



# CHAPTER 9

# Public Opinion and Interest Groups

## CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

*To learn about and understand . . .*

- ★ What public opinion is and how it is measured
- ★ The many factors that affect public opinion
- ★ How political attitudes are categorized
- ★ The many different types of interest groups and how they function in American politics
- ★ The various strategies used by interest groups to affect public policy





*"A government can be no better than the public opinion that sustains it."*

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(1882-1945)

Thirty-second President of the United States

## JTRODUCTION

Suppose for a moment that your school is governed democratically. In this democracy, the students have the final say in determining school policies and procedures. But what if a significant number of students did not have an opinion on what school policies and procedures should be? What if many students had opinions but did not clearly communicate those opinions to school officials? In this situation, there could be no true democracy.

This example, when applied to our democratic nation, tells you something about how government works. Above all else, the aim of a democratic government is to convert the will of the people into public policy. In the above quotation, President Roosevelt was reminding the people of their responsibility to make our democratic system work by forming opinions and openly expressing them to public officials. Otherwise, these officials will never know what the people want.

◀ The purpose of the NAMES Project was to heighten public awareness of AIDS sufferers. The names embroidered onto quilts were of people who had died of the disease.

# Definition and Measurement of Public Opinion

## Preview Questions:

What is public opinion, and why is it important in American politics?

What is a public opinion poll, and how does it work?

## Key Terms:

public opinion, public opinion poll, samples, straw poll, biased sample, random sample, sampling error

People hold opinions-sometimes very strong ones-about a range of issues, from the ethics of the death penalty to the appearance of the latest fashion. In this chapter, however, we are concerned with public opinion, which is made up of individual attitudes or beliefs shared by a significant portion of adults about politics, public issues, and public policy.

Public opinion is important in American politics because opinions can determine how government handles such issues as the environment and the death penalty. You may hear a news report stating that "a significant number of Americans" feel a certain way about an issue. This probably means that a particular opinion is held by a large enough number of people to make government officials turn their heads and listen. Public opinion is most often cast in terms of percentages: 62 percent feel this way, 27 percent do not, and 11 percent have no opinion.

Public opinion is limited to those issues that are in the public arena, such as taxes, health care, Social Security, clean-air legislation, unemployment, and so on. The issue must be of interest to a significant number of people, and must be cause for some kind of political action, social action, or media coverage.

When does private opinion become public opinion? After all, you and your friends probably have private opinions about many people and issues. You may think your school principal is a great person. You may dislike the way your neighbor painted the house next door. Private opinion becomes public opinion only when it is publicly expressed and concerns public issues. Whenever your private opinion becomes so strong that you are willing to go to the polls to vote for or against a candidate or an issue, your private opinion has become public opinion. If you feel so intensely about an issue you are willing to speak out on a radio talk show, your private opinion has become public opinion.

## Measuring Public Opinion

If public opinion is to affect public policy, then public officials must be made aware of it. They must know how strongly people feel about the issues. They must also know when public opinion changes. The most common ways public officials learn about public opinion are through election results, personal contacts, interest groups, and media reports. A somewhat more



*Polling by phone is one way of measuring public opinion. While most respondents give straight answers, statisticians adjust their numbers for the occasional nonstandard answer, like Sally's.*



precise way to measure public opinion is through public opinion polls.

A public opinion poll is a survey of the public's opinion on a particular topic. A poll cannot include the entire population. Instead, polls are based on scientific polling techniques that use samples-groups of people who are representative of the population being studied.



*t The data for opinion polls are gathered from only a small portion of the population, and therefore might not represent the majority. For example, opinions gathered at a yacht club might differ greatly from opinions gathered at a neighborhood shopping center.*

**Early Polling Efforts** During the 1800s, writers often spiced up a magazine or newspaper article by doing a straw poll, or mail survey, of readers' opinions. Straw polls try to read the public's collective mind simply by asking a large number of people the same question. Straw polls are still used today. Some newspapers, for example, have interviewers ask adults in shopping centers and other central locations to "vote" on certain issues. More and more of this type of polling, however, makes use of telephone technology and "900" telephone numbers.

The major problem with straw polls is that there is no way to ensure that the opinions expressed are representative of the population being studied. Generally speaking, such opinions represent only a small portion of that population. The most famous of all straw-polling errors took place in 1936. A magazine called *Literary Digest* sent out millions of postcard ballots for the purpose of predicting the outcome of a presidential election. The *Digest* predicted that Alfred Landon would easily defeat incumbent Franklin D. Roosevelt. Instead, Roosevelt won by a landslide.

How did the magazine go so wrong? The *Digest* had drawn a biased sample, one that did not accurately represent the population. The magazine's editors had sent mail-in cards to citizens whose names appeared in telephone directories, to its own subscribers, and to automobile owners-in all, a staggering 2,376,000 people. In 1936, however, in the middle of the Great Depression, people who owned a car or a telephone or who subscribed to the *Digest* were not representative of the majority of Americans. The vast majority of Americans were far less prosperous than this group. Despite the enormous number of people surveyed, the sample was unrepresentative. Thus, the results of the survey were inaccurate.

Several newcomers to the public opinion poll industry, however, did predict the Roosevelt landslide victory. They were the Gallup poll of George Gallup and the Roper poll of Elmo Roper. The Gallup and Roper organizations are still at the forefront of the poll-taking industry.

**Sampling** How can interviewing a small sample of 1,500 to 2,000 voters possibly indicate what millions of voters think? Clearly, the sample must be representative of all the voters in the population being studied. A sample must consist of a group of people who are typical of that general population. If the sample is properly selected, the opinions of those in the sample will be representative of the opinions held by the larger population. If the sample is not properly chosen, then the results of the poll may not reflect the ideas of the general population under study.

The most important principle in sampling is randomness. In a random sample, every person in the population being polled has an equal chance of being chosen. Suppose that a polling organization wants to measure women's opinions on an issue. In order to have a truly representative random sample, the sample should have the same characteristics, in the same proportions, as the entire female population. For example, if 25 percent of the female population is between the ages of 25 and 40, then 25 percent of the sample must be in this age group.

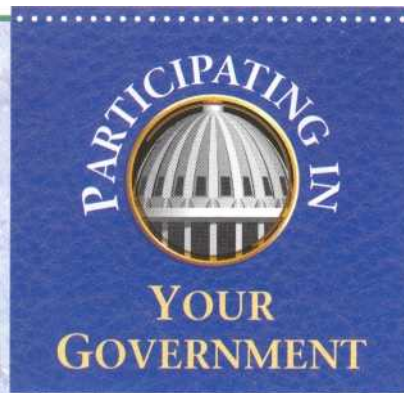
Polls can be surprisingly accurate when they are conducted properly. Politicians, the news media, and the public place a great deal of faith in the accuracy of poll results. Policymakers use polls to determine where the majority stands on particular issues.

### Just the Facts

*In numerous Gallup polls, less than half of the respondents can correctly name their congressional representatives.*

One of the many ways in which public opinion is expressed in this country is through letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines. Letters to the editor are usually printed on the opinion and editorial (op-ed) page of the newspaper and on the pages immediately following the table of contents in a magazine. Usually, newspapers and magazines print letters that best represent a variety of their readers' opinions. Use the following guidelines when you write a letter to the editor:

- Know your purpose for writing. Before you begin writing, be sure to know whether you are trying to inform, persuade, inquire, or complain.
- Know your subject. Research your subject before you write your letter so you can back up your opinions with facts.
- Make sure your letter is neat and well organized.
- Use precise language. Don't try to impress anybody with your vocabulary. Avoid harsh or sarcastic language. The



## Writing a Letter to the Editor

important thing is to convey your message. Be brief and to the point. Newspapers and magazines do not have the space to print long-winded introductions or explanations. Plan your opening sentence carefully so that your letter will make a strong initial impact. Deal with only one topic. Use correct grammar and spelling. Appeal to your readers' sense of fair play and justice. Challenge them to think

about and respond to the issue.

- Try to be optimistic and practical. If your letter is pointing out a problem, offer potential solutions.

For the final draft, type your letter on one side of the paper using double spacing. Sign your name and give your address and telephone number. You can use a pen name or initials if you wish.

### TAKING ACTION

1. Select an issue affecting your school that you would like to write about for a local newspaper. Write a draft of your letter, and read it to the class. Ask for constructive criticism from students and teachers.
2. Obtain a copy of the newspaper, and read its instructions on submitting letters to the editor. Then send the editor a neatly typed copy of your finished letter.

