

## **Pressure group; Special interest group**

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**Abstract :** *Interest group, also called special interest group or pressure group, any association of individuals or organizations, usually formally organized, that, on the basis of one or more shared concerns, attempts to influence public policy in its favor. All interest groups share a desire to affect government policy to benefit themselves or their causes. Their goal could be a policy that exclusively benefits group members or one segment of society (e.g., government subsidies for farmers) or a policy that advances a broader public purpose (e.g., improving air quality). They attempt to achieve their goals by lobbying—that is, by attempting to bring pressure to bear on policy makers to gain policy outcomes in their favor.*

*The common goals and sources of interest groups obscure, however, the fact that they vary widely in their form and lobbying strategies both within and across political systems. This article provides a broad overview that explains these differences and the role that interest groups play in society.*

**Keywords:** *Influence, Interest Group, Lobbying, Pluralism, Political Systems, Public Policy.*

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### **I. Introduction**

An interest group is usually a formally organized association that seeks to influence public policy. This broad definition, increasingly used by scholars, contrasts with older, narrower ones that include only private associations that have a distinct, formal organization, such as Guatemala's Mutual Support Group (human rights organization). One problem with such a narrow definition is that many formally organized entities are not private. The most important lobbying forces in any society are the various entities of government: national, regional, and local government agencies and institutions such as the military. Another reason to opt for a broad definition is that in all societies there are many informal groups that are, in effect, interest groups but would not be covered by the narrower definition. For example, in all political systems there are influential groups of political and professional elites that may not be recognized as formal groups but are nonetheless crucial in informally influencing public policy.

The term interest rather than interest group is often used to denote broad or less-formalized political constituencies, such as the agricultural interest and the environmental interest—segments of society that may include many formal interest groups. Similarly, interest is often used when considering government entities working to influence other governments (e.g., a local government seeking to secure funding from the national government). In authoritarian and developing societies, where formal interest groups are restricted or not as well developed, interest is often used to designate broader groupings such as government elites and tribal leaders.

### **II. Types of interests and interest groups**

Interests and interest groups in all types of political systems can be placed broadly in five categories: economic interests, cause groups, public interests, private and public institutional interests, and non-associational groups and interests. Economic interest groups are ubiquitous and the most prominent in all countries. There are several different kinds of economic interests: business groups (e.g., the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, the Confederation of British Industry, and the Nestlé Corporation, headquartered in Switzerland and with operations throughout the world), labor groups (e.g., IG Metal in Germany, the Trades Union Congress in the United Kingdom, and the AFL–CIO in the United States), farm groups (e.g., the Irish Farmers' Association in the republic of Ireland and the American Farm Bureau Federation), and professional groups (e.g., the American Bar Association and the Czech Chamber of Doctors).

Cause groups are those that represent a segment of society but whose primary purpose is noneconomic and usually focused on promoting a particular cause or value. This category is wide-ranging, including churches and religious organizations (e.g., Catholic Action in Italy). Some cause groups are single-issue groups, focusing very narrowly on their issue to the exclusion of all others—such as those favoring or opposing abortion rights or foxhunting—though most cause groups are more broadly based.

Whereas economic interests and most cause groups benefit a narrow constituency, public interest groups promote issues of general public concern (e.g., environmental protection, human rights, and consumer rights). Many public interest groups operate in a single country (e.g., the Federal Association of Citizen-Action Groups for Environmental Protection in Germany). Others, such as the Sierra Club, which has chapters in the

United States and Canada, may operate in only a few countries. Increasingly, however, many public interest groups have a much broader international presence, with activities in many countries (e.g., Amnesty International and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines).

