

WHERE DOES THE POWER OF AMERICAN INTEREST GROUPS LIES?

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Interest groups and lobby in America could be dated far back as the democratic origin of the country. The American political system from early years allowed space for them to pursue policies deemed beneficial to the members of the groups of the general public. Most of the activities they engage in range from filing a case, bearing witness in government hearings, rally and campaigns, influencing public opinion and contact arms of government. All these are classified as lobby which is legal in the United States. According to Lenz and Holman “it is impossible to understand the American politics without basic understanding of the interest groups”. The reverse is also true that is, it is impossible to understand interest groups without understanding the system under which they operate. The question is, how does American interest groups gain power to survive in the system?

The American political system is as complex as putting all the years of its existence into account to explain its current state of democracy. The foundation of the country was built on its first democratic constitution that starts up with the phrase “We the people...” This might not have directly intended to include the today’s diversity of America however it had it in view. The American system being a democracy is obliged to include in its decision making several aggregated interest of different groups of people through representation in the system.

In order to avoid concentration of power, American government was shared among the executives, legislative and judiciary as the three arms of government. This will enable the checking of one another’s exercise of power. Further power distribution is also seen in the tiers

of government; the federal and state government. Where States hold some level of autonomy in certain areas of decision making within their territory. (MJC Ville 2007, 3)

Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that this is a democratic system that portrays plutocracy or majoritarian democracy. Hence, there is need to understand the power of interest groups to be able to balance the American government. To examine the different patterns of effectiveness and limitations of interest groups three factors are responsible; Funding, Size and Pressuring.

From Culen and Page's research they have stated that some researchers have portrayed small interest groups and individuals have very limited influence on the public policy in the U.S. Others have contended that the group formed by the masses neither has a significant influence on the government policies. They have positioned the ability to impact government policies on in the hand of the economically advantaged few and the group that are composed of the business elites. They further explained that even if the individual, interest groups or the mass-base want to express their view about a policy, such views are dependent on the views of the business and economic elites. (Gilens & Page 2014, 2)

Edwin Gilmour (1975, 271-273) in his research on societal and economic inequality in the U.S. made reference to the political changes scenario that will take place in the nearest future by point to Dr Dolbear's explanations. This presents differences between how economic elites will incrementally change policy to favor themselves and the change sought after by the less economic advantage which includes redistribution of income. This two patterns also reflected in the analysis of Baugmeyer and Jones 2002. They revealed that historically policy change could have been occur incrementally or within a short while. Most importantly they acknowledge the significant of policy image and the location of the implementation of such policies that is, the

values and beliefs of people and the political institutions that are involve in such policy interact to bring about such policy incrementally or instantaneous change in policy. They have marked the different kinds of changes and how they come about. They explain the manipulation of the two factors by a policy entrepreneur it would determine the pattern in which such changes take. Although with less or no direct emphasis to interest groups, it involves how policies come about in the American political system (Baumgartner and Jones 2002).

Goldstein (1999) in his book acknowledged as a fact that the discourse of political mass participation is regarded as a different terrain from the aspect of interest groups. He presented that they both can go together. He argued that the aspect of influencing mass participation has rarely been visited. Goldstein combined the two by revealing how political space occupied by different actors is controlled by elites. He cited an example of increase in the citizen contacting their representative in the Congress stating that it has been incited by elites. This is not limited to individual but also interest groups making such contact. Lech, B L (2002) however identifies the difference in the significant in the type of contact made. For example he claimed that prioritizing constituencies amongst legislators makes members of a constituent able to push forward among legislators than others. Hence initiated participation is working in a manner that undermines the ability of others to engage by reaching their interest. As a matter of fact they find it unnecessary in the long run. This is applicable to interest groups.

Jack and Walker (1983) focused on the leadership of the interest groups being a determinant factor on how much or how long an interest group can survive. They connected financial responsibility to the leadership. Specifically the aspect of leadership involve money that can be raise outside the group as it puts less burden on the interest group members. “Estimate of patronage from different sources are provided as well as data on the congruence between the

policy goals of groups and their patrons”. This could mean that the goals are affected in the long run as the patrons continue to sponsor groups.

These scholars have one way or the other reflect the power of finances more than the size or the pressure ability of the interest groups. The existence of interest group by most of them is dependent on the ability of an elite to play a role in supporting them and bringing forth their course. Therefore to determine the effective of an interest group by the financial strength will lead to ignoring the size of an interest groups and the ability to intensify pressure to bring about their intended policies. (Lenz and Holman 2013)

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