

FACTFILE: GCE GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

PRESSURE GROUPS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM



Pressure groups

The decline in voter turnout and in membership of political parties has increased the importance of pressure groups. There is a renewed interest in the role of pressure groups in increasing political participation for the growing numbers of people who feel that traditional parties are not to be trusted or fail to represent their needs. A rise in career politicians in the UK has also resulted in a loss of faith in the political system. Research carried out into the perceived 'participation crisis' suggests that the main reason for low voter turnout especially amongst the young is the belief that political parties do not fulfil their promises and are unreliable as advocates of people's needs. This decade has seen a correlation between the decline in voting and political party membership and a rise in

membership of pressure groups, making this a very important political topic.

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of this section of the specification a number of key aspects must be investigated. This Factfile provides an overview of the main points providing a roadmap for further independent study. There are five key areas to consider: definition of the term pressure group, types of pressure groups, methods used by pressure groups, why some pressure groups are more successful in achieving their goals than others and finally an assessment of whether pressure groups help or hinder democracy. In this Factfile all of these areas will be addressed albeit in a broad manner.



What is a pressure group?

A pressure group is an organisation which campaigns on behalf of either a distinct group, such as the British Medical Association which represents doctors, or a specific cause such as Shelter which seeks to have governments address the acute housing shortage and other issues which lead to homelessness. Pressure groups may have a very large international membership like the World Wildlife Fund or Greenpeace or have a very small membership and focus on one very small local area. What distinguishes pressure groups from political parties is that although they want to influence policy makers and campaign to see changes in the law

or that the needs of certain groups be taken into consideration when laws are being made, they do not stand in elections. When a pressure group stands in an election it has moved from being a pressure group to being a political party as this is the key distinction between the two groups.

Pressure groups might also be part of a social movement. Social movements are much bigger than individual pressure groups and tend to incorporate a range of pressure groups within their auspices. A social movement is a large grouping of individuals, organisations or pressure groups who organise to

campaign on a specific political or social issue. The campaign of a social movement is a long-term campaign; for example at the beginning of the 20th century the labour movement developed to campaign for better working conditions. It included pressure groups, trade unions and a political party, the British Labour Party, but was always much larger than any of these groups. The 1960s saw the evolution of the feminist movement. Where the first wave of feminism in the early twentieth century had seen groups such as the Women's Social and Political Union and the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies campaign for the extension of the franchise, this second wave of feminism led to a movement made up of a number of different pressure groups focused on improving women's rights in the workplace and the domestic arena. Similarly the movement for gay rights or

for environmental protection include a range of individuals, organisations or pressure groups.

Whereas social movements are larger, more long term and designed to bring widespread social improvements in a significant area of social life, pressure groups are more specific and have definitive aims and focused policies they are trying to achieve in the immediate or short term. It could be argued that pressure groups are better organised than social movements as they are single units with clear aims and a clear organisational structure; there will be one person or group making the decisions about what the pressure group wants and how it plans to achieve this whereas a social movement is much more diverse and will have several key players but rarely will it come under one central command.



What types of pressure group are there?

There are really two ways of thinking about this which result in four overall types, although as you will see, there is a certain amount of overlap between the categories. The first way to classify or divide pressure groups is by who they represent. Using this typology we can generally say there are cause groups and sectional groups. Cause groups are campaigning on behalf of a particular cause. Greenpeace is an example of a pressure group which operates on a local, national and international level and is concerned with environmental issues such as climate change and deforestation. Another example would be Liberty, a pressure group concerned with the protection and promotion of human rights.

Sectional groups are campaigning on behalf of a specific group within society; they try to make sure that the needs and views of that group are taken on board by political leaders when making their decisions. The British Medical Association is an example of a sectional pressure group which is concerned with securing better conditions for doctors in the medical profession. Sixty-five percent of all doctors in the UK are registered with the BMA. Other sectional pressure groups include the National Union of Teachers and the Law Society.