Private and public institutional interests constitute another important category. These are not membership groups (hence, they are termed interests as opposed to interest groups) but private organizations such as businesses or public entities such as government departments. However, similar to interest groups, they attempt to affect public policy in their favor. Private institutional interests include think tanks such as the Brookings Institution in the United States and the Adam Smith Institute in the United Kingdom; private universities; and various forms of news media, particularly newspapers, that advocate on behalf of a particular issue or philosophy. But by far the largest component of this category is government in its many forms. At the national level, government agencies, such as the British Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, lobby on their own behalf to secure funding or to prioritize certain issues; at the regional level, public universities lobby the appropriate government (e.g., provincial governments in Canada and state governments in the United States) for funding or legislation that benefits them; at the local level, school boards may lobby the local government for money for a new school gymnasium or for more funding for educational programs. At the international level, the United Nations may lobby its members to pay their outstanding contributions to the organization or to carry out Security Council resolutions.

Governmental institutional interests are often the most important interests in authoritarian regimes, where private interest groups are severely restricted or banned. In communist countries (both before and since the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe), such governmental interests have included economic planning and agricultural agencies and the secret police. In some Muslim countries (e.g., Iran and Saudi Arabia), religious institutions are prominent interests. Although formally organized associations play a predominant role in traditional lobbying efforts, non-associational groups and interests often have an important influence. Such interests lack a formal organization or permanent structure. They include spontaneous protest movements formed in reaction to a particular policy or event and informal groups of citizens and officials of public or private organizations. For example, French farmers have sometimes held up traffic in Paris to protest government agricultural policy. Elsewhere protesters have mounted large-scale demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO), such as those in Seattle, Wash., in 1999; some Catholic bishops have worked in Latin America to promote human rights; and large landowners in India have utilized their personal ties with local assemblies and state and national political party organizations to protect against major land reforms.

Political systems at different levels of development and with different types of regimes manifest different combinations and varying ranges of these five types of interest groups. In Western Europe, Canada, the United States, and Japan, for example, each of the five types of interests are represented in large numbers and have developed sophisticated strategies and tactics. In developing countries and in those with authoritarian regimes, there is a much narrower range of economic groups, very few—if any—public interest and cause groups, and some government interests. In these regimes, informal interests are generally the most important and the most numerous.

### **III. Common characteristics and the importance of interest groups**

Interest groups are not formed for political purposes. They usually develop to promote programs and disseminate information to enhance the professional, business, social. Much of this activity is nonpolitical, as when the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) provides low-cost life insurance for its members or when the American Automobile Association negotiates discounts with service providers for its members. But many such interest groups enter the political arena when they believe there is no other way to protect their interests or because they want to secure government funding. In their nonpolitical role, interest groups may have several functions, but, when they become enmeshed in the political sphere, they have one overriding goal: to gain favorable outcomes from public policy decisions. In the political realm, interest groups perform important functions, particularly in a democracy but also in an authoritarian regime. These include aggregating and representing the interests of groups of individuals in a way that a single individual would not be able to do, helping to facilitate government by providing policy makers with information that is essential to making laws, and educating their members on issues and perhaps giving them political experience for entering politics. In addition to providing this political experience, groups sometimes actively recruit candidates for public office, with the hope that once elected these individuals will support their cause.

Interest groups in most democracies are also a source of financial support for election campaigns. In the United States the development of political action committees (PACs) after World War II was geared to providing money to candidates running for public office. In Western Europe, campaign funding is provided by many interest groups, particularly trade unions for social democratic parties as in Sweden and Germany. Mass parties in authoritarian regimes also often rely on interest groups for support. For example, in Argentina Juan Peron used the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the trade union Peak association, to gain and maintain

the presidency of that country from 1946 to 1955. In addition to financial resources, members of interest groups are important resources for grassroots campaigning, such as operating telephone banks to call prospective voters, canvassing neighborhoods door-to-door.

#### **IV. Factors shaping interest group systems**

Various factors shape the environment in which interest groups operate and provide a foundation for understanding similarities and differences in types of interest group systems around the world. The level of socioeconomic development within a society usually can inform observers about how highly developed and represented society's interests are. In more economically prosperous societies, the number of interest groups and the people belonging to them is usually quite extensive. By contrast, in less affluent countries, the number of interest groups is usually quite limited, and their level of sophistication is usually lower. In democracies, lobbying is more formalized and wide-ranging than in authoritarian and developing countries, where it is largely informal, with only a small segment of society having access to government.

