

STI COMMENTS ON PUBLIC AFFAIRS

INTEREST GROUPS AND “SPECIAL INTERESTS”

by

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Generally speaking, an interest group is an organization of like-minded individuals or entities such as business and professional associations that seek to influence political decisions and public policy while at the same time not seeking elective office. In a pluralistic society such as the United States, interest groups, sometimes referred to as advocacy, pressure or lobby groups, are essential in making a representative government operate efficiently.

The chief contribution of the interest group to the democratic process is providing information to the general public and elected representatives whether at the national, regional, state or local level. In this regard, if a legislator or individual wants to learn about railroads and their place in the national economy, the American Association of Railroads will be more than pleased to provide the information at their web site. So too, with the American Trucking Association, the American Medical Association, the American Bar Association, the American Hotel Association and the list goes on into the hundreds if not the thousands. As a general rule interest groups are accepted as part of the political process when lobbying for or against specific legislation or a stated public policy position as long as their role is limited to providing information. When they go beyond their role as information providers and solicit and spend money and to further their agendas, their place in the political process becomes contentious.

In most cases, interest groups advocating specific public policies will give rise to interest groups with opposite views. The result, all to the good, is that the voting public is provided information not generally known and too costly in terms of time and money for interested individuals to obtain on their own.

Well known examples of opposing interest groups include *Planned Parenthood v. National Right to Life*; *Greenpeace v.*

Alliance For America; Coalition to Stop Gun Violence v. National Rifle Association; AFL-CIO v. National Right to Work Legal Defense Fund; AARP v. Cato Institute: Project on Social Security Privatization and countless others.

An important point about interest groups that is obvious but generally overlooked is that members are not rigidly consistent in their preference for political parties or political philosophy. In this respect, an active member of the National Rifle Association may be pro-life or pro-choice while a long time member of the National Education Association may favor a school voucher program as a way to improve educational performance in local schools. A member of AARP may be conservative or liberal, and, as Ronald Reagan made quite plain in his campaigns for the presidency, otherwise staunch union members may favor conservative positions and candidates in a particular election year.

In off election years, interest groups have relatively low profiles and their activities limited to providing information and lobbying for or against legislation. In an election year that changes. Interest groups become more partisan which presents a dilemma for candidates seeking political office. For example, a candidate may be in favor of some sort of school choice, a position adamantly opposed by the National Education Association, but be reluctant to fire a political broadside at that organization for fear of losing member voters that may agree with him on other issues.

In the run up to the 2008 elections the preferred approach to this problem is to avoid attacking, by name, interest groups with large, diverse constituencies, but rather play it safe and castigate *unnamed* “special interests” when making a political point. All too common in campaign speeches are statements such as “I will take back our country from the “special interests.” I will make (health care, education, home ownership, etc) affordable for the middle class by eliminating the influence of “special interests.” If elected, I promise to end the influence of “special interests” in Washington, and so on and on. Unfortunately, few individuals in the audience

and media covering the event ask: To what “special interests” are you referring?

Absent such questions, special interests and interest groups become one and the same in the public mind. And for the reasons stated above, no candidate is going to specifically identify the “special interests” that he or she is castigating. I believe that interest groups play an important role in making democracy work and that the present name corruption of a legitimate and valuable part of the electoral process, the traditional interest group, should not go unchallenged.