Interest Groups Essay, Research Paper

Interest Groups

As Americans devote less and less time to an active participation in politics, they are increasing their participation in interest groups. As a result politicians are losing touch with the constituents that they represent. To the modern politician, the special interest and the people have become objectively indistinguishable. It is natural for people of like minds to want to form an interest group, and with the proliferation of hyperpluralism Americans are finding that no matter what their interest, there is a group for them to join. The irony is that with the advent of more and more interest groups, each group wields less and less power. Americans like to blame special interest for many of the problems going on in politics today, but some of the criticisms are unfounded. While there are instances where special interest are a detriment to the political process, for the most part they are no more than an extension of the first amendment that serves the purpose of informing the representatives on issues that they might not have a lot of expertise on.

As the strength of political parties continues to decline, individual members are gaining power. It is much easier for an interest group to target a single legislator than the whole party. In this regard interest groups have enjoyed a steady rise in influence. Legislators cannot be expected to keep abreast of every situation in the United States. If an issue arises that they are not completely familiar with, they can listen to interest groups on both sides of the issue to make a better-informed decision. This does not mean that they will make a decision based solely on the information that the groups provide, but they can expand on that information in order to answer all of their questions about an issue. However, this is not always the case. While talking in federalist 10 about legislators listening objectively to interest groups, James Madison had this to say. It is vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing of interests, and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm. Madison and the founders realized that there would be instances when legislators would side with an interest for personal reasons rather than for the good of the constituency. During the time when the parties were very strong, it was harder to use a statesmen to your advantage if you were an interest group. Because all aspects of the agenda were controlled at the party level you either had to recruit a majority of the legislators, or the most powerful. With an increase in the power of the individual legislator, it should theoretically be easier to use a lawmaker to your advantage. This is not always the case.

As the parties grow weaker and the individual legislator s grow stronger, the influence by the interest groups is also growing weaker. More people than ever are joining interest groups. They are faced with the reality of less and less time on their hands. In most families both parents work, and even though they may want to take an active interest in a political issue, they cannot find the time. This is where interest groups come in. By joining a group they get the satisfaction of feeling that they are making a difference without taking too much of their precious time. When people join a group they do not see that group as a lobbying group. They might view other groups like that, but not theirs. When someone sees that there is a group advocating an issue that they are not in favor of, they will be inclined to join a group that is going to off-set it. This has led to the term hyperpluralism . Hyperpluralism means that interest groups are becoming smaller and more specialized, all the while increasing in number. This has a direct correlation on the effectiveness of the groups. With so many groups out there, it is harder for a legislator to pay special attention to any one group. Lawmakers will be less responsive to a single-issue group when they present a problem, but they will run towards them when it is time to get elected.

One of the hardest parts of an election is getting your message out to the voters. A candidate has to spend long hours on the campaign trail shaking hands and kissing babies . By offering themselves as a sounding board to the special interest groups they can get hope to gain the votes of people who take the groups recommendation on who to vote for. Weather or not they follow up after the election is up to them. During his first term, President Clinton left some of the interest groups that supported him during the election by approving things such as N.A.F.T.A. and welfare reform legislation. Despite this apparent slap in the face, when it came time to get re-elected, he ran back to the groups and told them exactly what they wanted to hear. Sometimes it is hard to point at a legislator and say that they voted a certain way because of their affiliation with a certain special interest. If Jerry Moran accepts money from the National Wheat Growers Association and then votes in favor of cheaper crop insurance for wheat farmers, has he sold out? He is from the first district of Kansas, which has wheat as its main economy. Ideologically he may be in line with the N.W.G.A. so why should he say no to their offer of money.

Many groups such the tobacco industry give money to both parties. Some are decidedly sided with a single party: the Democrats and organized labor, the Republicans and the National Rifle Ass.. There is not a group that controls both parties of congress. Even if a group manages to persuade a large number of members in a single party to go along with them, in the age of small majorities it is unlikely that the could accomplish anything substantial. Individual legislators are more likely to cross party lines than they were forty years ago, and if they see an injustice happening they can easily quell it.

There is, however, one problem that the interest groups present to contemporary politics and that is money. With the propagation of soft money and issue advocacy advertisements, not to mention the rising cost of running for office, interest groups are becoming a major part of getting someone elected. It is not enough anymore to be a strong and viable candidate, a person needs money, and lots of it to be elected. A major source of this money is interest groups. There may be a time in the near future where interest groups will have to form a consortium in order to get enough money to a person elected. If enough of these groups join together into a few massive consortiums then they could have a large influence on policy. If enough candidates fall in favor of one of these consortiums then policy could be affected but that is a very unlikely scenario. This is an example of the foresight of the founders. By creating a government that is layered and where each branch has the power to check the other, they created a government that has withstood the test of time and interest groups.

As we near the end of the 20th century politicians are living under an ever-growing microscope. It is very unlikely that a single or small group of politicians would be able to be coerced by a single interest group without the media picking up on the fact. As evidenced by the fact that a large majority of politicians are against term limits, the main objective is to get re-elected. Despite the lure of money that the interest groups offer, politicians know that the quickest way to lose the favor of the electorate is by being implicated in a scandal (unless you happen to be Bill Clinton where it is an advantage). The fear of scandal combined with the effects of hyperpluralism make it increasingly unlikely that the influence of interest groups will do anything except decline. It has never been against the law to give a person advice, and according to the Supreme Court, it is part of your first amendment liberties to give soft money . While it may not be the most ethical of democratic way to influence a government, it is a by-product of the republican form of government that has worked so well for over two hundred years. Until interest groups become a major problem recognized by the majority we will have to find a way to live with them. Madison stated in federalist 10 that there were two ways to get rid of interest groups that he called factions : one, by removing its causes; the other by controlling its effects. Madison and the founders thought that removing the factions was a remedy that is worse than the disease. The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man. In other words; learn to live with them.