In democratic systems, interest groups are generally free to operate, though the acceptance of the scope of their activity by the general public and politicians may vary. Even in democracies, many may consider interest groups detrimental to the operation of society and government (in general, however, there is a broad consensus in most democracies that interest groups play a vital and necessary role in political and economic life). In post communist Lithuania, for example, there has been skepticism of interest groups both among the public (a hangover of the fear of belonging to banned groups in the former communist regime) and among some politicians who believe such groups acted as an impediment in the transition to democracy by promoting their special interests over that of society. In contrast to democracies, authoritarian regimes often restrict and may even ban group formation and lobbying.

A country's political culture—the characteristic shared values of the citizens upon which government is based and upon which certain political activities are considered acceptable or not—varies from country to country. In all political systems, be they democratic or authoritarian, the ideological underpinnings of society influence the pattern of interest group involvement in the political process—including, potentially, their exclusion from the process entirely. In Sweden, for example, where there exists a broad social democratic consensus that believes all interests should be taken into account in the policy-making process, the government actually organizes and funds groups (e.g., immigrant workers) that might not form otherwise. In contrast, the official ideology of communist regimes has not generally officially recognized the rights of interests to organize; thus, they have tended to operate unofficially and subject to potential legal action by the government.

The location of political power in the political system determines the access points and methods of influence used by interest groups. In authoritarian regimes, power usually lies with the dictator or a small cadre of officials. Thus, any interest group activity in such systems will be narrowly directed at these officials. In democracies, power is more diffused. In parliamentary systems, such as Canada and New Zealand, the executive is chosen from the legislature, and, because of party discipline, power tends to be concentrated in the executive, which therefore becomes the focus of lobbying. In presidential systems, particularly the United States, where there is a separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches, a lobbying strategy must focus on both branches of government. In addition, in some countries, power is divided among multiple layers of government. In unitary systems, where central government is the locus of policy making, lobbying efforts can concentrate on that level of government. By contrast, in federal systems (e.g., the United States, Australia, and Germany), interest groups often find it necessary to mount simultaneous campaigns at both the national and state levels.

Which party or party coalition controls the government influences the relative importance and impact of interest groups within society. For example, in a democracy, if a left or centre-left government is in office, it is most likely that allied groups (e.g., labor unions and environmental groups) would have more influence on and be consulted more often by the government, whereas business groups usually have wider access and importance when a conservative government is in office. Even in authoritarian regimes, changes in the executive can bring about the increased success of some groups at the expense of others. For example, the shift from a civilian to a military dictatorship or vice versa in a host of African, Asian, and Latin American countries in the period from the 1930s to the 1980s changed the configuration of interest groups and interest influence.

#### **V. The role of interest groups in public policy making: pluralist and neo-corporatist theories**

##### **5.1. Pluralism**

Pluralism and neo-corporatism are the two primary theories that have been put forward to explain interest group influence on public policy. Pluralists argue that the most realistic description of politics and policy making is a marketplace with more or less perfect competition. In theory, in this political marketplace many (or plural) perspectives—as represented by individuals, political parties, and interest groups and interests—compete to have their views heard by government and their favored policies enacted. According to

this conception, because of competition between the varied and diverse interests, no single interest is likely to have its views win consistently over others. The United States is invariably cited by scholars as the country coming closest to this model in practice, though other democracies also qualify, particularly those in the Anglo-American tradition such as Canada and Australia.

In practice, however, pluralism is often less than an ideal system of representation for achieving policy changes. First, different groups have different resources; some interests, such as those representing businesses or affluent professions, are well-organized and well-financed, while others, such as those for the poor or for immigrant workers, are not. Such disparities may serve to tilt the balance of policy influence in favor of better-organized and better-financed groups. Second, the government is rarely neutral in the conflict-resolution process: it often favors some groups over others because it depends on them. For example, a government may rely on a major industry (e.g., tourism) or a particular service, such as that provided by doctors, and so these interests will have more sway over that government than those it does not rely upon (e.g., welfare recipients or groups for the arts). These concerns have led to modifications of the pluralist model; an elitist perspective, such as that advanced by American political scientist Theodore Lowi, considers groups, interests, and individuals that are well-connected to government policy makers and well-financed as prime movers in interest-group activity and policy making. The advantage of such elites is enhanced in many Western democracies because of the advent of hyper pluralism—a development of the late 20th century, particularly in the United States. As so many groups have entered the lobby game, the competition for the attention of policy makers has become intense, and those groups with resources and connections—the elite groups—have an advantage in the fight to be heard by policy makers.