Supporters of polling argue that it is a tool for democracy. In contrast, critics of polling think that it makes politicians reactors rather than leaders. Critics also argue that election polls can discourage voters from voting when the polls predict that their candidates will lose.

**Problems with Polls** Although the methods used by public opinion pollsters have improved since the days of *Literary Digest*, polls have limitations and faults.

One criticism of polls is that the wording of questions can affect responses to the questions. Consider a question about building a new town library. One way to gather opinions about this issue is to ask, "Do you believe the town should have a new library?" Another way is to ask, "Are you willing to pay higher property taxes so that the town can build a new library?" Very likely, the poll results will differ depending on how the question is phrased.



## The Changing Face of Public Opinion >11 Polling

Before the 1930s, public opinion polling was much less sophisticated than it is today.

### THEN (BEFORE THE 1930S)

Public opinion polls were sponsored by the media.

Public opinion polls did not predict election results very well.

Most opinion polls were "straw polls" that did not use scientific sampling techniques.

Opinion pollsters typically relied on personal interviews to gather information.

Polls often reduce complex issues to simple "yes" or "no" questions. For example, suppose respondents are asked to answer "yes" or "no" to the question, "Do you favor aid to foreign countries?" Opinions could vary according to the recipient country or the purpose or the type of aid. The poll would nonetheless force respondents to answer "yes" or "no." These answers would not necessarily reflect respondents' true feelings.

Public opinion polls can also be misused. Instead of measuring public opinion, they can end up creating it. For example, a candidate might claim that all the polls show that he or she is ahead. People who want to vote for the winner may support this person.

Some people also question polls' reliability. Drawing accurate random samples is difficult. Any opinion poll contains a sampling error, the difference between what the sample results show and what the true result would be if everybody in the country had been polled.

### NOW

Public opinion polls are sponsored by interest groups, political parties, and candidates, as well as the media.

Public opinion polls consistently predict election results very well (at least with respect to who is going to win or lose).

Opinion polls are now based on random, representative samples and are therefore more reliable measures of public opinion.

Opinion pollsters use a variety of techniques to gather information, including call-in surveys, telephone or computer-assisted polls, and talk shows.

Furthermore, the answers given to pollsters may not be reliable. Those interviewed may be influenced by the interviewer's personality and give an answer that they think will please the interviewer. They may answer without having any information on the issue. Finally, opinion polls cannot reflect rapid shifts in public opinion unless they are taken frequently. This can be especially important in voting polls taken before elections.



1. What is public opinion?
2. What were some problems with early polling efforts?
3. What is sampling? What is random sampling?

4. What are some problems with public opinion polls?
5. What does the sampling error of a poll represent?
6. **For Critical Analysis:** Explain why supporters of polling argue that it is a tool for democracy and

why critics of polling think that it makes politicians reactors rather than leaders. Then explain which opinion you agree with and why.

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## Factors That Affect Public Opinion

### Preview Questions:

What is political socialization?  
 What is the difference between informal and formal political socialization?  
 What are agents of political socialization, and how do these agents and other factors affect public opinion?

### Key Terms:

political socialization, mass media, peer group

When asked, most Americans are willing to express an opinion on political issues. Not one of us, however, was born with these opinions. Most of the attitudes and beliefs that are expressed as political opinions are acquired through a learning process called political socialization. This complex process begins in early childhood and continues through a person's life.

Political socialization can be informal or formal. Informal political socialization usually begins with the

family. Although parents do not normally sit down and say, "Let us explain to you the virtues of becoming a Republican," children nevertheless come to know their parents' feelings, beliefs, and attitudes. Words such as *acquire*, *absorb*, and *pick up* perhaps best describe the informal process of political socialization. In contrast, formal

political socialization involves activities such as taking a government class in high school.

### Just the Facts

*The authors of the Federalist Papers believed that public opinion was potentially dangerous and that this danger could be reduced by having a large republic.*

Studies have shown that most political socialization is informal. There is little evidence that formally learning about political views has a lasting impact on people's political opinions. Rather, the strong early influence of the family later gives way to the multiple influences of school, peers, television, co-workers, and so on. We look here at the major agents of political socialization—groups that influence our political views—as well as at some other factors that affect public opinion.

### The Importance of Family

Most parents do not deliberately set out to form their children's political ideas and beliefs. They are usually more concerned with the moral, religious, and ethical values of their offspring. Yet children first see the political world through the eyes of their families—



***One shift in public opinion that has surprised many observers is the rise in home schooling. What changes in American society may have caused some parents to decide to teach their children "the old-fashioned way"?***



the most important force in political socialization. Children do not "learn" political attitudes the same way they learn to ride a bike. Rather, they learn by absorbing everyday conversations and stories about politicians and issues and by watching the actions of their family members. Families play such a crucial role in political socialization because they dominate a child's early years in terms of time and emotional commitment. The powerful influence of family is not easily broken.

The family's influence is strongest when children clearly perceive their parents' attitudes. In one study, more high-school students could identify their parents' political party affiliation than any other of their parents' attitudes or beliefs. It is no wonder, then, that in most cases, the political party of the parents becomes the political party of the child.

## Educational Influence

Education is a powerful influence on an individual's political attitudes. From their earliest days in school, children learn about the U.S. political system. They say the Pledge of Allegiance and sing patriotic songs. They celebrate national holidays such as Presidents' Day and Veterans Day and learn the history and symbols associated with them. In the upper grades, children learn more about government and democratic procedures through civic education classes and through student government and clubs. They also learn citizenship skills through school rules and regulations.

The level of education a person has influences his or her political knowledge and participation. For example, more highly educated men and women tend to show more knowledge about politics and policy. They also tend to vote and participate more often in politics.

## The Mass Media

The mass media—newspapers, magazines, television, and radio—also have an impact on political socialization. The most influential of these media is television. Grade-school children spend an average of thirty-two hours per week watching television, more time than they spend in academic classes. Television is the leading source of political and public affairs information for most people.



*Reaching across racial, social, and economic lines, television finds its way into the homes of almost every American. Have television programs influenced your political views in any way?*

The media can also determine what issues, events, and personalities are in the public eye. When people hear the evening's top stories, they usually assume that these stories concern the most important issues facing the nation. But by publicizing some issues and ignoring others, and by giving some stories high priority and others low priority, the media decide the relative importance of issues. They help determine what people will talk and think about. This, in turn, helps determine on which issues politicians will act.

For example, television played a significant role in shaping public opinion about the Vietnam War, which has been called the first "television war." Part of the public opposition to the war in the late 1960s came from the scenes and narrative accounts of destruction, death, and suffering that were televised daily. The war to free Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991 also had extensive media coverage, though some critics feel that this coverage may have shown only the better side of U.S. efforts.

Clearly, the media play an important role in shaping public opinion. The *extent* of that role, however, is often debated. Some studies have suggested that the media may be as influential as the family in shaping



Public opinion polls claim to tell us a variety of things: whether the president's popularity is up or down, or who is ahead in the race for the next presidential nomination.

When you see this information, keep in mind that poll results are not equally reliable. Before you believe what a poll is leading you to conclude, ask the following questions:

1. Who paid for the poll? If a poll was sponsored by a particular candidate or interest group the results may be presented in a misleading way. Take this into account and look carefully at how the poll results are worded.
2. Who was interviewed? A poll should reveal something about the population sampled. The best samples are random samples, in which everyone has an equal chance of being interviewed. You should be skeptical of the person-in-the-shopping-mall interviews. Almost certainly, the people in the mall are not representative of all the people in the community.
3. How were the interviews obtained? Were the interviews conducted by telephone? By mail? In person? Many pollsters think that people are less honest over the telephone than in person. Because telephone



## SOCIAL STUDIES SKILLS

### How to Read a Public Opinion Poll

- surveys cost less than person-to-person interviews, however, they are often used. Also be wary of the results of mail questionnaires. Only a small percentage of people tend to complete and return them. These people may not be representative of the general population.
4. When were the interviews conducted? If the interviews were conducted a year ago or more, the results may be outdated. This is particularly true if a change has taken place that would cause people to feel differently.
  5. How were the questions worded? Elmo Roper, a famous pollster, once said:

*If you ask people about any subject that they've got very strong opinions on, how you word*

*the question really doesn't matter. When they don't have convictions, how you ask questions and in what sequence you ask them are critical. You can flip-flop the answers ten points one way or the other just because of a relatively subtle phraseology difference or the context in which you ask the questions.*

#### PRACTICING YOUR SKILLS

1. Look through at least three news or business magazines. Make photocopies of all of the opinion polls and then analyze them in terms of the following questions:
  - a. How many individuals were included in each poll?
  - b. What percentage of the population being studied does this number represent?
2. Watch the TV news for seven consecutive days. Write down the number of times the newscasters refer to the results of opinion polls. Can you tell by the statements concerning the polls whether the number of individuals polled was small or large? Can you determine whether the polls were done over the phone or in person? After answering these questions, decide how much credibility you wish to give to each poll result.

opinion. Other studies have shown that the media may not have as much power to influence opinion as has been thought. Generally, people already have ideas about issues they see or hear about in the mass media. These ideas act as a screen to block out any information that does not fit with them. For example, if you are already firmly convinced that being a vegetarian is beneficial to your health, you probably will not change your mind if you watch a TV show that asserts that vegetarians live no longer on average than people who eat meat. Apparently, the media are most influential with those persons who have not yet formed an opinion about the issue being discussed.

