7.2: Interest Groups

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how interest groups differ from political parties
- Evaluate the different types of interests and what they do
- Compare public and private interest groups
- Describe how interest groups influence the government through elections
- Explain how interest groups influence the government through the governance processes
- Identify the various court cases, policies, and laws that outline what interest groups can and cannot do
- Evaluate the arguments for and against whether contributions are a form of freedom of speech
- Understand why interest groups are particularly strong in Texas
- Understand the relative strenght of various interest groups in Texas

While the term interest group is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, the framers were aware that individuals would band together in an attempt to use government in their favor. In Federalist No. 10, James Madison warned of the dangers of “factions,” minorities who would organize around issues they felt strongly about, possibly to the detriment of the majority. But Madison believed limiting these factions was worse than facing the evils they might produce, because such limitations would violate individual freedoms. Instead, the natural way to control factions was to let them flourish and compete against each other. The sheer number of interests in the United States suggests that many have, indeed, flourished. They compete with similar groups for membership, and with opponents for access to decision-makers. Some people suggest there may be too many interests in the United States. Others argue that some have gained a disproportionate amount of influence over public policy, whereas many others are underrepresented.
Madison’s definition of factions can apply to both interest groups and political parties. But unlike political parties, interest groups do not function primarily to elect candidates under a certain party label or to directly control the operation of the government. Political parties in the United States are generally much broader coalitions that represent a significant proportion of citizens. In the American two-party system, the Democratic and Republican Parties spread relatively wide nets to try to encompass large segments of the population. In contrast, while interest groups may support or oppose political candidates, their goals are usually more issue-specific and narrowly focused on areas like taxes, the environment, and gun rights or gun control, or their membership is limited to specific professions. They may represent interests ranging from well-known organizations, such as the Sierra Club, IBM, or the American Lung Association, to obscure ones, such as the North Carolina Gamefowl Breeders Association. Thus, with some notable exceptions, specific interest groups have much more limited membership than do political parties.

Political parties and interest groups both work together and compete for influence, although in different ways. While interest group activity often transcends party lines, many interests are perceived as being more supportive of one party than the other. The American Conservative Union, Citizens United, the National Rifle Association, and National Right to Life are more likely to have relationships with Republican lawmakers than with Democratic ones. Americans for Democratic Action, Moveon.org, and the Democratic Governors Association all have stronger relationships with the Democratic Party. Parties and interest groups do compete with each other, however, often for influence. At the state level, we typically observe an inverse relationship between them in terms of power. Interest groups tend to have greater influence in states where political parties are comparatively weaker.

What Are Interest Groups and What Do They Want?

Definitions abound when it comes to interest groups, which are sometimes referred to as special interests, interest organizations, pressure groups, or just interests. Most definitions specify that interest group indicates any formal association of individuals or organizations that attempt to influence government decision-making and/or the making of public policy. Often, this influence is exercised by a lobbyist or a lobbying firm.

Formally, a lobbyist is someone who represents the interest organization before government, is usually compensated for doing so, and is required to register with the government in which he or she lobbies, whether state or federal. The lobbyist’s primary goal is usually to influence policy. Most interest organizations engage in lobbying activity to achieve their objectives. As you might expect, the interest hires a lobbyist, employs one internally, or has a member volunteer to lobby on its behalf. For present purposes, we might restrict our definition to the relatively broad one in the Lobbying Disclosure Act.[1] This act requires the registration of lobbyists representing any interest group and devoting more than 20 percent of their time to it.[2] Clients and lobbying firms must also register with the federal government based on similar requirements. Moreover, campaign finance laws require disclosure of campaign contributions given to political candidates by organizations.

