Interest Groups: Crash Course Government and Politics #42

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
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Hello, I'm Craig and this is Crash Course Government and Politics and today we're going to talk about something almost every American has an opinion on: interest groups. Now if you've been watching these episodes and reading the comments you might be thinking that we've been trying to avoid the issue of money in politics and the role of special interests in the U.S. political system. We have. If you are one those people that wants to talk about money in politics, this episode will not disappoint you. I'm kidding, I know that some of you will still be disappointed. But mainly because I'm still not John Green.

(Intro theme)

So before we get into how interests groups influence American politics, let's define what we mean by interest groups. Groups of people who put money in banks and gain interest. That's not what we mean. An interest group is an organized group of individuals that make policy-related appeals to government. Now, interest groups don't actually have to meet in person, in fact in the case of very large interest groups it would be almost impossible to get them together in a room. But most interest groups have a membership and often it's the size of the membership that gives the group's political clout.

Political scientists tell us that there are 2 main things that interest groups do when they interact with the government. First, they try to shape policies, which they can do by mobilizing voters or by putting direct pressure on elected officials. The second and probably more important thing that interest groups do is gather information they can provide for elected officials. Some would characterize this gathering of information as interest groups writing bills for elected officials to pass into laws. So interest groups are most likely to focus on a particular branch of government and I'll give you 3 guesses which one.

No not the supreme court even though with only 9 members it would be the most efficient way for an interest group to exert pressure. Punching is most efficient way for me to exert pressure onto an eagle. And not the executive branch because if you remember, the president has lots of professional people to advise him and since he can only serve two terms, he's less susceptible to pressure that way. That leaves congress, which is the answer! That's where the interest groups exert their pressure. But wait, what about the bureaucracy?

Can't bureaucrats also be the target of interest group pressure? Yes, in fact they can mainly because interest groups, especially if they're well funded, can supply information that is either too costly or too difficult for congressmen or bureaucratic agencies to get. But adding the fourth group messes up the whole three guesses three branches bit I was trying to do. And guesses are fun. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The combination of interest groups, congress, and the bureaucracy are sometimes called an "iron triangle" which sounds a lot cooler than it is. Actually it's pretty cool, unless you're talking about the neighborhood in Queens near where the Mets play in which case my previous statement still stands. Anyway, in a political iron triangle, not only do interest groups help out congress through contributions and support, they also provide congressmen with information. Some might say that interest groups don't just provide information, they actually write the bills that become laws. And it is true that interest groups often have lawyers who propose language that can make it into bills and laws. But this is much more likely to happen on the state and local level where legislators don't have the staff resources to do the research behind bills. In fact, the practice of interest groups writing bills for state legislature is depressingly common. Given that congressmen are pretty busy trying to get re-elected, it's not surprising that they will be grateful for information from interest groups.

But what about bureaucracies? They're supposed to be made up of experts and they don't have to run for re-election, right? Well they are, and they don't, but information is really really costly, and often bureaucratic agencies are just not as well-funded as an interest group. The oil industry is represented by the American Petroleum Institute as well as individual oil and gas companies. Because it's highly regulated, the oil industry has a big interest in seeing legislation and regulations they like passed. But more important here is the fact that the oil and gas industry has a lot of money money money money - way more money than any particular federal agency, so it can spend money on research and provide information that the agencies often can't. Thanks Thought Bubble.

One more thing about interest groups and bureaucracies: There's a big temptation to think that wealthy interests spend their money providing campaign contributions and information to Congressmen and this does happen. But they can often be more effective providing information to agencies and writing regulations rather than the laws. As we've mentioned before, regulations are just as important as laws and for many industries, even more so. That's why you'll see a lot of interest group efforts spent lobbying bureaucratic agencies as well as Congress.