## Opinion Leaders

Every state and community has leaders who can influence the opinions of their fellow citizens. These people may be public officials, religious leaders, teachers, or celebrities. They are persons to whom others listen and from whom others draw ideas and convictions about various issues of public concern. These leaders play a significant role in the formation of public opinion. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a powerful opinion leader during the civil rights movements, for example.

## Peer Groups

The influence of peer groups is another factor in political socialization. A peer group is a group of people who share a number of social characteristics—for example, close friends, classmates, co-workers, club members, or church group members. Most political socialization occurs when the peer group is involved in political activities. For example, your political beliefs might be influenced by peers with whom you are working on a common political cause, such as controlling pollution in your neighborhood or saving an endangered species. Your political beliefs probably would not be as highly influenced by peers with whom you collected stamps or made pottery.

## Economic Status and Occupation

A person's economic status may influence his or her political views. For example, poorer people are more

likely to favor government-assistance programs than are wealthier people.

Where a person works may also affect her or his opinion. For example, individuals working for a non-profit corporation that depends on government funds will tend to support governmental spending in that area. Business managers are more likely to favor tax shelters and aid to businesses than are people who work in factories. People who work in factories are more likely to favor a national health-care program.

## Age

Age does not appear to play a central role in determining political preferences. There are, however, some age differences. Young adults are a bit more liberal than older Americans are on most issues. Young adults tend to be more progressive than older persons on such issues as racial and gender equality.

If older Americans are a little more conservative than younger Americans, it may be because individuals tend to maintain the values they learn when they first became politically aware. Forty years later those values may be considered relatively conservative. Additionally, people's attitudes are sometimes shaped by the events that unfold as they grow up. Individuals who grew up during an era of Democratic Party dominance will likely remain Democrats throughout their lives. The same holds true for those who grew up during an era of Republican Party dominance.



1. What is political socialization?
2. Name four agents of political socialization.
3. What is the strongest influence on a person's political attitudes?
4. How do economic status, occupation, and age affect a person's political attitudes?
5. **For Critical Analysis:** Every year, events occur in other countries that would never occur in the United States. Yet only a small percentage of these events are ever publicized in this country. What do you think determines which world events receive widespread media coverage?



## Categorizing Political Attitudes

### Preview Questions:

- What is a liberal?
- What is a conservative?
- What is an ideologue?

### Key Terms:

liberals, conservatives, moderates, radical left, radical right, reactionaries, ideologues

Political attitudes are often labeled as either conservative or liberal. Indeed, political officeholders and candidates frequently identify themselves as either liberal or conservative, or they are identified as such by the media. These terms refer to parts of a political spectrum that goes from the left (extremely liberal) to the right (extremely conservative). The terms *liberal* and *conservative* have changed in meaning over the years and will continue to change as political attitudes and ideologies evolve.

<sup>1</sup> In the depths of the Great Depression, assistance for poor people was broadly supported by the American people. Sixty-one years later, President Bill Clinton signed into law a bill reforming welfare, thereby ending the guarantee of federal financial assistance to poor people. He is surrounded by several state governors, Vice President Al Gore, and former welfare mothers.



### Liberal versus Conservative

As just mentioned, the two most commonly used labels with respect to political and social ideals are liberal and conservative. Liberals generally support the idea that the national government should take an *active* role in solving the nation's domestic problems. Liberals generally believe that more needs to be done to close the gap between the rich and the poor in this country. Liberals tend to view change in a positive light.

Conservatives tend to value tradition and to promote public policies that *conserve* tradition and the

ways of the past. Conservatives place a high value on the principles of community, continuity, and law and order. Conservatives believe that the national government is already too big and should not be expanded further. They think that the nongovernmental sector of society—businesses and consumers—should be left alone to a greater extent than it has been in the past few decades.

Liberals generally support social welfare programs that assist poor and disadvantaged persons, whereas conservatives tend to favor limiting such programs. Liberals generally accept the notion of expanding the role of the national government, whereas conservatives favor giving state and local governments more control over their own citizens and finances. Liberals generally favor decreasing defense spending, whereas conservatives generally favor maintaining or increasing it.

## The Left, the Center, and the Right

Look at the diagram of the political spectrum shown in Figure 9-1. As you can see, liberals are on the left side of the spectrum, and conservatives are on the right. Generally, Democrats tend to be liberal and Republicans conservative. There are, however, Democrats who are more conservative than certain liberal Republicans.

People whose political views are in between the liberal and conservative camps are generally called moderates. Moderates rarely classify themselves as either liberal or conservative.

On the extreme left of the political spectrum is the radical left-radicals (including Communists and socialists) whose followers are willing to work against

the established political agencies to reach their goals. They may even accept or advocate using violence or overthrowing the government in order to achieve those goals.

On the extreme right is the radical right radicals (including reactionaries and fascists) who resist change much more strongly than do either moderates or conservatives. Reactionaries and fascists are willing to actively fight against social change in order to return to the values and social systems they believe existed in the past. Like the radical left, those on the radical right may even resort to violence to achieve their goals.

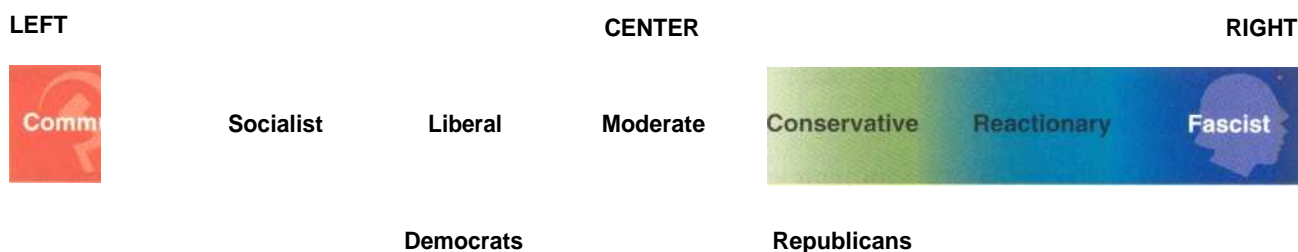
## The Average American versus the Ideologues

Most Americans, when asked, can identify themselves as liberal, conservative, or something in between. More people identify themselves as moderates than as either liberals or conservatives, however. The Gallup polling organization, the *New York Times*, and CBS News routinely ask individuals to identify themselves in these terms. During the last two decades, between 35 and 50 percent of those polled have said they considered themselves moderate, between 17 and 21 percent have said they considered themselves liberal, and between 26 and 33 percent have said they considered themselves conservative. (The remainder held no opinion.)

### Just the Facts

*People with more education tend to be relatively liberal on social issues but relatively conservative on economic issues.*

**FIGURE 9-1 The Political Spectrum** The figure below shows the political spectrum from the left to the right. Where do radicals fall on this scale?





**Some people hold a set of strong political opinions that are well thought out and relatively consistent with one another. These people are often called ideologues.**

Either liberals or conservatives may be ideologues. Most Americans, however, are not interested in *all* political issues and have a mixed set of opinions that do not fit under a conservative or a liberal label. Research shows that only about 10 percent of Americans could be identified as ideologues. The rest of the population looks at politics more in terms of party lines—Democratic or Republican—or from the viewpoint of their own economic well-being.

## Ideology versus Self-Interest

Public opinion polls suggest that the majority of Americans hold the strongest political convictions about issues that directly affect their own lives. For example, a poor person would be more likely to support aid to the poor than a wealthy person would be. An elderly person with serious health problems would be

more likely to support government funding for long-term medical care than would a young person in good health.

