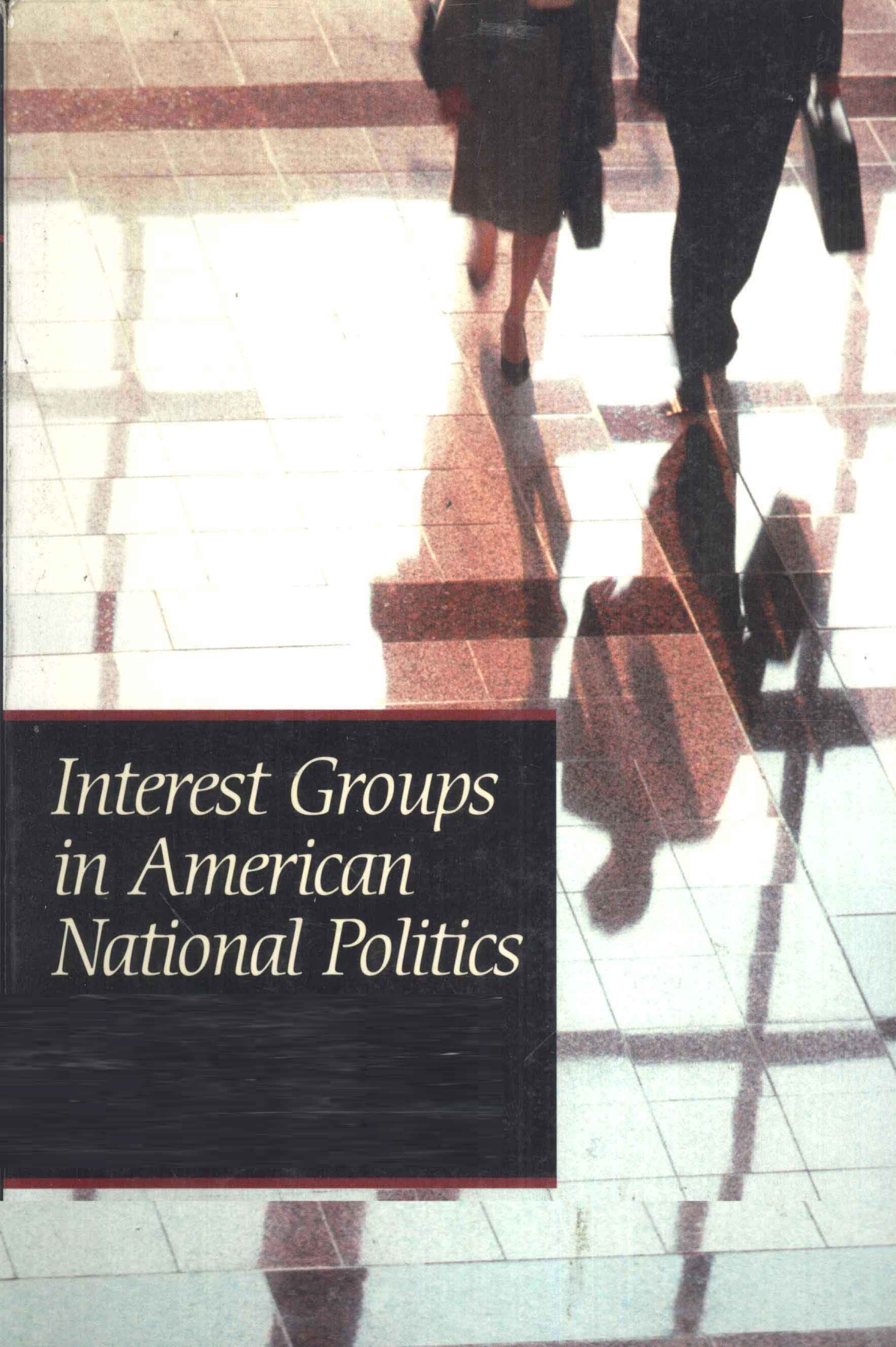

Interest Groups in American National Politics

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An Overview

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Interest Groups in American National Politics

Preface

Organized interests, or political interest groups, are permanent residents and actors in national policymaking. Virtually every segment of American society today has its spokesperson. Public officials at all levels—national, state, and local—are objects of a cacophony of interests lobbying for an endless variety of policy objectives. Certainly the years beyond 2000 will demonstrate similar patterns of government-interest-group interaction but the actors will vary over time.

This publication seeks to offer students of politics some insights into the formation, political strategies, and policy pursuits of the interest group universe. Fortunately, there is a growing body of interest group research that offers further insights to interest group behavior and what types of policies are being pursued. Just how various national policymakers respond to their petitioners is also being identified.

