

## **Political Parties v. Special Interest Groups**

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Political parties and interest groups are different in the most politically significant way. A political party is more flexible than a special interest group. Special interest groups are always interested in advancing certain goals. A political party on the other hand can redefine its platform as it sees necessary. In some regards, this makes political parties more political than special interest groups. Political party members can interact, compromise, and change their views. Special interest groups are constrained by their focus and their emphasis on conflict. Although political parties and interest groups appear very similar, interest groups are not able to be truly political.

Before going any further, it must be understood what qualifies as political in order to distinguish what is and is not political. In the spirit of such political writers as Hannah Arendt and Henry Fairlie, political is a style of interaction and flexibility. These characteristics are what make politics work. Without them, there would be mostly conflict and no encompassing compromises that would keep the public together. A synonym for politic is diplomatic (Merriam-Webster), employing tact and conciliation in situations of stress. In order to maintain a peaceful republic, politics needs to exist to handle affairs without arousing hostility.

An interest group is a group of persons having a common identifying interest that often provides basis for action (Merriam-Webster). It is only the common identifying interest that holds the group together. There isn't a lot of room for flexibility in interest else the group loses its identity. The "Accuracy In Media" interest group would not maintain its membership strength if it did not advocate 'setting the record straight on important issues that have received slanted coverage' as its members understood them. Membership in this particular interest group is an endorsement that the media too often applying a liberal bias to the news. The membership either has to either agree with the position of the interest group or choose not to be a member.

A political party is a group of persons organized for the purpose of directing the policies of a government. There is no one defining issue for a political party. They are affiliations of people with common philosophies. It is possible for a party to shift its position on a particular issue and still maintain its identity as a party. The members of a party still have reason to continue to be members, even if they don't agree with all of the positions taken by the party. Instead of an all-or-nothing support, there is room for continued membership while the discussion on a variety of topics.

Actual membership is very important to the power of an interest group. Progress is made by the group as they can demonstrate numbers of people and financial strength. The various groups formed by people like Jesse Helms, such as the Congressional Club, exemplify this nature of interest groups. The Congressional Club wields its influence by reminding elected officials of the quantity of voters that its membership encompasses.

When those voters do act together, they are exerting political power, but they are focused within their own common interests. This kind of power is of the sort that concerned James Madison as the mischiefs of faction. "By a faction, I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community." In addition funds raised from Congressional Club supporters are used as campaign contributions and other interest advancing activities. The greater fund raising ability the group has, the greater influence it has. Both of these forms of power are not really political power.

Political parties are not as dependent on the actual number of their membership. Martin Wattenberg has documented a decline in the association of people with a specific party. The segment of the population that identifies itself as independent of any political party is growing. Yet the Republican and Democratic parties remain important classifications in the selection of elected officials. The party leadership has to be attentive to views of the independent sector in order to get their candidates elected. Therefore the interaction of a political party is not confined to only the interaction within the party.

The mechanisms of change are also notably different between political parties and interest groups. The interaction of an interest group's leadership and membership and even among its membership can be severely limited. A large interest group has to depend on mailings and other kinds of publications to communicate its activities to its members. The interest group's leadership must depend on informal means for feedback on the sentiments of the group's membership, or exert some control over the membership's sentiments through its publications. Individual members are not likely to make the effort to engage in any dialog necessary to change the interest group when there is disagreement. That member will most likely just end his/her membership. This kind of environment doesn't create any space for interaction that would be necessary for politics to occur.

Political parties on the other hand have an organizational system for the collection and consolidation of its member's views. Each year, starting at the local level, members get together to discuss what the planks of the party's platform will be. There is debate and compromises. This process is continued through representatives on up until the national party's platform is decided upon. This design does allow for a space of interaction and thus is political.

The relationship between political parties and interest groups is undeniable. They often share similar goals and often engage in similar activities to gain political clout. However they remain significantly different in their design. The space for action, speech, and flexibility that is maintained in political parties make them much more political than interest groups.

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