

The role of pressure groups in Britain



Euphrasia Chigudu British Government and Politics

20 March 2015

Define pressure groups and critically analyse their role and importance to British democracy.

This essay will define pressure groups giving an explanation of each different pressure group, their role and importance to British democracy. The essay will also evaluate the developments and impacts of various political movements, will briefly evaluate the various political governmental systems that underpin British systems of government. It will also identify and offer an analytical account of the elements that make up the British political culture. The essay will analyse and evaluate recent changes to political systems and major political players. Lastly it will analyse and evaluate the role of external influences in British democracy.

Pressure groups differ from political parties in various ways. Pressure groups are organisations set up to try to influence what we think about the law and its environment. They can challenge and even change the law by writing letters to MPs, contacting the press, organising marches and even running campaigns (Anon., 2014). They are organisations which campaign for change in the law or new legislation in specific areas. As such, they can have a strong influence on public opinion and voting behaviour. They are a group formed to protect and advance a specific interest or cause through lobbying powerfully rather than elections. They are distinct from political parties because they do not seek power. Instead they aim to influence those already in power. They also do not have a general programme or manifesto, and

<https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-pressure-groups-in-britain/>

focus on single issues or areas. Pressure groups allow people the opportunity to participate in democracy by being involved in social change without necessarily joining a political party. In some ways, pressure groups may be viewed as essential to democracy because they allow the free expression of opinion and the opportunity to influence governments. Because of this, pressure groups are not tolerated in non-democratic countries (Anon., 2014). Pressure groups developed to defend and promote interests likely to be affected by particular government policies. For its own part, Government has to appreciate pressure groups as valuable sources of information and potential support. The advent of modern media have provided a vast arena in which pressure groups can compete on equal terms with the political parties, to deliver their message to the public (Jones & Norton, 2014) Pg 180. A distinction is usually drawn between sectional or interest groups, cause and promotional groups. Sectional or interest groups are the ones that aim to represent the common interests of a particular section of society and are mostly concerned with restricted. They also aim to get as many eligible members as possible to join the group. These are open only to certain individuals, like the members of trade union or the National union of journalist. The cause or promotional groups, they have open membership from public. They promote a cause. They exist to promote an idea not directly related to the personal interests of its members. Pressure groups have species which include peak association these are organisations that represent broad bands of similar groups such as employers, fire brigade groups they form in reaction to a specific problem and disband if and when it has been solved, episodic groups usually are non-political but occasionally throw themselves into campaigning when their interest are affected and the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-pressure-groups-in-britain/>

online pressure groups they usually focus on abuse of power, torture and war crimes and mustering hundreds of thousands of signatures to bring pressure to bear, often with remarkable success (BBC, 2014). It should be noted that pressure groups regularly seek to influence each other to maximise impact and often find themselves in direct conflict over certain issues. In several stages of the policy process pressure groups have opportunities to play an important role, in the parliament they may influence the final form of legislation. When governments issue Green papers (setting out policy options for discussion) and White papers (proposals for legislation) pressure groups may lobby backbenchers or civil servants. Pressure groups are often divided into two categories according to their characteristics and methods they interpret; the insider group and the outsider group. Insider groups have close links with the government and they are trusted by the government. They tend to choose more legal and legitimate methods such as lobbying to influence the decision-making process. They will give advice and will be consulted prior to legislation which may affect that group, for example the British Medical Association will be consulted on the matters relating to health, and RSPCA will be consulted with the matters related to animals. Insider pressure groups are most likely to be consulted regularly by governments. Outsider groups often take action of which the government disapproves. Organisations like Greenpeace often engage in civil disobedience or direct action in order to reinforce their point. Outsider groups on the other hand, are either not consulted by government or consulted irregularly and not usually by the senior level. Some outsider groups are wealthy and use a great deal of publicity to attract people to promote their cause (Anon., 2014). Sometimes pressure groups might be

seen as a threat to democracy because a relatively small, unelected group of individuals can force a change in the law. They do employ a variety of methods to promote their cause.

Political movement is a social group which operates together to obtain a political goal, on a local, regional, national or international scope. They have influence inside Parliament if there is an MP who is a member of the group or is understanding to it. MPs with relationships to pressure groups must declare an interest when speaking on behalf of the group. MPs may also receive payment for promoting the cause but they must declare it.

The cabinet is a committee at the centre of the British political system and supreme decision-making body in the government. The British Prime Minister has traditionally been referred to as *primus inter pares*, which means first among equals and demonstrates that he or she is a member of collective decision-making body of the cabinet, rather than an individual who has powers in their own right. The Prime Minister first among equal simply in recognition of the responsibility held for appointing and dismissing all the other Cabinet members. The Cabinet is made up of the senior members of government. Every Tuesday while Parliament is in session the members of Cabinet (Secretaries of state from all departments and some other ministers) meet in the Cabinet room at 10 Downing Street to discuss the issues of the day and to decide what the most important issues for the government are. The Prime Minister chairs the meeting and sets its agenda; he also decides who speaks around the Cabinet table and sums up at the end of each item. It is this summing up that then becomes the government policy (Anon., 2015). The Cabinet nonetheless remains a core component of British government.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-pressure-groups-in-britain/>

