In 1773, the British Parliament passed the Tea Act. This legislation was designed to rescue the British East India Tea Company from financial ruin. In order to do so, it granted the company a monopoly on the tea trade to all British colonies, including those in the new world. American colonists were outraged by this action; they considered it to be an act of governmental oppression. To show their disgust with King George III’s new policy, they held a protest known as the Boston Tea Party. Late on the evening of December 16th, the colonists boarded ships docked in Boston Harbor and threw overboard all of the imported tea stored on the boats. Similar tea parties were held in other colonies.

More than two hundred years later, in 2008, the U.S. Congress enacted legislation creating the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP). This program, also known as the “bailout bill,” was designed to rescue American banks from financial ruin. In order to do so, it used billions of federal taxpayers’ dollars to purchase troubled assets and equity from financial institutions. Many Americans were outraged by this action; they considered it to be an act of governmental oppression. To show their disgust with the new policy, on February 27, 2009, thousands of Americans held organized protests around the country. These protestors soon became known as the tea party movement.

Members of this social movement seek to influence the direction of governmental policy. Of particular interest to tea party members is opposing federal government intervention in the financial sector. They believe in a free market economy and states’ rights to govern themselves without undue involvement from the national government. They value lower taxes and fewer so-called governmental handouts. To communicate this message to legislators and other policymakers, they have held additional protests on occasions such as Tax Day (April 15) and Independence Day (July 4).
have also garnered significant media attention and gained access to members of Congress who are interested in addressing the concerns of the growing number of tea party identifiers among their constituents.

More recently, the tea party movement has shown some interest in becoming a political party and running candidates for a wide array of local, state, and national offices. In 2010, it vetted potential candidates to challenge congressional Democrats in the midterm elections, but many of these candidates, including visible Senate candidate Rand Paul (KY), ran under the Republican Party label. Members of the tea party also devised the beginnings of a party platform, known as the Contract from America. Among a number of other conservative public policy goals, this document called for protecting the Constitution, balancing the federal budget, reforming taxes, limiting government spending, and repealing the 2010 health care reform bill.

It was signed by more than 300 candidates and elected officials. Although more than thirty of its endorsed candidates for Congress won, to date, the movement’s greatest successes have come from its protests and lobbying—actions that are more typical of an interest group than a political party.
The face of interest group politics in the United States is changing as quickly as laws, political consultants, and technology allow. Big business and trade groups are increasing their activities and engagement in the political system at the same time that there is conflicting evidence concerning whether ordinary citizens join political groups. Political scientist Robert Putnam, for example, has argued that fewer Americans are joining groups, a phenomenon he labeled “bowling alone.” Others have faulted Putnam, concluding that America is in the midst of an “explosion of voluntary groups, activities and charitable donations [that] is transforming our towns and cities.”

Although bowling leagues, which were once a very common means of bringing people together, have withered, other organizations such as volunteer groups, soccer associations, health clubs, and environmental groups are flourishing. Older organizations, such as the Elks Club and the League of Women Voters, whose membership was tracked by Putnam, are attracting few new members, but this does not mean that people are not joining groups; they are simply joining different groups and online social networks.

Why is this debate so important? Political scientists believe that involvement in community groups and activities with others of like interests enhances the level of social capital, “the web of cooperative relationships between citizens that facilitates resolution of collective action problems.” The more social capital that exists in a given community, the more citizens are engaged in its governance and well-being, and the more likely they are to work for the collective good. This tendency to form small-scale associations for the public good, or civic virtue, as Putnam calls it, creates fertile ground within communities for improved political and economic development. Thus, if Americans truly are joining fewer groups, overall citizen engagement in government and the government’s provision of services may suffer. New groups, such as the tea party movement, place increased demands on government, even when the demands are for less government.

Interest groups are also important because they give the unrepresented or underrepresented an opportunity to have their voices heard, thereby making the government and its policy-making process more representative of diverse populations and perspectives. Additionally, interest groups offer powerful and wealthy interests even greater access to, or influence on, policy makers at all levels of government.

To explore the impact of interest groups on policy and the political process, in this chapter we examine the following issues:

- First, we will explore the roots of the American interest group system.
- Second, we will look at the origins and development of American interest groups.
- Third, we will investigate what interest groups do to achieve policy change.
- Fourth, we will analyze what makes an interest group successful.
- Finally, we will discuss reform efforts geared toward regulating interest groups and lobbyists.
**ROOTS OF the American Interest Group System**

16.1 Trace the roots of the American interest group system.

**Interest groups** are organized collections of people or organizations that try to influence public policy; they go by various names: special interests, pressure groups, organized interests, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), political groups, lobby groups, and public interest groups. Interest groups are differentiated from political parties largely by the fact that interest groups do not run candidates for office.

**Theories of Interest Group Formation**

Interest group theorists use a variety of theories to explain how interest groups form and how they influence public policy. **Pluralist theory** argues that political power is distributed among a wide array of diverse and competing interest groups. Pluralist theorists such as David B. Truman explain the formation of interest groups through **disturbance theory**. According to this approach, groups form as a result of changes in the political system. Moreover, one wave of groups will give way to another wave of groups representing a contrary perspective (a countermovement). Thus, Truman would argue, all salient issues will be represented in government. The government, in turn, should provide a forum in which the competing demands of groups and the majority of the U.S. population can be heard and balanced.6

**Transactions theory** arose out of criticisms of the pluralist approach. Transactions theory argues that public policies are the result of narrowly defined exchanges among political actors. Transactions theorists offer two main contentions: it is not rational for people to mobilize into groups, and therefore, the groups that do mobilize will represent elites.

The idea that individuals will not mobilize into groups arises from economist Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action*.7 In this work, Olson assumes that individuals are rational and have perfect information upon which to make informed decisions. He uses these assumptions to argue that, especially in the case of **collective goods**, or things of value that may not be withheld from nonmembers, such as a better environment, it makes little sense for individuals to join a group, if they can gain the benefits secured by others at no cost and become “free riders.” (The problem of free riders is discussed later in this chapter.)

The elite bias that transactionists expect in the interest group system is the result of differences in the relative cost of mobilization for elite and nonelite citizens. Individuals who have greater amounts of time or money available simply have lower transaction costs. Thus, according to one political scientist, “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class bias.”8

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**interest group**
A collection of people or organizations that tries to influence public policy.

**pluralist theory**
The theory that political power is distributed among a wide array of diverse and competing interest groups.

**disturbance theory**
The theory that interest groups form as a result of changes in the political system.

**transactions theory**
The theory that public policies are the result of narrowly defined exchanges among political actors.

**collective good**
Something of value that cannot be withheld from a nonmember of a group, for example, a tax write-off or a better environment.
More recently, a new wave of political scientists called neopluralists have evaluated previous theories and data to find a middle ground. For example, one neopluralist perspective, population ecology theory, argues that the formation of political organizations is conditional on the resources allocated to a given issue area. This theory builds on the biological idea that the resources of an ecosystem can only support a certain number of any one species (or groups). Growth of these species usually proceeds in an "s" curve, with a slow period of initial growth followed by a rapid increase in population and an eventual leveling off when the population has reached its maximum carrying capacity.9

Kinds of Organized Interests

In this book, we use interest group as a generic term to describe the numerous organized groups that try to influence government policy. Thus, interest groups take many forms including public interest groups, business and economic groups, governmental units such as state and local governments, and political action committees (PACs). (To learn more about a number of prominent interest groups, see Table 16.1.)

