SECTION 2
Types of Interest Groups

Guiding Question
What are the different types of interest groups at work in American society? Use the outline to record notes about different types of interest groups.

1. Types of Interest Groups
   A. Economic Interests
      1.
      2.
   B. Other Interest Groups
      C. Public-Interest Groups

Political Dictionary
- trade association
- labor union
- public-interest group

Objectives
1. Explain how the American tradition of joining organizations has resulted in a wide range of interest groups.
2. Describe four categories of groups based on economic interests.
3. Outline the reasons other interest groups have been created.
4. Identify the purpose of public-interest groups.

“Everything from A to Z.” That expression can certainly be applied to the many interest groups in this country. They include, among thousands of others, AAA (the American Automobile Association), ACLU (the American Civil Liberties Union), Amnesty International, the Zionist Organization of America, and the Zoological Association of America. All of those thousands of organizations can be more or less readily classified and, so, usefully described as interest groups.

An American Tradition
The United States has often been called “a nation of joiners.” Recall Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations cited in the previous section. His comments, true when he made them, have become even more accurate over time.

No one really knows how many associations exist in the United States today. There are thousands upon thousands of them, however, and at every level in society. Each one becomes an interest group whenever it tries to influence the actions of government in order to promote its own goals.

Interest groups come in all shapes and sizes. They may have thousands or even millions of long-established members or only a handful of new or temporary members. They may be well or little known, highly structured or quite loose and informal, wealthy or with few resources. No matter what their characteristics, they are found in every field of human activity in this country.

The largest number of these groups has been founded on the basis of an economic interest, and especially on the bases of business, labor, agricultural, and professional interests. Some groups are grounded in a geographic area.

Others have been born out of a cause or an idea, such as prohibition of alcohol, environmental protection, or gun control. Many groups seek to influence some aspect of the nation’s foreign policy. Still others exist to promote the welfare of certain groups of people—veterans, senior citizens, a racial minority, the homeless, women, people with disabilities, and so on.

Many people belong to a number of local, regional, or national interest groups—often without realizing they do. A car dealer, for example, may belong to the local Chamber of Commerce, a car dealers’ association, the
American Legion, a local taxpayers' league, a garden club, a church, and the American Cancer Society. All of these are, to one degree or another, interest groups—including the church and the garden club, even though the car dealer may never think of these groups in that light.³

Many people may belong to groups that take conflicting stands on political issues. For example, the taxpayers' league may endorse a plan to eliminate plantings in traffic islands while the garden club wants to keep and even enlarge them.

**Economic Interest Groups**

Most interest groups are formed on the basis of economic interests. Among those groups, the most active—and certainly the most effective—are those representing business, labor, agriculture, and certain professions.

**Business Groups** Business has long looked to government to promote and protect its interests. Recall that it was merchants, creditors, and property owners who were most responsible for calling the Constitutional Convention in 1787. In the early years of the Republic, business interests fought for and won the protective tariff. Along with organized labor, many of them continue to work to maintain it, even now.

The United States Brewers Association, the oldest organized interest group at work in national politics today, was born in 1862 when Congress first levied a tax on beer. The association's stated purpose was to assure the brewing trade that its interests would be "vigorously prosecuted before the legislative and executive departments."

Hundreds of business groups now operate in Washington, D.C., in the 50 State capitals, and at the local level across the country. The two best-known business organizations are the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and the Chamber of Commerce of the United States.

Formed in 1895, NAM now represents some 12,000 firms. It generally speaks for "big business" in public affairs. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1912, is a major voice for the nation's thousands of smaller businesses. It has some 3,000 local chambers with about 3 million total members.

The Business Roundtable, founded in 1972, is made up of the chief executive officers of the nation's largest companies. It, too, plays a major role in promoting and defending the business community.

Most segments of the business community also have their own interest groups, often called trade associations. They number in the hundreds and include the American Trucking Association, the Association of American Railroads, the National Restaurant Association, and many more. The several trade associations that represent the pharmaceutical, oil, and natural gas industries are generally regarded as the most powerful and effective interest groups today.

Despite their common goal of promoting business interests, business groups do not always present a solid front. In fact, they often disagree and sometimes fight among themselves. The trucking industry, for example, does its best to get as much federal aid as possible for highway construction. The railroads, however, are unhappy with what they see as "special favors" for their competition. At the same time, the railroads see federal taxes on gasoline, oil, tires, and other "highway users' fees" as legitimate sources of federal income. The truckers disagree, of course.

**Labor Groups** A labor union is an organization of workers who share the same type of job or who work in the same industry. Labor unions press for government policies that will benefit their members.

The strength of organized labor has ebbed over the past several years. Some 15 million Americans, only about 12 percent of the nation's labor force, belong to labor unions today. In the 1940s and 1950s, as many as a third of all working Americans were union members; as recently as 1973,
Union membership has declined as the economy has shifted from manufacturing to services. However, the voice of unions remains strong politically with education, training, and library occupations having the highest rates of union membership. Unions have also become increasingly diverse demographically.