However, there is another way of classifying pressure groups which focuses more on their success or lack of success with government. This method results in defining pressure groups as either insider or outsider. Insider groups, as the name suggests, are more likely to have the ear of the government and to be called upon to give expert witness during an investigation or during the pre-legislative period. These groups may be well established sectional groups whose views are respected and who are seen as experts who the government can turn to for detailed inside information or trusted advice; the British Medical Association and the Confederation of British Industry are two such groups. Outsider groups, on the other hand, may be very popular groups but are generally groups who find it hard to get access to government and are very unlikely to be called by government to give advice. These groups may be outsiders because of their aim or because of their methods. Nonetheless, it is clear that some pressure groups find it much easier to gain access to the corridors of power than others and this is a fundamental problem.

Both of these ways of classifying pressure groups – insider/outsider or cause and sectional – are problematic, as neither classification really covers all of the differences between groups.



What methods do pressure groups use?

The methods used by pressure groups can broadly be broken down into two categories: conventional methods and direct action. Conventional methods are generally regarded as more likely to be successful as they are non-threatening and adhere to the rule of law. Insider groups are associated with more conventional methods and are unlikely to turn to direct action unless very heavily provoked. Conventional methods include; letter writing, petitioning, marches, demonstrations, legal challenges, lobbying, collecting information for parliamentarians, consultation and giving evidence.

Direct action can take a number of forms and is more likely to be employed if a group feels that its cause is likely to be ignored or if there is little or no chance of ever being an insider group. Direct action may also be favoured by groups who have an antagonistic attitude or a distrustful attitude towards the state. Direct action can also involve a number of strategies such as blockading or occupying areas, holding illegal marches, staging one-off theatrical events designed to highlight an issue, holding talks to raise public awareness which can then lead to further direct action events.

At the extreme end, direct action can involve the use of illegal threats or intimidation. The use of direct action can reflect a failure to be heard through conventional methods and extreme methods will often put people off supporting the aims of the group. However, not all forms of direct action are violent. Although most will be illegal, for example, street theatre to raise public awareness of an issue may be technically illegal in that the performers don't have a licence to perform but it is not in any way violent or threatening. Unplanned marches or protests can also be seen as disruptive and therefore troublesome but not necessarily threatening, for example the popular Reclaim the Streets or Critical Mass events.

It is true that it is easy for the opponents of direct action groups to point to their methods as proof of the invalidity of their cause, therefore, it is advisable for groups to explore other options before proceeding down the direct action path. This is even more so the case when the methods used are criminal and involve threats to people or property.