PUBLIC INTEREST GROUPS One political scientist defines public interest groups as organizations “that seek a collective good, the achievement of which will not selectively and materially benefit the membership or activists of the organization.”10 For example, many Progressive era groups were created by upper- and middle-class women to solve the varied problems of new immigrants and the poor. Today, civil liberties groups, environmental groups, good government groups, peace groups, church groups, groups that speak out for those who cannot (such as children, the mentally ill, or animals), and even MoveOn.org are examples of public interest groups. Ironically, even though many of these groups are not well funded, they are highly visible and can actually wield more political clout than other better-funded groups.

Table 16.1 What are the characteristics of selected interest groups?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Founded)</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>PAC?</th>
<th>Fundraising—2010 Election Cycle*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Interest Groups</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AARP (1958)</td>
<td>40 million</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>$27,900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned Women for America (1974)</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>366,509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights Campaign (1980)</td>
<td>750,000</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>1,268,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) (1929)</td>
<td>115,000</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (1909)</td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic Interest Groups</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFL-CIO (1886)</td>
<td>11.5 million</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>1,692,335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Association for Justice (1946)</td>
<td>56,000</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6,265,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) (1895)</td>
<td>12 million</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>7,450,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Chamber of Commerce (1912)</td>
<td>3 million businesses</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>232,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good Government Groups</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Cause (1970)</td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>161,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Citizen, Inc. (1971)</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoveOn.org (1998)</td>
<td>5 million</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>39,860,865</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fundraising amounts are significantly less in off-year elections, such as the midterm election in 2010. Source: www.opensecrets.org (August 24, 2010).
**Economic Interest Groups**  Most groups have some sort of economic agenda, even if it only involves acquiring enough money in donations to pay the telephone bill or to send out the next mailing. Economic interest groups are, however, groups whose primary purpose is to promote the economic interests of their members. Historically, the three largest categories of economic interest groups were business groups (including trade and professional groups such as the American Medical Association), labor organizations (such as the AFL-CIO), and organizations representing the interests of farmers. The influence of farmers and labor unions is on the decline, however, as big businesses such as General Electric and AT&T spend increasingly large amounts contributing to campaigns and hiring lobbyists.

Groups that mobilize to protect particular economic interests generally are the most fully and effectively organized of all the types of interest groups. They exist to make profits and to obtain economic benefits for their members. To achieve these goals, however, they often find that they must resort to political means rather than trust the operation of economic markets to produce outcomes favorable for their members.

**Governmental Units**  State and local governments are becoming strong organized interests as they lobby the federal government or even charitable foundations for money for a vast array of state and local programs. The big intergovernmental associations and state and local governments want to make certain that they get their fair share of federal dollars in the form of block grants or pork-barrel projects. Most states, large cities, and even universities retain lobbyists in Washington, D.C., to advance their interests or to keep them informed about relevant legislation. States seek to influence the amount of money allotted to them in the federal budget. In fact, state and local governments may spend a significant proportion of their revenues trying to win federal earmarks, appropriations specifically targeted for programs within a state or congressional district, such as building roads, schools, enhancing parks or waterways, or other public works projects.

**Political Action Committees**  In 1974, amendments to the Federal Election Campaign Act made it legal for businesses, labor unions, and interest groups to form what were termed political action committees (PACs), officially registered fund-raising organizations that represent interest groups in the political process. Many elected officials also have leadership PACs to help them raise money for themselves and other candidates. Unlike interest groups, PACs do not have formal members; they simply have contributors who seek to influence public policy by electing legislators sympathetic to their aims. (To learn more about PACs, see chapter 14.)
The Development of American Interest Groups

Describe the historical development of American interest groups.

From his days in the Virginia Assembly, James Madison knew that factions occurred in all political systems and that the struggle for influence and power among such groups was inevitable in the political process. This knowledge led him and the other Framers to tailor a governmental system of multiple pressure points to check and balance these factions. It was their belief that the division of power between national and state governments and across the three branches would prevent any one individual or group of individuals from becoming too influential. They also believed that decentralizing power would neutralize the effect of special interests, who would not be able to spread their efforts throughout so many different levels of government. Thus, the “mischief of faction” could be lessened. But, as farsighted as they were, the Framers could not have envisioned the vast sums of money or technology that would be available to some interest groups as the nature of these groups evolved over time. (To learn more, see The Living Constitution: First Amendment.)

National Groups Emerge (1830–1889)

Although all kinds of local groups proliferated throughout the colonies and in the new states, it was not until the 1830s, as communications networks improved, that the first national groups emerged. Many of these groups were single-issue groups deeply rooted in the Christian religious revivalism that was sweeping the nation. Concern with humanitarian issues such as temperance, peace, education, slavery, and women’s rights led to the founding of numerous associations dedicated to solving these problems. Among the first of these groups was the American Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1833 by William Lloyd Garrison.

After the Civil War, more groups were founded. For example, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was created in 1874 with the goal of outlawing the sale of liquor. Its members, many of them quite religious, believed that the consumption of alcohol was an evil injurious to family life because many men drank away their paychecks, leaving no money to feed or clothe their families. The WCTU’s activities took conventional and unconventional forms, including organizing prayer groups, lobbying for prohibition legislation, conducting peaceful marches, and engaging in more violent protests such as the destruction of saloons.
This section of the First Amendment prohibits the national government from enacting laws dealing with the right of individuals to join together to make their voices known about their positions on a range of political issues. There was little debate on this clause in the U.S. House of Representatives, and none was recorded in the Senate. James Madison, however, warned of the perils of “discussing and proposing abstract propositions,” which this clause was for many years.

Freedom of association, a key concept that allows Americans to organize and join a host of political groups, grew out of a series of cases decided by the Supreme Court in the 1950s and 1960s when many southern states were trying to limit the activities of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). From the right to assemble and petition the government, along with the freedom of speech, the Supreme Court construed the right of people to come together to support or to protest government actions. First, the Court ruled that states could not compel interest groups to provide their membership lists to state officials. Later, the Court ruled that Alabama could not prohibit the NAACP from urging its members and others to file lawsuits challenging state discriminatory practices. Today, although states and localities can require organized interests to apply for permits to picket or protest, they cannot in any way infringe on their ability to assemble and petition in peaceable ways.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS
1. What role has protest played in American history?
2. Does requiring a government permit infringe on the right to protest? Under what conditions could a government permit be declined?
3. What is meant by “peaceable” protest? Should these words be strictly interpreted to prohibit physical violence, or could behaviors that are not physical be interpreted as nonpeaceable?

The Grange also was formed during the period following the Civil War. The Grange was created as an educational society for farmers to teach them about the latest agricultural developments. Although its charter formally stated that the Grange was not to become involved in politics, in 1876 it formulated a detailed plan to pressure Congress to enact legislation favorable to farmers.

Business interests also began to play even larger roles in both state and national politics during the late 1800s. A popular saying of the day noted that the Standard Oil Company did everything to the Pennsylvania legislature except refine it. Increasingly large trusts, monopolies, business partnerships, and corporate conglomerations in the oil, steel, and sugar industries became sufficiently powerful to control the votes of many representatives in the state and national legislatures.