## **5.2. Neo-corporatism and state corporatism**

Corporatism is a much more structured theory of interest group activity than pluralism. It is a modern version of state corporatism, which emerged in the late 19th century in authoritarian systems and had several manifestations in the first half of the 20th century—for example, in Adolf Hitler's Germany and Francisco Franco's Spain. In this system, society is seen as a corporate—that is, united and hierarchical—body in which the government dominates and all sectors of society (e.g., business, the military, and labor) are required to work for the public interest as defined by the government. Whereas state corporatism is coercive, neo-corporatism is, in theory, based on voluntary agreement between government and labor and business interests. The goal is primarily economic; the neo-corporatist model focuses on keeping costs and inflation in check so that the country can be competitive in international trade and maintain and enhance the domestic standard of living. To be able to establish and maintain a neo-corporatist interest group system, a country has to have peak associations that are able to enforce the agreements between business, labor, and the government. Consequently, in Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, for example, where there are major peak associations that dominate their respective economic sectors, neo-corporatism can best explain major interest group activity.

Neo-corporatist theory also has its critics. Some argue that it is not a distinct interest group system at all but rather just another form of pluralism. This is because it still functions within a pluralist political environment and only major groups are involved in this special relationship with government; all other groups and interests compete in the same way that they would in a pluralist system such as the United States. In addition, critics also claim that neo-corporatism is so varied in actual practice as to lack distinct core characteristics. The Scandinavian countries are highly neo-corporatist, but countries such as France and Belgium are much less so; and the form of neo-corporatism practiced in Japan does not incorporate labor. Similar to pluralism, neo-corporatism operates differently in different countries depending on sociopolitical and historical circumstances. In fact, it is best to understand the interest group system in democratic countries as existing along a scale with highly pluralist countries such as the United States (with no dominant peak associations) at one end; countries such as New Zealand, which combines elements of pluralism and neo-corporatism, in the middle; and predominantly neo-corporatist systems, such as those of Scandinavia, at the other end of the scale.

Theories of interest group activity in non-pluralist regimes are less all-embracing because of the wide variety of such regimes. State corporatism helps explain group activity in some countries (e.g., Cuba); in former communist countries (e.g., those in Eastern Europe), the leaders of groups were simply tools of the party elite; in authoritarian countries in the developing world (e.g., the monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Tonga), it is the elite cliques close to the royal family that hold the most sway.

## **VI. Lobbying strategies and tactics**

As discussed above, lobbying involves working to bring pressure to bear on policy makers to gain favorable policy outcomes. In order to accomplish their goals, interest groups develop a strategy or plan of action and execute it through specific tactics. The particular strategies developed and the specific tactics used, however, vary widely both among and within political systems. Three factors are of particular importance in shaping lobbying strategies and tactics. One is whether the political system is democratic or authoritarian.

Because there generally are few restrictions on interest groups in democratic societies, they have more options available (e.g., hiring lobbyists, using the press, and staging public demonstrations). Thus, strategies and tactics are more formalized and open than in authoritarian societies, where they must be more ad hoc and less publicly visible.

