form a government and influence it directly through its institutions. However, this is a mere definition of pressure groups, and does not explain the different types there are. Pressure groups are present at all levels of US government, from a national level to a local level, and thus these groups can differ wildly in terms of size, influence, and what policies they seek to change. This wide variety means that there are several ways of separating pressure groups into different types. One of these methods is the insider/outsider distinction. 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. So, groups like the American Bar Association (Legal profession); the American Medical Association (medical profession); and think-tanks like the Brookings Institute. These groups are generally more moderate because of their close relationship with government. Outsider groups, on the other hand, operate

outside the government system and are the groups which usually participate in demonstrations, rallies, and other acts of protest. Although they will sometimes lobby or be consulted on policies, they do not have the close relationship with government which Insider groups benefit from. This distinction clearly shows that insider groups are going to wield a significant amount of power in influencing policy, because they are advising legislators on policy issues. Therefore, they will be able to better set the agenda and implement their policies.

Another typology is that of sectional and institutional groups. Institutional groups are those which represent businesses, organisations, professions, and the like. Some examples would be the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organisations. Also, the aforementioned professional groups like the AMA and ABA are also institutional groups. Membership groups can be in the form of single-issue groups like the National Rifle Association; group rights groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People; or think-tanks, like the aforementioned Brookings Institute or the Heritage Foundation.

The sheer number of pressure groups and the distinctions between them immediately suggests that Pressure groups are an influential part of American Politics. There is a pressure group for almost every issue, group, or section of society, and some of these pressure groups are incredibly powerful in terms of size and wealth.

Functions of Pressure Groups

Before discerning whether pressure groups wield too much power, it is imperative to understand what functions pressure groups fulfil. The first function is that of representation, particularly for membership groups. In a representative democracy, individual citizens have few outlets to truly express their own views and desires outside of voting in elections. Therefore, pressure groups are an important outlet for people to voice their discontent with certain policies or to have their views represented. Some pressure groups, like the NAACP, may also give its members legal representation to take up grievances with the government. For example, the famous case of *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka (1954)* was brought by the NAACP, and US President Barack Obama represented the group ACORN in court in the mid-1990s.

Another function which pressure groups perform is to allow for citizen participation. Any healthy democratic society needs the participation of its citizens outside elections, and pressure groups (along with political parties) are vital for this. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau once said that “The British are only free at election time”, criticising British democracy and citizen participation. The same cannot be said of American citizens, however. Americans are more likely than their European counterparts to join pressure groups, and are also the most charitable people in the world.

Think-tanks like the Brookings Institute, as well as cause groups, can help to raise public awareness and education of key issues. Environmental groups like Greenpeace, for example, have done much work to raise public awareness of issues like global warming and climate change.

Furthermore, pressure groups can perform the function of agenda building. They can attempt to influence the policies and agendas of legislators, political parties, and

members of the executive/bureaucracy, so that they take notice of their members' interests.

Finally, pressure groups perform the function of scrutinising and monitoring of policies. In this function, groups can ensure that the government policies are carried out effectively, and that promises made during election campaigns are fulfilled. But, how do pressure groups carry out these functions? There are a myriad of methods associated with pressure group campaigning, but one of the most important and influential is lobbying. This is where pressure groups, either directly or through professional lobbyists, actually meet with legislators and bureaucrats to discuss policies and issues. Pressure groups are also a vital source of information for busy officials, who must deal with an infinite number of issues, but who only have very general policy expertise. Thus, they must rely on pressure group lobbying to help them. In return, pressure groups can achieve a high level of influence. Not only are they directly influencing policy decisions, but they are often called upon to help draft bills for individual members of Congress. This makes the democratic values of such a system questionable, because unelected members of pressure groups and professional lobbyists are actually having a massive influence on the legislative process, which is supposed to be run by elected legislators.

Another method of pressure group campaigning is through grassroots activities. Such campaigns are the most obvious and iconic of all methods used by pressure groups, as they include organising rallies, parades, marches, and, sometimes, civil disobedience or even completely illegal and dangerous behaviour. For example, a Federal government building in Oklahoma was bombed in 1995 by a group on the far-right of US politics. Demonstrations and marches will usually take place outside important federal or state government building. When the Supreme Court rules on something particularly controversial, the streets outside will often be flooded with campaigners on both sides of the argument.

Other methods include litigation in courts, as mentioned earlier with the NAACP and *Brown*; publicity stunts and merchandise (like some quite famous bumper stickers); and electioneering. It is in this last method where a lot of controversy lies. The idea that large and wealthy pressure groups like the NRA were supporting candidates for election with massive funding was deplorable and undemocratic to many. Thus, reforms in the 1970s limited the amount of money pressure groups could give to candidates. Now, Political Action Committees (PACs) are set-up in order to fulfil the function of supporting election candidates financially. It is unclear whether pressure groups actually receive anything in return for this support, but it is assumed that candidates who win through funding by a pressure group will be more receptive to the views of that pressure group when they enter office.

Too powerful?

So, we have seen what pressure groups are, the functions they fulfil, and the methods that they use, but do they wield too much power in US politics?

