

Interest groups in the united states assignment

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Though the United States shares the same “ Liberal Democracy” classification as its Western European brothers, there is substantive difference in the role an individual plays, and can play, in the shaping of their political system. The best example of differences between European and American political action is recognized in the role of interest groups. In those countries which most align themselves with the United States, namely Great Britain, France, and Germany, the role of interest groups is downplayed and only seen as a radical option for voicing political dismay.

However, citizens of the United States are far more likely to voice their respective ideologies and beliefs via interest groups. As a result, interest groups play a much larger role in shaping the politics of the United States than they do of its European contemporaries. Lawrence Graham writes of the inevitable existence of interest groups in his book *The Politics of Governing*. Stating, “ Interest group activities are... essential and effective in a constitutional democracy (21). Instead of looking at whether or not the United States is better or worse than Europe because of the prevalent existence of interest groups, it is more important to understand why such a divide exist. In order to do so the characteristics which differentiate these constitutional democracies must be examined. Evidently the government’s structure, legislative process, and social makeup define the role of interest groups in a specific country. The United States dual federalist plural-majority system was conceived with notion of interest groups in mind.

As a result there is a concrete separation of powers and an intricate system of checks and balances. Not only are these two unique characteristics reflective of founders’ fears of one interest group dominating government

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practices, they also contribute directly to their existence. " The liberty the government was created to guarantee includes the liberty of individuals to pursue their own aspirations...to do so they will join with others and form interest groups (18). James Madison and other founders such as Alexander Hamilton recognized the necessary role of interest groups in the forming of the nation.

Competing interest groups would instead be relied upon to ensure the success of democracy. Thus the First Amendment expressively grants citizens the privilege to " assemble," " petition," and " redress grievances. " Exclusionary interest groups are now recognized as a necessary part of the American political structure, even being seen as a necessary part of the " iron triangle" of American politics. The effectiveness, and thereby the existence, of interest groups in European nations is much less likely because of their government structure.

Great Britain operates under a system of " fusion of power," in which the executive branch exists with in the legislative branch. As a result the party which controls Parliament has complete control over the government till the next election. Single party control, without the existence of committees, practically negates any sort of impact an interest group could have. Leaving those who look to push their own political agenda alienated and instead opting to participate via local government.

In France and Germany the Constitution advocates a strong executive branch and expressively limits the powers of legislature and individuals. This presents a major problem for interest groups, as they often look to directly

impact legislators. Instead, in order to be heard citizens must voice their disapproval via referendums, which have come to take on the role of interest groups. The single member district electoral structure is another aspect of the American political process advantageous to the existence of interest groups.

This winner take all arrangement predicates itself on having two major political parties, essentially manufacturing an environment where smaller third parties have no political weight. Because of this and other factors such as ballot regulations, “ there is little likelihood that a third party could form a swing voting bloc or force the necessity for a governing coalition, as one may do in a parliamentary system (Graham 25). ” Citizens who make up these third parties do not remain quiet, in fact they tend to be the most politically opinionated and vocal of the electorate, and as a result, form interest groups in order to push their agenda.

The American political process fosters an extremely favorable environment for the existence of interest groups, where as the proportional representation systems of European democracies, the main exception being Great Britain, yield an atmosphere which encourages the existence of three or more political parties. As one would imagine the existence of many political parties stifles interest groups, as large interest groups begin to function as political parties. The very nature of American political campaigns serves as a breeding ground for nterest groups. The lengthy, drawn out process of selecting candidates first with primaries and then general elections exists in stark contrast to the systems of Europe. In many countries, Great Britain for example, operate under a system where party leaders nominate the
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candidate which will run in each district and then have limits on the length of general campaigns. The American system again fosters an environment which benefits interest groups, allowing them more time to gain influence over prospective candidates.

This often comes in the form of monetary donations and leads to the inevitable consequence of elected officials feeling obligated to their contributors. Although efforts have been made to lessen this rather undemocratic influence, most notably under the Nixon administration and the creation of the Federal Elections Commission, wealthy interest groups such as the National Rifle Association still maintain a strong grip on the platforms of America's two political parties. The successes of large interest groups such as the N. R. A. in the United States, coupled with the rising cultural divide have led to an exponential increase in religious based interest groups. Recently many of the America's most prevalent interest groups have born out of what are seen as religious issues; such as, abortion, gay marriage, and the death penalty. This is also a direct result of the implication of religion in American's day to day lives, with 60% considering religion very important to them, compared to only 21% of Europeans (Graham, 113). While American politics becomes increasingly more predicated on social issues, Europe has become more secular.

The Church of England, along with France and Germany's inherent disregard for religion on the political stage produce an inherent lack of religiously motivated interest groups. Suffice to say that without the numerous interest groups predicated on religion and morality, America would be left with very few interest groups. However the reality of the situation is that American

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politics, unlike that of liberal European democracies, is at the mercy of numerous interest groups motivated by largely social reform.