Perhaps the most effective organized interest of the day was the railroad industry. In a move that couldn’t take place today because of its clear impropriety, the Central Pacific Railroad sent its own lobbyist to Washington, D.C., in 1861, where he eventually became the clerk (staff administrator) of the committees of both houses of Congress that were charged with overseeing regulation of the railroad industry. Subsequently, Congress awarded the Central Pacific Railroad (later called the Southern Pacific) vast grants of lands along its route and large subsidized loans. The railroad

**lobbyist**

Interest group representative who seeks to influence legislation that will benefit his or her organization or client through political and/or financial persuasion.
company became so powerful that it later went on to have nearly total political control of the California legislature.

**The Progressive Era (1890–1920)**

By the 1890s, a profound change had occurred in the nation’s political and social outlook. Rapid industrialization, an influx of immigrants, and monopolistic business practices created a host of problems including crime, poverty, squalid and unsafe working conditions, and widespread political corruption. Many Americans began to believe that new measures would be necessary to impose order on this growing chaos and to curb some of the more glaring problems in society. The political and social movement that grew out of these concerns was called the Progressive movement.

Progressive-era groups ranged from those rallying for public libraries and kindergartens to those seeking better labor conditions for workers—especially women and children. As discussed in chapter 5, some groups were dedicated to ending racial discrimination, including the NAACP. Groups also were formed to seek woman suffrage.

Not even the Progressives themselves could agree on what the term “progressive” actually meant, but their desire for reform led to an explosion of all types of interest groups, including single-issue, trade, labor, and the first public interest groups. Politically, the movement took the form of the Progressive Party, which sought on many fronts to limit or end the power of the industrialists’ near-total control of the steel, oil, railroad, and other key industries.

In response to the pressure applied by Progressive-era groups, the national government began to regulate business. Because businesses had a vested interest in keeping wages low and costs down, more business groups organized to consolidate their strength and to counter Progressive moves. Not only did governments have to mediate Progressive and business demands, but they also had to accommodate the role of organized labor, which often allied itself with Progressive groups against big business.

**Organized Labor**

Until the creation of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1886, there was not any real national union activity. The AFL brought skilled workers from several trades together into one stronger national organization for the first time. As the AFL grew in power, many business owners began to press individually or collectively to quash the unions. As business interests pushed states for what are called open shop laws to outlaw unions in their factories, the AFL became increasingly political. It also was forced to react to the success of big businesses’ use of legal injunctions to prohibit union organization. In 1914, massive lobbying by the AFL and its members led to passage of the Clayton Act, which labor leader Samuel Gompers hailed as the Magna Carta of the labor movement. This law allowed unions to organize free from prosecution and also guaranteed their right to strike, a powerful weapon against employers.

**Business Groups and Trade Associations**

The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) was founded in 1895 by manufacturers who had suffered business losses in the economic panic of 1893 and who believed that they were being affected adversely by the growth of organized labor. NAM first became active politically in 1913 when a major tariff bill was under congressional consideration. NAM’s tactics were “so insistent and abrasive” and its expenditures of monies so lavish that President Woodrow Wilson was forced to denounce its lobbying tactics as an “unbearable situation.” Congress immediately called for an investigation of NAM’s activities but found no member of Congress willing to testify that he had ever even encountered a member of NAM (probably because many members of Congress had received illegal contributions and gifts).

The second major business organization came into being in 1912, when the U.S. Chamber of Commerce was created with the assistance of the federal government. NAM, the Chamber of Commerce, and other trade associations, groups representing specific industries, were effective spokespersons for their member companies. They
were unable to defeat passage of the Clayton Act, but organized interests such as cotton manufacturers planned elaborate and successful campaigns to overturn key provisions of the act in the courts. Aside from the Clayton Act, innumerable pieces of pro-business legislation were passed by Congress, whose members continued to insist that they had never been contacted by business groups.

In 1928, the bubble burst for some business interests. At the Senate’s request, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) undertook a massive investigation of the lobbying tactics of the business community. The FTC’s examination of Congress revealed extensive illegal lobbying by yet another group, the National Electric Light Association (NELA). Not only did NELA lavishly entertain members of Congress, but it also went to great expense to educate the public on the virtues of electric lighting. Books and pamphlets were produced and donated to schools and public libraries to sway public opinion. Needy teachers and ministers who were willing to advocate electricity were helped with financial grants. Many considered these tactics unethical and held business in disfavor. These kinds of activities also led the public to view lobbyists in a negative light.

The Rise of the Interest Group State

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Progressive spirit reappeared in the rise of public interest groups. Generally, these groups devoted themselves to representing the interests of African Americans, women, the elderly, the poor, and consumers, or to working on behalf of the environment. Many of their leaders and members had been active in the civil rights and anti–Vietnam War movements of the 1960s. Other groups formed during the Progressive era, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the NAACP, gained renewed vigor. Many of them had as their patron the liberal Ford Foundation, which helped to bankroll numerous groups, including the Women’s Rights Project of the ACLU, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund (now called LatinoJustice PRLDEF), and the Native American Rights Fund. The American Association of Retired Persons, now simply called AARP, also came to prominence in this era.

The civil rights and anti-war struggles left many Americans feeling cynical about a government that they believed failed to respond to the will of the majority. They also believed that if citizens banded together, they could make a difference. Thus, two major new public interest groups—Common Cause and Public Citizen—were founded. Common Cause, a good-government group that acts as a watchdog over the federal government, is similar to some of the early Progressive movement’s public interest groups. Public Citizen is the collection of groups founded by Ralph Nader (who went on to run as a candidate for president in 1996 and subsequent elections). In 1965, the publication of Nader’s Unsafe at Any Speed thrust the young lawyer into the limelight. In this book, he charged that the Corvair, a General Motors (GM) car, was unsafe to drive; he produced voluminous evidence of how the car could flip over at average speeds on curved roads. In 1966, he testified about auto safety before Congress and then learned that GM had spied on him in an effort to discredit his work. The $250,000 that GM subsequently paid to Nader in an out-of-court settlement allowed him to establish a public citizen litigation center in 1971.

Conservative Response: Religious and Ideological Groups

Conservatives, concerned by the activities of these liberal public interest groups founded during the 1960s and 1970s, responded by forming religious and ideological groups that became a potent force in U.S. politics. In 1978, the Reverend Jerry Falwell founded the first major new religious group, the Moral Majority. The Moral Majority was widely credited with assisting in the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980 as well as with the defeats of several liberal Democratic senators that same year. Falwell claimed to have sent 3 to 4 million newly registered voters to the polls.
How do interest groups influence elections? Voter guides such as this one were distributed in conservative churches around the United States as well as at public places and events by the Christian Coalition. Critics charged that the guide distorted the positions of Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate.

Pat Robertson, a televangelist, formed the Christian Coalition in 1990. Since then, it has grown in power and influence. The Christian Coalition played an important role in the Republicans winning control of the Congress in 1994. In 2008, the group distributed millions of voter guides in churches throughout the United States.

The Christian Coalition is not the only conservative interest group to play an important role in the policy process as well as in elections at the state and national level. The National Rifle Association (NRA), an active opponent of gun control legislation, saw its membership rise in recent years, as well as its importance in Washington, D.C. The NRA and its political action committee spent more than $11 million trying to elect John McCain president in 2008. And, conservative groups such as Students for Academic Freedom have made their views known in the area of higher education.

