

Strategies of pressure groups



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Pressure Groups

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Britain is often referred to as a homogenous society as the public tend to share similar political views. However, more recently, there has been a decline in membership in political parties and an increase in the membership of pressure groups. In this essay I aim to define pressure groups, analyse their role and importance to British democracy. According to Duncan Watts, a pressure group can be described as an organised group which seeks to influence government policy, protect or advance a particular cause or interest. They can also be described as 'interest groups', 'lobby groups' or 'protest groups'. However some people avoid using the term 'pressure group' as it may inadvertently be interpreted as meaning the groups use actual pressure to achieve their aims, which does not necessarily happen. Pressure groups are distinct from political parties in that they do not seek political power, instead they aim to influence those already in power.

The term 'pressure group' is relatively recent, however 'voluntary organisations' have been attempting to influence policy ever since the late 18th Century. A typical example of this, is The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Which was founded in 1787 under William Wilberforce, and successfully achieved its objective to abolish slavery in 1807. A pressure group may be a huge organisation such as the British Medical Association (BMA), which stand represents doctors both individually and collectively on a wide variety of employment issues, or it may be a single-issue locally based organisation like CLARA (Central Area Leamington Resident's Association), which represents less than 300 households

campaigning to preserve and improve the town of Leamington Spa. Pressure groups are not only distinguished by size, cause, and aim but also by the levels of extremism, such as the Animal Liberation Front, which has frequently indulged in illegal activities to further its aims and objectives. Pressure groups may also have strong links to political parties such as the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), which have links to the Labour government and have regular contact with cabinet ministers. (Jones & Norton, 2010)

Pressure groups are divided into the following sub-groups: Causal (or promotional) groups, Sectional (or Protection) groups and also how close they are to the government known as either Insider or Outsider groups. Causal groups are involved with a particular issue or issues and serve this cause by promoting it. These groups vary in size and aims, which can be permanent 'such as friends of the earth' who continually campaign for their particular cause or they can be temporary such as CND, the 'campaign for nuclear disarmament' who would disperse if their cause was attained or irreversibly lost. Sectional groups represent and further the interests of a particular part of society and as a result the members of these groups are more directly concerned with the outcome of the campaign at hand as they usually stand to gain something (professionally, economically). Therefore membership is usually limited to the sole members of that particular group of the population and aim to involve all those that are eligible to join. Insider groups have strong links with decision makers and are regularly consulted. They are the groups that the government - local and national - considers to be legitimate and are, therefore, given access to decision makers. This

category includes the National Farmers Union (NFU) and the police force, as they are involved in the consultation process as a matter of course when government proposals relevant to their activities are discussed. An outsider group is one that operates outside the government, they have no special links with them but they still seek to influence decision makers by (usually) mobilizing public opinion, an example would be Fathers 4 justice. They're generally not involved in the Law Making process and so don't have a chance to influence legislation. This may be due to previous protests or demonstrations which have made their relationship with the government hostile. Generally, Insider groups would be more successful than outsider groups because of the influences that they do hold and the power they have to change the decisions made by the government. (Jones & Norton, 2010)

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/higher/modern/uk_gov_politics/central_gov/revision/4/)

Pressure groups act as intermediaries between the government and the public. This role has become increasingly important as the scope and complexity of politics have increased and as it has become more difficult for political parties alone to perform all the representative functions. This means that they act as a spokesman or negotiators on behalf of clearly defined sectional interests, for example the 'National Farmers Union' which acts on behalf of farmers or the 'British Medical Association' which acts on behalf of medical professionals or doctors. Additionally pressure groups help governments to create and actualize their approaches by entering into detailed consultations on recommendations for administrative action or legislation and in this way by conveying a measure of public consent to the

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output of policy and decision making processes. For example, accommodation has had an extensive impact on housing legislation over the years, the Child Poverty Action Group has consistently pressed for changes to help the poor and particularly families with children. Pressure groups empower new concerns and issues to achieve the political agenda, thereby facilitating social advance and avoiding social stagnation, for instance the women's and environmentalist movements. Pressure groups build social cohesion and political stability by providing almost a safety net for people and collective demands. (Forman and Baldwin, 2007)

For many years, pressure groups in Europe worked at or below the level of the state. On the other hand, they have been dynamic in the EU since its formation, playing a significant role in its political improvement and policy making. The movement of political power towards the EU has implied that more power is progressively being transferred to Brussels. Hence pressure groups are increasingly turning to Brussels to campaign on issues as issues have a tendency to work on a worldwide level such as global warming. Pressure groups can now impact choices made on a worldwide level. The rapid rise of multinational originations also implies these companies have influence on a global level. Hence people need to campaign through pressure groups to impact them on key issues like child labour and free trade. (Watts, 2008)

Quite a bit of what the public thinks about politics originates from the activities of pressure groups. They empower political instruction and raise political awareness. They commit significant resources to carrying out research, maintaining websites, remarking on government approaches and