This is a result of a constitution which not only allows, but advocates an individual's right to shape his or her own government outside the obvious political action of voting. The framework set by Madison and other framers has not only allowed for interest groups, but in doing so also created a necessary need for them in American politics. Consequently voting has taken a back seat to what one could say are more effective means of political action, such as interest groups.

Formal political participation is lower in the United States than in western European democracies; however, Americans " tend to participate more through informal means such as interest group organizations (Graham 23). "

Are political systems in the Muslim world the 21st century's communist? Do the former and current politics of Eastern and Central Europe provide us a guide to understanding Islamic governing and the potential for democratization

The end of communism and the ensuing break of the U. S. S. R were brought about by an intrinsic need for change and the inherent difficulties of maintaining an absolute socialist society.

As economic prosperity spread around the world a growing number of satellite nations recognized the threat of being left behind. This problem stemmed mainly from the inabilities of a small ruling party which showed little regard for communicating with and helping those who it ruled, and even less regard for adapting to the ever changing surroundings. Refusal on the part of the ruling elite to recognize a growing global economy and to instead

focus the nation's resources on maintaining the illusion of power ultimately led to disaster.

The problem was those who took power once the old regime was cast out had little idea themselves. Essentially, as a member of the U. S. S. R. , the government was responsible for all aspects of life, more importantly maintaining a massive economic system which fostered the notion that governments should provide the populace with many basic necessities. (Graham 148-150). However, with democracy and capitalism came the reality of individualism, and the dream of post-communist countries providing the same standard of living, security, and protection as the Soviet Union soon turned into a nightmare.

The explanation of failure is complex and all encompassing, but it is one that must be examined if there is to be any hope for present-day Islamic countries to achieve stability while democratizing. First and foremost many of the once soviet nations had no stable system of government to turn to once they disbanded the ineffective communist means of governing. Countries such as Hungary wrote new constitutions implementing democracy solely on the platform of knowing that they did not want communism (Graham 154).

As a result no concrete decision on how to rule was ever setup and many of these nations still face political upheaval. The main problem which stems problem from a lack of consensus is the ensuing inability to legislate with authority. However, leaders with in each country failed to recognize that when you govern merely through authority you lack any legitimacy (Graham

169). Political scientists who study the failings of post-communist nations developed four ways to help achieve legitimacy: procedure, results, habit, and identity.

If these four elements can be forged into a process of electoral change, than legitimacy is a possible outcome. For a successful transition to democracy to take place there needs to be more than just strong leadership, the people as a whole must be willing to intrinsically change. Graham refers to this as a “consensus of values,” that is value system shared by at least a majority of its people. In democracy the people have all of the power, and in the case of the Soviet Union the people had never possessed the ability to shape their government. The political machinery of the communist system was as extensive, bureaucratized, and penetrating as any in the 20th century... both a broad value system and a developed political machinery existed in communist systems (Graham, 150). ” Consequently, when many post-communist nations were faced with the frustrating responsibilities of self-governance they fell into turmoil. Such continuing turmoil can not be all blamed on state leaders. The public’s once concrete communist mindset that “the government will solve problems and provide services” is only now just starting to change (Graham 174).

Only now, with the birth of a new, confident generation, are citizens participating with a new found passion. The main difference between post-communist states and Islamic states willing to democratize is that post-communist states wanted to cut all ties with their past. On the other hand, Islamic states want to modernize and democratize without subjugating the ideals and beliefs which they hold sacred, former Soviet nations tried as hard

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as they could to abandon communism all together. This poses a much different and much more difficult dilemma. The teachings of the prophet Muhammad at Median and the Qur'an act s the basis for all Islamic societies; moreover, these two references promote the notion submission for the betterment of society and political order. Here Islam parallels Communism, yet there exists an inherent difference between submission out of fear (Soviet Union) and submission out of belief. As a result there would need to be a drastic fundamental shift in a Muslim's values for them to allow themselves to embrace democracy. Perhaps more importantly, Islamic states would have to be willing to at least tolerate the debate of democratization and the ensuing debates concerning civil liberties.

Additionally, unlike in the Soviet Union, the underprivileged and impoverished still buy into the very system which keeps them down. As Graham writes, " tolerance is the absolute cornerstone of functioning democratic and capitalist systems... the glue that holds together societies that are just beginning to work through issues that come naturally with heterogeneity and political debate (Graham 154). " Communism and Islam by definition discourage tolerance and oppose any opposition to the ruling elite.

The mere existence of dialogue concerning democratization would be a feat given the lack of diversity within Islamic states. Furthermore, any talk of democratization within Islam today revolves around outside influence from the West and essentially calls for upheaval of an oppressive system. Graham uses Russia and Ukraine as examples of the ineffectiveness of rapid change in government systems. At the present it appears as though the only

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successful democratization would have to come from within and that would only be recognized through a change in “ consensus values. “