

FACTFILE: GCE GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

PRESSURE GROUPS IN THE USA



Pressure groups in the USA

Pressure groups, also known as lobby groups, play a central role in the American political process and their role and influence is greatly helped by the federal structure of the US government. The separation of powers which separates the executive, the legislature and the judiciary also extends to the states, allowing pressure groups to individually target not only their state legislatures, executives and judiciaries but also these branches at the federal level. The work of pressure groups is carried out through a variety of lobbying tactics. In many respects their participation is indirect in that they do not seek to get members of their organisations elected but rather they hope to influence the

decisions of those responsible for policy outcomes in a particular area.

Pressure groups in American politics are as old as the United States themselves. As far back as the early 1800s, manufacturers were, as a group, asking the government to put taxes on foreign products to protect the sale of their own goods.

There are different types of pressure groups – political, sectional or single issue. An example of each is given below with a description of the type of action they might take.

Type	Example	Action
Political	The Christian Coalition	Will seek to promote 'family values' across a wide range of issues. They will offer advice to those involved in the political system and mobilise their members.
Sectional	American Bar Association	The ABA will often liaise with the executive and legislature on issues pertaining to the legal system. They will also issue reports on Supreme Court nominees.
Single Issue	National Rifle Association	The National Rifle Association, which campaigns against all forms of gun control and seeks to defend second amendment rights, has a substantial income and spends over \$3 million on lobbying, often making a campaign donation to both candidates.

Much of the lobbying carried out by pressure groups is directly centred on members of Congress as they have the power to introduce legislation favourable to the pressure group's aims. Once a piece of legislation is introduced, a pressure group's focus will turn to members of the Standing Committees that directly affect their specialist area. Therefore a company such as [Lockheed Martin](#), which spends over \$12 million each year on lobbying, will seek interaction with members of the Armed Services Committee of both houses. This direct contact will take the form of reports, the exchange of information and discussion aimed at moving the debate closer to the needs of the pressure group.

Pressure groups will also exert political pressure on elected representatives in order to achieve their aims. A lobby group such as the Christian Coalition might publish the voting records of individual members on abortion related issues in a bid to sway their future voting decisions. They may even urge their members to [directly contact](#) a Congressman in order to apply pressure on the elected representative to move in a certain direction. Similarly a pressure group may provide a public endorsement for one candidate over another in a Congressional election, providing a clear indication to their members of the 'best' candidate for them to choose.



Pressure groups may also provide support for candidates in the form of campaign donations. The cost of political advertising makes the [raising of funds](#) for fighting elections essential to any Congressman or prospective President. In the 2014 mid-term elections the [National Rifle Association](#) spent in excess of \$27 million for or against candidates in their goal of defending the second amendment right to bear arms. Nearly \$11



million dollars was spent on donations to individual Republican candidates and over \$15 million dollars was spent on campaigning against Democratic candidates.

Regulations to limit the financial influence of US pressure groups have continually been circumvented by the formation of Political Action Committees and '507 groups'. The latter will make advertisements in support of candidates but can claim to have no direct financial connection to them. In 2004 the pro-Bush '[Swift Boat Veterans for Truth](#)' ran a series of advertisements in a bid to discredit the Democratic party's candidate, John Kerry's war record.

Kerry, who is currently the United States' Secretary of State, is no stranger to contact with lobbyists and it brings us to the central problem regarding pressure groups and American politics, namely whether or not the financial power of the groups enables them to mould the democratic legislative process in a manner that ordinary citizens cannot. In the late 1990s Kerry received over \$1m in donations from the mobile phones industry. As chair of the Subcommittee on Telecommunications he steered through deregulation legislation beneficial to that industry. If this happened in Britain there would be a storm over a clear conflict of interest, but in America it is viewed as a natural part of the process. The aforementioned Lockheed Martin received \$30 billion worth of Pentagon contracts in 2001-2002.

A key way in which pressure groups influence the work of both the executive branch and Congress is through the formation of so-called 'Iron Triangles'. This is when we take the three key players in a policy area and see how they interact. For example, with regard to the energy sector the three political actors would be:

- A government agency such as the Department of Energy
- The 'Fossil Fuel' lobby representing the major oil and gas companies
- The respective House and Senate Committees such as the House Energy and Commerce Committee

The government agency, in this instance, the Department of Energy, will work closely with groups who represent the economic interests of the energy sector, the 'Fossil Fuel' lobby. The 'Fossil Fuel' lobby will seek to make their needs known and work to persuade the relevant Congressional committees to meet these needs. The government agency may also provide assistance in terms of administrative support for suggested legislation. The Executive will also be responsive to suggestions from Committee reports. In this scenario, the pressure group might also monitor regulatory changes in their given area and seek amendments to them. So the Automobile Association of America may seek to monitor and curb any regulations on carbon emissions.

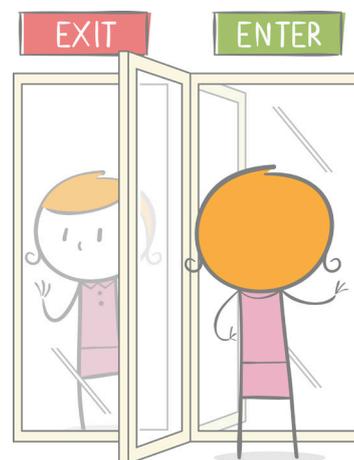
In many respects this may make sense but it also poses some democratic challenges in that it closes off entire policy areas to a select few while restricting access to ordinary citizens. There was extreme concern that George W. Bush's cabinet was heavily drawn from the [oil industry](#) and would pursue policies friendly to that industry. He had followed a similar pattern when as Governor of Texas, he allowed local oil corporations to self-regulate on emissions. The result of this was that Texas became the most polluted state in America.

One of the methods 'political' or 'ideological' pressure groups have used to push their agenda beyond Congress is to use the judicial system to test the constitutional limits within their policy area. It was the NAACP that supported and funded the Brown vs Board of Education (1954) case and subsequent litigation that helped to break down segregation barriers in schools. Likewise the American Civil Liberties Union has been prominent in cases involving First Amendment Rights, and

Planned Parenthood has played a key role in testing the constitutionality of the legislation introduced by many states in the post- Roe vs Wade era.

Further controversy

As we have seen, the amount of money flowing through the process can be considered highly controversial. There are over 20 000 employees within the lobbying industry, working on K Street in Washington. One key tactic is to offer future lucrative positions to the poorly paid interns and staff that work for Congressmen. This creates a connection between the lobbying firm and the Congressman. The staff member knows it is in his/her interest to accommodate the lobbyist's wishes. This was revealed by the shamed lobbyist [Jack Abramoff](#), one of the few to go to prison for flagrant flouting of the rules governing the behaviour of lobbyists. The '[revolving door](#)' is [very much a](#) feature of US pressure group politics as it is in the United Kingdom. Many former Representatives, Senators or Congressional aides find work as lobbyists. The lobby groups who hire these former Senators, Representatives or aides are very much aware that they are paying staff who have excellent contacts and experience of working within the political system.



Recommended weblinks:

[Test your knowledge on Pressure groups in the USA – access a quiz by Kate Ivey in the publication Politics Review, Vol 25, Number 1](#)

