

Are US pressure groups undemocratic?

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Pressure groups in the USA allow a large proportion of the population to participate in the political process between presidential elections every 4 years. They pressure all three branches of government – the executive, legislature and judiciary – to convince them to follow their viewpoint and take action on particular causes that are important to the group. However, pressure groups are not always fully democratic, and sometimes, they may even encroach and disrupt the normal democratic process of government in the USA.

Firstly, by their very nature, pressure groups are nearly always interested only in the plight of their own membership rather than the society at large. This results in special interest groups fighting for recognition and implementation of their ideas without stopping to think about its wider impact. Pressure groups such as the NAACP follow this pattern. This may also lead to particular sections of society being stereotyped for their apparently identical viewpoint on issues while in real life, viewpoints are varied.

Secondly, pressure groups with a medium to high level of influence and financial ability frequently hire professional lobbyists to work on their behalf, promoting recognition of the group and their ideas. However, many such lobbyists are themselves former Congress members with internal knowledge of the workings of the US government. Critics point out that this gives them an unfair advantage over other groups who may not have such resources at their disposal.

Professional lobbying can also lead to the “buying of political influence”, in which pressure groups spend un-proportionally large amounts of money on lobbying activities, therefore “buying” influence on Congress members who may be sympathetic to their cause. In some cases, this can lead to legislation being “helped” out by pressure group members who suggest clauses and amendments which will help their business activities.

The “iron triangle” is a term used to describe the relationship between a pressure group, a congressional committee and a government department. Usually, these relationships are very strong, and can lead to favourable policies for the pressure group membership. Just like professional lobbying, iron triangles can “buy influence” on committees and departments, and this is generally seen as a bad thing, as it does not allow smaller groups the same level of recognition and access to influential politicians.

Finally, pressure groups are simply unequal in terms of size, membership and financing. Some groups, like the NRA, have millions of members and very high

levels of financial ability, which they use for their lobbying activities regarding gun laws. Other groups, such as NARAL, are much smaller, only have a few hundred or thousand members, and have limited finances to pursue their agendas. This unequal competition is seen by some to be the “power of the rich over the poor”.

However, pressure groups also have many advantages to them, which must also be discussed and recognised to be able to draw reasonable conclusions about their position within a democratic society.

In recent times, pressure groups have made a large impact on the government in a number of policy areas. For example, the NAACP won civil rights for African-Americans with its backing of the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* case at the US Supreme Court. The NAACP also helped to finance many civil rights cases where the prosecutor did not possess enough financial ability to fight the case. In the more recent case of the 2003 *Grutter v Bollinger* Supreme Court judgement, the NAACP helped the University of Michigan by filing an *amicus curiae* supporting its affirmative action programme. The University won the case.

Groups like the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society and National Wildlife Federation have campaigned for greater environmental protection, while the National Organisation for Women campaigned for an equal rights amendment to the US Constitution in the 1970s and 1980s. In this way, such groups can be seen to be representing the views of various groups which would not otherwise be heard, therefore protecting interests and ensuring a free democracy by lessening the chances of a government only listening to the views of influential people.

Secondly, pressure groups can sometimes offer very valuable advice and guidance to committees and government departments on certain issues on which they have expertise. An example would be the NAACP advising politicians on racial and African-American issues, while the NRA does the same with gun legislation and education. While this helps politicians on difficult policy issues, pressure groups can also use it to their advantage by giving advice which implies compliance with their viewpoints. This is particularly important with *amicus curiae*, which allow any individual or organisation with an interest in a particular Supreme Court case to submit their views and methods of thinking in the subject in hand for consideration by the justices when delivering their verdict. This can sometimes greatly sway the swing of opinion on the justice panel, and can sometimes even change the outcome if enough justices are persuaded by the brief.

Finally, by influencing all three branches of government using the many different points of access available, it can also be argued that pressure groups make sure that

the government can never encroach on First Amendment rights because the points of access are continually used and known about.

In conclusion, US pressure groups are said to be undemocratic and unhelpful in the democratic process of the US government. However, evidence shows that they can also be of great use not only to the people that they represent through shared views, but also the government which can take advantage of their great membership for advice and guidance as well as relying on them for voting purposes. This can sometimes mean that the more extremist politicians never make it past a very local level because the views of a pressure group's membership and their voting patterns make sure of this. Therefore, US pressure groups are, on evaluation, not undemocratic, but actually the complete reverse, providing a range of services and ensuring freedom and democracy in the US.