Chapter 1 concerns itself with both the structures and processes of our national political system as these have portent as to the relative success or failure of lobbying organizations. Chapter 2 looks at recently developed concepts about group formation, what sort of benefits they offer members and the role the national government has played in interest group formation. Chapter 3 offers a long listing and composition of many of the prominent organizations in today's politics.

Part II includes Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 presents a detailed look at the process of lobbying and the lobbyists themselves. The latter are comprised of an elite group who play a vital role in representing various clients.

These individuals are quite knowledgeable in the "ways of Washington." They know who influences policy in government. Chapter 5 addresses the growing amounts of money that interest groups disperse in seeking political access to selected officials. Money does not necessarily "buy" influence but it does grant access that then offers opportunities for political influence.

Part III is comprised of the final four chapters of the book. Chapter 6 looks at the uniqueness of Congress and what strategies must be employed by organizations seeking to influence legislation. Congress offers various points of access such as committee hearings or mark-up sessions. Groups also spend resources on maintaining good working relationships with members of Congress as well as with their staffs. Chapter 7 addresses lobbying various executive personnel as well as the president. Given the growing of the executive branch with respect to policymaking and interpretation, interest groups are increasingly preoccupied with various agencies whose clientele they are. Chapter 8 examines the increasing importance of federal courts in policymaking. The growing agendas of both lower federal courts and the Supreme Court are the result of group lobbying. One must keep in mind, though, that judicial lobbying and legislative or executive lobbying call for different approaches by petitioners.

Chapter 9, the final chapter, attempts to predict interest group politics in the years beyond 2000. The chapter begins with a review of material from earlier chapters and uses this data as a basis for the predictions offered.

This publication does not try to judge "good" or "bad" interests nor does it offer a broad condemnation of the interest group universe. It must be kept in mind, all citizens under the Constitution, have the right to organize and petition. Certainly all citizens do not agree on what policy decisions must be made with respect to education, civil rights, or environmental issues. But, these and other citizen organizations do have the right to be heard and then government personnel must decide how to address or not address these concerns. The main purpose here is to enlighten readers of the existence of a virtually endless number of frequently clashing organizations. It is left to the individual to judge what role and contributions organized interests bring to American national politics.

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H. R. Mahood

Contents

Preface xi

Part I: American Politics

1 American Politics: Some Basic Aspects 1

Introduction 1
Federalism 2
Three Branches of Government 2
Political and Economic Culture 3
Interrelatedness of Politics 7

2 Getting Organized: Some Concepts and Realities 11

Introduction 11
The Advent of Group Theory: Arthur Bentley and David Truman 12

Critics and Criticisms of Pluralism and Interest Group Theories 15
Changes in Government and the Interest Group Game 20
Toward the Future 23

3 Forces and Actors in Pluralist Politics: The List Is Long and Varied 25

Introduction 25
Motivations for Joining 25
Agriculture 27
Business 32
Organized Labor 34
Professionals 36
Civil Rights 39
Ideological Interest Organizations 40
Public Interest Groups 42
Single-Issue Organizations 44

Part II: Lobbyists and Lobbying

4 Lobbyists and Lobbying: Key Actors and Strategies in Pursuit of Influence 47

Introduction 47
Profile of Washington Representatives 48
Components of the Lobbying Establishment 49
Lobbying Strategies 53
Direct and Indirect Lobbying 54
Lobbying the Legislature 54
Lobbying the Executive 63

5 The Money Game: Political Action Committees and Soft Money 71

Introduction 71
Political Action Committees 71
PAC Formation: Motivational Forces 74
Factors Contributing to PAC Formation 77
PACs and Policy Orientation 77
PACs and Political Parties 78
Internal Operations of PACs 79
Allocation Decisions 80
Soft Money and Political Campaigns 82
Campaign Finance Reform: Some Caveats 86

Part III: Lobbying Congress and the White House

6 Lobbying Congress: Some General Observations 91

Introduction 91
Congress As a Political System 92
The "New" Congress 94
committees and Subcommittees 95
Congressional Staffs and Lobbyists 96
Legislative Caucuses and Coalitions 97

7 Influencing the Executive: Actors and Strategies 101

Introduction 101
Bureaucratic Growth: Size and Scope 102
Strategies of Influence 104
The White House and Interest Groups: From Temporary Guests to Permanent Residents 110
The Role of the Office of Management and Budget 117

8 Courts and Policymaking: The Litigation Explosion 119

Introduction 119
Uniqueness of the Judicial System 120
Judicial Strategies 120
Case Study: Interest Group Conflict Over the Nomination of Robert Bork 134
Group Compliance/Noncompliance with Supreme Court Decisions 139