Examples of traditional pressure group activity	Examples of direct action taken by pressure groups
<p>Petitioning – The Snowdrop Campaign in 1996 gained 750,000 signatures in 6 weeks. In 2011 the government set up an e-petition website. If a petition gains more than 100,000 signatures it can be considered for debate by MPs. Successful petitions have included one calling for the disclosure of documents relating to the Hillsborough disaster. More recent examples include those signed by members of the public in support of a second EU referendum.</p>	<p>Blockades –The pressure group Farmers for Action, in August 2015, organised the boycott of a Morrisons distribution centre in protest at the price paid for their milk. They also urged consumers not to buy milk from Morrisons, Aldi, Lidl and Asda.</p>
<p>Consultations – The NSPCC is an example of a pressure group which regularly responds to government consultations in the hope of helping to develop government policies. In 2013, the NSPCC responded to a call for evidence from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Runaway and Missing Children and Adults which was inquiring into the number of children who go missing from care and their reasons for doing so.</p>	<p>Violence – A demonstration in London against student tuition fees descended into violence on November 10th, 2010. The demonstration was attended by numbers in excess of 30,000 and saw violent scenes which included the occupation of 30 Millbank, the campaign headquarters of the Conservative Party. Thirty five arrests were made and a number were injured. A student demonstration against tuition fees in London took place in November 2015 but did not descend into the same level of violence. Twelve arrests were made for public order offences.</p>
<p>Marches/Demonstrations – 2 million people as part of a demonstration against the War in Iraq in 2003 took to the streets of London in a march which converged in a rally in Hyde Park with protestors carrying banners stating ‘Make tea not war’ and ‘No to War in Iraq.’</p>	<p>Violence – Actions by the Animal Liberation Front have been particularly violent and one of its members was convicted in 2006 of attacking the home of Paul Blackburn, the corporate controller of the drugs company Glaxo Smith Kline with an incendiary device which exploded on the porch of Paul Blackburn’s home. Paul Blackburn was targeted as Glaxo Smith Kline has links with the Huntingdon Life Sciences animal research laboratory, a target for much animal liberation violence.</p>
<p>Lobbying – The Gurkha campaign of 2009 successfully lobbied MPs to gain the right for some of the Gurkha veterans to live in the UK.</p>	<p>Occupation of public places – Occupy London did just that and set up key sites in London in 2012 as part of their anti-capitalist protest against austerity and the government’s handling of the banking crisis which sparked the economic downturn of 2008.</p>
<p>Legal Challenges – In April 2016 the pressure group Liberty brought a case to the European Court of Justice challenging the legality of the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act of 2014, arguing that it contravened human rights legislation. However, the Court delayed ruling on the legality of this Act until after the EU referendum of June 2016.</p>	<p>Strikes – Mass public sector strikes took place in July 2014 and disrupted a number of public services such as schools and hospitals. The strikes were in response to the government’s austerity measures especially pension reforms. David Cameron earlier in 2011 had warned public sector workers that striking would be ‘wrong for you, for the people you serve, for the good of the country.’</p>



Why are some pressure groups more successful than others?

There are a variety of factors which influence how successful pressure groups will be in achieving their aims.

1. The first significant factor is how achievable their aims are; in other words, are they likely to succeed or do they want something which is really so far removed from the political agenda that it is unlikely to happen either ever or without a full blown revolution? In some ways the aims of the Occupy movement fall into this category. Although they had some very relevant and salient comments to make on the handling of the economic recession, they were unlikely to get their demands met as meeting these demands would have essentially required an entirely new political and economic system to be established.
2. Although public support won't always guarantee that a group will achieve its aims it is nevertheless a very important factor in explaining pressure group success. The Snowdrop Campaign was a response to the tragic events of March 1996 in Dunblane, Scotland when one teacher and 15 children were killed by a perpetrator in possession of a legally held handgun. The public's revulsion at this event and their sympathy for those bereaved led to tremendous public pressure on the government for a total ban on private ownership of handguns. The Snowdrop Campaign captured the imagination of the public, the media and the UK's politicians and led to the passage of legislation that banned the private ownership of all handguns.
3. Having a large membership also helps to make it more likely that a group will achieve its aims. The TUC is made up of 52 unions and represents 5.8 million workers. Traditionally, the TUC has been particularly influential when the Labour Party has been in government as the Labour Party receives funding from trade unions. Likewise large groups such as the RSPB who have a well-respected membership may well be asked to make presentations, for example on the environmental factors affecting birds and their habitats, to parliamentary committees when legislation is under consideration.
4. A well-educated membership who have a clear idea of how to conduct successful lobbying campaigns. The type of membership a pressure group has can be as important as the numbers or size of that group. Middle-class groups tend to be more successful partly because they tend to have better connections and partly because they can articulate their ideas more succinctly and have a better plan on how to conduct effective lobbying or media campaigns.
5. Celebrity endorsement can certainly help a pressure group; at the very least it will help to gain a higher media profile for the group. The support of Joanna Lumley was seen as a significant factor in the 2009 Gurkha campaign mentioned earlier, and although not specifically endorsing one campaign, Russell Brand certainly has had a political impact and raised debate about participation and political parties in the UK.
6. The methods used by pressure groups will have an impact on how successful they are. They need to be able to target local or national politicians who might be likely to support their cause. Once this has been established they may well want to try to attain insider status by providing parliamentarians with good quality research and statistics for committee investigations or when preparing legislation.
7. How much money pressure groups have will affect the level of success they achieve. Money helps to finance campaigns, to fund research, to run an office and prepare and post leaflets or flyers. Money is also needed to effectively lobby MPs, the government in general and if appropriate, the EU. Money will help if a pressure group is challenging an issue through the courts, perhaps by launching a judicial review. This may mean that wealthier groups or groups with wealthier members are more likely to be successful, which has negative implications for democracy.