A second factor is the structure of the policy process. As indicated above, in democratic parliamentary systems, where the executive is drawn from the major political party or party coalition in the parliament (e.g., Finland, India, and the republic of Ireland), the legislative branch is less important than the prime minister and the cabinet in policy making. In contrast, because of the power placed in the U.S. Congress and state legislatures, the United States is one of the few countries in which legislative lobbying is a major strategy of interest groups. The courts in most parliamentary systems also play a minor role in policy making. Again, in contrast, in the United States the separation-of-powers system has provided the courts, which have the power to invalidate legislation, with a major role in policy making, and, as a result, litigation strategies are often vital to American interest groups. A third factor is political culture as it relates to group activity and lobbying. In the United States, for example, the use of contract lobbyists—those hired by contract specifically to lobby government—is much more accepted than in most other Western democracies, including those of the European Union, where public officials usually prefer to deal directly with the members of the concerned group, organization, or business.

Three major factors can also be identified to explain why lobbying strategies and tactics vary within a political system. One is the nature of the group and its resources. “Insider” groups—those older and more traditional business, labor, and professional groups with extensive resources, including money and established access to public officials—are more able to pursue “insider tactics,” utilizing their close friends and associates in government to promote their goals, and generally have many more options available to them than do “outsider” groups. Such outsider groups tend to be newer and sometimes promote radical causes; they usually lack key contacts with policy makers and major financial resources, and they often focus their energy on grassroots efforts, which may include letter writing or Internet campaigns or public demonstrations to gain media coverage (insider groups may also use such methods). Second, whether the purpose is to promote or defeat a legislative proposal helps to explain variations in strategies and tactics across different political systems. For instance, in the United States, a system that was designed by its founders to prevent government action, the so-called “advantage of the defense” operates. All an interest has to do to stop a proposal is to get a sympathetic committee chair in the legislature to oppose it or a president or governor to veto it. To get a proposal enacted requires that it clear hurdles in both houses of the legislature and be signed by the executive. In contrast, in parliamentary systems, with power concentrated in an executive committed to the platform of the major party or party coalition in parliament, it is much harder to defeat something if it has been agreed upon by the party beforehand. Third, a country’s political climate influences strategies taken by interest groups. Which party is in power (such as one favorably disposed to an interest group’s agenda), the major issues facing the government, and the country’s budget circumstances will influence the types of strategies an interest group uses. For example, the National Education Association (NEA) in the United States pursues a different strategy when the Republicans are in power in Washington, D.C., and in the states than when the Democrats are in power. The NEA has “insider status” with the Democrats but generally not with the Republicans.

Although strategies and tactics vary between and within political systems, there is one aspect of lobbying that is common in all systems, whether democratic or authoritarian: building close personal contacts between group representatives and public officials to foster trust and credibility and to persuade the government that it needs the group. In democracies, tactics are usually broad-ranging, but building relationships is universal regardless of the type of democratic system. In authoritarian and developing political systems, personal contacts between political elites within and outside of government are often the major tactic (and sometimes the only tactic available). For example, patron-client networks, which are modern manifestations of court cliques in traditional monarchies, are based not on a shared interest (as set out in the definition of an interest group above) but on the personal benefit of the patron and clients. However, patron-client connections can work to represent and gain benefits for a group, such as merchants or landowners.

Among democracies, it is in the United States that interest group activity is most accepted and displays the widest range of tactics. The lobbying profession, both at the federal and the state level (and increasingly at the local government level), is highly developed. In regard to lobbyists in Washington, D.C., in newspapers and other popular writings, they are often talked about in connection with the terms “K Street” and “Gucci gulch,” as it is on K Street that many of the contract lobbying firms are located, and the corridors in the Capitol where lobbyists congregate have been nicknamed for the expensive shoes and garments they often wear. Increasingly, however, American-style tactics have been adopted in other democracies and in transitional systems as ideology, and the centralization of the policy process has been eroded. In the United Kingdom and other countries of the European Union, Australia, and Canada, lobbyists are becoming increasingly important (they

are usually known by other designations such as political consultants or government-affairs or public-affairs representatives), and there also has been more use of the media and increased campaign contributions.