9 Summary and Conclusions: The Shape of Interest Group Politics Beyond 2000 143

Introduction 143
Participants in the Power Game 143
Strategies 146
Changing the Rules 148
Strategies for Rules Changes 148
Conclusions 150

Key Terms 155

References 159

World Wide Web 159
Books 161
Articles and Periodicals 164

Index 167

1

American Politics

Some Basic Aspects

INTRODUCTION

An enduring feature of our democratic society is the existence and interplay of many and various citizen interests. Freedom to organize and act on behalf of aggregations of citizens goes hand in hand with an open, democratic system of government. This book is primarily concerned with formalized citizen aggregations or political interest groups. These numerous and varied institutions are mainly interested in determining the content and impact of various governmental policy decisions with respect to their memberships. (While there are thousands of organizations throughout the country, our primary concern is with those wanting access to or interaction with government on a more or less continuing basis. Political parties are excluded for the time being but will be discussed shortly.) Political interest groups are found at all levels of government—national, state, and local. Political processes and decisions have consequences for organized interests existing at their respective levels.

With respect to what has been stated, an inevitable result of interest group formation and activism is a preoccupation with government—legislative bodies, judicial forums, agencies, and so forth. These and other similar bodies have the power to tax, fund medical research, fight discrimination in employment, or establish programs for the elderly. A high degree of government–interest group interaction is endemic to today's politics. Endless

numbers of public policymaking bodies function as fiduciary agents or legitimators of interest group claims.

But before we can begin to understand and appreciate the contributions and political role of organized interests in American politics, we need to be aware of the unique characteristics of the American political system. Its structures and processes have important political implications for the relative effectiveness or ineffectiveness of organized interests as representatives of citizen aspirations. The balance of this chapter addresses a number of attributes of American politics that have consequences for interest group influence.

FEDERALISM

Decentralization of power, or federalism, is a basic characteristic of American politics that modifies interest group behavior. Our Founding Fathers', fearful of a potential demagogue or tyrant emerging, decentralized political power in the 1787 Constitution. Political power is parceled out on three levels: national, state, and local. Initially conceived as a way of preventing any one level from dominating the other two, Washington has nonetheless moved into a relatively more dominant position today.[1] However, public officials at all three levels indulge in a good deal of policy or decision making such as levying and collecting taxes, building and maintaining roads and highways, providing and maintaining healthcare delivery systems, and operating various educational institutions.

Federalism, thus, allows different combinations of organized interests to emerge and indulge in varying degrees of political activism. It actually encourages interest group formation by providing many points of political access (contacts with policymakers). State interests, for example, usually concentrate their efforts on state administrators or legislators, while those at the local level approach "city hall" with their concerns. All three levels have their own interest constellations with their political agendas to pursue. Public officials at these various levels face a cacophony of organizations competing for influence.

THREE BRANCHES OF GOVERNMENT

A *constitutional division of power*—executive, legislative, judicial—is also an important factor conditioning the amount of influence a single organization or coalition thereof may have. Borrowing from the French writer Baron de Montesquieu, the Founders were determined that the system of their creation would not allow the centralization of power that existed at that period in France and England.[2] Their creation of a horizontal sharing

of power was unprecedented. Governing power could be controlled by dividing it among multiple branches and making the power of the branches interdependent.

These coequal branches maintain their own unique policymaking processes and procedures for dealing with various petitioners' claims. As later chapters show, Congress has such subsystems as committees and subcommittees; the executive branch has bureaus, agencies, and departments; the judiciary is comprised of different types and levels of judicial forums. As a result, this structural arrangement presents a series of difficult challenges to any interest group or organization advocating a significant policy change such as scrapping welfare assistance. In a case like this, advocates of change must operate across a broad governmental front that includes a host of officials scattered across branches of government as well as across various executing agencies. Power and policymaking capabilities are, thus, diffuse and require expenditures of a vast amount of time, effort, and other resources.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CULTURE

Prevailing political and economic cultures also condition the degree of organizational success or failure, politically speaking. *Political culture* comprises a set of learned attitudes toward government and politics acquired over time. It involves an informal set of attitudes and values that determines acceptable or unacceptable political ideology and behavior. Characteristic of these are support for individual rights and equality of opportunity.

Most Americans have internalized basic constitutional rights of free speech, organization, and demonstration. Citizen organizations pursuing political goals operationalize these in their own unique ways. Groups utilizing the aforementioned rights are much more likely to achieve success over time than those that do not. A small minority resorting to violence or destruction of property risks alienating potential allies and/or public officials. Recalling the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties, Martin Luther King's nonviolence concept found more public and governmental support than did Black Power advocates of violence and destruction.