Some researchers have determined that self-interest is a great motivator of public opinion. Individuals who have suffered at the hands of a criminal often express harsh opinions about issues such as capital punishment or building more prisons. People who have been suddenly laid off frequently express negative opinions about the current president's ability to manage the economy.

### SECTION 3 REVIEW

1. How do liberals differ from conservatives?
2. What kinds of people are considered ideologues?
3. **For Critical Analysis:** Of what use are the labels *conservative* and *liberal*?

### SECTION 4

## Interest Groups

### Preview Questions:

- What is an interest group?
- What purposes do interest groups serve in American politics?
- How do interest groups differ from political parties?
- What are the various types of interest groups?

### Key Terms:

interest group, public interest groups, trade organizations, labor force

All of us have interests that we want represented in government. Farmers want higher prices for their products. Young people want good educational and job opportunities. Environmentalists want clean air and water. Homeless people want programs for food and

shelter. Throughout our nation's history, organizing to promote and protect such interests has been a natural part of democracy. As the French political observer Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his often-cited book *Democracy in America* (1835), Americans have a tendency to form "associations" and have perfected "the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires." According to de Tocqueville:

*[I]n no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objectives than in America.*

The old adage "there is strength in numbers" is true in American politics. The right to organize groups is protected by the Constitution, which guarantees people the right "peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for redress of grievances." The



*t Senior citizens in America are a large, vocal, and powerful group. Here a proud member of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) looks on as others lobby on behalf of older Americans. What issues might be of particular interest to senior citizens?*



Supreme Court has defended this important right over the years.

## What Is an Interest Group?

Defining the term *interest group* seems simple enough. *Interest* in this sense refers to objectives and policy goals. A *group* is an accumulation of people with something in common. An interest group is an organization made up of people who share common objectives and who actively attempt to influence government policymakers through direct and indirect methods.

Whatever their goals—more or fewer social services, higher or lower prices—interest groups pursue them on every level and in every branch of government. On any given day in Washington, you can find national interest groups in action. If you eat breakfast in the Senate dining room, you might see congressional committee staffers reviewing testimony with representatives from women's groups. Later that morning, you might visit the Supreme Court and watch a lawyer from a civil rights group arguing on behalf of a client in a discrimination suit. Lunch in a popular Washington restaurant might find you listening in on a conversation between an agricultural lobbyist and a representative. That afternoon you might visit the Department of Labor, and watch

bureaucrats working out rules and regulations with representatives from a labor interest group. Then you might stroll past the headquarters of Common Cause, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), and the National Wildlife Federation (NWF).

Interest groups are often criticized in the United States, but they do serve several purposes in American Politics:

Interest groups help bridge the gap between citizens and government and enable citizens to explain their views on policies to public officials.

Interest groups help raise public awareness and inspire action on various issues.

Interest groups often give specialized and detailed information to public officials that might be difficult to obtain otherwise. This information may be useful in making public policy choices.

Interest groups serve as another check on public officials to make sure that they are carrying out their duties responsibly.

### Just the Facts

*Interest groups often concentrate on preventing legislation, rather than promoting it.*



## How Do Interest Groups Differ from Political Parties?

Realize that although both interest groups and political parties are groups of people joined together for political purposes, they differ in several important ways:

- Interest groups are often policy *specialists*, whereas political parties are policy *generalists*. Political parties are broad-based organizations that must attract the support of many opposing groups and consider a large number of issues. Interest groups, in contrast, focus on only a handful of key policies. An environmental group is not as concerned about the problems of the homeless as it is about polluters. An agricultural group is more involved with promoting farm programs than it is with crime in the cities.
- Interest groups are usually more tightly organized than political parties. They are often financed through contributions or dues-paying memberships. Organizers communicate through conferences, mailings, newsletters, and electronic formats, such as e-mail.
- A political party's main sphere of influence is the electoral system. That is, parties run candidates for political office. Interest groups try to influence the outcome of elections; but unlike parties, they do not compete for public office. Although candidates for office may be sympathetic to or even be members of certain groups, they do not run for election as candidates of that group.

### Types of Interest Groups

American democracy embraces almost every conceivable type of interest group, and the number is increasing rapidly. A look at your telephone directory-or even better, the Washington, D.C., directory-will give you an idea of the number and variety of groups. No one has ever compiled a *Who's Who* of interest groups, but you can get an idea of the number

and variety by looking through the annual *Encyclopedia of Associations*.

Some interest groups have large memberships, such as the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), with 33 million members. Others, such as the Tulip Growers Association, have only a few members. Some are familiar groups that have been in existence for many years, such as the National Rifle Association, while others crop up overnight. Some are highly structured and run by a professional full-time staff, while others are loosely structured and informal. Figure 9-2 shows profiles of some important interest groups.

The most common interest groups are private interest groups. These groups seek public policies that benefit the economic interests of their members and work against policies that threaten those interests. Other groups, sometimes called public interest groups, are formed with the broader goal of working for the "public good."

**Business** Business has long been well organized for effective action. Hundreds of business groups now operate in Washington, D.C., in the fifty state capitals, and at the local level across the country. Two umbrella organizations that include most businesses are the Chamber of Commerce of the United States and the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM). More than 200,000 individual businesses belong to the Chamber of Commerce, which also has 4,000 local, state, and regional affiliates. It has become a major voice for the nation's thousands of small businesses. The NAM chiefly represents big business and has thirteen thousand members.

The hundreds of trade organizations are far less visible than the Chamber of Commerce and the NAM, but they are also important in seeking policy goals for their members. Trade associations cover a range of areas, from the aerospace industry to angora goat producers, through builders and pickle makers, to truckers and theater owners. Trade organizations usually support policies that benefit business in general. They may not agree on specific issues, however. For example, people in the oil industry work for policies that favor the development of oil as an energy resource. Other business groups have worked for policies that favor the development of coal, solar power, and nuclear power. Trucking companies work for policies that would result in the construction of more highways. Railroad com-

**ROM 9-2 Profiles of Selected Interest Groups** The figure below provides information about the membership, activities, and budgets of five interest groups. Which of the interest groups profiled has the largest budget? Which has the smallest budget?

Name: American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)  
 Founded: 1958  
 Membership: 33,000,000 working or retired persons fifty years of age or older  
 Description: The AARP strives to better the lives of older people, especially in the areas of health care, worker equity, and minority affairs. The AARP sponsors community crime prevention programs, research on the problems associated with aging, and a mail-order pharmacy.  
 Budget: \$322,000,000  
 Address: 601 E. St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20049  
 Contact: (202) 434-3741; [www.aarp.org/](http://www.aarp.org/)

Name: League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS)  
 Founded: 1920  
 Membership: 120,000 volunteer women and men eighteen years of age or older  
 Description: The LWVUS promotes active and informed political participation. It distributes candidate information, encourages voter registration and voting, and takes action on issues of public policy. The group's national interests include international relations, natural resources, and social policy.  
 Budget: \$3,000,000  
 Address: 1730 M. St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036  
 Contact: (202) 429-1965; [www.lwv.org/](http://www.lwv.org/)

Name: National Education Association (NEA)  
 Founded: 1857  
 Membership: 2,300,000 elementary and secondary school teachers, college and university professors, academic administrators, and others concerned with education  
 Description: The NEA's committees investigate and take action in the areas of benefits, civil rights educational support, personnel, higher education, human relations, legislation, minority affairs, and women's concerns.  
 Budget: \$147,500,000  
 Address: 1201 16th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036  
 Contact: (202) 833-4000; [www.nea.org/](http://www.nea.org/)

#### MADD

Name: Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)  
 Founded: 1980  
 Membership: 3,200,000 members and supporters  
 Description: MADD looks for effective solutions to problems related to drunk driving and underage drinking. The organization also supports those who have been victims of drunk driving.  
 Budget: \$53,000,000  
 Address: 511 E. John Carpenter Freeway, No. 700, Irving, TX 75062  
 Contact: (214) 744-6233; (800) GET MADD.  
[www.madd.org/](http://www.madd.org/)

#### SC

Name: Sierra Club (SC)  
 Founded: 1892  
 Membership: 650,000 persons concerned with the interrelationship between nature and humankind  
 Description: The Sierra Club endeavors to protect and conserve natural resources, save endangered areas, and resolve problems associated with wilderness, clean air, energy conservation, and land use. Its committees are concerned with agriculture, economics, environmental education, hazardous materials, the international environment, Native American sites, political education, and water resources.  
 Budget: \$45,000,000  
 Address: 85 2d St., 2d Floor. San Francisco, CA 94105  
 Contact: (415) 977-5500, [www.sierraclub.org/](http://www.sierraclub.org/)

panies do not, of course, want more highways built, because that would hurt their business.