Lobbying is not limited to Washington, DC, however, and many interests lobby there as well as in one or more states. Each state has its own laws describing which individuals and entities must register, so the definitions of lobbyists and interests, and of what lobbying is and who must register to do it, also vary from state to state. Therefore, while a citizen contacting a lawmaker to discuss an issue is generally not viewed as lobbying, an organization that devotes a certain amount of time and resources to contacting lawmakers may be classified as lobbying, depending on local, state, or federal law.
Largely for this reason, there is no comprehensive list of all interest groups to tell us how many there are in the United States. Estimates of the number vary widely, suggesting that if we use a broad definition and include all interests at all levels of government, there may be more than 200,000. Following the passage of the Lobbying Disclosure Act in 1995, we had a much better understanding of the number of interests registered in Washington, DC; however, it was not until several years later that we had a complete count and categorization of the interests registered in each of the fifty states. Political scientists have categorized interest groups in a number of ways.

First, interest groups may take the form of membership organizations, which individuals join voluntarily and to which they usually pay dues. Membership groups often consist of people who have common issues or concerns, or who want to be with others who share their views. The National Rifle Association (NRA) is a membership group consisting of members who promote gun rights. For those who advocate greater regulation of access to firearms, such as background checks prior to gun purchases, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence is a membership organization that weighs in on the other side of the issue.

A Florida member of the NRA proudly displays his support of gun rights (a). In December 2012, CREDO, a San Francisco telecommunications company that supports progressive causes, called on the NRA to stop blocking Congress from passing gun control legislation (b). (credit a: modification of work by Daniel Oines; credit b: modification of work by Josh Lopez)

Interest groups may also form to represent companies, corporate organizations, and governments. These groups do not have individual members but rather are offshoots of corporate or governmental entities with a compelling interest to be represented in front of one or more branches of government. Verizon and Coca-Cola will register to lobby in order to influence policy in a way that benefits them. These corporations will either have one or more in-house lobbyists, who work for one interest group or firm and represent their organization in a lobbying capacity, and/or will hire a contract lobbyist, individuals who work for firms that represent a multitude of clients and are often hired because of their resources and their ability to contact and lobby lawmakers, to represent them before the legislature.

Governments such as municipalities and executive departments such as the Department of Education register to lobby in an effort to maximize their share of budgets or increase their level of autonomy. These government institutions are represented by a legislative liaison, whose job is to present issues to decision-makers. For example, a state university usually employs a lobbyist, legislative liaison, or government affairs person to represent its interests before the legislature. This includes lobbying for a given university’s share of the budget or for its continued autonomy from lawmakers and other state-level officials who may attempt to play a greater oversight role.

In 2015, thirteen states had their higher education budgets cut from the previous year, and nearly all states have seen some cuts to higher education funding since the recession began in 2008. In 2015, as in many states, universities and
Community colleges in Mississippi lobbied the legislature over pending budget cuts. These examples highlight the need for universities and state university systems to have representation before the legislature. On the federal level, universities may lobby for research funds from government departments. For example, the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security may be willing to fund scientific research that might better enable them to defend the nation.

Interest groups also include associations, which are typically groups of institutions that join with others, often within the same trade or industry (trade associations), and have similar concerns. The American Beverage Association includes Coca-Cola, Red Bull North America, ROCKSTAR, and Kraft Foods. Despite the fact that these companies are competitors, they have common interests related to the manufacturing, bottling, and distribution of beverages, as well as the regulation of their business activities. The logic is that there is strength in numbers, and if members can lobby for tax breaks or eased regulations for an entire industry, they may all benefit. These common goals do not, however, prevent individual association members from employing in-house lobbyists or contract lobbying firms to represent their own business or organization as well. Indeed, many members of associations are competitors who also seek representation individually before the legislature.

Finally, sometimes individuals volunteer to represent an organization. They are called amateur or volunteer lobbyists, and are typically not compensated for their lobbying efforts. In some cases, citizens may lobby for pet projects because they care about some issue or cause. They may or may not be members of an interest group, but if they register to lobby, they are sometimes nicknamed “hobbyists.”

