CHAPTER EIGHT

Interest Groups and the Media

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter explores how interest groups and the mass media affect American politics. The types of interest groups and tactics of influence are covered along with the role of lobbyists. Another important theme deals with money and its relationship to political campaigns, as shown by the power of PACs. Reform proposals to curb the power of PACs are also noted.

The importance of the mass media’s relationship to national politics comprises the other half of the chapter. Television and newspapers are emphasized. News coverage and the significance of media mergers and new media are discussed. The three major types of media messages--news reports, entertainment programs, and advertising--are explained. An important sub-theme of “media profits and information diversity” follows. The interaction of politicians and media is examined and the chapter ends with a case study of a fictional “day in the life” of a candidate for the U.S. Senate.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading chapter 8, the student should be able to:

1. List the various types of economic interest groups with specific examples of each type.
2. Review the roles of the lobbyist and the various kinds of lobbying tactics.

3. Discuss the relationship between campaign contributions and PACs (Political Action Committees).

4. Summarize how the media affects political life, specifically noting such sub-themes as media mergers, sound bites, media messages and profitability, news management, media campaign ads, and the media’s relationship to public opinion.

5. Discuss the political importance of the rise of new media, like the Internet, and alternative media forums, such as late-night TV talk shows.

6. Summarize the key points found in the chapter case study, “The Candidate: A Day in the Life . . . .”

OUTLINE

I. Interest Groups

Interest groups organize to pursue a common interest by applying pressure on the political process. There are numerous groups in America, as Alex de Tocqueville noted in 1835. Interest groups are usually more tightly organized than political parties. They are financed by contributions or by dues-paying members.

A. Types of Interest Groups. The most important and widespread type of association is based on common economic interests. Business groups (Chamber of Commerce, NAM), including corporations, are interested in profits and supporting a system that maintains them; professional associations (teachers, doctors, lawyers, etc.), labor unions (AFL-CIO), and
agricultural lobbies are among the most powerful groups seeking protection and favors. In addition, there are religious (Christian Coalition), racial, environmental, (Sierra Club) public interest, and political groups all seeking to influence government policies.

B. Lobbying. Interest groups or individuals put pressure on the government to act in their favor. The typical lobby is a professional staff of experienced people who provide information to congressional committees and the bureaucracy (the law requires Washington’s lobbyists to register and limits gifts and meals for congressmen to $100 a year from any one person). These lobbyists include former members of Congress or the executive branch. Indirect lobbying (used by the NRA) may involve campaigns to enlist public recognition and support (grassroots campaigns--AARP) and attempts to influence other interest groups for their cause. In some cases groups will form a coalition to lobby for one specific goal (e.g., free trade). Direct lobbying usually takes place in congressional committees and executive bureaucracies. Lobbyists, bureaucrats, and congressional committees comprise the so called Iron Triangle.

Advocacy ads do not fall under campaign financing rules (they don’t directly support a candidate and are not coordinated by campaign officials), so they can help a candidate and avoid restrictions on raising/spending money in an election. John McCain found this out when TV stations began broadcasting ads in key primary states (2000 election) attacking his record on the environment. These ads were sponsored by two Texas billionaires (Sam and Charles Wyly) who were Bush supporters.

C. Campaign Contributions and PACs. The most controversial aspects of lobbying relate to campaigns and elections. Interest groups can support friendly candidates or work to defeat candidates they oppose (in the 2000 election, energy, tobacco, an high tech companies supported Bush). The threat of using
money against an incumbent can have an impact upon decision-making. Political action committees (PACs) are set up by private groups in order to influence elections. (The earliest PAC, created in 1955, was the AFL-CIO’s COPE.) Since the campaign reforms of the mid-1970s put limits on individual donations, the numbers of PACs have mushroomed (from 608 in 1975 to 4,393 in 2000). As a result, election funds from special interests, especially business groups, have grown enormously, the exact opposite intention of the reforms. Money does buy access, the right to talk to a legislator (by 2000, GOP candidates got $86 million from PACs, while Democrats got nearly $80 million). The 2000 congressional elections were the most expensive in history. To win an open Senate seat cost almost $14 million, and winning House candidates spent 1.3 million. However, candidates who spend the most do not always win (Charles Schumer). Most recent attempts at new reforms haven’t offered enough enticements to both “in” and “out” politicians to secure passage. Various attempts to reform PACs are usually opposed by one party who feels it would benefit the other party.