**Labor** Interest groups representing labor have been some of the most influential groups in the country. Nationwide labor groups date back as far as 1886, when the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was formed.

The largest and most powerful labor group today is the AFL-CIO (the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations), an organization consisting of nearly ninety unions representing more than thirteen million workers. Several million other workers are members of non-AFL-CIO unions such as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the

United Mine Workers, the International Longshoremen's Union, and the Warehousemen's Union.

Like labor unions everywhere, American unions press for policies to improve working conditions and pay for their members, but there are also issues on

which they compete with or oppose each other. For example, a bricklayers' union might try to change building codes to benefit its own members even though such changes might hurt the carpenters' union. Labor groups may also compete for new members. For example, in California, the Teamsters, the AFL-CIO, and the

United Mine Workers have

competed to organize farm workers. Today, these unions are competing to organize farm workers in Texas, Florida, and other states.

Note that organized labor does not represent all of America's workers. It represents only 15 percent of the labor force—the total of those over the age of sixteen who are working or who are actively looking for a job. The interests of workers who do not belong to labor unions sometimes differ from the interests of unions and their members.

Although unions had great strength and political power in the late 1800s and the early 1900s, their strength and power have waned in the last two decades. They are still a powerful lobbying force, however.

**Agricultural Groups** Many groups work for general agricultural interests at all levels of government. Several broad-based agricultural groups represent over five million American farmers, from peanut farmers to dairy producers to tobacco growers. They are the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Grange, and the National Farmers' Union. The Farm Bureau, with over 4.7 million members, is the largest and generally the most effective of the three mentioned. The Grange, founded in 1867, is the oldest and has a membership of about 290,000 farm families. The National Farmers' Union consists of approximately 300,000 smaller farmers. Specialized groups, such as the Associated Milk Producers, Inc. (AMPI), also have a strong influence on farm legislation.

### Just the Facts

*The first labor organization in the United States was created by shoemakers and coopers (barrel makers) in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1648.*

## THE GLOBAL VIEW

### Gun Control in Britain and the United States—A Tale of Two Lobbies

The British have had a long history of strict gun-control laws. Recent British laws are said to be the toughest gun-control measures in the world. Under these laws, almost all handguns are banned, and the small guns currently permitted are expected to be banned soon. British residents face the prospect of spending up to ten years in prison if they fail to give up their weapons.

Gun-control laws in the United States are far less strict than those of Britain. In public opinion polls, a majority of U.S. citizens (routinely over 60 percent) say they would like stricter gun-control laws, but such laws have not been passed in this country. Why not? The answer to this question, at least in part, has to do with the effective lobbying efforts of the National Rifle Association, which strongly opposes any gun-control legislation. In contrast, the most important gun lobby in Britain is primarily concerned with protecting sport shooting, and it has been effective in protecting the use of shotguns in the countryside.

### THINKING GLOBALLY

Opponents of the British handgun ban argued that in 1996, 41 percent of homicides in Britain were committed with knives; 29 percent resulted from the use of blunt objects, hitting, or kicking; and 18 percent were the result of strangulation. Only 12 percent were committed with guns. Do these statistics represent a valid argument against the British handgun ban? Explain.





*t Striking United Parcel Service (UPS) employees picket as a truck leaves a downtown Chicago shipping center. More than 185,000 members of the Teamsters Union were involved in the 1997 nationwide strike against UPS. Why are strikes an effective tool of labor unions?*

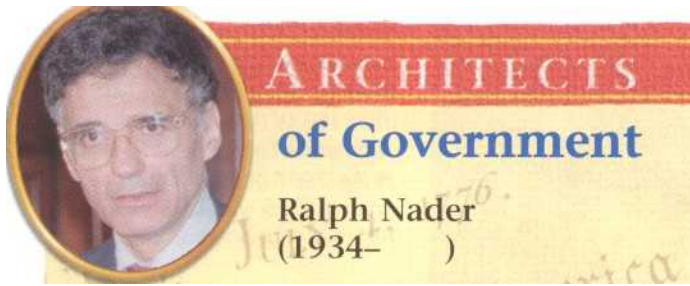
People in many product areas of agriculture have formed their own organizations. Groups have been formed around specific farm commodities such as dairy products, soybeans, grain, fruit, corn, cotton, beef, sugar beets, and so on. Like business and labor groups, farm organizations sometimes find themselves in competition. In some western states, for example, barley farmers, cattle ranchers, and orchard owners may compete to influence laws concerning water rights. Different groups also often disagree over the extent to which the government should regulate farmers.

**Consumer Groups** Groups organized to promote consumers' rights were very active in the 1960s and 1970s. Some are active today. The most well known and perhaps the most effective are the public interest consumer groups organized under the leadership of consumer activist Ralph Nader. (See the *Architects of Government* feature on page 252.) Another well-known consumer group is Consumers Union, a non-profit organization started in 1936. In addition to publishing *Consumer Reports*, Consumers Union has been influential in fighting for the removal of phosphates in detergents, lead in gasoline, and pesticides in food. Consumers Union strongly criticizes government agencies when they act against consumer interests. Recently, members of several leading policy groups formed the National Consumer Coalition (NCC). The

NCC's goal is to promote consumer choice in several issue areas, including housing, transportation, health and safety, and telecommunications. In each city, consumer groups have been organized to deal with such problems as poor housing, discrimination against minorities and women, and business inaction on consumer complaints.

**Older Americans** While the population of the nation as a whole has tripled since 1900, the number of older Americans has increased eightfold. Persons over the age of sixty-five account for 13 percent of the population. Many of these people have united to call attention to their special needs and concerns. Interest groups formed to promote the interests of older Americans have been very outspoken and persuasive. As pointed out before, the large membership of the American Association of Retired Persons has enabled it to become a potent political force. The Gray Panthers is another organization formed to promote the interests of older people.

**Environmental Groups** Concern for the environment has led to growth in the membership of established environmental groups and formation of new groups. Indeed, environmental groups are some of the most powerful interest groups in Washington. The National



Ralph Nader is one of the nation's most well-known consumer activists. Nader's book *Unsafe at Any Speed*, which was published in 1965, influenced Congress to bring automobile safety design under the control of the national government. Nader founded the Center for the Study of Responsive Law, the Center for Auto Safety, and the Public Interest Research Group. He also formed Essential Information, a nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging all citizens to become active and engaged in their communities. In 1996, he was the Green Party's candidate for president.

#### HIS WORDS

"The time has not come to discipline the automobile for safety; that time came over four decades ago. But that is not cause to delay any longer what should have been accomplished in the nineteen-twenties."

(*Unsafe at Any Speed*, p. xi)

"For almost 70 years the life insurance industry has been a smug sacred cow feeding the public a steady line of sacred bologna."

(*Testimony to U.S. Senate Committee*,  
May 18, 1974)

#### DEVELOPING

1. In the first quotation above, what did Nader mean by the phrase "discipline the automobile for safety"? Why should this have been accomplished in the 1920s?
2. Regarding the second quotation, why do you think Nader had such a negative view of the insurance industry?

Wildlife Federation now has 5.6 million members. Other major environmental groups include the Sierra Club, the National Audubon Society, and the Nature Conservancy.

These groups have organized to support pollution reduction and control, wilderness protection, and natural resource and wildlife conservation. They have organized to oppose strip mining, nuclear power plants, logging activities, chemical waste dumping, and many other environmental hazards.

**Professional Groups** Most professions that require advanced education or specialized training have organizations to protect and promote their interests. These groups are concerned mainly with the standards of their professions, but they also work to influence government policy.

Four major professional groups are the American Medical Association (AMA), representing physicians; the American Bar Association (ABA), representing lawyers; and the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), both representing teachers. Each has an impact on public policy in its own area. In addition, there are dozens of less well-known and less politically active professional groups, such as the Screen Actors Guild,



*A The Gray Panthers is a group dedicated to promoting the interest of older Americans. What clues do you have from the photo that the Gray Panthers may be more militant than the AARP?*

the National Association of Social Workers, and the American Political Science Association.

**Women's Groups** Groups concerned with women's interests swelled with the women's rights movement. The National Organization for Women (NOW) is the largest women's group, having about 250,000 members. It has a national board made up of salaried officers and regional representatives. NOW has established the Legal Defense and Education Fund, which focuses on education and public information concerning women's rights.

**Church-Related Organizations** Many church-related organizations try to influence public policy in several important areas. The National Council of Churches, for example, has spoken out on civil rights, human rights, and other social issues.