Lobbyists representing a variety of organizations employ different techniques to achieve their objectives. One method is inside lobbying or direct lobbying, which takes the interest group’s message directly to a government official such as a lawmaker. Inside lobbying tactics include testifying in legislative hearings and helping to draft legislation. Numerous surveys of lobbyists have confirmed that the vast majority rely on these inside strategies. For example, nearly all report that they contact lawmakers, testify before the legislature, help draft legislation, and contact executive agencies. Trying to influence government appointments or providing favors to members of government are somewhat less common insider tactics.

Many lobbyists also use outside lobbying or indirect lobbying tactics, whereby the interest attempts to get its message out to the public. These tactics include issuing press releases, placing stories and articles in the media, entering coalitions with other groups, and contacting interest group members, hoping that they will individually pressure lawmakers to support or oppose legislation. An environmental interest group like the Sierra Club, for example, might issue a press release or encourage its members to contact their representatives in Congress about legislation of concern to the group. It might also use outside tactics if there is a potential threat to the environment and the group wants to raise awareness among its members and the public. Members of Congress are likely to pay attention when many constituents contact them about an issue or proposed bill. Many interest groups, including the Sierra Club, will use a combination of inside and outside tactics in their lobbying efforts, choosing whatever strategy is most likely to help them achieve their goals.
In February 2013, members of the Sierra Club joined a march on Los Angeles City Hall to demand action on climate change and protest the development of the Keystone pipeline. (credit: Charlie Kaijo)

The primary goal of most interests, no matter their lobbying approach, is to influence decision-makers and public policies. For example, National Right to Life, an anti-abortion interest group, lobbies to encourage government to enact laws that restrict abortion access, while NARAL Pro-Choice America lobbies to promote the right of women to have safe choices about abortion. Environmental interests like the Sierra Club lobby for laws designed to protect natural resources and minimize the use of pollutants. On the other hand, some interests lobby to reduce regulations that an organization might view as burdensome. Air and water quality regulations designed to improve or protect the environment may be viewed as onerous by industries that pollute as a byproduct of their production or manufacturing process. Other interests lobby for budgetary allocations; the farm lobby, for example, pressures Congress to secure new farm subsidies or maintain existing ones. Farm subsidies are given to some farmers because they grow certain crops and to other farmers so they will not grow certain crops. As expected, any bill that might attempt to alter these subsidies raises the antennae of many agricultural interests.

**Interest Group Functions**

While influencing policy is the primary goal, interest groups also monitor government activity, serve as a means of political participation for members, and provide information to the public and to lawmakers. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, by November 2015, thirty-six states had laws requiring that voters provide identification at the polls.

A civil rights group like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) will keep track of proposed voter-identification bills in state legislatures that might have an effect on voting rights. This organization will contact lawmakers to voice approval or disapproval of proposed legislation (inside lobbying) and encourage group members to take action by either donating money to it or contacting lawmakers about the proposed bill (outside lobbying). Thus, a member of the organization or a citizen concerned about voting rights need not be an expert on the legislative process or the technical or legal details of a proposed bill to be informed about potential threats to voting rights. Other interest groups function in similar ways. For example, the NRA monitors attempts by state legislatures to tighten gun control laws.
Interest groups facilitate political participation in a number of ways. Some members become active within a group, working on behalf of the organization to promote its agenda. Some interests work to increase membership, inform the public about issues the group deems important, or organize rallies and promote get-out-the-vote efforts. Sometimes groups will utilize events to mobilize existing members or encourage new members to join. For example, following Barack Obama’s presidential victory in 2008, the NRA used the election as a rallying cry for its supporters, and it continues to attack the president on the issue of guns, despite the fact that gun rights have in some ways expanded over the course of the Obama presidency. Interest groups also organize letter-writing campaigns, stage protests, and sometimes hold fundraisers for their cause or even for political campaigns.