The functions ascribed to it in 19th century remain relevant and, in practice, are complemented by important political roles. They have five essential principal roles; they approve policy, resolve disputes, constrain the Prime Minister, unify government and unify the parliamentary party. Parliament is the highest legislative authority in the UK. It has responsibility for checking the work of government and examining, debating and approving new laws. It is also known as the `Legislature` (Anon., 2015). It is an essential part of UK politics. Its main roles are examining and challenging the work of the government (scrutiny), enabling the government to raise taxes. The business of Parliament takes place in two houses: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Ministers stand at the heart of British government. In legal terms, they are the most powerful figures in government. Legal powers are vested in senior ministers, not in the Prime Minister or Cabinet. Senior ministers are those appointed to head government departments. Their formal designation is Ministers of the Crown. Each Minister of the Crown heads a government department. Each has a number of other ministers, known as junior ministers, to assist in fulfilling the responsibility of the office. Each senior minister has one or more political advisers and also has a body of civil servants – permanent, non-political professionals to advise on policy and to ensure the implementation of policy once it is agreed on (Jones & Norton, 2014) Pg 392. They discuss various points of view, weigh up arguments concerning whatever is being discussed and come to a decision that is backed by the majority of the Cabinet. As such it becomes government policy, if supported in the House of Commons, and have the legitimacy of majority Cabinet support behind it. This means that decisions have collective responsibility behind them. All Cabinet members would be

<https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-pressure-groups-in-britain/>

expected to publicly support and defend such policies. Cabinet ministers would also be expected to defend such policies during parliamentary debates. If a Cabinet minister feels that he/she cannot defend a policy, he/she has the option to resign from the Cabinet (Trueman, 2000-2015).

The monarchy is the oldest secular institution in England. The formal power that the crown conferred- executive, legislative and judicial- was exercised personally by the monarch. The King has a court to advise him and, as the task of government became more demanding, so various functions were exercised on the King's behalf by other bodies. Those bodies now exercise power independent of the control of the monarch, but remain formally the instruments of the crown. The courts are Her Majesty's courts and the government is Her Majesty's government. Parliament is summoned and prorogued by royal decree. Civil servants are crown appointees (Jones & Norton, 2014) Pg 276. The monarch exercises few powers, but those powers remain important. However, the importance of the monarchy in the 21st century derives more from what it stands for than from what it does. The monarch has been eclipsed as a major political institution not only by the sheer demands of governing a growing kingdom but also by changes in the popular perception of what form of government is legitimate. The policy-making power exercised by a hereditary monarch has given way to the exercise of power by institutions deemed more representative. However, the monarch has retained a claim to be a representative institution in one particular definition of the term. It claims that it largely defines the activities of the monarch today (Jones & Norton, 2014) Pg 274.

Pressure groups provide an essential freedom for citizens, especially minorities, to organise with like-minded individuals so that their views can be heard by others and taken into account by government. They help to disperse power from the central institutions and provide important checks against possibly over-powerful legislatures and executives. Pressure groups also provide functional representation according to occupation and belief, they allow for continuity of representation between elections, thus enhancing the degree of participation in the democratic system. They provide a safety valve and an outlet for the pent-up energies of those who carry grievances or feel hard done by, they apply scrutiny to government activity, publicising poor practice and maladministration (Jones & Norton, 2014) Pg 195.

As globalisation is one of the external influences in British democracy, it is generally defined with reference to a set of economic and technological changes which are held to have dramatically increased economic and communication flows across what are seen as increasingly porous national borders. Hence globalisation is generally associated with nations of the world becoming increasingly interconnected, with goods, services, investment, financial transactions and skilled labour moving freely between countries, and the globe effectively 'shrinking' in comparison to previous decades, due to rapid developments in telecommunications and the continued growth and expansion of air travel (Jones & Norton, 2014) Pg 522. Under globalisation trade tends to grow faster than national output, so that a higher proportion of national production is exported and a higher proportion of consumption is imported.

In conclusion pressure groups seek to influence policy and not control it. Regardless of the type of pressure group, they eventually aim to make governments aware of public views not shared in political parties. They also often create new ideas and conceive a programme of reform. Some groups have too much influence over government. Overall pressure groups and their features do play a coherent role to promote and enhance democracy as they raise the public awareness and provide direct opportunities to participate.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anon., 2014. *GCSE Bitesize*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/business/environment/acompetitivemarketrev2.shtml>

[Accessed 7 March 2015].

Anon., 2014. *Higher Bitesize*. [Online]

Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/higher/modern/uk_gov_politics/central_gov/revision/4/

[Accessed 7 March 2015].

Anon., 2015. *GOV.UK*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/how-government-works#who-runs-government>

[Accessed 10 March 2015].

<https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-pressure-groups-in-britain/>

Anon., 2015. *Parliament UK*. [Online]

Available at: <http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/parliament-government/>

[Accessed 11 March 2015].

BBC, 2014. *Higher Bitesize*. [Online]

Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/higher/modern/uk_gov_politics/central_gov/revision/4/

[Accessed 10 March 2015].

Jones, B. & Norton, P., 2014. *POLITICS UK*. 8th ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Trueman, C., 2000-2015. *The Cabinet and British Politics*. [Online]

Available at: http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/cabinet_and_british_politics.htm

[Accessed 11 March 2015].

1