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using high profile and expert individuals to get over their perspectives. An example would be Bob Geldof and the Live Eight concerts held in 2005 in ten cities, which was designed to put pressure on the G8 leaders to tackle global poverty. Pressure groups likewise provide a means for cooperation in local politics between elections. For instance, in 1994 the A452 Coordination Group campaigned to block plans by Warwickshire County Council to make the A452 a dual carriageway. After the groups exceptional campaigning, the board dropped the arrangements. . (Forman and Baldwin, 2007) (http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/what_are_pressure_groups.htm)

The strategies and methods utilized by pressure groups can influence its success such as advertising. Pressure groups endeavor to impact public opinion through the media and mass communication including strategies of advertising and public relations. Groups that use advertising campaigns such as NSPCC and GOSH (Television advertisement campaigns) appeal to a wide audience which often make the group a household name. Another technique utilized by pressure groups is ‘lobbying’. Lobbying is the art of cultivating and influencing the opinions of policy-makers, such as MPs and Lords.

Methods of lobbying vary and can range from sending letters, making presentations, providing briefing material to Members and organised rallies. Another method used by pressure groups is participating in publicity stunts. In 2008, Greenpeace battled against the 3rd runway at Heathrow Airport by breaking into the air terminal and protesting on top of one of the planes, this generated a lot of media coverage and attention from both the general population and the government. The use of public demonstrations can also aid the success of a pressure group, which can be seen from the 2010 NUS

(National Union of Students) demonstration against the rise in university fees in London, this was exceptionally advertised and the group drew a considerable amount of attention, nonetheless it didn't impact the government and the rise in fees still occurred. Pressure groups also raise petitions which can lead to success, for example the National Trust's petition against the government selling forestry lands which was a success as Cameron dropped the proposals not long after the petition was presented. Pressure groups that use strategies and methods widely are more inclined to be effective rather than groups that 'sit back' and are not involved in any public demonstrations or petitions such as Tentelini, a group that isn't known to use any methods to gain attention or to influence the government.

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7338875.stm) (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-20412792>)

A pressure groups can use a variety of different methods to influence law. Firstly, it can merely educate legislators of its member's inclinations. Second it may well give money or time to help with an election campaign. Third, its members may threaten, as a group, to vote as a block. By doing this they guarantee to help a cooperative legislator, and threaten to harm a non-cooperative legislator. Fourth, a pressure group may speed up legislation by writing bills and helping legislators make progressive agreements. Finally, a pressure group may attempt to influence members of the executive, who have some law making input and who can partly decide the strength and effectiveness of law enforcement. (Coxall and Robins, 1998)

For some, pressure groups are a fundamental part of democracy. To others, pressure groups undermine the whole principle of democracy. Democracy is a system of government where decisions are arrived at by majoritarian principles with representatives elected at periodic elections where political equality and political opportunity permit the voter a compelling decision between competing candidates in a secret ballot. Arguments are present on both sides of the debate on whether pressure groups are beneficial for the government, and democracy. These arguments are typically focused upon Elitist and Pluralist belief systems, which differentiate one another in terms of thoughts. Elitists believe that the utilization of pressure groups threaten democracy, with the opinion of parties becoming too extreme in their views of which they become involved in criminalised activities, exert forced influence onto the general public, and the concept of innocent lives being harmed in the process of the pressure group's protests. Pluralists however, consider pressure groups to promote democracy; with the use of individuals participating more in politics, and the focus of particular issues raised by the group to the government. Pluralists believe that pressure groups overcome the democratic deficit that builds up thereby enhancing the quality of democracy by increasing participation and access to the political system. Pressure groups complement and supplement electoral democracy in two main ways: by providing a vital form of citizen influence of the government between elections and enabling society's variety of opinions is known. Pressure groups are the objective way to influence decisions in a free society. Freely operating pressure groups are crucial to the effective functioning of liberal democracy in three main ways: they serve as a voice between government and society, they disperse political power and provide

an important counterweight and balance to political power which is particularly important with the two main political parties: the Conservative Party and the Labour party. Pressure groups improve the responsibilities of decision makers to electorates if enough impact is made. (Joyce, 2010)

Although it's undeniable that pressure groups play a vital role in British politics particularly in today's less differential society, perhaps it's not the suggested one of the pluralist model. For example, pressure groups do enhance interest however in an unequal way, benefiting the powerful and organised and disadvantaging the weak and disorderly. The groups themselves may not be representative of their members as many members' views are overlooked if they don't comply with the ideologies of the leaders or decision makers of that group. The methods of influence some groups use build social discontent and political instability by intensifying social frustration and injustice felt by certain sections of the population. This can disregard the benefit of the whole of the community and this kind of civil disobedience can't be justified in today's democratic system.

In conclusion, pressure groups can both detract from and strengthen democracy to a certain extent. Pressure groups are an essential dimension of any democracy, yet they can endanger it if sectional groups undermine the public interest or if the methods they use are corrupt or intimidating. Lastly in my humble opinion, I think pressure groups are a fundamental part of any democratic society, serving as a voice between the elite and the common citizens. However I question, if pressure groups were not influential in British politics, would the voices of common citizens be heard or even considered by the elite minority such as politicians?

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