A key argument in favour of this idea is in the structure of pressure groups themselves, as well as the system in which they operate. Proponents of pressure groups state that they enhance democracy through citizen participation and representation, but the groups themselves will often be incredibly undemocratic. They will often not hold elections for their leaders, and individual members will often not

have much of a say on how the group operates or what issues they wish to campaign on. In fact, most pressure groups are hierarchical rather than pluralistic, and thus a powerful elite emerges within the organisation. This can be illustrated by Robert Michels's theory of the 'Iron law of oligarchy'. This is the idea that any group will eventually revert to an oligarchical (i.e. elitist) organisation and structure, no matter how democratic their original ideals may be. This can clearly be seen in the elitist structure of most pressure groups and, according to Michels, any pressure group which is not yet an oligarchy will eventually become one. Even where elections within the group are held, there will usually be an elite of some kind who always win elections; thus propagating and reinforcing the dominance of the oligarchy.

This idea of a lack of democracy where pressure groups are concerned can also be seen in the inequality of groups. Advocates of plurality will argue that because there are pressure groups on both sides of any debate, this makes society and politics more pluralistic and thus more democratic. This, however, is a far too simplistic view. It fails to take into account the fact that different groups have different levels of influence, depending on their size, wealth, and standing with the government (i.e. whether they are an insider or outsider group). In gun control, for example, the National Rifle Association, a wealthy group of 4 million members, is clearly the dominant force in comparison to the much smaller, weaker gun control groups like Handgun Control, Inc. This is one of the main reasons why the 2nd amendment is still so rigidly enforced; because one of the most powerful pressure groups in the USA continues to campaign for this approach. Similarly, the influence of industry against the influence of environmental campaign groups is clearly unequal and unfair. Again, this shows that it is the *elite* of society in the USA who hold power—the influential pressure groups, the legislators, the bureaucrats, and so on. Small-scale pressure groups with little funding find it extremely difficult to be listened to by those with the power.

In relation to the varying influences of pressure groups is the criticism often levelled at them regarding buying political influence. As already stated in this essay, pressure groups often lobby the decision-makers in government in order to achieve their aims, and vast amounts of money go into campaigns of this sort. In 1999, \$1.45 billion was spent on lobbying activities, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. By 2008, this had risen to \$3.24 billion, a staggering amount of money.¹ The key criticism here is *why* pressure groups are spending this amount of money—what are they receiving in return? The answer is political influence and, most importantly, power. There have been reports of political lobbyists actually drafting bills on behalf of legislators, which is extremely worrying considering that these people are unelected and, as has already been discussed, often very elitist. The image here is that of the National Rifle Association, having funded their favoured candidate during election period, then helping this person to draft a bill which allows for even more liberal gun laws.

¹ <http://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/index.php>

Iron Triangles and Revolving Doors

The two main criticisms of the power wielded by pressure groups, though, are two metaphorical ‘syndromes’: iron triangles, and the revolving door. The iron-triangle syndrome is the idea of a close relationship between government agencies or departments, Congressional committees, and pressure groups. This creates an ‘iron’ or ‘cosy’ triangle of power. Such a triumvirate thus wields a vast amount of power in its respective policy area. After all, the Congressional Committee is supposed to be overseeing and scrutinising the government departments, not collaborating with it, and pressure groups, on policy areas for the benefit of all parties involved. This is a clear case of *quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*, or ‘Who will guard the guards?’. An example of such cosy triangles would be the national defence triangle between the Department of Defence (aka the Pentagon); the House and Senate Defence Committees; and various military contractors and arms dealers. This creates a situation where pressure groups have far too much influence and dealings with the government, and are no longer campaigning but actually *collaborating* for the benefit of all three parties, and possibly to the detriment of other departments or the nation itself. This idea is related to Robert Singh’s criticisms of the Federal Bureaucracy, such as clientelism and parochialism.

The other syndrome is known as the revolving-door syndrome. This refers to the idea of there being a ‘revolving door’ where bureaucrats and politicians walk out of the political arena, only to become influential in pressure groups and act as lobbyists. They use their insider knowledge and expertise to actually further the interests of the pressure group and, by extension, themselves. This also means that they will earn vast amounts of money at the same time, and is often criticised by critics as being an abuse of public service. Although Federal Law forbids former public officials from becoming lobbyists for a year after they leave office, once this time has expired they are free to do so. However, the current President Barack Obama introduced, on the first day of his Presidency, tighter ethics rules in regards to lobbying in an attempt to stop this revolving door syndrome. Whether this will actually have any effect is yet to be seen, however.²

Regulation

So, it is clear that there are several reasons why pressure groups wield far too much influence in US politics. However, there have been some attempts to curb the powers of pressure groups. As already stated, President Obama claims to have ‘closed’ the revolving door in Washington, although one wonders how exactly he has done this. The Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act 1946 required lobbyists to register with Congress if it was raising money to help the passage of legislation, but its provisions were largely ignored and unregulated. Congress has also introduced bans on giving ‘gifts’ to members of Congress (and President Obama has introduced a similar rule for executive members), as well as further reforms after the Watergate scandal.

² White House Press Statement Jan 21 2009

However, these regulations are largely ignored or ineffective, and most of them are aimed at lobbying Congress; lobbying of the executive has remained largely unchecked, although the new Administration has introduced some ethics rules.

Conclusion

Overall, it is clear that pressure groups wield far too much power in US politics. They are elitist; unfairly balanced in society; they buy political influence; and they are subject to the revolving door and iron triangle syndromes. All of these factors mean that pressure groups, largely, have become too ingrained into the US political system. Instead of campaigning and protesting, the larger pressure groups are collaborating with government in exchange for political influence. There is too much clientelism in regards to pressure groups. However, there is no denying that they allow for citizen participation and representation, and some pressure groups do actually do a lot of commendable work. Unfortunately, there is too little regulation of their activities and, thus, far too much corruption and elitism.