### **VII. Influence of interest groups**

Research conducted in the United States provides major insights into the factors that determine interest group influence. Money is important in explaining the influence (or lack thereof) of interest groups, but, contrary to what might be believed by the public, it is not simply money that determines political clout. Factors determining the influence of individual interest groups include the group's financial resources, the managerial and political skills of its leaders, the size and cohesiveness of its membership, and political timing—presenting an issue when the political climate is right. Three factors appear to be of particular importance:

1. How much influence a group has depends on the extent to which government officials need the group. The more elected or appointed public officials who rely on an interest, business, or organization, the greater its leverage will be over government. Some corporations may have a presence in many districts throughout the country, and decisions that affect them will affect employment in those districts, thus making it likely that members of the legislature from those districts will be favorably predisposed to legislation that the group supports. Moreover, many interest groups provide major financial backing to political campaigns; the more widely dispersed its funds are in a country, state, or local jurisdiction, the more likely that legislators will listen to the concerns of that group.
2. Lobbyist–policy-maker relations are also important in explaining the relative power of an interest group, since it is at this point that the demands of the group are conveyed to government. The more skillful the lobbyists are in forging personal contact with government officials, the more successful the group is likely to be. As noted earlier, this is the case in both democratic and authoritarian systems alike. In the United States, political scientists have identified phenomena known as “iron triangles” and “policy niches” in regard to lobbyist–policy-maker relations. In such cases, lobbyists, members of the legislature, and, in particular, members of the key committees work together to get policy enacted. These arrangements typify a form of elitism with privileged access leading to established lobbyist–policy-maker relationships that gives “insiders” an upper hand in influencing public policy.
3. The relative level of organized opposition to a group is essential to understanding the success or failure of that group. The more intense the opposition to a group's cause, the more difficult it will be to achieve its goals. Some groups have natural political enemies (e.g., environmentalists versus developers and corporations versus labor unions). Other interests, such as those advocating stricter laws against domestic violence and child abuse, have little opposition, though such groups may be limited by the other factors that determine influence, such as a lack of financial resources.

### **VIII. Interest groups in international politics**

Interest groups have long been active in international affairs, but the level of that activity has increased significantly since World War II and particularly since the late 1960s. A confluence of factors accounts for the explosion in international lobbying activities. These include: the increasing importance of international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN) and its various agencies, and regional organizations, such as the European Union (EU), with jurisdictions that extend beyond national borders; the fact that many issues (e.g., environmental protection, wildlife management, and the fight against the child prostitution trade) require an international approach; and increasing awareness of issues because of advances in communications and the adoption of many international causes in Western democracies (where most international interests originate and operate) by an increasingly affluent middle class. According to American political scientist Howard Tolley, an authority on international interest groups, without political parties and elections to voice concerns at the international level, nongovernmental pressure groups are even more vital in world politics than interest groups are at the domestic level.

There are thousands of international lobbies, but four broad categories constitute the vast majority.

1. Foreign governments and international organizations. Countries maintain a wide array of embassies and consulates in foreign countries, and they often use these and hired lobbyists to work for such benefits as foreign aid and military support, as well as to boost the country's image abroad. International organizations (e.g., UNESCO, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Arab League, and the Organization of American States) use their resources in manners similar to governments.
2. Multinational corporations (e.g., McDonald's, Coca Cola, Honda, Volvo, and Procter & Gamble) and business trade associations (e.g., the International Chamber of Commerce and the European Association of Manufacturers of Business Machines and Information Technology). These often have extensive global or regional reach. Their major concerns in lobbying relate to similar issues that they have within individual countries and include ensuring favorable labor codes and tax structures, making trade as free as possible,

ensuring favorable laws regarding government regulation of their product (e.g., food and drink) or service (e.g., telecommunications), and trying to minimize added costs such as those involving environmental regulations. Because of their extensive resources and the fact that the government relies on the economic advantages provided by these multinational corporations, they are often successful in achieving their lobbying goals.