BUSINESS GROUPS, CORPORATIONS, AND ASSOCIATIONS

Conservative business leaders, dissatisfied with the work of the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, also decided during the 1970s to start new organizations to advance their political and financial interests in Washington, D.C. The Business Roundtable, for example, was created in 1972. The Roundtable, whose members head about 150 large corporations, is “a fraternity of powerful and prestigious business leaders that tells 'business's side of the story' to legislators, bureaucrats, White House personnel, and other interested public officials.” It urges its members to engage in direct lobbying to influence the
course of policy formation. Its lobbying efforts were instrumental in the Bush administration’s decision to not honor the Kyoto Protocol on climate change because of its impact on American businesses.

Most large corporations, in addition to having their own governmental affairs departments, employ D.C.-based lobbyists to keep them apprised of legislation that may affect them, or to lobby bureaucrats for government contracts. In the past, large corporations also gave significant sums of soft money to favored politicians or political candidates.

**ORGANIZED LABOR** Membership in labor unions held steady throughout the early and mid-1900s and then skyrocketed toward the end of the Depression. By then, organized labor began to be a potent political force as it was able to turn out its members in support of particular political candidates, many of whom were Democrats.

Labor became a stronger force in U.S. politics when the American Federation of Labor (AFL) merged with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1955. Concentrating its efforts largely on the national level, the new AFL-CIO immediately turned its energies to pressuring the government to protect concessions won from employers at the bargaining table and to other issues of concern to its members, including minimum wage laws, the environment, civil rights, medical insurance, and health care.

More recently, the once fabled political clout of organized labor has been on the wane at the national level. Membership peaked at about 30 percent of the workforce in the late 1940s. Since that time, union membership has plummeted as the nation changed from a land of manufacturing workers and farmers to a nation of white-collar professionals and service workers.

Even worse for the future of the labor movement, at least in the short run, is the split that occurred at the AFL-CIO’s 2005 annual meeting, ironically the fiftieth anniversary of the joining of the two unions. Plagued by reduced union membership and
disagreement over goals, seven member unions, including three of its largest member unions, seceded from the AFL-CIO. The then-head of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Andy Stern, said the AFL-CIO had grown “pale, male, and stale.”

What Do Interest Groups Do?

16.3 . . . Identify several strategies and tactics used by organized interests.

Not all organized interests are political, but they may become politically active when their members believe that a government policy threatens or affects group goals. Interest groups also enhance political participation by motivating like-minded individuals to work toward a common goal. Legislators often are much more likely to listen to or be concerned about the interests of a group as opposed to the interests of any one individual.

Just as members of Congress are assumed to represent the interests of their constituents in Washington, D.C., interest groups are assumed to represent the interests of their members to policy makers at all levels of government. In the 1950s, for example, the NAACP was able to articulate the interests of African Americans to national decision makers even though as a group they had little or no electoral clout, especially in the South. Without the efforts of the civil rights groups discussed in chapter 6, it is unlikely that either the courts or Congress would have acted as quickly to make discrimination illegal. By banding together with others who have similar interests, all sorts of individuals—from railroad workers to women to physical therapists to campers to homosexuals to mushroom growers—can advance their collective interests. Getting celebrity support or hiring a lobbyist to advocate those interests in Washington, D.C. or a state capital also increases the likelihood that issues of concern to them will be addressed and acted on favorably.

There is a downside to interest groups, however. Because groups make claims on society, they can increase the cost of public policies. The elderly can push for more costly health care and Social Security programs; people with disabilities, for improved access to public buildings; industry, for tax loopholes; and veterans, for improved benefits that may be costly to other Americans. Many Americans believe that interest groups exist simply to advance their own selfish interests, with little
regard for the rights of other groups or, more importantly, of people not represented by any organized group.

Whether good or bad, interest groups play an important role in U.S. politics. In addition to enhancing the democratic process by providing increased representation and participation, they increase public awareness about important issues, help frame the public agenda, and often monitor programs to guarantee effective implementation. Most often, they accomplish these things through some sort of lobbying activities as well as participating in elections.

**Lobbying**

Most interest groups put lobbying at the top of their agendas. **Lobbying** is the activities of a group or organization that seek to persuade political leaders to support the group’s position. The exact origin of the term is disputed. In mid-seventeenth-century England, there was a room located near the floor of the House of Commons where members of Parliament would congregate and could be approached by their constituents and others who wanted to plead a particular cause. Similarly, in the United States, people often waited outside the chambers of the House and Senate to speak to members of Congress as they emerged. Because they waited in the lobbies to argue their cases, by the nineteenth century they were commonly referred to as lobbyists. Another piece of folklore explains that when Ulysses S. Grant was president, he would frequently walk from the White House to the Willard Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue just to relax in its comfortable and attractive lobby. Interest group representatives and those seeking favors from Grant would crowd into that lobby and try to press their claims. Soon they were nicknamed lobbyists.

Most politically active groups use lobbying to make their interests heard and understood by those who are in a position to influence or cause change in governmental policies. Depending on the type of group and on the role it is looking to play, lobbying can take many forms. You probably have never thought of the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts as political. Yet, when Congress began debating the passage of legislation dealing with discrimination in private clubs, representatives of both organizations testified in an attempt to persuade Congress to allow them to remain single-sex organizations.

There are multiple legal ways for lobbyists and organizations to influence policy at the state and national level. Almost all interest groups lobby by testifying at hearings and contacting legislators. Other groups also provide information that decision makers might not have the time, opportunity, or interest to gather on their own. Interest groups also file lawsuits or friend of the court briefs to lobby the courts, and some even engage in protests or demonstrations as a form of lobbying public opinion or decision makers.

**LOBBYING CONGRESS**  Members of Congress are the targets of a wide variety of lobbying activities: congressional testimony on behalf of a group, individual letters from interested constituents, campaign contributions, or the outright payment of money for votes. Of course, the last item is illegal, but there are numerous documented instances of money changing hands for votes.

Lobbying Congress and issue advocacy are skills that many people
have developed over the years. In 1869, for example, women gathered in Washington, D.C., for the second annual meeting of the National Woman Suffrage Association and marched to Capitol Hill to hear one of their members (unsuccessfully) ask Congress to pass legislation to enfranchise women under the terms of the Fourteenth Amendment. Practices such as these floor speeches are no longer permitted.

Today, many effective lobbyists are former members of Congress, staff aides, or other Washington insiders. These connections help them to develop close relationships with senators and House members in an effort to enhance their access to the policy-making process. A symbiotic relationship between members of Congress, interest group representatives, and affected bureaucratic agencies often develops. In these iron triangles and issue networks (discussed in chapter 9), congressional representatives and their staff members, who face an exhausting workload and legislation they frequently know little about, often look to lobbyists for information. “Information is the currency on Capitol Hill, not dollars,” said one lobbyist.19 According to one aide: “My boss demands a speech and a statement for the Congressional Record for every bill we introduce or co-sponsor—and we have a lot of bills. I just can’t do it all myself. The better lobbyists, when they have a proposal they are pushing, bring it to me along with a couple of speeches, a Record insert, and a fact sheet.”20 (To learn more about why lobbying firms seek to hire former members of Congress, see Politics Now: Wall St. Ramps Up Lobbying on Hill.)

