

Political Parties & SIGS

US Government Political Interest Groups What is a political interest group?

A political interest group or special interest group (SIG) is a group of people that have a specific political interest. They organize in an effort to influence laws and government policy. They try to get elected officials to pass laws that will benefit their group. Sometimes these groups are called "special interest groups" or "advocacy groups."

Lobbying and Lobbyists

One of the main ways that interest groups try to influence elected officials is through lobbying. The term "lobbying" comes from a time when citizens would wait in the lobby outside the Congress to talk to the representatives. Today the people doing the lobbying are called lobbyists. Many lobbyists are highly paid members of the interest group. They work full time trying to convince elected officials to help their group. In order to influence the public officials, lobbyist have meetings, offer legal advice, help to draft laws, and entertain the officials by taking them out to dinner or a show.

Rating Representatives

Interest groups often rate representatives on how well they think they are supporting their cause. For example, if the interest group was for a strong military they may rate a Congressman low for voting to lower the military budget. At the same time, an antiwar interest group may rate that same Congressman high.

Marketing

Sometimes interest groups use marketing to influence both voters and public officials. They will run commercials on TV or take out ads in magazines. They may also send out letters through the mail or run an online ad campaign.

Types of Interest Groups

There are thousands of interest groups in the United States. Some of them are very powerful. Most interest groups can be put into one of two categories:

Economic - These groups work to improve the economic benefits (pay, profits, jobs) of the group they represent.

Public Interest - These groups work on issues that they believe will help protect the rights and lives of the general public.

Economic Interest Groups

Agriculture - Some economic interest groups specialize in agriculture. They try to influence legislation that will help out farmers. One example of this is the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF). They have over 5 million members.

Business - Business interest groups try to influence government policies to help out their industry. There are some larger groups like the United States Chamber of Commerce which try to help business in general, but most groups are formed for a specific industry. Examples include the American Trucking Association, the National Association of Realtors, and the American Paper Institute.

Trade Associations - Some interest groups are based on a specific trade or profession. Examples of these include the American Medical Association (doctors) and the American Bar Association (lawyers).

Organized Labor - Labor unions form some of the most powerful interest groups in the country. One example is the AFL-CIO which has over 13 million members.

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Public-Interest Groups

Environmental - These groups take up the cause to help keep the environment clean and protect animals. Examples include the National Wildlife Federation, the National Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club.

Civil Rights - These organizations lobby to improve the civil rights of different groups of people in the country. Examples include the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), NOW (National Organization for Women), AAPD (American Association of People with Disabilities), and AARP (American Association of Retired People).

Consumer - These groups try to influence the government to protect the consumer from big business. Examples include the Better Business Bureau, Public Citizen, and Consumer Watchdog.

What are political parties?

Political parties are groups of people that are organized based on their political beliefs and goals. In some cases, political parties are large powerful organizations that run much of the government.

Two Main Parties In the United States there are two main political parties:

Democrats and Republicans. These two parties run much of the government. Because these two parties are so powerful, the United States government is often called a "two-party system."

Elections in a Two-Party System

The elections in a two-party system are often held in two phases. The first phase is the primary election. In the primary election each party elects a candidate to represent their party. The next phase is called the general election. In the general election, the public votes between the winners of the primary election. These elections are sort of like playoffs in sports. The primary elections are like the semifinals and the general elections are like the finals.

Democrats

The Democratic Party was founded in 1828. It is generally associated with larger government programs and higher taxes. Members of the Democratic Party are often referred to as "liberals" or "progressives." The symbol of the Democratic Party is the donkey.

Republicans

The Republican Party was founded in 1854 by anti-slavery activists. It is generally associated with smaller government and lower taxes. Members of the Republican Party are often referred to as "conservatives." The symbol of the Republican Party is the elephant.

Other Parties

There are other political parties in the United States, but they have not been able to make a significant impact in the government. Some of these parties include the Libertarian Party, the Green Party, and the Constitution Party. Political parties that have had power in the past include the Whigs, the Federalists, and the Democratic-Republicans.

Advantages and Disadvantages

There are good and bad things about a two party system. On the plus side, having only two parties helps the government to run smoother. Two-party systems can lead to a more stable government and less radical politics. On the negative side, two-party systems give the voters only two choices. Voters start to think that their vote doesn't count for much, causing them not to

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participate. It also makes it difficult for people with new ideas to have an influence in the government.

Left or Right?

Sometimes political parties are described as being "left-wing" or "right-wing." The Democrats are considered "left" and the Republicans "right." The terms "left" and "right" originally came from the National Assembly during the French Revolution when the supporters of the king stood on the right and the supporters of the revolution on the left.