D. Do Group Interests Overwhelm the Public Interest?
The growth in numbers and influence of interest groups is unarguable (by mid-1999, there were more than 38 registered lobbyists and 2.7 million in lobbying spent for every member of Congress). The failure of reforms is equally evident. As the number of interest groups multiplied, the result is hyperpluralism—too many groups making too many demands on government (see Greider’s “Grand Bazaar”). These criticisms are overstated. “Special interests” do not dominate the entire game. They are countered by politicians, other groups, and the media who limit their interest group power and ensure that the results of the political competition remain unpredictable.
II. The Media (sometimes called the “fourth branch of government”)

A. What Are the Media? Media includes those means of communication that permit messages to be made public. Television dominates the mass media and is in turn dominated by the three major networks, CBS, NBC, and ABC. These networks function as agencies that produce and sell programs with advertising to their affiliates (each network had over 200; Fox had 177). In recent years, the three networks have been challenged by Fox and various cable stations (65 million television households get their signals through cable). Cable-only stations such as CNN and C-SPAN have also become important. New technologies are causing the distinctions between television, computers, and telephones to be blurred. For example, the Internet provides endless sources of information and entertainment. Newspapers, though more varied, have shown a rapid decline in number and competitiveness in this country. At the turn of the century, there were 2,226 daily papers in the United States. By 2000, there were only 1,647. In 1920, there were 700 cities with competing newspapers. Today there are only 13.

B. What Do the Media Do? The media provide three major types of messages—news reports, entertainment programs, and advertising. In news reports, the media selectively supply accounts of the most important events and issues (however, note that few people pay much attention to political news, especially young people under the age of 30). The most important function the media perform is agenda-setting—putting together an agenda of national priorities (what should be taken seriously, lightly, or ignored). In short, the media can’t tell people what to think, but it can tell them what to think about. Entertainment programs subtly give images of “normal” behavior and turn political conflicts into personal problems. Advertising also
presents images of material well-being presumed to be within
the reach of most people.

III. Media and the Marketplaces of Ideas

A. The Media and Free Speech. Although the Framers of the
Constitution saw communications media as part of a free market
of varied ideas, recent trends have countered this goal.
Profitability has led to a decline in the number of competing
newspapers, the increase in media “chains,” and the control of
TV and radio by a small number of corporations (ABC-Capital
Cities was acquired by Disney). More than 80 percent of the
nation’s newspapers are owned by chains, and only three
corporations own most of the nation’s 11,000 magazines.
Market calculations have caused mergers, meaning that
ownership of almost all major outlets are concentrated in a few
 corporate hands (Disney/ABC, Viacom/CBS, America
Online/Time Warner). The dependence on advertising has led
the media to avoid controversy so as not to antagonize either
consumers or advertisers. While the quantity of political
information has certainly increased, the need for profitability
and to provide entertainment has probably led to a decline in
serious discussions of issues.

B. The Media and the Government. These influence one another in
various ways (in the early years of the Republic, the press was
consciously partisan; by the end of the century, advertisers
bankrolled papers).

1. The Federal Communication Commission regulates TV and
radio (since 1934). Radio and TV stations must renew their
broadcast licenses every six years.
2. The media are both opportunity and adversary for
campaigning politicians. Media advertising has accounted
for 60 percent of campaign money in presidential races.
Candidates also are fond of staging “newsworthy events”—pseudoevents—such as the Clinton-Gore bus tours of 1992. Also, the quality of political news has not necessarily improved—the typical sound bite has declined from 42 seconds in 1968 to 7 seconds.

3. Informal pressure by political leaders through news management and promoting their favorable image to the public is widespread. Presidents try to get on the good side of the media by giving favored reporters exclusive “leaks” of information or through press conferences. Presidents now have large staffs of media experts and speech writers to perfect their images. Bill Clinton’s attempts at good relations with the press came to an end when the media became fixated on covering the President’s affair with a young intern. Clinton also pursued the “alternative-media” strategy, avoiding White House reporters in favor of local news anchors and televised town meetings. George W. Bush copies the Clinton strategy, adding a few twists of his own. He favored less-informed, less-critical reporters from outside of Washington and depended upon Dick Cheney for exploring issues in greater substantive depth.