Not surprisingly, lobbyists work most closely with representatives who share their interests.21 A lobbyist from the NRA, for example, would be unlikely to try to influence a liberal representative who was on record as strongly in favor of gun control. It is much more effective for a group such as the NRA to provide useful information for its supporters and to those who are undecided. Good lobbyists also can encourage members to file amendments to bills favorable to their interests, as was evident in the recent health care debate. They also can urge their supporters in Congress to make speeches (often written by the group) and to pressure their colleagues in the chamber.

A lobbyist’s effectiveness depends largely on his or her reputation for fair play and provision of accurate information. No member of Congress wants to look uninformed. As one member noted: “It doesn’t take very long to figure out which lobbyists are straightforward, and which ones are trying to snow you. The good ones will give you the weak points as well as the strong points of their case. If anyone ever gives me false or misleading information, that’s it—I’ll never see him again.”22

**LOBBYING THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH**

As the executive branch has increasingly concerned itself with shaping legislation, executive branch lobbying efforts have increased in frequency and importance. Groups often target one or more levels of the executive branch because there are so many potential access points, including the president, White House staff, and the numerous levels of the executive branch bureaucracy. Groups try to work closely with the administration to influence policy decisions at their formulation and later implementation stages. As with congressional lobbying, the effectiveness of a group often depends on its ability to provide decision makers with important information and a sense of where the public stands on
What Do Interest Groups Do?

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the issue. The National Women’s Law Center, for example, has been instrumental in seeing that Title IX, which was passed by Congress to mandate educational equity for women and girls, be enforced fully.

LOBBETING THE COURTS  The courts, too, have proved a useful target for interest groups.23 Although you might think that the courts decide cases that affect only the parties involved or that they should be immune from political pressures, interest groups for years have recognized the value of lobbying the courts, especially the U.S. Supreme Court, and many political scientists view it as a form of political participation.24

Generally, interest group lobbying of the courts can take two forms: direct sponsorship or the filing of amicus curiae briefs. Sponsorship involves providing resources (financial, human, or otherwise) to shepherd a case through the judicial system. When a case a group is interested in but not actually sponsoring comes before a court, the organization often will file an amicus brief—either alone or with other like-minded groups—to inform the justices of the group’s policy preferences, generally offered in the guise of legal arguments. Over the years, as the number of both liberal and conservative

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What other reasons might lobbying firms have for hiring former members and staffers?
2. Former members and staffers must currently wait one year before they can become lobbyists. Should this waiting period be extended? What other limitations, if any, might be necessary?
3. How might the relationships discussed in this article affect public policy outcomes?

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Wall St. Ramps Up Lobbying on Hill

By Erika Lovley

Wall Street has dramatically expanded its influence on Capitol Hill over the past year, using a lobbying army that includes nearly 1,500 former federal employees and 73 former members of Congress who have been deployed during debate on financial reform legislation.

Citigroup, Visa, the American Bankers Association, Prudential Financial and Goldman Sachs have drawn some of the top experts from Capitol Hill—with each organization registering nearly 50 people who formerly worked in the government, according to a joint report released today by the Center for Responsive Politics and Public Citizen. . . .

Of the 73 lawmakers-turned-lobbyists touting Wall Street’s interests, 17 served on congressional bank committees during their time in office, including former House Financial Services Committee Chairman Michael Oxley (R–Ohio), a co-author of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. . . .

“Wall Street hires former members of Congress and their staff for a reason,” said Public Citizen Congress Watch Division Director David Arkush. “These people are influential because they have personal relationships with current members and staff. It’s hard to say no to your friends.”

Besides members of Congress, Wall Street bankers have also snapped up some of the brightest former staffers from financial committees.

At least 66 registered financial lobbyists previously worked as staffers on either a House or Senate banking committee, and 82 worked for members of Congress who sat on one of the banking committees. Another 42 served at some point in the Treasury Department with at least seven serving in some form in the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency. . . .

Even more intriguing, dozens of current banking lobbyists have previously worked for members of Congress who are still serving on the Senate or House Banking Committees—a key relationship connection. . . .

“Companies pay a premium for lobbyists who’ve spun through the revolving door because it can be a small price to pay relative to the huge payoff if they can shape legislation,” said Center for Responsive Politics Executive Director Sheila Krumholz. “Without a doubt, the goal is to weaken the legislation.” . . .
groups viewing litigation as a useful tactic has increased, so has the number of briefs submitted to the courts. Most major U.S. Supreme Court cases noted in this book have been sponsored by an interest group, or one or both of the parties in the case have been supported by an *amicus curiae* brief. Interest groups also file *amicus* briefs in lower federal and state supreme courts, but in much lower numbers.

In addition to litigating, interest groups try to influence who is nominated to the federal courts. For example, they play an important role in judicial nominees’ Senate confirmation hearings, as discussed in chapter 10. In 1991, for example, 112 groups testified or filed prepared statements for or against the controversial nomination of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 2009, 218 groups testified or prepared statements for or against the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. The diversity of groups was astounding, from gun rights groups to pro-choice groups, women’s groups, and Hispanic advocacy organizations.

It is also becoming increasingly more common for interest groups of all persuasions to pay for trips for judges to attend “informational conferences” or simply to interact with judges by paying for club memberships and golf outings. In fact, many commentators criticized the absence of Justice Antonin Scalia from the swearing in of Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., because Scalia was on a golf outing in Colorado. This outing was part of a legal conference sponsored by the Federalist Society, a conservative group that was very influential in judicial appointments during the Bush administration.

**GRASSROOTS LOBBYING** Interest groups regularly try to inspire their members to engage in grassroots lobbying, hoping that lawmakers will respond to those pressures and the attendant publicity. In essence, the goal of many organizations is to persuade ordinary voters to serve as their advocates. In the world of lobbying, there are few things more useful than a list of committed supporters. Radio and television talk-show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck try to stir up their listeners by urging them to contact their representatives in Washington, D.C. Other interest groups use petition drives and carefully targeted and costly television advertisements pitching one side of an argument. It is also routine for interest groups to e-mail or text message their members and to provide a direct Web link as well as suggested text that citizens can use to lobby their legislators.

**PROTESTS AND RADICAL ACTIVISM** An occasional though highly visible tactic used by some groups is protest activity. Although it is much more usual for a group’s members to opt for more conventional forms of lobbying or to influence policy through the electoral process, when these forms of pressure-group activities are unsuccessful, some groups (or individuals within groups) resort to more forceful measures to attract attention to their cause. Since the Revolutionary War, violent, illegal protest has been one tactic of organized interests. The Boston Tea Party, for example, involved breaking all sorts of laws, although no one was hurt physically. Other forms of protest, such as the Whiskey Rebellion, ended in tragedy for some participants.