**Ethnic Organizations** A number of ethnic groups in the United States have formed organizations to influence public policy at all levels of government. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) works for improvement in the political, social, and economic status of African Americans.

Hispanic Americans have a number of organizations that work for their interests. They include the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund and the League of United Latin American Citizens. Asian Americans have the Organization of Chinese Americans and the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium.

As America becomes more culturally diverse and economically complex, we will most likely see an even greater array of interest groups.

## SECTION 4 REVIEW

1. How do interest groups fit into American politics?
2. How does an interest group differ from a political party?
3. Name four different types of interest groups.
4. **For Critical Analysis:** One individual may belong to several different interest groups. Might the goals of one of these groups conflict with those of another? Explain.

## SECTION 5

# How Groups Try to Shape Policy

### Preview Questions:

- At what level or levels of government do interest groups operate?
- What are some of the methods used by lobbyists to influence public policymakers?
- What is the difference between the direct and the indirect techniques used by lobbyists?
- Co What are some of the indirect techniques that interest groups employ?
- How have government regulations affected lobbyists?

### Key Terms:

lobbying, lobbyist, political action committees (PACs), ratings systems

Interest groups operate at all levels of government, and they use a variety of strategies to steer policies their way. Sometimes, they attempt to directly influence the policymakers themselves. At other times, they try to shape public opinion, which indirectly influences policymakers. The extent and nature of their activities depend on their goals and their resources.

### Direct Techniques

Lobbying and providing election support are two important direct techniques used by interest groups.

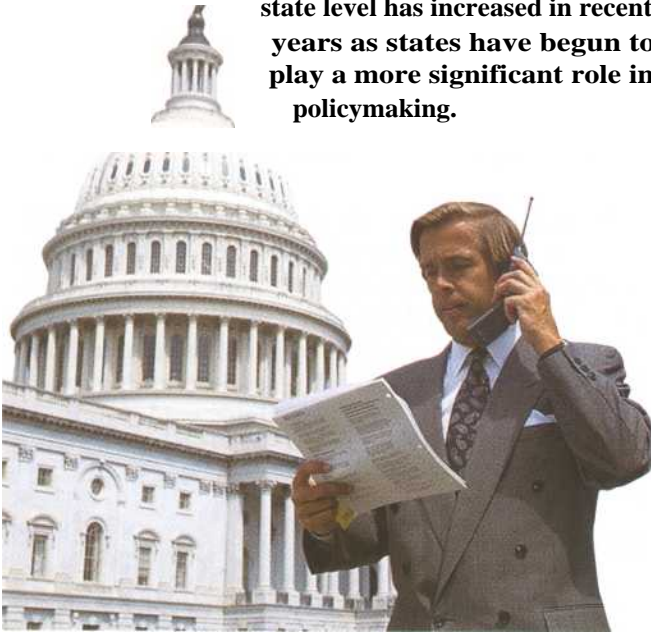
**Lobbying** Today, lobbying refers to all attempts by organizations or individuals to influence the passage,



defeat, or contents of legislation and the administrative decisions of government. A lobbyist is a representative of an organized lobby who handles the group's lobbying efforts. Lobbying takes its name from the foyer, or lobby, of the legislature itself, where petitioners used to corner legislators to speak about their concerns. The use of the term *lobbying* dates back at least to the 1830s. By 1841, according to an English visitor to the United States, it was a well-established practice, at least in state capitals:

*A practice exists in the State capitals, called lobbying. . . . A certain number of agents, selected for their skill and experience in the arts of . . . persuading . . . members, are employed by public companies and private individuals, who have bills before the legislature which they are anxious to get passed. These persons attend the lobby of the House daily, talk with the members, . . . invite them to dinners and suppers, etc.*

Most of the larger interest groups have lobbyists in Washington, D.C. These lobbyists often include former members of Congress or former employees of executive bureaucracies who are experienced in the methods of political influence and who "know people." Many lobbyists also work at the state and local levels of government. In fact, lobbying at the state level has increased in recent years as states have begun to play a more significant role in policymaking.



*This Washington lobbyist for the health-care industry uses the latest technology to make his client's case to legislators. Why does an organization hire a lobbyist?*

While lobbying can be directed at the legislative branch of government, it is also directed at administrative agencies and even at the courts. For example, individuals concerned over the suffering caused by acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) formed a strong lobby in the early 1990s. Their goal was to force the Food and Drug Administration to allow patients to use experimental anti-AIDS drugs before the drugs were fully tested.

Lobbyists use several methods to achieve their goals:

1. *Making personal contact with key legislators.* This is one of the most effective direct lobbying techniques. A competent lobbyist must be persuasive, have a good understanding of human nature, and present a strong case with accurate information. It is to the lobbyist's advantage to provide accurate information so that the legislator will rely on the individual or interest group in the future. For example, a lobbyist from the Sierra Club lobbying for clean-air legislation must be familiar with all aspects of the problem before contacting a congressional staff member. If the lobbyist does not present accurate information, the club's credibility and effectiveness will be damaged, if not destroyed.
2. *Providing expertise to legislators or other government officials.* Members of Congress cannot be experts on every issue, so they eagerly seek information to help them make up their minds. Some lobbying groups do research and present their findings to these legislators, as well as to other officials.
3. *Offering "expert" testimony before congressional committees for or against proposed legislation.* A bill to prohibit logging in a certain forested area, for example, might concern several interest groups. The timber industry would probably oppose the bill, and representatives from that interest group might be asked to testify before a congressional committee. Groups that would probably support the bill, such as wildlife conservationists and other environmental groups, might also be asked to testify. Each side would offer as much evidence as possible to support its position on the bill.
4. *Assisting legislators or bureaucrats in drafting legislation.* Lobbyists often have knowledge or expertise that is useful in drafting legislation, and that is a major strength for an interest group. Lobbyists also are a source of ideas and sometimes offer legal advice on specific details.

5. *Following up.* Even after a lobbying group wins a legislative victory, the battle is not over. Executive agencies responsible for carrying out legislation can often increase or decrease the power of the new law. Lobbyists often try to influence the government officials who implement the policy. For example, beginning in the early 1960s, laws outlawing gender-based discrimination were broadly outlined by Congress. Both women's rights groups favoring the laws and interest groups opposing the laws lobbied for years to influence how the laws would be implemented by executive agencies.

**Providing Election Support** Interest groups often become directly involved in the election process. Many interest group members join and work within political parties in order to influence party platforms and the nomination of candidates. They provide campaign support for legislators who favor their policies and sometimes urge their own members to try to win posts in party organizations. Most important, interest groups urge their members to vote for the candidates that support the views of the group. They can also

threaten legislators with the withdrawal of their votes. No candidate can expect to have support from all interest groups. If a candidate expects to win, however, he or she often needs support (or little opposition) from powerful interest groups.

Today, interest groups often provide money to campaigns through political action committees (PACs), which are groups organized to collect money and provide financial support for political candidates. Interest groups funnel money through PACs to the candidates whom they think will benefit them the most. (PACs are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 11.) The number of PACs has grown significantly, along with the amounts of money they spend on elections. Campaign contributions do not guarantee that officials will vote the way the groups wish. Rather, groups make these contributions to ensure that they will have access to the public officials they have helped to elect.

## Indirect Techniques

Interest groups also try to influence public policy indirectly through third parties or the general public.



*t Interest groups encourage voters to vote for their issues, and they also encourage voters to sign petitions so that issues can be placed on state ballots as voter-sponsored initiatives. Today, some groups hire individuals to gather signatures for specific ballot initiatives. What is the attitude of the voters in this cartoon?*



## Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)

The formation of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) began with a tragedy. On May 3, 1980, Cari Lightner, aged thirteen, was walking in a bicycle lane near her home in Fair Oaks, California, on her way to a church carnival. She was struck from behind by a swerving car and hit so hard that she was hurled 120 feet down the road. The driver of the car never stopped, but he was arrested four days later.

The driver was drunk at the time of the accident. In fact, when he killed Cari, he had been out of jail on bail for only two days because of another hit-and-run drunk-driving accident. Although he had been convicted of drunk driving and related offenses three times in four years, he had served only forty-eight hours in jail. The police told Candy Lightner, Cari's mother, that the driver would probably never go to jail, because drunk driving was not considered a serious crime in California. The driver, in fact, never did go to prison, though he did serve eleven months in a work camp and halfway house.

Candy Lightner was shocked and angry. After extensive research, she found out that nothing

effective was being done to keep drunk drivers off the road. Drunk drivers could literally "get away with murder" without fear of being punished. "Death caused by drunk driving is the only socially acceptable form of homicide," she concluded.