8. Having media support is also helpful. This is not the same as having media attention, as media attention may be for all the wrong reasons. Media support can help to portray your cause in a sympathetic light; for example there was a degree of media support for the campaign to allow prisoners to receive books following the attempt by Chris Grayling in 2013 to ban this in English jails. The campaign spearheaded by the Howard League for Penal Reform was a success and the original ruling was overturned by the High Court in December 2014.
9. Insider status is probably the most helpful factor in ensuring pressure groups achieve their aims. It is helpful as it means the government will hear the views of the group and both are likely to develop a close working relationship. A range of pressure groups will have insider status depending on the government and the zeitgeist of the times. It is common for the CBI, BMA and large trade unions to have insider status, however, other groups such as Shelter or Age Concern will also have a good working relationship with the government regardless of which party is in power.



Do pressure groups help or hinder democracy?

As with many political questions the answer to this question really depends on personal perspective. For some, pressure groups are an essential way of keeping people engaged in politics and giving the public an opportunity to influence decision-makers. For others, pressure groups are undemocratic and unnecessary in a representative democracy. The view that pressure groups enhance democracy is most often espoused by pluralists or liberals. They believe that pressure groups allow different views to be heard by government and therefore are good for democracy. They also point out that pressure groups supply the government and individual MPs with statistics and information which may help them to formulate better policies.

Pressure groups allow opportunities for single issues which might be important but which are not big enough to be the focus of an election campaign to be discussed, for example, banning the use of tobacco in enclosed spaces around children or putting safety catches on cords on blinds. Finally, supporters of pressure groups would argue that they give the electorate an opportunity to participate in the political process between elections, which reduces voter disengagement and keeps the political class on their toes.

Opponents of pressure groups, interestingly, come from two varying perspectives. Firstly, there are those on the left who are suspicious of the tendency of wealthier groups to have their say whilst those who have less money or represent poorer groups in society do not. Secondly, there are those on the

right who think pressure groups interfere in the operation of the role of democratically elected governments and should not be allowed to do so. These views can be divided into the elitist view and the New Right view. Elitists would claim that pressure groups are inherently undemocratic and allow the rich, well-educated and well-connected to have greater access to political power than the poor and disadvantaged. Elitists would also point out that pressure groups themselves may not be very internally democratic, raising questions about the extent to which they actually represent the views of their members. Decisions tend to be made by the leadership with little input from grassroots members in most cases. The New Right view is associated with the Conservatives in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher, and the pressure groups they disliked most were the trade unions who they viewed as their arch enemies. From the perspective of the New Right, it is the job of politicians and parties to make policy as they are accountable to the people through elections and that allowing pressure groups access to power or to influence decision-making is fundamentally undemocratic and should not be encouraged. There is some value in this argument and it cannot be dismissed entirely; however, in general, pressure groups are seen as giving ordinary citizens a vehicle for the expression of their political ideas and beliefs which, in a time of increasing disillusionment with traditional politics, is both necessary and helpful for democracy.

Further Reading

Grant, Wyn (September 2014) *Pressure Politics: The role of pressure groups* in *Political Insight*, Sage Publications.

Hammal, Rowena (April 2014) *Revision powerpoint in Politics e-review Extras*, Hodder Education.

Watts, Duncan (2012) *Chapter 8 Pressure Groups* in *British Government and Politics, A Comparative Guide*, Edinburgh University Press.

