Interest Groups Essay, Research Paper

Interest Groups

Interest Group is defined as “an organized body of individuals who try

to influence public policy.” This system is designed so that interest groups

would be an instrument of public influence on politics to create changes, but

would not threaten the government much. Whether this is still the case or not

is an important question that we must find out. Interest groups play many

different roles in the American political system, such as representation,

participation, education, and program monitoring. Representation is the

function that we see most often and the function we automatically think of when

we think of interest groups. Participation is another role that interest groups

play in our government, which is when they facilitate and encourage the

participation of their members in the political process. Interest groups also

educate, by trying to inform both public officials and the public at large about

matters of importance to them. Lobby groups also keep track of how programs are

working in the field and try to persuade government to take action when problems

become evident when they monitor programs. The traditional interest groups have

been organized around some form of economic cause, be it corporate interests,

associates, or unions. The number of business oriented lobbies has grown since

the 1960s and continues to grow. Public-interest groups have also grown

enormously since the 1960s. Liberal groups started the trend, but conservative

groups are now just as common, although some groups are better represented

through interest groups than others are. There are many ways that the groups

can influence politics too. The increase in interest group activity has

fragmented the political debate into little pockets of debates and have served

to further erode the power of political parties, who try to make broad based

appeals. PACs also give money to incumbents, which means that incumbents can

accumulate large reelection campaign funds, that in result, discourages

potential challengers. As a result, most incumbents win, not because they

outspend their challengers, but because they keep good potential opponents out

of the race. Conservatives are one of the big groups that influence politics

and for many reasons.

Conservative thinking has not only claimed the presidency; it has spread

throughout our political and intellectual life and stands poised to become the

dominant strain in American public policy. While the political ascent of

conservatism has taken place in full public view, the intellectual

transformation has for the most part occurred behind the scenes, in a network of

think tanks whose efforts have been influential to an extent that only five

years after President Reagan’s election, begins to be clear.

Conservative think tanks and similar organizations have flourished

since the mid-1970s. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) had twelve

resident thinkers when Jimmy Carter was elected; today it has forty-five, and a

total staff of nearly 150. The Heritage Foundation has sprung from nothing to

command an annual budget of $11 million. The budget of the Center for Strategic

and International Studies (CSIS) has grown from $975,000 ten years ago to $8.6

million today. Over a somewhat longer period the endowment of the Hoover

Institution has increased from $2 million to $70 million. At least twenty-five

other noteworthy public-policy groups have been formed or dramatically expanded

through the decade; nearly all are anti-liberal.

No other country accords such significance to private institutions

designed to influence public decisions. Brookings, began in the 1920s with

money from the industrialist Robert S. Brookings, a Renaissance man who aspired

to bring discipline of economics to Washington. During the New Deal the

Brookings Institution was marked-oriented–for example, it opposed Roosevelt’s

central planning agency, the National Resources Planning Board. Only much later

did the institution acquire a reputation as the head of liberalism.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, as Americans enjoyed steady increases in

their standard of living and U.S. industry reigned over world commerce,

Washington came to consider the economy a dead issue. Social justice and

Vietnam dominated the agenda: Brookings concentrated on those fields, emerging

as a chief source of arguments in favor of the Great Society and opposed to U.S.

involvement in Vietnam. In the Washington swirl where few people have the time

to read the reports they debate, respectability is often proportional to tonnage.

The more studies someone tosses on the table, the more likely he is to win his

point. For years Brookings held a dominance on tonnage. Its papers supporting

liberal positions went unchallenged by serious conservative rebuttals.

As the 1970s progressed, a core of politically active conservative

intellectuals, most prominently Irving Kristol, began to argue in publications

like The Public Interest and The Wall Street Journal that if business wanted

market logic to regain the initiative, it would have to create a new class of

its own –scholars whose career prospects depended on private enterprise, not

government or the universities. “You get what you pay for, Kristol in effect

argued, and if businessmen wanted intellectual horsepower, they would have to

open their pocketbooks.”1

The rise of Nader’s Raiders and similar public-interest groups–which

achieved remarkable results, considering how badly outgunned they were; brought

a change in business thinking about money and public affairs. So did the

frustration felt by oil companies, which were being fattened by rising prices

but still dreamed of being fatter if federal regulations were abolished. They

were willing to invest some of their riches in changing Washington’s mood.

Women also have a voice in their own interest groups. The Woman

Suffrage movement was headed up by many groups that differed in some of their

views. The moderate branch was by far the largest and is given most of the

credit for the Nineteenth Amendment. Under the banner of the National Women’s

Party, the militant feminists had used civil disobedience, colorful

demonstrations and incessant lobbying to get the Nineteenth Amendment out of

Congress.

These are just some of the ways that American politics in the twentieth

century was influenced by special interest groups. Interest groups have grown

this much in this century and will probably keep progressing in the coming

centuries.

Bibliography

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2.Ideas Move Nations, The Atlantic Monthly, 1986

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