Interesting Facts about the Two Party System

- There have been 15 democratic presidents and 18 republican presidents.
- The Republican Party is sometimes called the GOP which stands for Grand Old Party.
- Four members of the Whig Party became president in the 1840s and 1850s.
- George Washington was elected without being a member of any political party.
- In the United Kingdom there are two main parties (Labour Party and Conservative Party) and a fairly powerful third party (Liberal Democrats).

How Voting Works

An important part of the United States government is the right of every person over the age of 18 to vote. Voting is not only a right, but a privilege and a responsibility.

Who can Vote?

When the US government was first formed only white men over the age of 21 were allowed to vote. This was changed over the years to include everyone regardless of race or gender. Today anyone who is a citizen and is over the age of 18 can vote.

Is Voting Important?

Yes. It's important that each person vote and get their voice to be heard. Even though it may seem to not make a difference as your vote is one in millions, it's important that each citizen cast their vote. This is important for democracy and for our country that people get to have their say and place their votes.

Why do we have political parties?

At first it may seem strange that we have different political parties. The two main ones in the United States are the Republican and Democratic Parties. They seem to be fighting and arguing a lot over issues. This may seem like a bad thing, but is really a good thing. Having different parties allows for different sides of issues to get discussed and voted on. If we only had a single party, then the party leaders would decide everything and other ideas would not get presented and voted for.

What do we vote on?

In elections in the United States we mostly vote for people who are going to represent us in the government. This could be in a wide variety of positions, but usually we vote for someone who we think is going to vote and work for issues we find important. People who think like us. This way our opinion and viewpoint is represented in the government.

How Elections Work

Elections can be complicated things, especially when you are talking about a nationwide election like the president. Candidates have large teams of people working for them who try to

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convince voters to vote for them. They use statistics and polls to determine what people like and try to say and do the right things to get elected. Candidates run ads on TV, hand out buttons, give speeches, and have debates to let people know why they will be the best person for the job.

How the President is Elected

You may think that the President of the United States is just voted on by all the people in the country and then the person with the most votes wins. But it's not that simple. The president is actually elected by something called the Electoral College.

Electoral College What is the Electoral College?

At first you may think that the Electoral College is a school somewhere where people learn about politics, but that isn't the case. The Electoral College isn't even a place, it's the process that elects the president of the United States.

Don't the citizens of the U.S. elect the president?

Well, not directly. When people vote for president they are really voting for an elector from their state. Each state has a certain number of electors. These electors then vote for president.

How many electors does each state get?

Each state gets an elector for each member of Congress from that state. That is one for each member from the state in the House of Representatives (which is based on the population of the state) and two more for the state's two senators. For example, California gets 55 electors, North Carolina 15, and Wyoming 3.

How do states choose their electors?

Each state has its own rules on how electors are chosen. Usually, the political party of the presidential candidate who won the state chooses the electors.

Who can be an elector?

Pretty much anyone who can vote can be an elector. The only people prevented from being electors are certain political leaders like Senators and Representatives. Most electors are people who have been loyal and dedicated members of their political party for a long time.

Do electors have to vote a certain way?

This depends on the state. In some states there are laws requiring that electors vote the same as the people who voted for them. Most of the time electors vote as expected, but in rare cases they have changed their vote and voted for a different candidate than the people who voted for them.

All or Nothing

In most states all the electors are awarded to one president. Even if one candidate won by a single popular vote, they would get all the electoral votes. So it is possible that one popular vote in California could make the difference of 55 electoral votes. There are two states, Maine and Nebraska, that split up the electors between the candidates.

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Pros and Cons of the Electoral College

Today, many people think that the Electoral College should be abolished and that the total popular vote should determine the president. Here are some of the arguments for and against the Electoral College:

For:

- The current process protects state's rights. The United States is a republic of states and each state should be able to apportion its electorates as it sees fit.
- The Electoral College keeps high population states and regions from deciding the presidency. Without the Electoral College, a huge popular margin in one state (like California or Texas) could decide the entire election.

Against:

- It is possible that the winner may not receive the most popular votes. This has happened four times.
- Some votes count more than others. In 2012 there were less than 200,000 people per electoral vote in Wyoming, but more than 700,000 people per electoral vote in Texas.
- It causes the elections to focus on swing states such as Florida and Ohio.

Interesting Facts about the Electoral College

- There are 538 total electors.
- The District of Columbia has 3 electors.
- A total of 270 electoral votes is needed to win the presidential election.
- The electoral votes are officially counted in a joint session of Congress.

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