Candy Lightner decided to do all she could to help other victims and to prevent such tragedies from happening again. She quit her job to form an interest group called Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or MADD. She began her campaign by convincing the California governor and legislature that stiffer penalties were needed for drunk-driving offenses. She quickly gained the support of other parents who had experienced similar tragedies.

Once launched, MADD proved to be a powerful force. Members wrote letters, gave speeches, and issued press releases. MADD members sponsored community-awareness meetings and educational seminars. They circulated petitions calling for state and national action. They applied for corporate and foundation grants. They took their fight to Washington, D.C., where they held

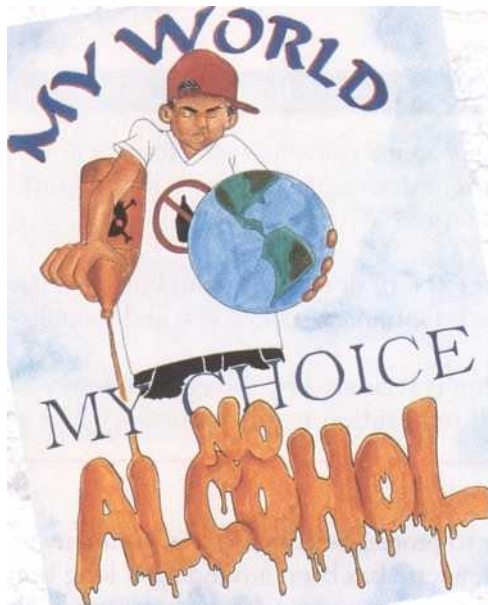
Indirect techniques may appear to be spontaneous, but they are normally well planned. Interest groups use indirect techniques in part because public officials are often more impressed by contacts from voters than by contacts from lobbyists.

**Shaping Public Opinion** Public opinion ultimately puts pressure on policymakers, so interest groups pay careful attention to their public images. If public opinion favors a certain group's interests, then public officials will be more likely to listen to that group and more willing to pass legislation favoring its interests. Using public opinion in this way is often referred to as bringing grassroots pressure to bear on officials or mounting campaigns for the people back home. Such

efforts may include television publicity, newspaper and magazine advertisements, mass mailings, and public relations techniques to improve the group's or industry's public image. For example, environmental groups run television ads to dramatize threats to the environment. Oil companies respond to criticism about high profits with advertising showing their concern about public welfare. The goal of all these activities is to convince both the public and the policymakers that the public overwhelmingly supports the interest group's position.

Some interest groups try to influence legislators through ratings systems. They select legislative issues that are important to their groups' goals and rate legislators on the percentage of times the legislators vote





1 The efforts of such organizations as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) have resulted in stiffer drunk-driving laws. Detroit high-school student Clifton Perry gives a distinctly antidrinking message with his first-place-winning poster in the 1997 MADD Poster/Essay Contest.

press conferences, lobbied, and urged stronger legislative action on drunk driving, such as raising the legal minimum drinking age to twenty-one.

Now headquartered near Dallas, the organization has more than 600 chapters and 3,200,000 members. Since the founding of MADD, all fifty states have tightened their drunk-driving laws. Media coverage, stiffer penalties and laws, and commissions and task forces to study the problem are all accomplishments of which MADD can be proud.

### THINK ABOUT IT

1. Drunk driving has been a problem for many years in the United States. Why do you think no organizations such as MADD were formed prior to 1980?
2. Who might be in favor of not passing harsher legislation against drunk drivers? Why?



favorably on those issues. For example, one environmental group identifies twelve members of Congress whose voting record on environmental issues is unacceptable and labels them the "Dirty Dozen." The Communication Workers of America (CWA) labels policymakers who take positions consistent with its own as "heroes" and those who take the opposite position as "zeroes." Needless to say, legislators do not want to earn membership on the "Dirty Dozen" or "zeroes" lists of these groups.

**Mobilizing Constituents** Interest groups sometimes urge members and others to write letters or call government officials to show their support for or opposition to certain policies. Large interest groups can

generate hundreds of thousands of letters, calls, and e-mail messages. They often provide form letters or postcards for people to fill out and mail. For example, consider the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). The AARP has mobilized many of its 33 million constituents on a number of occasions to oppose legislation that might adversely affect the interests of older Americans. Such campaigns make the policymakers more aware of issues important to the groups.

**Bringing Lawsuits** Achieving policy goals through the legal system offers another avenue for influencing the political process. Civil rights groups paved the way for using lawsuits to achieve policy goals with major victories in cases concerning equal housing, school



## How Lobbying Has Changed

Interest groups have always tried to lobby government. Before the twentieth century, however, lobbying was much different than it is today.

### THEN (BEFORE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY)

Lobbying occurred mainly in the halls and offices of legislators.

Lobbying was always done in person.

Lobbying was not regulated by the government.

### NOW

Lobbying occurs in regulatory agencies and executive offices as well as the halls and offices of legislators.

Lobbying is still done in person, but lobbyists also use telephones, mail, faxes, and e-mail.

Lobbying is regulated by the government through registration requirements.

desegregation, and labor market equality in the 1950s and 1960s. Lawsuits are also used by environmental groups. For example, an environmental group, such as the Sierra Club, might legally challenge developers who threaten to pollute the environment. The legal challenge will force the developers to bear the costs of defending themselves and possibly delay the project. The next time, developers might be more willing to make concessions and avoid lengthy and costly legal battles. In fact, much of the success of environmental groups has been linked to their use of lawsuits.

**Influencing Judicial Appointments** Groups also try to influence courts indirectly by lobbying the Senate to support or oppose judicial nominees. For example, in 1987, nearly two hundred groups mobilized to support or oppose Robert Bork, who had been nominated to the Supreme Court by President Ronald Reagan. As a result of their actions, the Senate rejected Bork's nomination. (Judicial nominations are discussed in detail in Chapter 20.)

**Staging Demonstrations** Some interest groups stage protests to make a statement in a dramatic way. The Boston Tea Party of 1773, in which American colonists dressed as Native Americans threw tea into the Boston

Harbor to protest British taxes, is testimony to the fact that the tactic has been around for a long time.

In recent years, many groups have generated protest marches and rallies to support or oppose issues such as legalized abortion, busing, government assistance to farmers, and the increased restrictions on the use of western lands owned by the national government.

## Why Do Interest Groups Get Bad Press?

Despite their importance to democratic government, interest groups, like political parties, are sometimes criticized by both the public and the press. Our image of interest groups and their special interests is not very favorable.

You may have seen political cartoons depicting lobbyists prowling the hallways of Congress, briefcases stuffed with money, waiting to lure representatives into a waiting limousine. These cartoons are not entirely factual, but neither are they entirely fictitious. In 1977, "Koreagate"-a scandal in which a South Korean businessman was accused of offering lavish "gifts" to several members of Congress-added to the view that politicians were too susceptible to special interests. In the



*t In the aftermath of the 1982 assassination attempt on the life of President Ronald Reagan, a mandatory five-day waiting period to purchase a handgun went into effect. This cartoon refers to that law while taking a stab at another political problem-corruption.*

OR NOW THEY WANT A **FIVE-DAY** WAITING PERIOD  
**SO THAT WE CAN PURCHASE A CONGRESSMAN**

early 1990s, *it* was revealed that a number of senators who had received generous contributions from a particular savings and loan association later supported a "hands-off" policy on the part of savings and loan regulators. This meant less government regulation of savings and loan institutions. The savings and loan association in question later got into financial trouble, costing the federal government billions of dollars. In the wake of numerous scandals over the years, Congress passed a set of rules in 1996 banning members of Congress from accepting free trips, meals, and gifts from interest group lobbyists.

Despite incidents of this kind, a few bad apples do not spoil the whole interest group barrel. For every dishonest action, there are hundreds of honest transactions between interest group leaders and public officials. For every lobbyist who attempts to bribe a public official, there are hundreds who try only to provide public officials with solid facts that support the goals of their groups.

## The Regulation of Interest Groups

Interest groups are not free to do whatever they choose. In 1946, Congress passed the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act in an attempt to control lobbying. It is the only major law regulating interest groups,

and it applies only to those persons or organizations that lobby Congress. The act includes the following requirements:

1. Any person or organization that receives money to be used principally to influence legislation before Congress must register with the clerk of the House and the secretary of the Senate.
2. Any groups or persons registering must identify their employers, salary, amount and purpose of expenses, and duration of employment.
3. Every registered lobbyist must give quarterly reports on his or her activities, which are published in the *Congressional Quarterly*.
4. Anyone failing to satisfy the specific provisions of this act can be fined up to \$10,000 and receive a five-year prison term.