Some interests are more broadly focused than others. AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) has approximately thirty-seven million members and advocates for individuals fifty and over on a variety of issues including health care, insurance, employment, financial security, and consumer protection.[14]

This organization represents both liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, and many who do not identify with these categorizations. On the other hand, the Association of Black Cardiologists is a much smaller and far-narrower organization. Over the last several decades, some interest groups have sought greater specialization and have even fragmented. As you may imagine, the Association of Black Cardiologists is more specialized than the American Medical Association, which tries to represent all physicians regardless of race or specialty.

Health care is an important concern for AARP and its members, so the organization makes sure to maintain connections with key policymakers in this area, such as Katherine Sebelius, secretary of Health and Human Services from 2009 to 2014, shown here with John Rother, director of legislation and public policy for AARP. (credit: modification of work by Chris Smith, HHS)

Public vs. Private Interest Groups

Interest groups and organizations represent both private and public interests in the United States. Private interests usually seek particularized benefits from government that favor either a single interest or a narrow set of interests. For example, corporations and political institutions may lobby government for tax exemptions, fewer regulations, or favorable laws that benefit individual companies or an industry more generally. Their goal is to promote private goods. Private goods are items individuals can own, including corporate profits. An automobile is a private good; when you purchase it,
you receive ownership. Wealthy individuals are more likely to accumulate private goods, and they can sometimes obtain private goods from governments, such as tax benefits, government subsidies, or government contracts.

On the other hand, public interest groups attempt to promote public, or collective, goods. Such collective goods are benefits—tangible or intangible—that help most or all citizens. These goods are often produced collectively, and because they may not be profitable and everyone may not agree on what public goods are best for society, they are often underfunded and thus will be underproduced unless there is government involvement. The Tennessee Valley Authority, a government corporation, provides electricity in some places where it is not profitable for private firms to do so. Other examples of collective goods are public safety, highway safety, public education, and environmental protection. With some exceptions, if an environmental interest promotes clean air or water, most or all citizens are able to enjoy the result. So if the Sierra Club encourages Congress to pass legislation that improves national air quality, citizens receive the benefit regardless of whether they are members of the organization or even support the legislation. Many environmental groups are public interest groups that lobby for and raise awareness of issues that affect large segments of the population.[15]

As the clean air example above suggests, collective goods are generally nonexcludable, meaning all or most people are entitled to the public good and cannot be prevented from enjoying it. Furthermore, collective goods are generally not subject to crowding, so that even as the population increases, people still have access to the entire public good. Thus, the military does not protect citizens only in Texas and Maryland while neglecting those in New York and Idaho, but instead it provides the collective good of national defense equally to citizens in all states. As another example, even as more cars use a public roadway, under most circumstances, additional drivers still have the option of using the same road. (High-occupancy vehicle lanes may restrict some lanes of a highway for drivers who do not car pool.)

Influence in Elections

Interest groups support candidates who are sympathetic to their views in hopes of gaining access to them once they are in office.[16] For example, an organization like the NRA will back candidates who support Second Amendment rights. Both the NRA and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence (an interest group that favors background checks for firearm purchases) have grading systems that evaluate candidates and states based on their records of supporting these organizations.[17]

To garner the support of the NRA, candidates must receive an A+ rating for the group. In much the same way, Americans for Democratic Action, a liberal interest group, and the American Conservative Union, a conservative interest group, both rate politicians based on their voting records on issues these organizations view as important.[18] These ratings, and those of many other groups, are useful for interests and the public in deciding which candidates to support and which to oppose. Incumbents have electoral advantages in terms of name recognition, experience, and fundraising abilities, and they often receive support because interest groups want access to the candidate who is likely to win. Some interest groups will offer support to the challenger, particularly if the challenger better aligns with the interest’s views or the incumbent is vulnerable. Sometimes, interest groups even hedge their bets and give to both major party candidates for a particular office in the hopes of having access regardless of who wins.