How might the interests of labor unions have shifted with the changing economy?

Manufacturing
Manufacturing jobs employed half of all unionized workers in the 1950s.

Union Membership in 1955: 28%

Service
Two in five public sector employees, including teachers and other government employees, belong to a union today.

Union Membership Today: 12%

union membership accounted for about a fourth of the labor force.

Organized labor is composed of a host of groups today. The AFL-CIO (the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) is by far the largest. It is now made up of more than fifty separate unions, including, for example, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (the IBEW) and the International Union of Automotive, Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers (the UAW). All told, the AFL-CIO has 10 million dues-paying members today. Each of its member-unions is, like the AFL-CIO itself, organized on a national, State, and local basis.

The industrial sector of the nation's economy has declined over recent years. Because of this, blue-collar workers in such basic industries as automobiles and steel now represent a decreasing percentage of the working population. That decline has forced organized labor leaders to look elsewhere for new members. The AFL-CIO has been particularly active in efforts to unionize migrant farm workers, service workers, and, most recently, public employees.

In fact, the overall decline in union membership has been partially offset by an upswing in the unionization of government workers in recent years. Public-sector unions now have nearly 8 million members, and that number is likely to continue to grow.

Quarrels over how to rejuvenate the labor movement led several unions to leave the AFL-CIO in 2005. Chief among them were the Service Employees International Union (the SEIU), with 2 million members, and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (the

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4 The AFL was formed in 1886 as a federation of craft unions. A craft union is made up of those workers who have the same craft or skill—for example, carpenters, plumbers, or electricians. The growth of mass-production industries created a large class of workers not skilled in any particular craft, however. The AFL found it difficult to organize those workers. Many of its craft unions opposed the admission of unions of unskilled workers to the AFL. In 1935, after years of bitter fighting, a group led by John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers was expelled from the AFL. They formed the independent CIO in 1938. The rivalry between these unions eased the point where a merger took place in 1955, creating the AFL-CIO.

blue-collar worker
n. one who does manual or industrial work—e.g., a miner, mechanic

rejuvenate
vt. restore, breathe new life into
IBT), with 1.4 million members, who formed a new 5-million-member group, the Change to Win Coalition.

There are also several independent unions not associated with either the AFL-CIO or Change to Win. Among the largest of them is the Communications Workers of America (the CWA), with approximately 700,000 members.

Organized labor generally speaks with one voice on such social welfare and job-related matters as Social Security, minimum wages, and unemployment. Labor does sometimes oppose labor, however. White-collar and blue-collar workers, for example, do not always share the same economic interests. Sectional interests (East-West, urban-rural, and so on) sometimes divide labor. Production and transportation interests (trucks versus railroads versus airplanes, for example) can create divisions, as well.

**Agricultural Groups** For much of our history, most Americans lived in rural areas on farms. The First Census, taken in 1790, set the nation's population at 3,929,214. It found that nearly all Americans then—94.9 percent of them—lived outside any city or town.

The nation's population has increased dramatically since 1790, of course—to well over 300 million today. Over that period the farm population has plummeted. Less than two percent of the population live on farms today. Still, farmers' influence on the government's agricultural policies has been and is enormous. Many powerful associations serve the interests of agriculture. They include several broad-based farm groups and organizations that represent farmers who raise particular commodities.

The most prominent farm groups today are the National Grange, the American Farm Bureau Federation, and the National Farmers Union. The Grange, which was established in 1867, is now as much a social as a political organization. Most of its 300,000 farm-family members live in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic States.

The Farm Bureau, formed in 1919, is the largest and most effective of the three major agricultural groups. It has over 5 million members today and is especially strong in the Midwest.

The National Farmers Union draws its strength from smaller and less prosperous farmers. The NFU often calls itself the champion of the dirt farmer, and it is frequently at odds with the Grange and the Farm Bureau.

Many other groups speak for the producers of specific farm products—these include the National Association of Wheat Growers, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, the National Milk Producers Federation, and many others. Then, too, farm-related businesses such as pesticide manufacturers and farm implement dealers have their own organizations.

As with business and labor, farm groups sometimes find themselves at odds with one another. Thus, cotton, corn, soybean, and dairy associations compete as each of them tries to influence State laws regulating margarine and yogurt. California and Florida citrus growers are sometimes pitted against one another, and so on.

**Professional Associations** The professions are generally defined as those occupations that require extensive formal training, and, often government licensing—for example, medicine, law, and teaching. Most professional associations are not nearly as large, well-organized, well-financed, or effective as most business, labor, and farm groups.

Three professional groups are exceptions, however: the American Medical Association (AMA), the American Bar Association (ABA), and the National Education Association (NEA). Each has a very real impact on public policies, and at every level of government.