Today, anti-war activists, animal rights activists, and some pro-life groups, such as Operation Rescue, at times rely on illegal protest activities. Members of the Animal Liberation Front, for example, stalked the wife of a pharmaceutical executive, broke into her car, stole her credit cards, and then made over $20,000 in unauthorized charitable donations. Members of this group also use circus bombings, the sabotage of restaurants, and property destruction to gain attention for their cause. Other radical groups also post on the Web the names and addresses of those they believe to be engaging in wrongful activity and urge members to take action against these people. Some groups have faced federal terrorism charges for these illegal actions.
Election Activities

In addition to trying to achieve their goals (or at least draw attention to them) by lobbying, many interest groups also become involved more directly in the electoral process. The 2008 Republican and Democratic National Conventions, for example, were the targets of significant organized interest group protests concerning each party’s stance on a variety of issues, including the U.S.-led war in Iraq, same-sex marriage, the environment, immigration, and reproductive rights.

**CANDIDATE RECRUITMENT AND ENDORSEMENTS** Some interest groups recruit, endorse, and/or provide financial or other forms of support for political candidates. EMILY’s List (EMILY stands for “Early money is like yeast—it makes the dough rise”) was founded to support pro-choice Democratic women candidates, especially during party primary election contests. It now also recruits and trains candidates. In 2008, EMILY’s List not only provided over $30 million in direct contributions to candidates, but also mobilized volunteers, provided campaign consultants, and paid for some direct media.

Candidate endorsements also play an important role in focusing voters’ attention on candidates who advocate policies consistent with an interest group’s beliefs. In addition, endorsements may help to mobilize group members. Many members of groups supporting Barack Obama in 2008 provided much needed volunteers and enthusiasm.

**GETTING OUT THE VOTE** Many interest groups believe they can influence public policy by putting like-minded representatives in office. To that end, many groups across the ideological spectrum launch massive get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts. These include identifying prospective voters and getting them to the polls on Election Day. Well-financed interest groups such as the liberal MoveOn.org and its conservative counterpart, Progress for America, often produce issue-oriented ads for newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet designed to educate the public as well as increase voter interest in election outcomes. (To learn more about the efforts of parties and candidates to turn out voters, see chapters 12 and 13.)

**RATING THE CANDIDATES OR OFFICE HOLDERS** Many ideological groups rate candidates to help their members (and the general public) evaluate the voting records of members of Congress. The American Conservative Union (conservative) and Americans for Democratic Action (liberal)—two groups at ideological polar extremes—routinely rate candidates and members of Congress based on their votes on key issues. (To learn more about interest group ratings, see Analyzing Visuals: Interest Group Ratings of Selected Members of Congress.)

**CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS** As discussed in chapter 14, corporations, labor unions, and interest groups may give money to political candidates in a number of ways. Organized interests are allowed to form political action committees (PACs) to raise money to contribute directly to political candidates in national elections. PAC money plays a significant role in the campaigns of many congressional incumbents, often averaging over half a House candidate’s total campaign spending. PACs generally contribute to those who have helped them before and who serve on committees or subcommittees that routinely consider legislation of concern to that group. In 2008, the average Senate candidate received $2 million from PACs, and the average House candidate received $600,000.

Some organized interests may also prefer to make campaign expenditures through soft money groups such as 527s or 501(c) groups. Money raised by these groups may not be given to or spent in coordination with a candidates’ campaign. However, it may be used for issue advocacy, which may help a group’s preferred candidate indirectly. Soft money groups have been major players in recent elections, spending over $400 million in 2008.
What Makes Interest Groups Successful?

16.4 Analyze the factors that make an interest group successful.

All of the groups discussed in this chapter have one thing in common: they all want to shape the public agenda, whether by helping to elect candidates, maintaining the status quo, or obtaining favorable legislation or rulings from Congress, executive agencies, or the courts. For powerful groups, simply making sure that certain issues never get discussed may be the goal. In contrast, those opposed to other issues, such as random stops of Hispanic drivers to check for proof of legal resident status, win when the issue becomes front-page news and law enforcement officials feel pressured to investigate the discriminatory practice of racial or ethnic profiling.

Groups often claim credit for winning legislation, court cases, or even elections individually or in coalition with other groups. They also are successful when their leaders become elected officials or policy makers in any of the three branches of the
government. For example, Representative Rosa DeLauro (D–CT) was a former political director of EMILY’s List. President Barack Obama worked as a grassroots community organizer for a variety of Chicago–based groups.

Political scientists have studied several phenomena that contribute in varying degrees—individually and collectively—to particular groups’ successes. These include leaders, funding and patrons, and a solid membership base.

**Leaders**

Interest group theorists frequently acknowledge the key role that leaders play in the formation, viability, and success of interest groups while noting that leaders often vary from rank-and-file members on various policies. Without the powerful pen of William Lloyd Garrison in the 1830s, who knows whether the abolition movement would have been as successful? Other notable leaders include Frances Willard of the WCTU, Marian Wright Edelman who founded Children’s Defense Fund, and the Reverend Pat Robertson of the Christian Coalition.

The role of an interest group leader is similar to that of an entrepreneur in the business world. Leaders of groups must find ways to attract members. As in the marketing of a new product, an interest group leader must offer something attractive to persuade members to join. Potential members of the group must be convinced that the benefits of joining outweigh the costs. Union members, for example, must be persuaded that the cost of their union dues will be offset by the union’s winning higher wages and concessions for them.

**Funding and Patrons**

Advertising, litigating, and lobbying are expensive. Without financiers, few public interest groups could survive their initial start-up periods. Many interest groups rely on membership dues, direct-mail solicitations, and patrons to remain in business. Charismatic leaders often are especially effective fundraisers and recruiters of new members. In addition, governments, foundations, and wealthy individuals can serve as patrons, providing crucial start-up funds for groups, especially public interest groups.

**Members**

Organizations usually are composed of three kinds of members. At the top are a relatively small number of leaders who devote most of their energies to the single group. The second tier of members generally is involved psychologically as well as organizationally. They are the workers of the group—they attend meetings, pay dues, and chair committees to see that things get done. In the bottom tier are the rank and file members who don’t actively participate. They pay their dues and call themselves group members, but they do little more. Most group members fall into this last category.

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**Who are interest group leaders?** As president of the Children’s Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman continues to fight against child poverty and for better health care.

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**Agricultural Interests in France**

In France, less than 5 percent of the population is engaged in agricultural farming, and less than 3 percent of the country’s economy is devoted to agriculture. Historically, however, France’s National Farmers’ Union has been especially powerful and, despite its small size, very adept at resisting limits to agricultural subsidies from the European Union and attempts to open agricultural markets globally.

- What role do agricultural interest groups play in American politics today? How might this role be affected by issues on the governmental agenda?
- What are some of the interest groups in the United States that exercise political influence disproportionate to their size? Why do you think their influence is so disproportionate?
- Think of interest groups with which you are familiar in the United States. Would these or similar groups be successful in France or other parts of the world? Why or why not?
Since the 1960s, survey data have revealed that group membership is drawn primarily from people with higher income and education levels. Individuals who are wealthier can afford to belong to more organizations because they have more money and, often, more leisure time. Money and education also are associated with greater confidence that one’s actions will bring results, a further incentive to devote time to organizing or supporting interest groups. These elites also are often more involved in politics and hold stronger opinions on many political issues.

People who do belong to groups often belong to more than one. Overlapping memberships often can affect the cohesiveness of a group. Imagine, for example, that you are an officer in the College Republicans. If you call a meeting, people may not attend because they have academic, athletic, or social obligations. Divided loyalties and multiple group memberships frequently affect the success of a group, especially if any one group has too many members who simply fall into the dues-paying category.