Some interests groups form political action committees (PACs), groups that collect funds from donors and distribute them to candidates who support their issues. As the chart below makes apparent, many large corporations like...
Honeywell International, AT&T, and Lockheed Martin form PACs to distribute money to candidates. Other PACs are either politically or ideologically oriented. For example, the MoveOn.org PAC is a progressive group that formed following the impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton, whereas GOPAC is a Republican PAC that promotes state and local candidates of that party. PACs are limited in the amount of money that they can contribute to individual candidates or to national party organizations; they can contribute no more than $5,000 per candidate per election and no more than $15,000 a year to a national political party. Individual contributions to PACs are also limited to $5,000 a year.

Corporations and associations spend large amounts of money on elections via affiliated PACs. This chart reveals the amount donated to Democratic (blue) and Republican (red) candidates by the top ten PACs during the most recent election cycle.

PACs through which corporations and unions can spend virtually unlimited amounts of money on behalf of political candidates are called super PACs. As a result of a 2010 Supreme Court decision, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, there is no limit to how much money unions or corporations can donate to super PACs. Unlike PACs, however, super PACs cannot contribute money directly to individual candidates. If the 2014 elections were any indication, super PACs will continue to spend large sums of money in an attempt to influence future election results.

### Influencing Governmental Policy

Interest groups support candidates in order to have access to lawmakers once they are in office. Lawmakers, for their part, lack the time and resources to pursue every issue; they are policy generalists. Therefore, they (and their staff members) rely on interest groups and lobbyists to provide them with information about the technical details of policy proposals, as well as about fellow lawmakers’ stands and constituents’ perceptions. These voting cues give lawmakers an indication of how to vote on issues, particularly those with which they are unfamiliar. But lawmakers also rely on lobbyists for information about ideas they can champion and that will benefit them when they run for reelection. Interest groups likely cannot target all 535 lawmakers in both the House and the Senate, nor would they wish to do so. There is little reason for the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence to lobby members of Congress who vehemently oppose any restrictions on gun access. Instead, the organization will often contact lawmakers who are amenable to some restrictions on access to firearms. Thus, interest groups first target lawmakers they think will consider introducing or sponsoring legislation.

Second, they target members of relevant committees if a company that makes weapons systems wants to influence
a defense bill, it will lobby members of the Armed Services Committees in the House and the Senate or the House and Senate appropriations committees if the bill requires new funding. Many members of these committees represent congressional districts with military bases, so they often sponsor or champion bills that allow them to promote policies popular with their districts or state. Interest groups attempt to use this to their advantage. But they also conduct strategic targeting because legislatures function by respectfully considering fellow lawmakers’ positions. Since lawmakers cannot possess expertise on every issue, they defer to their trusted colleagues on issues with which they are unfamiliar. So targeting committee members also allows the lobbyist to inform other lawmakers indirectly.

Third, interest groups target lawmakers when legislation is on the floor of the House and/or Senate, but again, they rely on the fact that many members will defer to their colleagues who are more familiar with a given issue. Finally, since legislation must pass both chambers in identical form, interest groups may target members of the conference committees whose job it is to iron out differences across the chambers. At this negotiation stage, a 1 percent difference in, say, the corporate income tax rate could mean millions of dollars in increased or decreased revenue or taxation for various interests.

Interest groups also target the budgetary process in order to maximize benefits to their group. In some cases, their aim is to influence the portion of the budget allocated to a given policy, program, or policy area. For example, interests for groups that represent the poor may lobby for additional appropriations for various welfare programs; those interests opposed to government assistance to the poor may lobby for reduced funding to certain programs. It is likely that the legislative liaison for your university or college spends time trying to advocate for budgetary allocations in your state.