Virtually all Americans agree that there should be equal opportunity for all in pursuit of their particular goals. Without this concept, various groups and individuals are perpetually doomed to failure and lack of political influence. Certainly, the concept of equality is not lost on women and racial minorities. As later pages demonstrate, coalitions of the foregoing are relatively better organized and politically more effective. Public acceptance of groups of citizens should not be stereotyped because of a common, unique characteristic. Commitment to equality for all, though elusive at times, is embedded in American culture.[3]

There are other attributes of political culture, but as implied here, they fulfill important needs for individuals, political institutions, and society in general. Political institutions (including political interest groups) gain an understanding of public expectations and see more clearly the contours of acceptable political behavior. The continuity of political culture brings greater predictability to politics and undergirds political stability.

Economic culture is another important determinant of interest group influence. In drafting the *Declaration of Independence,* Thomas Jefferson (borrowing from the British philosopher John Locke) proclaimed that people are endowed with certain "inalienable" rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.[4] The latter phrase really implied property rights and literally became sacrosanct during America's colonial period. By the time of the Revolutionary War—with the abundance of free land, low taxes, and liberal inheritance laws—there was wide distribution of property among white males and a universal respect for property rights. In this context, the Revolutionary War can be seen as a property owners' revolt against the British crown whose taxes and trade policies were perceived as threatening colonial property rights.[5]

Deep respect for property rights undergirds the American capitalist system with its emphasis on private ownership of the means of production and on a free marketplace for the sale of goods and services. In this context, a strong Protestant ethic comes into play with its emphasis on hard work, thriftiness, individualism, and material success. This ethic influences public perception of the proper role of government in economic matters. For example, although we have been witnessing increasing public regulation of the nation's economy (such as manipulation of the nation's money supply by the Federal Reserve), there are limits. Only in times of serious economic duress—inflation, recession, or corporate monopolization—is increased regulation called for, and then, it is only temporary in nature.

Economic policy choices by Washington have important consequences for different interests. For example, a national agency may evoke certain licensing or regulatory powers to protect consumers from fraudulent advertising or dangerous products. Or Washington may use its powers to benefit certain private businesses by granting tax breaks or requiring that all car makers follow common standards when installing emission control devices. As long as fraud, unfair competition, or threats to worker safety are kept to a minimum, national power will not seek to intrude.

The nation's economy, however, is not static. In 200 years, its economy has evolved from an essentially rural, agricultural base to corporate urban manufacturing and then to postindustrialization. Industrial productivity in this last stage involves information and services. Fewer of today's workers are in factories or large plants; more and more are in education, health services, banking, and real estate. Facilitated by a modern information and communication system, America's work force is relatively more

dispersed. This condition does not lend itself to the establishment and maintenance of traditional worker organizations. Rather, there is a tendency to establish ad hoc organizations to deal with problems such as job security, worker compensation, and workplace safety.

As this implies, a changing work force produces changes in its organizations. Whereas labor unions encompassed about 35 percent of the work force in the early 1950s, they encompass only about 11 percent now. (This is borne out by data in a later chapter.) Farmers, too, comprising about 2 percent of the population, lack the political influence they had in earlier decades. Though business has experienced criticism in recent years with respect to stock trading and corporate downsizing, its organizations continue to play important roles in national politics because of their relatively greater affluence, larger numbers, and increased competitiveness. Business organizations are heavily involved in electoral campaigns and have elected many of their supporters to policymaking systems (i.e., the Congress and various state and local positions).

Economic issues are of concern to all Americans and their respective membership organizations. The relatively more affluent not only perceive a greater stake in policy outcomes but have the resources to stay involved. Winning or losing in politics is often determined by the economic strength and aggressiveness that organizations bring to the struggle for influence.

Modern technology is also important because of its contributions to interest group maintenance as well as group formation. The eighties and nineties have witnessed a virtual explosion in the development and use of political technology. It is comprised of such elements as C-SPAN and CNN television, computer-based mailings, e-mail, Wide Area Telecommunications Service (WATS) lines, cellular telephones, videos, polling, fax machines, and the Internet. As a result, politically active individuals and organizations have an array of electronic means available for pursuing their agenda. Each organization, of course, chooses those most likely to enhance its political success.

New Right groups, for example, have been quick to exploit television. Paul Weyrich, leader of the National Committee for Survival of a Free Congress (NCSFC), has created National Empowerment Television (NET).[6] NET is a satellite network that allows members of the NCSFC to view public officials debating issues of concern and ask questions through an interactive connection. Weyrich believes that this type of instantaneous interaction has greater political advantages over letters and telegrams.