The act is very limited and has not regulated lobbying to any great degree. First, the Supreme Court has restricted the application of the law to lobbyists who *directly* seek to influence federal legislation. Any lobbyist indirectly seeking to influence legislation through efforts to shape public opinion does not fall within the scope of the law. Second, only persons or organizations whose principal purpose is to influence legislation are required to register. Interest groups or individuals claiming that their principal function is something else need



## Gun Control

The National Rifle Association (NRA) has been a successful interest group in the United States for many years. The NRA has worked hard to prevent the government from passing gun-control legislation. The NRA argues that the right to bear arms is protected by the Second Amendment to the Constitution and that Congress has no authority to limit this right. Many Americans are at odds with the views of the NRA, however. In fact, polls suggest that a majority of Americans want gun-control laws tightened up-through increased registration and licensing requirements, for example.

### It's Time for More Gun Control, Some Say

According to those who favor more gun-control laws, the United States has the most heavily armed population in the world. As a result, it has the highest murder rate. Proponents of gun-control laws do not believe that the Second Amendment was intended to allow private citizens to bear firearms in their homes. Rather, they argue that the Second Amendment was intended to allow citizens to bear firearms in the event they are called upon to be part of a state-sponsored militia.

In any event, say members of this group, under what circumstances would an American ever need a semiautomatic weapon to protect himself or herself? Certainly, no one needs these sophisticated weapons for sport shooting.

not register. Many groups can avoid registration in this way. Third, the act does not cover lobbying directed at agencies in the executive branch or lobbyists who testify before congressional committees. Fourth, the public is almost totally unaware of the information in the quarterly reports, and Congress has not created an agency to oversee interest group activities.

Finally, a gun in the home is many times more likely to kill a family member than to stop a criminal. Armed citizens are simply not a deterrent to crime.

### The NRA and Others Say No to Gun Control

Opponents of stricter gun-control laws, including the nearly three million members of the NRA, have strong beliefs. Specifically, they contend that the Second Amendment contains no qualifiers—no "buts" or "excepts." In other words, the government has no authority to restrict gun ownership.

In addition, this group argues that increased registration and licensing of guns will have no effect on crime. After all, criminals, by definition, do not obey laws.

Finally, more than 99 percent of all handguns are used for no criminal purpose. At least one-half of handgun owners in the United States own them for protection and security. According to the NRA, a handgun at home is an insurance policy.

### YOU DECIDE

1. "If guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns." Do you accept this reasoning? Explain.
2. Read the Second Amendment. How do you interpret it?

One problem with strengthening the regulation of lobbying is that any stricter regulation may run into constitutional problems, particularly with respect to the First Amendment freedoms of speech and assembly. Additionally, as long as the Supreme Court does not view indirect lobbying—as falling within the scope of the law, lobbying will be difficult to control.

## SECTION 5 REVIEW

1. Name two methods used by interest groups to influence policymakers directly.
2. How do lobbyists attempt to influence policymakers through the electoral process?
3. Describe some of the techniques by which lobbyists indirectly influence legislators.
4. What federal regulation of interest groups exists?
5. For Critical Analysis: What additional restrictions, if any, do you think should be placed on interest groups? Explain how the First Amendment rights of these groups might be violated by further restrictions.

## \* \* \* \* Chapter Summary

### Section 1: Definition and Measurement of Public Opinion

Public opinion consists of beliefs and attitudes about politics and public policy shared by a large portion of the population.

The most common ways in which public officials learn about public opinion are through election results, personal contacts, interest groups, and media reports.

One way to measure public opinion is through the use of scientific public opinion polls.

### Section 2: Factors That Affect Public Opinion

Most views that are expressed as political opinions are acquired through a learning process called political socialization.

Some of the agents of political socialization include the family, the educational establishment, the mass media, opinion leaders, and peer groups.

Economic status and age can also influence the political socialization process.

### Section 3: Categorizing Political Attitudes

Liberals have a viewpoint toward public policy that almost always favors change. Liberals also believe in expanding the role of the national government. Conservatives believe that public policy should protect tradition and that state and local governments should rely less on the national government. Most Americans consider themselves moderates—neither liberals nor conservatives.

### Section 4: Interest Groups

Interest groups are organizations made up of people who share common objectives and who actively attempt to influence government policymakers through direct and indirect methods.

Although both interest groups and political parties are made up of people who join together for political purposes, they are very different. Most interest groups focus on specific issues, whereas political parties must support a wide range of causes.

Private interest groups primarily seek economic benefit for their own members. Public interest groups are formed with the broader goal of working for the "public good."

### Section 5: How Groups Try to Shape Policy

Interest groups operate at all levels of government and use a variety of strategies to affect public policy. Direct techniques used by interest groups include lobbying and providing election support.

- Interest groups also try to influence public policy through indirect methods, such as shaping public opinion, mobilizing constituents, bringing lawsuits, influencing judicial appointments, and mounting demonstrations.

Although lobbying is regulated by the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act of 1946, the act is very limited.

## CHAPTER 9 Review

### \* REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is public opinion?
2. How is public opinion measured?
3. Explain the problems of early polling efforts.
4. What are some criticisms of opinion polls?
5. Describe the factors that help explain how public opinion is formed.
6. Explain how various agents of political socialization influence our political opinions.
7. What distinguishes a conservative from a liberal?
8. What groups are on the extreme left and right sides of the political spectrum?
9. What purposes do interest groups serve in American politics, and how do they operate?
10. Briefly describe three types of private interest groups.
11. In what ways do interest groups directly try to influence policymakers?
12. Describe five methods used by lobbyists to indirectly influence policymakers.
13. What are the requirements of the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act of 1946?
14. Briefly describe the guidelines for writing a letter to a newspaper or magazine editor.

### \* CRITICAL THINKING \*

1. What individuals have most influenced your political perspectives? In what ways have they influenced you?
2. Name some interest groups that you think could be seen as public interest groups. Name some interest groups that could be seen as private interest groups. What led you to classify these groups as you did?
3. Why might stricter regulation of lobbying endanger First Amendment rights?
4. How might one's personal experiences (with crime, for example) affect one's views on national policies (such as crime policies)?

### \* IMPROVING YOUR SKILLS \*

#### Communication Skills

**Formulating a Thesis Statement** Many times throughout your studies, you will be asked to write about your ideas or about what you have learned. Before writing an essay, you should write a thesis statement, which should explain the main idea of your essay. Here is a sample thesis statement from Section 3 of this chapter:

*Political attitudes are often labeled as either conservative or liberal.*

The following steps will help you formulate a thesis statement:

1. *Choose a general topic that interests you.* Begin to gather and list facts and information about the general topic.
2. *Gradually narrow the topic in stages.* As you gather more information and facts, look for related facts and make choices about which facts are really important.
3. *Organize the facts.* Discard information that has no bearing on your topic, keeping only information that is directly related.
4. *Decide what you believe the facts mean.*
5. *Formulate a thesis statement that can be fully proved by the collected facts.*

**Writing** The following thesis statements were taken from this chapter. Using your own words, rewrite each of them.

1. Above all else, the aim of a democratic government is to convert the will of the people into public policy.
2. Public opinion is important in American politics because opinions can determine how government



handles such issues as environmental pollution and the death penalty.

3. Education is a powerful influence on an individual's political attitudes.
4. The media can also determine what issues, events, and personalities are in the public eye.

### Social Studies Skills

**Understanding a Pictogram** Look at the pictogram below. Why does it have a right side, a left side, and a center? According to the pictogram, are there any moderates who are Democrats? Are there any moderates who are Republicans? Which groups on the spectrum represent the radical left and the radical right? Do the groups on the radical right and the radical left share any characteristics? If so, what are they? What does the pictogram tell you about the party affiliation of those who occupy the political center?

### \* ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS

1. Develop your own schoolwide "straw poll" on three issues facing high-school students in the United States today. Report to the class on your findings, and describe the polling techniques you used.
2. Identify an important national issue that is currently under debate. Research two interest groups that are involved with the issue. Write a one-page summary on each group's position.

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### Lobbying Were Made Illegal?

Today, lobbyists representing thousands of interest groups try to influence government at all levels. How would elected representatives make decisions if there were no lobbying?

**FIGURE 9-1 The Political Spectrum** The figure below shows the political spectrum from the left to the right.