3. Special interest and cause groups. These include the World Council of Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, the Anglican Communion, international networks of gay-rights groups, and the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, an organization of indigenous peoples of the Arctic and subarctic regions of North America, Europe, and Asia. Such groups and organizations are involved in international lobbying for a variety of reasons and with mixed success. Some, such as churches, often lobby simply for the right to operate in a country and on behalf of human and civil rights and the poor. Others, such as indigenous groups, lobby for the rights of their compatriots in terms of preserving their customs and language and repatriating artifacts that may have been taken to other countries and are now housed in museums around the world (particularly in countries that were former colonizers).
4. International public interest groups (nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]). NGOs embrace a wide range of groups that focus on issues of broad public concern, such as human rights, child welfare, and the status of women, as opposed to the specific interests of particular businesses or sectors of society, such as automobile manufacturers and physicians. At the meeting in 1945 in San Francisco that drew up the UN charter, some 1,200 NGOs were in attendance. Though there is no current, reliable count of NGOs, they mushroomed in the period after World War II and may number as many as 10,000; in Latin America alone it is estimated that there are some 2,000 NGOs, many of which work in several countries. Significant among the multitude of NGOs operating in world politics today are Human Rights Watch, Oxfam International, CARE, Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, Earth First!, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. NGOs enjoy mixed success in their political activities, partly because governments rarely rely on these groups to maintain themselves in office. Most operate far from public view, and their successes may receive little publicity. Some, however, such as Greenpeace, receive major publicity for their campaigns.

### **IX. The regulation of interest groups**

Even though interest groups are indispensable to the operation of government in both democracies and authoritarian systems, they have the potential to promote the interests of a small segment of society at the expense of society as a whole. Consequently, there is criticism of interest group activity in both democracies and authoritarian regimes. However, views of the negative effects of interest groups and ways of attempting to deal with them are different in democracies and authoritarian systems. In pluralist systems there is a great degree of concern with how interest groups might undermine democracy. Groups in such systems often claim to pursue an agenda that is "in the public interest," but in practice they often serve rather narrow interests. In non-pluralist systems it is sometimes feared that interest groups will undermine the national interest or major government plans and commitments that are often expressed by a country's official ideology or through the statements of national officials.

To deal with potential problems of interest group activity, many democratic governments and all authoritarian regimes adopt some form of regulation (control in authoritarian systems) on interest groups. In all systems, the goal of regulation is to promote the public interest, however defined, over that of the narrow segments of society represented by interest groups. In its specific form, however, regulation varies considerably in scope, focus, and form between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Regulations in authoritarian systems are usually quite wide-ranging and are focused on controlling group formation and channeling the modes of activity that groups can pursue. In such systems, activity by particular interest groups may be prohibited (e.g., in communist systems in eastern Europe during the Cold War, nearly all private associations were banned), or groups may be allowed to form and participate but be co-opted and have their activities heavily circumscribed by the government.

In democracies the underlying principle of the regulation of interest groups is that it enhances democracy. However, few, if any, restrictions are placed on group formation and the right to lobby government. Indeed, these are rights guaranteed in many national constitutions. Instead, democracies attempt to address perceived ethical questions surrounding lobbying, such as a normative desire to create a somewhat-level playing field for groups in terms of access and influence. Most often this is attempted through public disclosure or the monitoring of interest group activity by requiring interest groups and their lobbyists to register with public authorities and to declare their objects of lobbying as well as their income and expenditures. Even so, the extent of regulation varies widely across democracies. The United States has a long history of fairly extensive regulation, whereas the countries of Western Europe generally have far less regulation; Australia attempted to

implement a system of regulation in the early 1980s but abandoned it in the mid-1990s in favor of self-regulation by interest groups and lobbyists.

## **X. Conclusions**

As long as human beings engage in politics, interest groups will be a part of the political process. Moreover, interest group activity will almost definitely increase in all political systems in the future for a couple reasons. First, government activity is likely to expand and affect existing interests more extensively and new interests in various ways, thereby forcing individuals and organizations to become politically active to protect or promote their interests. Second, globalization will likely increase international interest group activity and result in an increasing interdependence between many domestic and international interests. This expansion, and particularly the internationalization of interest group activity, will produce some homogenization in the organization of interests and the techniques they use to gain access and exert influence. However, specific governmental structures, political culture, deep-rooted ideology, historical practice, and short-term political circumstances will likely always work to give interest group activity many unique elements in each country.

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