Interest groups also try to defeat legislation that may be detrimental to their views. For example, when Congress considers legislation to improve air quality, it is not unusual for some industries to oppose it if it requires additional regulations on factory emissions. In some cases, proposed legislation may serve as a disturbance, resulting in group formation or mobilization to help defeat the bill. For example, a proposed tax increase may result in the formation or mobilization of anti-tax groups that will lobby the legislature and try to encourage the public to oppose the proposed legislation. Prior to the election in 2012, political activist Grover Norquist, the founder of Americans for Tax Reform (ATR), asked all Republican members of Congress to sign a “Taxpayer Protection Pledge” that they would fight efforts to raise taxes or to eliminate any deductions that were not accompanied by tax cuts. Ninety-five percent of the Republicans in Congress signed the pledge. Some interests arise solely to defeat legislation and go dormant after they achieve their immediate objectives.

Once legislation has been passed, interest groups may target the executive branch of government, whose job is to implement the law. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has some leeway in providing care for military veterans, and interests representing veterans’ needs may pressure this department to address their concerns or issues. Other entities within the executive branch, like the Securities and Exchange Commission, which maintains and regulates financial markets, are not designed to be responsive to the interests they regulate, because to make such a response would be a conflict of interest. Interest groups may lobby the executive branch on executive, judicial, and other appointments that require Senate confirmation. As a result, interest group members may be appointed to positions in which they can influence proposed regulation of the industry of which they are a part.

In addition to lobbying the legislative and executive branches of government, many interest groups also lobby the judicial branch. Lobbying the judiciary takes two forms, the first of which was mentioned above. This is lobbying the executive branch about judicial appointments the president makes and lobbying the Senate to confirm these appointments. The
second form of lobbying consists of filing amicus briefs, which are also known as “friend of the court” briefs. These documents present legal arguments stating why a given court should take a case and/or why a court should rule a certain way. In Obergefell v. Hodges (2015), the Supreme Court case that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide, numerous interest groups filed amicus briefs.[24]

For example, the Human Rights Campaign filed a brief arguing that the Fourteenth Amendment’s due process and equal protection clauses required that same-sex couples be afforded the same rights to marry as opposite-sex couples. In a 5–4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed.

Members of the Human Rights Campaign, an interest that supports LGBT rights, march toward the Supreme Court on June 26, 2015, the day that the Obergefell v. Hodges decision is announced. (credit: modification of work by Matt Popovich)

Measuring the effect of interest groups’ influence is somewhat difficult because lobbyists support lawmakers who would likely have supported them in the first place. Thus, National Right to Life, an anti-abortion interest group, does not generally lobby lawmakers who favor abortion rights; instead, it supports lawmakers and candidates who have professed “pro-life” positions. While some scholars note that lobbyists sometimes try to influence those on the fence or even their enemies, most of the time, they support like-minded individuals. Thus, contributions are unlikely to sway lawmakers to change their views; what they do buy is access, including time with lawmakers. The problem for those trying to assess whether interest groups influence lawmakers, then, is that we are uncertain what would happen in the absence of interest group contributions. For example, we can only speculate what the ACA might have looked like had lobbyists from a host of interests not lobbied on the issue.

How are lobbying and interest group activity regulated? As we noted earlier in the chapter, James Madison viewed factions as a necessary evil and thought preventing people from joining together would be worse than any ills groups might cause. The First Amendment guarantees, among other things, freedom of speech, petition, and assembly. However, people have different views on how far this freedom extends. For example, should freedom of speech as afforded to individuals in the U.S. Constitution also apply to corporations and unions? To what extent can and should government restrict the activities of lobbyists and lawmakers, limiting who may lobby and how they may do it?
Interest Groups and Free Speech

Most people would agree that interest groups have a right under the Constitution to promote a particular point of view. What people do not necessarily agree upon, however, is the extent to which certain interest group and lobbying activities are protected under the First Amendment.