Groups vary tremendously in their ability to enroll what are called potential members. According to Mancur Olson, all groups provide a collective good. If one union member at a factory gets a raise, for example, all other workers at that factory will, too. Therefore, those who don’t join or work for the benefit of the group still reap the rewards of the group’s activity. The downside of this phenomenon is called the free rider problem. As Olson asserts, potential members may be unlikely to join a group because they realize that they will receive many of the benefits the group achieves, regardless of their participation. Not only is it irrational for free riders to join any group, but the bigger the group, the greater the free rider problem.

Thus, groups provide a variety of material benefits to convince potential members to join. The American Automobile Association, for example, offers roadside assistance and trip planning services to its members. Similarly, AARP offers a wide range of discount programs to its 35 million members over the age of fifty. Many of those members do not necessarily support all of the group’s positions but simply want to take advantage of its discounts.

Individuals may also choose to join groups despite the free rider problem once a policy environment appears to threaten existing rights. Joining a group may also be necessary to establish credibility in a field. Many lawyers, for example, join local bar associations for this reason.

In addition, groups may form alliances with other groups to help overcome the free rider problem. These alliances have important implications. For example, over one hundred groups belong to the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, which lobbies for the enforcement of Title IX.

Interest groups also carve out policy niches to differentiate themselves to potential members as well as policy makers. One study of gay and lesbian groups, for example, found that they avoided direct competition by developing different issue niches. Some concentrate on litigation; others lobby for marriage law reform or open inclusion of gays in the military.

Small groups often have an organizational advantage because, for example, in a small group such as the National Governors Association, any individual’s share of the collective good may be great enough to make it rational for him or her to join. Patrons, be they large foundations such as the Ford Foundation or individuals such as wealthy financier George Soros, often eliminate the free rider problem for public interest groups. They make the costs of joining minimal because they contribute much of the group’s necessary financial support.
TOWARD REFORM: Regulating Interest Groups and Lobbyists

16.5 . . . Explain reform efforts geared toward regulating interest groups and lobbyists.

For the first 150 years of our nation’s history, federal lobbying practices went unregulated. While the courts remain largely free of lobbying regulations, reforms have altered the state of affairs in Congress and the executive branch.

Regulating Congressional Lobbyists

In 1946, in an effort to limit the power of lobbyists, Congress passed the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act, which required anyone hired to lobby any member of Congress to register and file quarterly financial reports. For years, few lobbyists actually filed these reports and numerous good government groups continued to argue for the strengthening of lobbying laws.

By 1995, public opinion polls began to show that Americans believed the votes of members of Congress were available to the highest bidder. Thus, in late 1995, Congress passed the first effort to regulate lobbying since the 1946 act. The Lobbying Disclosure Act employed a strict definition of lobbyist (one who devotes at least 20 percent of a client’s or employer’s time to lobbying activities). It also required lobbyists to: (1) register with the clerk of the House and the secretary of the Senate; (2) report their clients and issues and the agency or house they lobbied; and, (3) estimate the amount they are paid by each client. These reporting requirements made it easier for watchdog groups or the media to monitor lobbying activities. In fact, a comprehensive analysis by the Center for Responsive Politics revealed that by the end of 2009, 13,754 lobbyists were registered. Nearly $3 million was spent on lobbying for every member of Congress. 43

After lobbyist Jack Abramoff pleaded guilty to extensive corruption charges in 2006, Congress pledged to reexamine the role of lobbyists in the legislative process. After the Democrats took control of both houses of Congress in 2007 in the wake of a variety of lobbying scandals, they were able to pass the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007. Among the act’s key provisions were a ban on gifts and honoraria to members of Congress and their staffs, tougher disclosure requirements, and longer time limits on moving from the federal government to the private lobbying sector. Many observers complained, however that the law did not go far enough. In particular, many commentators were critical of the fact that the ban on gifts applied only to private lobbyists. Thus, state and local agencies and public universities, which spent over $130 million in 2006 to obtain earmarks, are still free to offer tickets for football and basketball games, and provide meals and travel. 44 (To learn more about the debate over the revolving door between Congress and lobbying firms, see Join the Debate: Should Former Members of Congress Be Allowed to Become Lobbyists?)

Regulating Executive Branch Lobbyists

Formal lobbying of the executive branch is governed by some restrictions in the 1995 Lobbying Disclosure Act as well as updates contained in the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007. Executive branch employees are also constrained by the 1978 Ethics in Government Act. (To learn more about the Ethics in Government Act, see Table 16.2.) Enacted in the wake of the Watergate scandal, this act attempted to curtail questionable moves by barring members of the executive branch from representing Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007

Lobbying reform banning gifts to members of Congress and their staffs, toughening disclosure requirements, and increasing time limits on moving from the federal government to the private sector.
Join the DEBATE

Should Former Members of Congress Be Allowed to Become Lobbyists?

Former members of Congress make particularly effective lobbyists. They have an intimate understanding of the ins and outs of the legislative process, they develop friendships with other members of Congress, and they have access to members-only gyms and restaurants in the Capitol building. This access makes lobbying a lucrative industry for former members. According to a 2010 report by the watchdog group Public Citizen, 43 percent of all members of Congress who have left office since 1998 have subsequently become lobbyists, petitioning their former colleagues in the House or Senate.¹

However, the revolving door between Congress and lobbying firms has served to undermine public confidence in Congress. Allowing former members to use their unprecedented access to the advantage of their clients has an air of impropriety. Many citizens also believe that buying this sort of access undermines the democratic process and limits citizens’ access to their legislators.

To address these concerns, in 2010, Public Citizen launched a campaign asking retiring members of Congress to sign a pledge that they would not accept employment with firms lobbying Congress for two years after leaving office, and Senator Michael Bennet (D–CO) introduced a bill that would ban members of Congress from lobbying for life. But no member of Congress has signed Public Citizen’s pledge, and Senator Bennet has yet to receive a committee hearing for the proposed legislation. Given their potential impact on the legislative process, should former members of Congress be permitted to become lobbyists?

To develop an ARGUMENT FOR allowing members of Congress to become lobbyists, think about how:

- Lobbying by former members of Congress promotes healthy competition among interest groups. How does better representation of a diverse array of interests promote better public policy? How might having members of Congress as lobbyists actually allow more citizens’ voices to be heard in the legislative process?
- Former members of Congress may provide better information than other lobbyists. How is information the currency of Capitol Hill? Why might former members be better able to help current legislators craft policies that achieve their stated goals than other lobbyists?
- There are already sufficient checks in place to limit the undue influence of lobbyists. How do the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 and the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007 limit the activities of former members and prevent them from receiving special treatment as lobbyists?

To develop an ARGUMENT AGAINST allowing members of Congress to become lobbyists, think about how:

- Lobbying by former members of Congress undermines the ability of ordinary citizens to influence the political process. Can individuals get their voices heard when forced to compete with the organized efforts and the money of lobbyists in Washington? How do former members of Congress’s personal knowledge, contacts, and virtually unfettered access give them an unfair advantage?
- Members of Congress may be biased toward information provided by their former colleagues and friends. Will members of Congress do as thorough a job of researching and verifying information when it comes from lobbyists that are former colleagues? In what ways might this negatively affect policy outcomes?
- The appearance of impropriety undermines the public’s confidence in the job performance of Congress. Even if there is no actual impropriety, will the public be able to trust that members of Congress who are former or future lobbyists have their best interests at heart? In what ways might stricter rules on lobbying improve public confidence and trust in Congress?