The Chamber of Commerce of the United States maintains a number of high-tech systems for both informing and activating its membership. The chamber publishes a weekly newsletter, *Washington Report,* that is sent to approximately 1 million readers and political allies; it also has a weekly television show, *It's Your Business,* that is carried on more than 100 stations and a radio show, *What's the Issue?,* that discusses issues of general concern to its membership. Finally, the chamber has Biznet, which is a closed-

circuit, tax-exempt television network that can quickly activate the membership if need be.

The Internet, too, is extremely helpful in contacting legislative or executive personnel. Whether the computer user calls up an interest organization's Web or home page or receives political intelligence from automatic lists, it is quite easy to forward messages to targeted policymakers. These electronic mailings allow for instantaneous contact between private sector interests and certain Washington policymakers.

Modern technology also contributes to organizational establishment. It contributed, for example, to the establishment of Common Cause in the early 1970s.[7] The expansion of national television news in the 1960s made it possible for millions of Americans to view the vividness of the distant war in Vietnam with its tremendous physical destruction, loss of life, and the sad spectacle of hundreds of fleeing Vietnamese storming the American embassy in Saigon in their futile efforts to escape. The scenes and the war in general activated a constituency for a general purpose citizens' lobby made up of predominately middle-class professionals holding liberal social attitudes. Many of these individuals were looking for some way to express their growing dissatisfaction with the war but were not attracted to demonstrations or more radical protests.

Another contributing development was the relatively new process of computer-based direct mailing. In its early stages of development, Common Cause was able to mail millions of membership solicitations. Computers were also used to keep track of new members, break down the membership by congressional district, and facilitate local chapter organizing.

Finally, modern technology provided the organization with inexpensive, reliable, and quick long-distance telephoning. It was able to initially rent a dozen or so WATS lines that were used to communicate with members. These lines also periodically issued "alerts" that encouraged members to pressure congressional personnel on certain votes. New technologies, as we have just seen, trigger interest group formation. They also offer a new range of strategies that are available to today's interest groups while modifying older ones. In these and other ways, technology is changing the nature of politics as well as its outcomes.

The diminished role of political parties in American politics today offers opportunities for organized interests to play a greater role. Some 55 years ago, the late E. E. Schattschneider wrote:

> The rise of political parties is indubitably one of the principal distinguishing marks of modern government. The parties, in fact, have played a major role as makers of governments; more especially they have been makers of democratic government. It should be flatly stated at the outset that ... political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.[8]

A decade later, the American Political Science Association (1950) issued a report critical of state the of parties and called for a series of reforms to make them more "responsible."[9] The 1970s saw publications inferring that the "American party system was over."[10] More recent commentaries, though, have been more favorable to the continuing existence of the American two-party system.[11] Certainly, the persistence of the two-part system virtually over the entire history of the nation stands as testimony to its resiliency.

Political parties are best understood in terms of organizational theory.[12] Parties arose to meet certain needs of the new nation. Over time, as they achieved a life of their own, they often faced public criticism for not doing this or that as far as elections were concerned. But value-laden appraisals miss the point. Political parties are not good or evil per se; rather, they are functional. They are extraconstitutional institutions bridging the gap between public officials and voters.

Presently, there is an inverse relationship between political parties and interest groups. Weakening party loyalties and consistently low voter turnouts provide more opportunities for political influence by organized interests.[13] Initially, these two institutions complemented each other. Political parties nominated candidates, engaged in fund-raising, drafted and disseminated campaign literature, and indulged in get-out-the-vote drives on election day. (Earlier political machines were exemplars in this regard.) For their part, political interests endorsed candidates, disseminated party campaign materials to their memberships, and indulged in modest fund-raising activities.

Today, the situation is totally different. Organized interests are monopolizing the roles once played by parties with respect to identifying, endorsing, fund-raising, and campaigning on behalf of selected candidates. The upshot of this is that legislators, for example, are much more likely to ignore party leaders and positions and support interest group claims. This weakens the vitality of legislative parties. As a result, collective responsibility for decision making is diminished. Individual members are more susceptible to interest group claims, and the traditional processes of bargaining and compromise are virtually abandoned.

THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF POLITICS

American politics is best understood as an ongoing struggle for influence. In this process, what occurs in Congress can affect presidential decision making. Congressional consideration of an international treaty does not take place in a vacuum. White House personnel along with a range of other individuals and organizations are activated. The Panama Canal Treaty (1978) drew a wide range of individuals and organizations on both sides