In addition to free speech rights, the First Amendment grants people the right to assemble. We saw above that pluralists even argued that assembling in groups is natural and that people will gravitate toward others with similar views. Most people acknowledge the right of others to assemble to voice unpopular positions, but this was not always the case. At various times, groups representing racial and religious minorities, communists, and members of the LGBT community have had their First Amendment rights to speech and assembly curtailed. And as noted above, organizations like the ACLU support free speech rights regardless of whether the speech is popular.

Today, the debate about interest groups often revolves around whether the First Amendment protects the rights of individuals and groups to give money, and whether government can regulate the use of this money. In 1971, the Federal Election Campaign Act was passed, setting limits on how much presidential and vice-presidential candidates and their families could donate to their own campaigns. The law also allowed corporations and unions to form PACs and required public disclosure of campaign contributions and their sources. In 1974, the act was amended in an attempt to limit the amount of money spent on congressional campaigns. The amended law banned the transfer of union, corporate, and trade association money to parties for distribution to campaigns.

In *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), the Supreme Court upheld Congress’s right to regulate elections by restricting contributions to campaigns and candidates. However, at the same time, it overturned restrictions on expenditures by candidates and their families, as well as total expenditures by campaigns. In 1979, an exemption was granted to get-out-the-vote and grassroots voter registration drives, creating what has become known as the soft-money loophole; soft money was a way in which interests could spend money on behalf of candidates without being restricted by federal law. To close this loophole, Senators John McCain and Russell Feingold sponsored the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act in 2002 to ban parties from collecting and distributing unregulated money.

Some continued to argue that campaign expenditures are a form of speech, a position with which two recent Supreme Court decisions are consistent. The *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* and the *McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission* cases opened the door for a substantially greater flow of money into elections. *Citizens United* overturned the soft money ban of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act and allowed corporations and unions to spend unlimited amounts of money on elections. Essentially, the Supreme Court argued in a 5–4 decision that these entities had free speech rights, much like individuals, and that free speech included campaign spending. The *McCutcheon* decision further extended spending allowances based on the First Amendment by striking down aggregate contribution limits. These limits put caps on the total contributions allowed and some say have contributed to a subsequent increase in groups and lobbying activities.
With his Harper’s Weekly cartoon of William “Boss” Tweed with a moneybag for a head, Thomas Nast provided an enduring image of the corrupting power of money on politics. Some denounce “fat cat” lobbyists and the effects of large sums of money in lobbying, while others suggest that interests have every right to spend money to achieve their objectives.

### Regulating Lobbying and Interest Group Activity

While the Supreme Court has paved the way for increased spending in politics, lobbying is still regulated in many ways. The 1995 Lobbying Disclosure Act defined who can and cannot lobby, and requires lobbyists and interest groups to register with the federal government. The Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007 further increased restrictions on lobbying. For example, the act prohibited contact between members of Congress and lobbyists who were the spouses of other Congress members. The laws broadened the definition of lobbyist and require detailed disclosure of spending on lobbying activity, including who is lobbied and what bills are of interest. In addition, President Obama’s Executive Order 13490 prohibited appointees in the executive branch from accepting gifts from lobbyists and banned them from participating in matters, including the drafting of any contracts or regulations, involving the appointee’s former clients or employer for a period of two years. The states also have their own registration requirements, with some defining lobbying broadly and others more narrowly.

Second, the federal and state governments prohibit certain activities like providing gifts to lawmakers and compensating lobbyists with commissions for successful lobbying. Many activities are prohibited to prevent accusations of vote buying.
or currying favor with lawmakers. Some states, for example, have strict limits on how much money lobbyists can spend on lobbying lawmakers, or on the value of gifts lawmakers can accept from lobbyists. According to the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act, lobbyists must certify that they have not violated the law regarding gift giving, and the penalty for knowingly violating the law increased from a fine of $50,000 to one of $200,000. Also, revolving door laws also prevent lawmakers from lobbying government immediately after leaving public office. Members of the House of Representatives cannot register to lobby for a year after they leave office, while senators have a two-year “cooling off” period before they can officially lobby. Former cabinet secretaries must wait the same period of time after leaving their positions before lobbying the department of which they had been the head. These laws are designed to restrict former lawmakers from using their connections in government to give them an advantage when lobbying. Still, many former lawmakers do become lobbyists, including former Senate majority leader Trent Lott and former House minority leader Richard Gephardt.