C. The Media and the Public. The media have a powerful influence on the political attitudes and actions of Americans. The media has the power to “define alternatives.” While they may check the activities of those in power, mainly they reflect and enhance the influence of the most powerful players in the political game.

IV. Case Study: Candidate: A Day in the Life . . . . .

A. Morning. She is running for the Senate. Her typically early morning is dedicated to two good-sized towns that she hopes will provide exposure, personal contact, and money to a candidate whose advisers still disagree over whether she should carry a purse on the campaign trail. She meets local teachers for
breakfast, parries a reporter’s question about her children, and has a good press conference. She does two press conferences a day, each with a new position paper, scheduled with hopes for space in the morning or evening papers or the big prize, evening TV news.

B. **Afternoon.** She’s late to lunch at a senior citizens’ center (the volunteer college driver got lost) and she hurries back to her motel to ask for more money from two well-off contributors to keep several effective ads on the air as the campaign winds down. More phone calls for more money are followed by filming of a TV spot--45 seconds on the screen, two grueling hours to film. Then it’s off to two “coffees” given by supporters.

C. **Evening.** She and her advisors discuss fine-tuning her aggressive attacks on her opponent, which are cutting into his lead but raising her “negatives.” She postpones a decision to take advantage of her opponent’s son’s activities -- which may be unsavory -- as a campaign issue, and goes to a TV debate, the last event of the day. Having scored well on her opponent in the debate, she calls her husband and children at home for support and leaves word for another 5 a.m. wakeup call.

D. **Analysis.** Today’s candidate spends more time on media exposure and fundraising than personal contact with voters; paradoxically, the core value that appeals to news media and to potential givers is personal contact.

**KEY CHAPTER TERMS AND IDENTIFICATIONS**

Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*
Interest group
James Madison and *The Federalist Papers*
economic interest groups
National Association of Manufacturers
business, professional, labor, agricultural groups
Sierra Club, Greenpeace, Common Cause
lobbying and lobbyists, “Five Commandments of Lobbying”
1995 lobbying reform bill—lobbyists must register
Christian Coalition
Iron Triangle
garoots campaigns
coalitions
John McCain and advocacy ads
Sam and Charles Wyly
National Rifle Association
Bush’s corporate donors
PACs (Political Action committees)
Jon Corzine, Al D’Amato vs. Charles Schumer
access
hyperpluralism, “Grand Bazaar” of deal making
millionaires “buying” elections
Buckley v. Valeo
Ross Perot
the media--the “fourth branch of government”
networks and affiliates
CNN, C-SPAN
Internet
Matt Drudge, Monica Lewinsky, Kenneth Starr
wire services—AP, UPI
media messages—news, entertainment, advertising
media “selectivity”
media’s agenda-setting function
“marketplace of ideas”
Primary Colors
chain ownership of media outlets
media mergers--Disney/ABC, NBC/General Electric, etc.
Federal Communications Commission
Clinton-Gore 1992 bus tours
sound bites
late-night talk shows—Jay Leno, David Letterman
pseudoevents
news
Reagan as “The Great Communicator”; Lesley Stahl’s commentary
leaks
Clinton’s “alternative-media” strategy
President Kennedy and Pamela Turnure
presidential press conferences
“on message”
E.E. Schattschneider’s “definition of alternatives”
media’s political functions
Federal Trade Commission’s report on entertainment industry

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. If possible, obtain videotapes of television political ads that were used in previous presidential campaigns. Show these clips to the class. Ask for reactions and discuss what messages were conveyed by those ads.

2. Discuss the role that lobbyists and interest groups play in American politics. Why are some groups more successful than others? Talk about the ethics of retired members of Congress lobbying their former colleagues.

3. Have students debate the question as to whether the many new media mergers of the past few years pose a threat to the free and diverse expression of ideas in America.

4. Ask students why so many young people (those under 30) are disinterested in politics. Also, how many members of the class watch an evening news program at least three times a week or read a newspaper editorial/column as least once a week?
5. Ask the class to consider the following question—do millionaires entering politics have a guaranteed advantage over their opponents based upon the historical record—why or why not?

