

# Continuity & Change

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## A Balancing Act?

Throughout the history of the United States, interest groups have played a key role in the development of our pluralist society. Groups have arisen in response to crises, to alleviate a problem, or to maintain the status quo from attack. Government frequently has been the mediator of battles between these interest groups, and sometimes has been captured by the victors. Competition for public attention and governmental action is a recurring theme in American politics.

In the public forum, interest groups, or factions, as James Madison called them in *Federalist No. 10*, often present two opposing approaches to the same problem. When

some of the colonists decided to break from Great Britain, the colonies were split into two camps: the loyalists and the revolutionaries. Then, as the new nation became established, it was the Federalists and Anti-Federalists. During the Civil War, Americans were divided into pro-slavery and antislavery factions. Today, the dividing lines are gun control versus the right to bear arms, the right to choose versus the right to life, and the list goes on. For each of these interests, there is a group. Thus, there is the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and the NRA. Similarly, there is the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League and the National Right to Life Committee.

Although the two major political parties are not per se interest groups, they represent very different approaches to solving a variety of problems, and many political interest groups are largely allied with one party or the other, highlighting the persistence, and importance, of factions in politics. While labor unions today may try to reach out to Republicans and big business to Democrats, fairly sharp lines are drawn concerning a variety of issues. In general, interest groups ally themselves with a single party and view themselves as competitors trying to capture control of the government to have an influence on its policies. It is not surprising, then, that President George W. Bush, the first president with an MBA, is pro-business and that his ties to big business and its influence on him and his administration have been questioned. A president coming out of a labor union could expect similar questions about influence.

1. As interest groups and their issues have changed over time, theories about how they form and maintain themselves have been able to explain interest groups pretty well. As Internet use increases for mobilizing potential adherents, do you see a change coming in the general nature of interest groups?
2. What role have big business interests and labor unions had as the war on terrorism has proceeded?
3. What ways have groups used to voice their support or opposition to American foreign and domestic policy? In which arena are they more successful?



#### **CAST YOUR VOTE**

In what ways will the Internet succeed as a mobilizing tool for interest groups? In what ways will it fail? To cast your vote, go to

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