Before we get into the question of whether or not interest groups are destroying American democracy, I want to clarify two things that interest groups are not: First off, an interest group is not a political party. As you remember, political parties exist to get candidates elected. Interest groups exist to influence the policies that those elected officials make. Interest groups are also not the same as political action committees or PACs. A PAC is an organization that collects and distributes campaign funds and information, and therefore is concerned with elections. Interest groups can give money to PACs and they can even form their own PACs, but they aren't exactly the same thing.

Okay, so now the controversial issue with interest groups. Do they have too much influence? To sort this out, I'm going to need some help from some friends, and by friends I mean clones, which aren't my friends. Let's head to the Clone Zone! Hey, here we are! Clone Zone! It's just like the regular zone except that thing's gone and there's a graphic. So today, clone with the tie is going to argue that interest groups are good for American democracy and clone without the tie is going to argue that they're bad. He also has bad fashion sense. Okay, go.

Clone with a tie: The main argument in favor of interest groups has to do with pluralism. If all interest groups are free to compete to influence officials, then they'll balance each other out. It'll be cool. The idea of incorporating lots of groups goes back at least as far as James Madison. In the *Federalist Papers*, Madison argued for extending the sphere in American politics and encouraging more and more factions. The theory was that the more groups there were, the less likely that any one group could gain a corrupting influence over the government. Sort of like the idea of the wisdom of crowds or Condorcet's jury theorem. With more interest groups providing more information, we will get policies that are the result of thoughtful compromise.

Another argument for interest groups is that they offer more opportunity for participation in politics. Elections only happen every two years, on the federal level at least, but policy gets made all the time, or at least, it's supposed to. By joining an interest group, an individual can push for a policy that care about all the time, not just at election time. And isn't participation the essence of democracy? I think yes.

Clone without a tie: Sure, it's great to have more voices involved in

policy making as long as each voice is powerful enough to be heard. In the current system, that's just not the case. Interest group politics diminishes American democracy because some interest groups are so powerful that their voices are able to crowd out all the others. And in America today, the people with the loudest voices are the wealthy! (loudly) And me right now!

And it's not only because the wealthy have more money to give to politicians; although that does help. Obviously, people who are really poor can't offer campaign contributions, but there are plenty of advocates for them. But in America, the wealthy have other resources that the poor just can't bring to bear. Like money! Lotsa, lotsa, money! They tend to be better educated, so they have access to more information, and the ability to disseminate their views more (stumbling over the word) articulately. And just as important, wealthy people have more time to devote to political participation than the poor.

Clone with a tie: Sure, what you're saying makes sense, but do you have any proof? I mean, there are plenty of laws protecting poor people. What about the earned income tax credit?

Clone without a tie: Well, I have a chart.

Clone with a tie: Oh.

Clone without a tie: You can see that the number of PACs, while not exactly the same thing as interest groups, has grown an awful lot since the mid-1970s. Corporate interests, which by and large represent wealthy people, vastly outnumber the groups representing working people, like labor and cooperative groups. By numbers alone, wealthy interest groups would seem to have more power than other groups. But that's not all. A series of studies that culminated in the book *Affluence & Influence* by Martin Gilens shows pretty definitively that Congress is much more likely to enact laws that respond to the interests of the wealthy, than the poor. It's not that they never took poor people's interests into account, it's just that they are much, much more likely to make policies that favor the rich. Is that the essence of democracy? I think no.

Wheezy: Thanks you beautiful clones. So there you have the basics of interest groups in America and why they are so controversial. I hope that you now have a better of what interest groups are and what they are not and how they work to influence policy in government, which is their main function in the American political system. You should also know what the Iron Triangle is and why people complain so much about interest groups in America today, other than they haven't had their coffee yet. Where's my coffee?!?

Thank you. But I also hope that you understand the idea of pluralism, it's powerful idea and one that if taken seriously, shows the importance of participation in politics.

This is empty. And that's ultimately what interest groups do for us. They give us another avenue to have our voices heard and contribute to the policies that shape our lives. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

(outro theme)

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