**SUGGESTED RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Ask selected students to correspond with some of the major interest groups in America such as the AMA, AFL-CIO, the NRA, the NEA, NOW, and so forth. Information can then be collected and analyzed from group brochures, pamphlets, flyers, etc. The purpose would be to summarize the political stands of these groups and to see how they promote their own interests.

2. Have your students pick an important issue form the recent past. Trace how that issue gained prominence. Did the media set the agenda by reporting on the issue or did the politicians create a media stir by discussing the issues? How do these two groups interact to set the political agenda?

3. Have students talk with roommates and friends about what news items they recall from this same week. How much do people not assigned to watch the news recall about a week’s worth of news? Can one draw any conclusions about how attentive people are to the media’s messages?

4. Ask several students to research how the media reacted to the three televised presidential debates during the 2000 election. Did the media appear to favor Gore or Bush?

5. Ask two teams of students to debate the following question—does money corrupt the American political process or not?
MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. Which of the following PACs donated the most to Republican candidates in the 1999-2000 election cycle?
   a. Trial Lawyers of America
   b. National Association of Realtors
   c. United Auto Workers
   d. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees

2. Which of the following groups is not classified as a business interest group?
   a. AFL-CIO
   b. Chamber of Commerce
   c. AT&T
   d. United States Steel

3. The “Iron Triangle” is said to comprise
   a. parties, interest groups, and the courts.
   b. lobbyists, bureaucrats, and congressional committees.
   c. lobbyists, courts, and bureaucrats.
   d. media representatives, bureaucrats, and congressional committees.

4. Interest groups
   a. became important in the U.S. during the 1970s.
   b. were identified by Woodrow Wilson in the *Federalist Papers*.
   c. represent only well-heeled corporate interests.
   d. have always been active, as evidenced by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*.

5. The following is not a business group
   a. Chamber of Commerce
   b. NAACP
   c. National Association of Manufacturers
   d. National Small Business Association
6. The “fourth branch of government” refers to
   a. the Congress.
   b. political parties.
   c. the media.
   d. interest groups.

7. Which of the following is a “professional” interest group?
   a. National Rifle Association
   b. American Medical Association
   c. National Education Association
   d. Associate Milk Producers

8. Top PAC contributors to Democrats are dominated by
   a. delivery services.
   b. women’s groups.
   c. unions.
   d. pro-Israel groups.

9. When the television networks stress the issue of environmental pollution for a week or so instead of universal health care, they are performing the important media function of
   a. agenda-setting.
   b. sound-bites.
   c. entertainment.
   d. none of the above

10. The growth of PACs
    a. has made politics cleaner and fairer.
    b. was an unanticipated consequence of campaign reform.
    c. forced big money contributors to donate illegally.
    d. is a new phenomenon directly linked to Republican control of Congress.
11. Nobody really knows what political contributions buy, but at the least they buy
   a. a speech in the donor’s favor.
   b. a vote in the legislature favoring the donor’s interest group.
   c. access to the politician.
   d. a job in the government for the donor.

12. The first PAC belonged to
   a. General Electric.
   b. the American Association of Retired Persons.
   c. the AFL-CIO.
   d. none of the above

13. As discussed in the chapter’s case study, “advocacy ads”
   a. do not advocate the election or defeat of a candidate.
   b. are funded directly from the treasury of corporations and labor unions.
   c. both a and b are incorrect
   d. both a and b are correct

14. PAC contributions typically
   a. mean that you are going to win the election.
   b. go to incumbent candidates of both parties.
   c. go to the challenger to promote more competitive elections.
   d. none of the above

15. E. E. Schattschneider meant by his term “definition of alternatives”
   a. the ability to set limits on political debates.
   b. the clarification of what is politically important.
   c. the making of certain political solutions reasonable and acceptable and others not.
   d. all of the above
16. President Clinton did not like press conferences because
   a. the press asked questions about their agenda and not his.
   b. the press mainly asked about scandals.
   c. the press asked questions about policies with which he was unfamiliar.
   d. a and b only

17. Interest groups support administrative agencies by
   a. providing information on their industry or group.
   b. contributing to re-election campaigns.
   c. offering personal and financial favors.
   d. all of the above

18. Which of the following is not a threat to the television networks?
   a. the Internet
   b. cable television
   c. newspapers
   d. CNN and C-SPAN

19. In its early days, the Lewinsky affair
   a. demonstrated the political role of the Internet.
   b. was first reported on by quasi-reporter Matt Drudge.
   c. was ignored because the New York Times did not break the story.
   d. a and b are correct

20. Television advertisers tend to prefer programs that are
   a. intellectually thought-provoking.
   b. conventional and inoffensive.
   c. controversial and challenging.
   d. overly concerned with factual information.

