Civics: Chapter 12 Lesson 3

Interest Groups and Lobbying

Government officials want to be linked with their constituents – the people they represent. They want to hear from those people, to know what they think and why they think it. If you want the government to take action you have many ways to contact your representatives.

As an individual, you have a voice. The question is how do you make your voice stronger?

One way is to join your voice with others who agree with you on an issue. This way you pool all your resources and increase your influence. Interest groups can be a powerful force to bring about change. An interest group is a group of people who share a point of view and unite to promote that viewpoint. The 1st Amendment guarantees Americans the right to assemble and to belong to interest groups. The right to petition the government makes it possible for those groups to meet with officials to promote their goals.

Business and Labor Groups

Some groups are based on shared economic goals. For instance, the US Chamber of Commerce promotes the interest of businesses. Other interest groups act for specific types of businesses. The National Automobile Dealers Association works on behalf of companies that sell cars and trucks. These groups try to sway government decisions on issues that affect their industries.

Some interest groups are formed by workers. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) is the largest such group. It is formed by many labor unions that have joined together. Unions try to improve wages, working conditions, and benefits for their members.

Other Interest Groups

People also join together to work for the rights of people who share similar characteristics. The National Associate for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) tries to improve the lives of African Americans. The AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) stands up for the interests of older Americans.

The Sierra Club wants to protect nature, the National Rifle Association (NRA) looks after the interests of people who own guns.

The interest groups described so far promote only the goals of their members’ interests. Public-interest groups work to benefit larger sections of society. They support causes that affect the lives of most Americans. One example is the League of Women Voters, this nonpartisan group is fee from ties to any political party. Its purpose is to educate voters about candidates and issues. Other public-interest groups work for the rights of all consumers.

Interest Groups at Work

Interest groups play an important role in our country. Their main goal is to influence the decisions that leaders make. They use 4 main types of action:

1. Active in elections
2. Working through the courts
3. Working directly with lawmakers
4. Trying to shape public opinion

Being Active in Elections

Many interest groups become involved in elections. They support certain candidates. For example, the Sierra Club might back candidates who favor laws to protect nature. Many interest groups have formed political action committees (PACS).

PACS collect money from group members. They give that money to help candidates they think will support their positions on the issues they care about. They can also spend money to oppose candidates they want to see defeated. For example, a PAC might buy TV or radio ads that criticize a candidate it knows does not share its goals.

Working Through the Courts

Many interest group try to shape policy by bringing cases to court. For example, an interest group for women might help a woman sue a company if it feels she was paid unfairly. The NAACP has used lawsuits to help end laws that treated African Americans unfairly.

Directly Influencing Officials

One of the most important methods interest groups use to shape policy is lobbying. Lobbyists are people who represent interest groups. They contact lawmakers or other government officials directly. Lobbyists are active at all levels of government – local, state, and national.

The term lobbyist was first used in the 1830s. It described people who waited in the lobbies of the state capitol buildings to ask lawmakers for favors. Few lobbyists use that technique today. Good lobbyists know exactly whom to contact about a particular concern. They understand how government works and are very good at public relations. They are also skilled at making friends and speaking persuasively.

The most effect lobbyists supply lawmakers with information that helps their cause. They suggest solutions to problems. Sometimes they draft (write) bills for lawmakers to consider. They may even testify before Congress about the bills.

Lobbyists are biased, they only present the side of the issue they are representing. The work of lobbyists does not end when the bill is passed, they also work to make sure the laws are enforced in ways that favor their interests.

Shaping Public Opinion

All interest groups want to influence public opinion. They also want to convince people that their cause is important. Some send messages by e-mail or mail or advertise, like ads encouraging you to drink milk or buy American products. Business groups sponsor these types of ads. Interest groups also hold protests and organize public events to gain media coverage and notice for their cause. Interest groups can provide useful, in-depth information on an issue. They may also use propaganda techniques to promote their ideas. Propaganda is presenting information in a slanted or biased way. (Chart page 345)

Regulating Interest Groups

The Constitution guarantees, or promises, Americans the right to take part in interest groups. Still, both state and federal governments have laws about what these groups can do. Some laws limit how much money a PAC may contribute to a candidate. Others require lobbyists to register with officials who have the authority to oversee them. Lobbyists must also state who hired them, how much they are paid, and how they spend money related to their work. These laws are aimed at preventing lobbyists from gaining unfair influence.

Federal and state laws also require former government officials to wait for a period of time before they can become lobbyists. This is meant to stop former officials from using friendships and inside knowledge to help special-interest groups. This kind of law has not been successful. Even after waiting some time they still understand how the legislature works, they still have friends among lawmakers, and they can be very influential

Some say that interest groups have too much say in government, like the example of Jack Abramoff. He was one of Washington’s most powerful lobbyists. In 2006, Abramoff admitted that he corrupted government officials and stole millions of dollars from his lobbying clients.

Other people defend interest groups. They say these groups help make known the wishes of large groups of people. They say that interest groups are an important part of a democracy. They provide a way for Americans to take an active role in government.