Third, governments require varying levels of disclosure about the amount of money spent on lobbying efforts. The logic here is that lawmakers will think twice about accepting money from controversial donors. The other advantage to disclosure requirements is that they promote transparency. Many have argued that the public has a right to know where candidates get their money. Candidates may be reluctant to accept contributions from donors affiliated with unpopular interests such as hate groups. This was one of the key purposes of the Lobbying Disclosure Act and comparable laws at the state level.

Finally, there are penalties for violating the law. Lobbyists and, in some cases, government officials can be fined, banned from lobbying, or even sentenced to prison. While state and federal laws spell out what activities are legal and illegal, the attorneys general and prosecutors responsible for enforcing lobbying regulations may be understaffed, have limited budgets, or face backlogs of work, making it difficult for them to investigate or prosecute alleged transgressions. While most lobbyists do comply with the law, exactly how the laws alter behavior is not completely understood. We know the laws prevent lobbyists from engaging in certain behaviors, such as by limiting campaign contributions or preventing the provision of certain gifts to lawmakers, but how they alter lobbyists’ strategies and tactics remains unclear.

The need to strictly regulate the actions of lobbyists became especially relevant after the activities of lobbyist Jack Abramoff were brought to light. A prominent lobbyist with ties to many of the Republican members of Congress, Abramoff used funds provided by his clients to fund reelection campaigns, pay for trips, and hire the spouses of members of Congress. Between 1994 and 2001, Abramoff, who then worked as a lobbyist for a prominent law firm, paid for eighty-five members of Congress to travel to the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory in the Pacific. The territory’s government was a client of the firm for which he worked. At the time, Abramoff was lobbying Congress to exempt the Northern Mariana Islands from paying the federal minimum wage and to allow the territory to continue to operate sweatshops in which people worked in deplorable conditions. In 2000, while representing Native American casino interests who sought to defeat anti-gambling legislation, Abramoff paid for a trip to Scotland for Tom DeLay, the majority whip in the House of Representatives, and an aide. Shortly thereafter, DeLay helped to defeat anti-gambling legislation in the House. He also hired DeLay’s wife Christine to research the favorite charity of each member of Congress and paid her $115,000 for her efforts. In 2008, Jack Abramoff was sentenced to four years in prison for tax evasion, fraud, and corruption of public officials. He was released early, in December 2010.
Jack Abramoff (center) began his lifetime engagement in politics with his involvement in the 1980 presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan (left) while an undergraduate at Brandeis University and continued it with his election to chair of the College Republican National Committee in a campaign managed by Grover Norquist (right). Abramoff thus gained unique access to influential politicians, upon which he capitalized in his later work as a DC lobbyist. Since his release from federal prison in 2010 after being convicted for illegal lobbying activity, Abramoff has become an outspoken critic of the lobbying industry.

Interest Group Strength in Texas

The way Texas has designed its Legislature (part-time and relatively poorly paid) and the laws regulating interest group activities allows interest groups in Texas to assume a powerful role in the political process.

Which interest groups are the strongest in Texas

Texas' individualistic and business-oriented culture leads to wide agreement among observers that interest groups representing business interests are the strongest in Texas. This is true of organizations that represent business in Texas in a general sense (such as the Texas Association of Business) and those that represent specific categories of business (such as the Texas Automobile Dealers Association).

6. The Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence was founded by James and Sarah Brady, after James Brady was...
permanently disabled by a gunshot following an assassination attempt on then-president Ronald Reagan. At the


10. Nownes and Newmark, “Interest Groups in the States.”


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