21. The decline in newspaper circulation
   a. is an outgrowth of high newsprint prices.
   b. does not concern political observers.
   c. both a and b are true
   d. both a and b are false
22. Some media organizations benefited from government action because
   a. the FCC generally restricted entry to competitors in radio and TV.
   b. they are exempt from government laws and anti-trust regulations.
   c. every agency develops free information for the press through their public affairs divisions.
   d. all of the above

23. Which of the following is not part of an Administration’s attempt at news management?
   a. offering favored reporters exclusive “leaks” of information
   b. allowing the president or his staff to be caught in compromising positions
   c. presenting issues in a way that looks best for the president
   d. having the president deliver good news in person

24. Which of the following techniques illustrates a grass roots campaign?
   a. letter-writing campaigns
   b. an interest group forming a coalition with other groups
   c. a voter phoning her senator
   d. all of the above

25. Who wrote that “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations”?
   a. Alexis de Tocqueville
   b. Tip O’Neill
   c. Ronald Reagan
   d. Theodore Roosevelt
26. Bill Clinton’s “alternative media” strategy
   a. meant calling *New York Times* reporters at home.
   b. accelerated after the Lewinsky scandal broke.
   c. meant granting interviews to local news anchors and holding televised town meetings.
   d. meant holding online press conferences.

27. The purpose of grassroots lobbying is
   a. to raise more funds than the opposition.
   b. to get constituents to contact their own representative.
   c. to form a national coalition of different groups.
   d. to prevent rash legislation from being passed.

28. Too many groups making too many demands on government is called
   a. the Democratic party.
   b. pluralism.
   c. hyperpluralism.
   d. lobbying.

29. The Internet was begun by
   a. the U.S. military.
   b. Apple Computer.
   c. Microsoft.
   d. independent computer hackers.

30. The movie *Primary Colors*
   a. is not important because no one saw it.
   b. possibly confirmed popular, unattractive views about President Clinton.
   c. was produced because of a “right wing” conspiracy in Hollywood.
   d. none of the above
TRUE-FALSE QUESTIONS

1. Unlike political parties, interest groups do not compete for public office.

2. Tocqueville set the agenda for creating interest groups.

3. The model for PACs was created by the AFL-CIO in 1955.

4. There are far more public interest PACs than business PACs.

5. Unions overwhelmingly support Democratic candidates through their PAC contributions.

6. Only business PACs and corporations have an impact on governmental decision making.

7. Lesley Stahl’s media piece on Ronald Reagan was met by vehement criticism from the White House.

8. The media is part of the Iron Triangle.

9. Over the years, “sound-bites” on TV have increased in length.

10. In 2000, late-night TV talk show hosts, such as Leno and Letterman, had a major impact upon political information obtained by young adults.
ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Why has grassroots lobbying increased in importance? Does this increase make the system more democratic or less democratic?

2. Does private money dominate Washington politics? Give examples that tend to support an affirmative as well as a negative answer.

3. Assess the impact of C-SPAN on Congress. Do members act more dignified or less in front of the cameras? How was C-SPAN used by the Republicans to help them capture the Congress?

4. How does the media’s need to be entertaining to gain the largest possible audience interfere with their political function as a channel of communication? Give specific examples.

5. In the chapter case study, our fictional candidate for the U.S. Senate spends most of her time preoccupied with media exposure and fundraising. In a well-reasoned essay, speculate as to how modern campaigning for Congress would change if television stations were compelled under FCC regulations to furnish a much larger percentage of air time at no cost to candidates.

6. How will the Internet affect American politics into the next century? Will it be an integral technology for candidate campaigns, grassroots campaigns, fundraising, and news gathering? Can or will the government attempt to regulate this form of media?

7. What are the “five commandments of lobbying”?

8. Should advocacy ads be banned—why or why not?

9. What is the significance of the “Christian Coalition” in politics?

10. What does the text insert entitled “A Knee-Deep Crisis” tell you about how the media covers the office of the presidency?