Interest Groups (IG’s)

- A type of FACTION
- Any political organization with POLITICAL goals
- Any organization that tries to establish favorable relationships and alliances with those in govt. so as to INFLUENCE public policy
- Most IG’s focus primarily on a very NARROW scope of issues – those issues that have a direct and significant impact on their membership/constituencies
- IG’s act as the “middle men” between their constituency groups within the public and govt.
- Negative spin: IG’s are actually elite “special interests” that pursue policy goals that accommodate only their own elite interests; elected officials are more likely to be responsive to these “special interests”, due to the financial influence they have with politicians and, therefore, LESS responsive to voters. Thus, IG’s subvert the democratic process.
- Positive spin: IG’s actually serve as the organized and efficient “voice” of different segments of the public; IG’s are able to effectively lobby the govt. on behalf of their respective public constituencies in a way that the average voter cannot – why? Because IG’s have financial and organizational efficiency that enables them to articulate the needs and views of their particular groups. Thus, IG’s are good for pluralism and democracy.

How IG’s Achieve Their Policy Goals

(1) “Indirect” Techniques

- IG’s will try to shape public opinion in a favorable way toward the IG and their policy goals
- The strategy is for IG’s to mobilize public support for the IG and its cause; the public, in turn, will then put pressure on their elected officials to support legislation and policy that is beneficial to the IG
- The IG will try and “educate” voters on the origin and history of the IG, as well as the cause and goals of the IG
- IG’s will try and make public aware of any proposed legislation relevant to the issue interests and causes of the IG; i.e., federal or state legislation? Is the legislation in committee? Will it get through committee? Has the legislation gotten to the floor? What are its chances of passage? Of failure? Will the President/Governor sign it? Veto it? IG’s will try to make the public aware of all these facts when it comes to a potential govt. policy that effects the IG and its constituents
- IG will then send a “call to action”; urge the voting public, in general, and their own membership to contact their elected officials (U.S. Senator, U.S. Congressional House Representative, State Senator, Assemblyperson, etc) and, in turn, pressure these elected officials to vote the way of the IG
- During election campaigns, IG’s will “rank” and compare candidates for each of the different federal and state elected offices specific to that particular voter population
- The IG will provide a “tale of the tape” comparing the candidates’ views and record with regard to issues and policies that are relevant to the IG and its issue interests
- After providing this comparative analysis, the IG will then endorse the candidate and urge the public and their membership to vote for that candidate; again, it will be the candidate with the record and public positions most favorable and beneficial to the IG
- IG’s provide all these indirect techniques with a variety of ways; published newsletters sent to their membership, mailers (political “junk mail”) during election campaigns, e-mails, TV, radio and newspaper ads, etc.

(2) “Direct” Techniques

- Techniques the IG’s use to directly mobilize govt./elected policy makers in order to support the IG’s policy goals
- Common example: Political Action Committees (PAC’s)
- PAC’s are the “financial arms” of IG’s, labor unions and corporations
- PAC’s provide campaign contributions ($) on behalf of the IG, union or corporation to the following types of candidates:
  - (A) Candidates that already have a pre-existing ideological view (public position taken or past voting record) favoring the IG and its policy goals;
  - (B) Incumbents: who are either option A or are neutral “fence-sitters” with regard to the IG’s issue concerns; that way, PAC S could then be used to favorably influence these elected law-makers when it comes time to vote on legislation relevant to the IG’s issue interests
- Incumbents are very difficult to beat in an election campaign due to name recognition and providing “constituency services” for voters within that district or state constituency
- IG PAC’s are, thus, motivated to make long-term “investments” as a way to secure a long-lasting favorable relationship with that legislator; this type of financial advantage makes incumbents that much tougher to defeat in an election race
- © Strong Challengers who are also option A – especially if the incumbent in the race has a pre-existing ideology & record opposing the IG; Vulnerable incumbents (incumbents who go against or anger their voter constituencies, incumbents who get caught up in a scandal or incumbents who anger IG’s that are influential in that region) will often draw viable challengers with a damn good chance to win that election campaign – especially if that challenger is wealthy and well-funded in their campaign
- Because these types of challengers are so viable, PAC’s will make $ donations to them – Again, PAC’s give $ as a way to make a good investment in policy makers who will support the views and policy goals of the IG
PAC's will also contribute PAC $ to BOTH candidates in an effort to cover all bases and have the winning candidate's gratitude no matter what the electoral outcome is

