ON OUR SOAPBOX:
ISSUES AFFECTING UNITED STATES POLITICS

BY DIANE GROMELSKI, JAY CHARLES, HALEY HARTSELL, SHANIQUA BELL, AND IMAN BROWN
“The invasion of private rights is chiefly to be apprehended, not from the acts of government contrary to the sense of its constituents, but from acts in which the government is the mere instrument of the major number of the constituents,” James Madison wrote in a letter to fellow founding father Thomas Jefferson in 1788 (“The Question of a Bill of Rights”). Madison expressed his concerns that large organizations of like-minded citizens, or interest groups, would gain too much influence in Congress, saying they contribute to “the mortal diseases under which popular governments have everywhere perished” (“The Federalist No. 10”). Madison’s predictions have come true as interest groups now have an unprecedented amount of influence on public policy decisions, overpowering the voice of the individual constituent.

It is worth noting that interest groups usually begin as non-political corporations or clubs that become involved in politics when public policy decisions are being made that affect them (Heberlig). Interest group representatives establish...
relationships with Congressmen so that they can easily reach out to them if a proposed bill will benefit or hurt their group. Often, forming those relationships involves making financial contributions to the representative’s campaign. Approximately one third of interest groups have political action committees (PACs), the legal entity interest groups must form to collect money from stockholders to donate to federal politicians (Heberlig). For example, Bank of America has a PAC that decides which candidates best represent their interests and donates money on behalf of the stockholders. During the 2012 election cycle, Bank of America contributed $3,168,658 to individual candidates alone. This figure does not include contributions made to an entire political party or to party committees (“Bank of America Profile”). The representative who received the largest donation from Bank of America in the amount of $60,039 was Shane Osborn, a senator from Nebraska whose website claims that federal regulations on business are “crippling” the American economy (“Meet Shane”).

**Gaining Sway**

Campaign donations allow interest groups to gain access to politicians, but how do groups influence public policy? Unlike the average constituent, interest groups do not just contact one representative to press an issue; they use their size and wealth to gain access to several representatives, legislative committees, the courts, and legislative leaders. One study by John R. Wright, a professor at Ohio State University, found that the number of contacts representatives received from influence groups had a strong positive correlation with bill passage at the committee level (Wright).

Access does not always equal influence, however. Interest groups must hire lobbyists to sway legislators to support their endeavors. Lobbyists, representatives of interest groups in Congress, outnumber the 535 members of Congress 23 to 1 (“Lobbyists have Congress Covered”). When deciding how to vote on a bill, politicians keep in mind that lobbyists are advocating for their specific sector of the electorate and not for the American public. The representative has to figure out if the majority of their district is concerned with the issue at hand, and if they will lose votes if they oblige the involved interest group (Heberlig). According to Richard W. Gable, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of California Davis, the power of interest groups lies in

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**12,951 lobbyists spent $3.5 billion influencing Congress in 2012. That is $6.5 million for each representative.**
In order to convincingly associate their interests with those of the public, interest groups have two main strategies: adapting their views to those of the public or changing the views of the public to fit the views of the interest group. For example, a gun rights group would most likely not advocate for the legal possession of guns by mentally ill individuals even if they feel that it is legally permissible, simply because they know that the general public would never support them. Also, gun rights groups like the National Rifle Association do not just lobby in Congress; they have conferences and rallies to incite the American public to defend their right to bear arms. Dr. Eric Heberlig, a political science professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, said some interest groups like oil companies spend money on advertising. “Oil companies, BP in particular, try to portray a particular image through advertising, saying that they cleaned up the Gulf after the oil spill, but most of the advertising they do is within Washington to create a favorable impression of their company and their industry for the people who are actually making the decisions,” (Heberlig). During the months after the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, BP’s advertising budget consisted of nearly $100 million, three times the amount during the same months the previous year (DuBois). Gable says these mechanisms of allying an interest group with the public can greatly increase the chance that Congressmen will vote in a way that benefits an interest group.

The techniques that interest groups use to sway politicians in their favor have been shown to be extremely effective. Members of Congress value the input of interest groups very highly, and often take the requests of interest groups into consideration when making public policy decisions (Evans). When interest groups go to congressional committees to propose legislation that would benefit their organization, the committees very often grant their proposal unless there is a large amount of competition from other interest groups, according to a study by Diana Evans of Trinity College.

**Out of Reach**

The ability to create interest groups gives organized and affluent Americans an advantage over the individual constituent. Compared to interest groups, individual constituents have little means of influencing public opinion unless they are willing to donate large sums of money to political campaigns (Heberlig). Professors from Berkeley and Yale Universities recently joined forces to conduct a study on the ability of constituents to schedule meetings with their representatives. They sent emails to representatives requesting a
meeting to discuss a bill. Some of the emails claimed to be from constituents, and the others claimed to be from campaign donors. The researchers found that they were more than three times more likely to get a meeting with the representative if they claimed to be campaign donors. Meanwhile, Bill Ackman, a wealthy hedge fund owner and campaign donor, used lobbying to get an hour-long, face-to-face meeting with a senator who later went on to support Ackman’s initiative (Chang). The fact is that representatives simply do not have time to sit down with regular people when they are busy playing golf with lobbyists and wealthy donors who pick up the tab.

**Competing Interests**

Interest groups, the majority of which are wealthy corporations, do not represent the interests of the American public. In his book *Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America*, Martin Gilens discussed public opinion on numerous proposed economic, social, and foreign policies in the past five decades. By comparing the policy preferences of people from different economic backgrounds with policy outcomes, he determined the degree of influence groups of differing incomes had on policy. Gilens wrote, “The American government does respond to the public’s preferences, but that responsiveness is strongly tilted toward the most affluent citizens. Indeed, under most circumstances, the preferences of the vast majority of Americans appear to have essentially no impact on which policies the government does or doesn’t adopt.” Gilen also showed through his research that the majority of public policy decisions would have been completely different if Congress’s vote had reflected the opinion of all income groups.

**Conclusion**

The United States was founded as a democratic republic in which each citizen’s opinion is considered equally regardless of wealth. Can a country truly be called a republic when wealthy interest groups have far more sway than the individual American? Legislators are representatives of the American people, not just those who can afford to pay, and they need to act accordingly. Congressional representatives should be required to find time to meet with their constituents, and there needs to be more limits on campaign funding from interest groups in order to give the power back to the American people.
Sources

Types of Interest Groups Registered to Lobby. N.d. www.norton.com