There are hundreds of less well-known professional groups. Most pharmacists join the National Association of Retail Druggists, librarians join the American Library Association, optometrists join the American Optometric Association, and so on. Still, not all professionals are members of the organizations that claim to represent them. Thus, fewer than half of all licensed medical doctors in the United States belong to the AMA.

**Additional Interest Groups**

Again, most organized interests are born out of economic concerns. Many others have
been formed for other reasons, however, and many of these other groups have a good deal of political clout.

**Issue-Oriented Groups** Many groups exist to promote a cause or an idea. It would take several pages just to list them here, and so what follows is just a sampling of the more important ones.

The American Civil Liberties Union was born in 1920. It fights in and out of court to protect civil and political rights. Common Cause dates from 1970, calls itself “the citizen’s lobby,” and works for major reforms in the political process. The League of Women Voters and its many local leagues have been dedicated to stimulating participation in and greater knowledge about public affairs since 1919.

The list of groups devoted to causes goes on and on. Many, such as the National Women’s Political Caucus, carry the women’s rights banner. Others, including the National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, and the Wilderness Society, are pledged to conservation and environmental protection.

Some groups are devoted to opposing or supporting certain causes. The National Right-to-Life Committee, Women Exploited by Abortion, and other groups oppose abortion. They are countered by the National Abortion and Reproduction Rights Action League, Planned Parenthood, and their allies. Similarly, the National Rifle Association (NRA) fights most forms of gun control; Handgun Control, Inc., works for it.

Washington’s many “think tanks”—research institutions staffed by scholars and experts in a variety of fields—also qualify as interest groups. They promote their particular policy views and oppose those of others in books, newspaper articles, journals, and tele-

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**Influencing International Events**

**Can interest groups make a difference?**

Years of conflict in the Sudan between the government and rebel groups in Darfur have left hundreds of thousands dead and made refugees of millions more. Amnesty International, the Save Darfur Coalition, Human Rights Watch, and other groups provide various resources to the refugees and press the United States, other nations, and the UN to act in this critical situation. **What could these groups do to persuade governments to respond to this problem?**

Refugees flee their homes in Darfur.
vision appearances. The more prominent among them include the more conservative Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation; the more liberal Institute for Policy Studies; and the centrist American Enterprise Institute and Brookings Institution.

Organizations for Specific Groups Hundreds of interest groups seek to promote the welfare of certain segments of the population. Among the best known and most powerful are the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, which work to advance the interests of the country’s veterans. Groups like Older Americans, Inc., and AARP are very active in such areas as pensions and medical care for senior citizens.

Several organizations—notably the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League—are concerned with public policies affecting African Americans. Other organizations, such as the Japanese American Citizens League, the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, and the National Association of Arab Americans, support the country’s many ethnic groups.

Religious Organizations Religious groups have long been involved in American politics, and many work to affect public policy in several important areas today. Many Protestants do so through the National Council of Churches, the Christian Voice, and the Christian Coalition.

The National Catholic Welfare Council speaks for the interests of Roman Catholics. The American Jewish Congress and B’Nai B’rith’s Anti-Defamation League promote the interests of the Jewish community.

Public-Interest Groups

The typical interest group seeks public policies that are of special benefit to its members and works against policies seen as threats. Some organizations have a broader focus and work for the “public good.” That is, a public-interest group is an organization that works for the best interests of the overall community, rather than the narrower interests of one segment. It seeks policies that benefit all or most people, whether or not they belong to or support the organization.

Public-interest groups have become quite visible over the past 30 years or so. Among the best known and most active are Common Cause, the League of Women Voters, and the several organizations that make up Ralph Nader’s Public Citizen, Inc.

5 Nearly all interest groups claim that they work for the “public good.” Thus, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) says that lower taxes on business will stimulate the economy and so help everyone. The AFL-CIO says the same thing about spending public dollars for public works programs. But, as a general rule, most interest groups support or oppose public policies on a much narrower basis: on what they see to be the best interests of their members.
Lobbying the Federal Government

Track the Issue
The 1st Amendment, which guarantees the right to peaceably assemble and petition the government for a redress of grievances, protects the rights of interest groups to lobby government.

The House passes a temporary measure that, for the first time, requires all lobbyists to register with the clerk of the House.

A series of articles entitled “The Treason of the Senate” appears in Cosmopolitan, alleging widespread corruption on the part of interest groups in Congress.

Congress passes the Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act.

Congress attempts to address shortcomings of the 1946 law with the Lobbying Disclosure Act.

Congress and the President respond to a major lobbying scandal with the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act.

Perspectives
Recent scandals involving several lobbyists and some members of Congress and other public officials have raised questions about the influence of lobbyists and interest groups. Amid charges that lobbyists had improperly used gifts and travel to gain support in government, the nation again debated the benefits and drawbacks of lobbying.

“My Administration is committed to reducing the undue influence of special interests that for too long has shaped the national agenda and drowned out the voices of ordinary Americans. