

To what extent do pressure groups undermine democracy

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



It is a varied opinion in society that pressure groups undermine democracy: some people believe strongly, some people don't. It is hard to begin to analyse whether this is the case or not, as there are a varying amount of factors that need to be considered before a final decision and be made. In the first instance of answering this question, we need to find out the two types of pressure groups; elitist pressure groups and pluralist pressure groups.

Elitism is the theory that political power is concentrated in the hands of a few, which therefore sort of emphasises a dictatorship in some instances. Whereas the other type of pressure group ideology is the theory of the distribution of political power that holds that power is widely and evenly dispersed in society, rather than concentrated in the hands of an elite or ruling class, which from an outside point of view, would look like it promotes democracy.

Supporters of pressure group would lead this on to say that pressure groups enhance this sense of pluralism in our democracy and make our democratic system much more effective. Although the opposite argument to this is that people claim that many organized groups can undermine the policy making process because they are dominated by people with vested interests concerned only to improve the position of certain groups within society, not the welfare of the whole country.

Pressure groups also help to promote democracy because they widen the distribution of political power because pressure groups compete against one another and this ensures that no group can remain on top of all the others,

so prevents an elitist situation whereby the ideologies pluralism is completely outcast from the situation. However as one group begins to turn more influential, other groups come into existence to combat them and offer rival viewpoints.

Due to this, public policy is created through an ongoing debate between rival groups that ensures that political influence is widely and evenly dispersed. However, as we already know, a healthy democracy needs a high level of political participation in order to function correctly. Pressure groups are thought to have a positive effect on political participation because pressure groups support single issue politics because most pressure group are seen to be fighting for one issue, and people like this sense of working to one targeted issue and it has become popular amongst young people to join in with the grass-roots activism that pressure groups are promoting, so supporters of pressure groups say that they increase political participation.

Evidence for this increase in political participation is that in the 2005 general election the turnout was 61.4%, however the 2010 general election saw a 2 million increase in the electoral turnout to 65%: from 2005 to now, there has been an ever-increasing number of pressure group memberships, so this may show a positive correlation between pressure group memberships and political participation.

Supporters of pressure groups would also say that pressure groups are good for democracy as they educate the electorate. Pressure groups promote political debate and argument and in doing this, they give birth to a more educated voter and this then leads to and improved quality of public policy.

Without this education, it would be simply down to the media to educate the electorate on this issue, which is a very flimsy way of doing so. Pressure groups also offer alternative view points and widen information available to the public.

For example the NSPCC offers a huge education programme on their website in order to educate their members on the wider issues of child cruelty. In many ways, pressure groups are able to raise the quality of political debate by introducing specialist knowledge and greater expertise. However pressure groups do hinder democracy in the sense that they sometimes hold a disproportionate influence over the government due to the power which particular groups hold. For example the BMA represents only a small proportion of the country.

Yet it has great influence over the government because its members provide an important service. A further example of this factor is the NFU. Again, they represent a small proportion of the country, but retain a huge influence over the government as they provide Britain's food supply. Another undemocratic feature of pressure groups is the way in which their influence can rely on financial clout rather than the proportion of public support. This theory applies to many of the protection groups whom have greater capital than many well supported causal groups.

An example is Bernie Ecclestone who used to have connections with Tony Blair to arrange a meeting in which the prime minister agreed to extend the deadline for the removal of tobacco advertising in formula one racing by 5 years, a few months later Ecclestone made a 1 million pound donation to the

labour party, so connections like this from pressure group members to high profile people, lead to undemocratic things like this occurring. In addition to this, power held by pressure groups can depend on the size of the membership.

Initially, this many seem more of a democratic factor rather than a undemocratic feature; surely if a group has a large membership it represents more of public opinion than one which has fewer members. An example which proves this is that of Anti-vivisection. The anti vivisection group has a reasonably large membership, yet the vast majority of the public support animal testing for medical purposes. In fact, up until 2005 no pressure group which opposed the views of anti vivisection even existed. If we were to go purely by the membership of these group prior to 2005, the data would indicate that 100% of the public supported anti vivisection.

One of the main reasons as to why the pluralist image of group politics is bad, is that it doesn't simply just disperse power more widely and empower ordinary citizens, pressure groups simply tend to empower the powerful even more and it therefore increases political inequality. Pluralists argue back and say that political inequality is broadly democratic, in that most successful groups are the ones with the large membership base however in reality, the most powerful pressure groups are the one which have the most money, so this is another reason as to why pressure groups undermine democracy, because they increase political inequality.

In conclusion I believe that there are several ways in which pressure groups do undermine democracy, however I agree with the pluralist view that

allowing a wide range of beliefs and ideologies to flourish promotes democracy, mainly by educating the public into making informal judgements on current affairs.