American Government

Interest Groups
What Are Interest Groups?

• Private organizations that try to shape public policy through extra-electoral channels

• Public interest groups (citizens’ groups):
  • E.g., NAACP, Christian Coalition

• Private interest groups
  • **Business groups**, e.g., National Association of Manufacturers.
  • **Professional organizations**, e.g., The American Medical Association, the National Lawyers Guild
  • **Labor Unions**
Historical View of Interest Groups

- Madison’s *Federalist No. 10*
  - Factions pursuing selfish aims contrary to the public interest
  - But must be tolerated to preserve civil liberties
Madison’s Solution

• Divide authority among federal institutions
  – Prevent any single faction from dominating
  – The nation’s diversity would foster a wide variety of competing interests

• Design the system to foil the potential problem
Pluralism—A Theory of Interest

Group Influence

• Government decisions reflect a process of bargaining among diverse interests in society

  – No single interest group dominates

  – Through negotiation, the common good is served
Challenges to Pluralism

• E.E. Schattschneider (1960):
  “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent. Probably about 90 percent of the people cannot get into the pressure system.”
Challenges to Pluralism

• Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965)
  – Someone has to organize the group and find the resources
  – Problems such as *free-riding* must also be overcome
  – Some groups easier to organize than others
    • Small groups
    • Interests with much at much at stake
Interest Group Explosion

• Olson’s work undermined by huge growth of interest groups since the 1960s

• Types of groups
  – Corporations
  – Labor unions
  – Colleges and universities
  – State and local governments
  – Religious groups
  – Non-profit organizations
How Do Groups Recruit Members?

• By offering selective incentives—benefits that go only to participants
  – Material benefits
    • Tote bags, mugs, etc.
  – Solidary benefits
    • Sense of belonging to a group
  – Expressive benefits
    • Sense of purpose/efficacy
Has Interest Group Explosion Shifted the Balance of Power?

• Interest group politics still skewed toward economic interests

• Not always active groups (or similarly weighted groups) on both side of an issue
Insider and Outsider Tactics

• Insider Tactics: Trafficking in Information and Cultivating Access

• Outsider Tactics: Altering the Political Forces
Insider Tactics

- Depend on personal access to government officials and work through mutually beneficial exchanges between lobbyists and politicians
- Political information
  - How congressperson’s constituents are likely to react
  - If information is misleading or inflicts political damage, its source is damaged
Outsider Tactics

• Strategy to persuade politicians by altering the political forces they feel obliged to heed
  – Use of mass media to shape public opinion
  – Demonstrations, picketing, marches
  – Reports, news conferences