Effort to Limit the Financial Influence of I G's/PAC's:
CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM (CFR)

- Latest law regulating and controlling campaign $ in election races passed in early 2002 - implemented into law in November, 2002 (McCain-Feingold)
- The cornerstone of CFR is the banning of “SOFT-MONEY”: “Soft $” was UNLIMITED, UNREGULATED funds donated to POLITICAL PARTIES, NOT INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATES for the purposes of “party building” and “issue advocacy.”
- Parties would receive “soft-$” donations as a way to “educate” the public on issues important to the party
- “Soft $” was never spent DIRECTLY on individual candidates: “soft $” ads could never be used to directly plug the campaigns of individual candidates
- However, candidates indirectly benefited from such “soft-$” ads
- Thus, “soft-$” was seen as a corrupting influence in the process of campaign $ in elections
- As of November, 2002, “Soft-$” is now ABOLISHED
- Other aspects of the McCain-Feingold CFR law:
  - Increases on “hard $” limit from $1,000 to $2,000 per contribution (“hard $” refers to those campaign contributions donated to individual candidates’ campaigns)
- Limits on political campaign advertising during last weeks of an election race
The Case For and Against Campaign Finance Reform (CFR)

Argument For

1. Will Make elected officials more responsive to voters, rather than big money interests.

1A. Counterargument: The money will simply change hands. While “soft $” is now banned, “hard $” contributions will now increase. Plus IG’s will now use more “indirect techniques” to get indirectly pressure candidates to be responsible to IG issue and policy goals. Also, CFR will only limit the flow of information voters need to be educated and make voting decision. Campaign $ provides a good service in that it gives the public access to political and candidate information and education that voters would otherwise not get.

2. Argument For: CFR will “level the playing field” and give challengers a real chance to be competitive in campaign races.

2A. Counterargument: The majority of “Soft $” went to ads that indirectly addressed challengers’ campaigns, rather than incumbents. Thus, CFR will make challengers even less competitive and incumbents even more difficult to beat.

3. Argument For: The regulation and control of money in election campaigns have been ruled by the courts to be in the public interest and, thus, not unconstitutional. After all, “soft money” may have been banned. But, other forms of campaign contribution to candidates and parties are still allowed. CFR is about REGULATION and CONTROL of election money - NOT abolition.

3A. Counterargument: CFR is in violation of the First Amendment by way of CFR limiting and infringing upon free speech. Campaign donations are one extended form of free speech that are now being subject to being curtailed. Please read item #3 as a argument against this.

4. Argument For: By political parties not having unlimited influence over campaigns through “soft money”, candidates will have more influence and autonomy over their own campaigns away from their parties.

4A. Counterargument: The major parties are already weak and divided within enough as it is. American party organizations are very DECENTRALIZED with regard to decision making authority. State and local organizations have more say over recruiting candidates, fund-raising, etc. than the national party organizations. Also, parties already have less control over their candidates campaigns and policy positions in terms of following the official party platforms and being unified with the official party ideology on issues. What we need is STRONGER, more UNIFIED parties. This belief is rooted in the concept known as Responsible Party Government. This is the idea that unified parties and unified candidates supporting the party 100% will present a clear policy direction and set of proposed solutions to the voters. Voters will then have a CLEAR CHOICE as to which party to vote for. The party that wins will enact their policy agenda into law. Voters will either be satisfied or not. This would make parties accountable to the voters.

By banning “soft money”, CFR weakens the parties even more...