

## WHY INTEREST GROUPS?

- Like political parties, interest groups are *linkage institutions*.
  - Help communicate citizens' political views to government between elections.
  - The comparatively weak U.S. party system creates space for interest groups to thrive.
- All interests are “special interests.”
  - Example of negative framing by opponents.
  - Preferred terms: *organized interests* or just interest groups.

## INTEREST GROUPS AND FACTION

- Madison wrote in Federalist no. 10 about the “mischiefs of faction.”
  - “A number of citizens... who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”
- Not all organized interests are “factions” in the sense Madison warned about.

## PLURALISM AND ITS CRITICS

- Dominant view among political scientists: U.S. interest group system is based on **pluralism**.
- Interest groups compete with each other for influence over the political system; outcomes are usually fair.
- Exceptions:
  - Low-profile issues.
  - Easier to obstruct action (“play defense”).
  - Differential resources.

## CRITIQUES OF THE PLURALIST SYSTEM

- Upper and middle class interests tend to be more heavily emphasized.
- Important issues may not make it on the **policy agenda**.
- Interest group conflict leads to more negative public debate and discourse.
- “Revolving door” between government and lobbying groups leads to public distrust.

## ORGANIZED INTERESTS EARLY ON

- America had always been distinct based on its vibrant “civic culture”; e.g. Tocqueville.
- First “true” national interest groups emerged after the Civil War.
  - The rise of organized labor.
  - Union and confederate veterans' groups.
  - Benevolent/mutual-aid societies.



## INTERESTS IN THE MODERN ERA

- Broad-based national associations emerge in the Progressive Era, including:
  - U.S. Chamber of Commerce
  - American Farm Bureau Federation
  - NAACP
- 1960s and beyond see the rise of narrow professional and issue-based groups:
  - NOW, Christian Coalition, abortion groups.
  - More recent: Occupy Wall Street; Tea Party movement.

## GAINING MEMBERSHIP

- Most interest groups need *members* and supporters to successfully achieve their goals.
- Three broad types of incentives/benefits:
  - **Material:** the desire to get personal benefits.
  - **Social** (solidary/solidarity): the desire to belong in a group with like-minded people.
  - **Purposive:** interest in achieving group's common goals.

## ESTABLISHING GROUPS

- Groups are often founded by a small group of **interest group entrepreneurs** who see a need for their interest to be advanced.
- Ideological/political groups often rely on the support of **patrons** to provide resources to reach potential members.

## THE FREE RIDER PROBLEM

- **Free riding** is particular problem for interest groups (unlike most voluntary associations).
- If the group manages to lobby government successfully, all potential supporters benefit.
- If the group fails, only the group's *members* had to bear the costs.
- Thus it is rational for individuals who would join to *free ride* on the group's efforts.

## SOLVING THE FREE RIDER PROBLEM

- Coercion
  - Force people to join the group by law
    - Professional licensing requirements.
    - Agricultural marketing associations.
    - Organized labor: “closed shop” laws.
  - Use violence and intimidation against people who refuse to join (usually illegal).

## SOLVING THE FREE RIDER PROBLEM

- **Selective benefits**
  - Offer members benefits that aren't available to non-members.
  - If the benefits are good enough, even people who disagree with the group's goals join.
  - Examples: AARP, American Automobile Association.
- Occasionally, a broader **social movement** may excite people

## INFLUENCING GOVERNMENT

- Direct lobbying.
- Grassroots lobbying by members.
  - “Astroturfing.”
- Electioneering (PACs, 527 groups).
- Public advocacy: attempt to influence public opinion.
- Litigation.
- Direct action (protests, strikes, rioting).

## ELECTIONEERING AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE

- Groups can organize **political action committees** (PACs) to contribute to campaigns for federal and state office.
- They can also engage in **independent expenditures** supporting or opposing candidates.
- Groups can also organize **527 committees** and **501(c)(4) groups** which have some advantages over PACs when engaging in independent spending.
- Groups can use **bundling** to take credit for members' support of candidates.