



Political scientists have come up with varied definitions of interest groups without settling on a consensus understanding of what they are.¹ They are not political parties because, unlike parties, they do not recruit and nominate candidates for public office. Nor are they social movements because social movements encompass multiple groups. **Interest groups** are organizations that seek to affect public policy and government. They may be membership organizations such as labor unions, business groups like trade associations, ‘good government’ reform-oriented groups, or issue-focused groups such as organizations concerned with on gun policy or abortion.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects the “right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” The Supreme Court has therefore ruled that a **right of association** is fundamental and guaranteed.² Those in the founding generation saw group activity all around them, and James Madison presumed that the propensity to divide into mutually opposing groups was “sown into the nature of man” – in other words, human nature.³ Later political scientists have pointed out that joining and contributing to groups can be personally costly, and that groups may not form as spontaneously as Madison might have predicted.⁴ Groups may have an easier time sustaining themselves if they are wealthier, and if they can offer attractive benefits to prospective members.

Costly or not, the number of active groups in American politics exploded during the last century. Tracking exact numbers is difficult,

however, because figures differ depending on what the groups in question do. According to the Federal Election Commission, over 8,600 **Political Action Committees (PACs)**, groups that spend money to influence elections or contribute money to political campaigns, were active in the 2017-2018 election cycle.⁵ The website OpenSecrets counts more than 11,000 registered **lobbyists**, people whose job it is to urge specific actions from Congress on behalf of groups or other organizations.⁶ These figures only scratch the surface, as many groups seek to influence not political campaigns or Congress, but the federal bureaucracy (by affecting the content of regulations), the judicial system (by filing suit or by submitting ‘friend-of-the-court’ briefs), or states and local governments.

Many interest groups engage the public directly through fundraising appeals, advertisements, membership drives, and **grassroots organizing**. (Some cynics call artificial grassroots activity ‘astroturf’, after the imitation grass used in sports stadiums.) One of the largest national groups, AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired People) reports a total membership of 38 million, a number that has given the organization substantial clout in Washington.⁷

Government regulation of groups is permitted inasmuch as groups may be required to limit their contributions to candidates or to track and report their finances. Courts are more skeptical of regulations that would appear to infringe upon First Amendment rights of speech or assembly.

¹ For a discussion, see Frank R. Baumgartner and Beth L. Leech, *Basic Interests: The Importance of Groups in Politics and Political Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), Chapter 2.

² See, for example, *NAACP v. Patterson* 357 U.S. 449 (1958).

³ *Federalist 10*.

⁴ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971 [1965]).

⁵ This number includes so-called “Super PACs” that do not contribute directly to campaigns. <https://www.fec.gov/updates/statistical-summary-24-month-campaign-activity-2017-2018-cycle/>.

⁶ <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2018/01/drain-the-swamp-lobbyists-are-filling-it-up/>.

⁷ <https://www.aarp.org/about-aarp/company/annual-reports/>.