¹The report from Public Citizen, entitled Congressional Revolving Doors: The Journey from Congress to K Street, is available at www.lobbyinginfo.org.
any clients before their agency for two years after leaving governmental service. Thus, someone who worked in air pollution policy for the Environmental Protection Agency and then went to work for the Environmental Defense Fund would have to wait two years before lobbying his or her old agency.

More recently, the Obama administration has implemented reforms that bring congressional-style lobbying regulation to the executive branch. In regulations put into place on his first day on the job, Barack Obama limited aides leaving the White House from lobbying executive agencies within two years. He also banned members of the administration from accepting gifts from lobbyists.

### Table 16.2 What are the key provisions of the Ethics in Government Act?

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<td>1. <strong>Financial disclosure</strong></td>
<td>The president, vice president, and top-ranking executive employees must file annual public financial disclosure reports that list:</td>
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<td>- The source and amount of all earned income; all income from stocks, bonds, and property; any investments or large debts; the source of a spouse’s income, if any.</td>
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<td>- Any position or offices held in any business, labor, or nonprofit organizations.</td>
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<td>2. <strong>Employment after government service</strong></td>
<td>Former executive branch employees may not:</td>
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<td>- Represent anyone before an agency for two years after leaving government service on matters that came within the former employees’ sphere or responsibility (even if they were not personally involved in the matter).</td>
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<td>- Represent anyone on any matter before their former agency for one year after leaving it, even if the former employees had no connection with the matter while in the government.</td>
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What Should I Have LEARNED?

*Now that you have read this chapter, you should be able to:*

**16.1 Trace the roots of the American interest group system, p. 511.**

An organized interest is a collection of people or groups with shared attitudes who make claims on government. Political scientists approach the development of interest groups from a number of theoretical perspectives, including pluralist theory, the transactions approach, and neopluralist theories such as population ecology. Interest groups can be classified in a variety of different ways based on their functions and membership.

**16.2 Describe the historical development of American interest groups, p. 514.**

Interest groups did not begin to emerge in the United States until the 1830s. From 1890 to 1920, the Progressive movement dominated. The 1960s saw the rise of a wide variety of liberal interest groups. During the 1970s and 1980s, legions of conservatives formed new groups to counteract those efforts. Business groups, corporations, and unions also established their presence in Washington, D.C. during this time.

**16.3 Identify several strategies and tactics used by organized interests, p. 520.**

Interest groups often fill voids left by the major political parties and give Americans opportunities to make organized claims on government. The most common activity of interest groups is lobbying, which takes many forms. Groups routinely pressure members of Congress and their staffs, the president and the bureaucracy, and the courts; they use a variety of techniques to educate and stimulate the public to pressure key governmental decision makers. Interest groups also attempt to influence the outcome of elections; some run their own candidates for office. Others rate elected officials to inform their members how particular legislators stand on issues of importance to them. Political action committees (PACs), a way for some groups to contribute money to candidates for office, are another method of gaining support from elected officials and ensuring that supportive officials stay in office.

**16.4 Analyze the factors that make an interest group successful, p. 526.**

Interest group success can be measured in a variety of ways, including a group’s ability to get its issues on the public agenda, winning key pieces of legislation in Congress or executive branch or judicial rulings, or backing successful candidates. Several factors contribute to interest group success, including leaders and patrons, funding, and committed members.

**16.5 Explain reform efforts geared toward regulating interest groups and lobbyists, p. 529.**

It was not until 1946 that Congress passed any laws regulating federal lobbying. Those laws were largely ineffective and were successfully challenged as violations
of the First Amendment. In 1995, Congress passed the Lobbying Disclosure Act that required lobbyists to register with both houses of Congress. By 2007, a rash of scandals resulted in the sweeping reforms called the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act, which dramatically limited what lobbyists can do. The executive branch is also regulated by the 1978 Ethics in Government Act.

Test Yourself: Interest Groups

16.1 Trace the roots of the American interest group system, p. 511.
Business groups, labor organizations, and trade and professional groups would best be classified as which of the following kinds of interest groups?
A. Public interest groups
B. Good government groups
C. Economic interest groups
D. Governmental units
E. Political action committees

16.2 Describe the historical development of American interest groups, p. 514.
Which political and social movement started in the 1890s and grew out of concerns about the effects of rapid industrialization, an influx of immigrants, and monopolistic business practices?
A. The Progressive movement
B. The Industrial Revolution
C. The labor movement
D. The Grange
E. The Christian revivalism movement

16.3 Identify several strategies and tactics used by organized interests, p. 520.
An interest group files an amicus curiae brief to
A. sponsor a case heard before the Court.
B. respond to a ruling against the interests of the group.
C. inform the courts of its policy preferences.
D. to respond to a judicial request for additional information on the implications of decisions.
E. to seek clarification on a ruling of the Court.

16.4 Analyze the factors that make an interest group successful, p. 526.
What is one of the downsides of being an interest group that provides a collective good?

16.5 Explain reform efforts geared toward regulating interest groups and lobbyists, p. 529.
The Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007 was passed in large part due to
A. Republicans seeking to limit the influence of interest groups.
B. the lack of any previous efforts to control the activities of lobbyists.
C. lobbying scandals that came to light around the 2006 midterm elections.
D. complaints about the ban on gifts that applied only to private lobbyists.
E. the desire to make lobbying registration more efficient for lobbyists.

Essay Questions
1. What was the government’s response to the Progressive movement?
2. What is a political action committee?
3. How do lobbyists seek to influence the different branches of government?
4. How has the interest group landscape changed since 1970?
5. What are some of the components of the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995?

Key Terms

civic virtue, p. 510
collective good, p. 511
disturbance theory, p. 511
earmark, p. 513
economic interest group, p. 513
free rider problem, p. 528
Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007, p. 529
interest group, p. 511
lobbying, p. 521
lobbyist, p. 515
patron, p. 527
pluralist theory, p. 511
political action committee (PAC), p. 513
population ecology theory, p. 512
public interest group, p. 512
social capital, p. 510
trade association, p. 516
transactions theory, p. 511
To Learn More on Interest Groups

In the Library


On the Web

To learn more about specific interest groups discussed in this chapter, type the name of the group into an Internet search engine and ask yourself the following questions as you explore the group’s Web site:

- What are this group’s stated goals?
- What are the requirements to become a member of the group?
- Does the group provide information that can be used by anyone, even someone not interested in formally joining the group?
- On its Web site, does this group explicitly oppose any other interest groups?

To learn more about how interest groups grade your political representatives, go to Project Vote Smart at [www.votesmart.org](http://www.votesmart.org) and click “Interest Group Ratings” on the home page.

To learn more about interest group fundraising, go to the Center for Responsive Politics’s Web site at [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org).

To learn more about lobbying reform efforts, go to Thomas, the legislative information section of the Library of Congress, at [thomas.loc.gov](http://thomas.loc.gov). Search for the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 and the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007 in order to find out more about the lobbying restrictions required by this legislation.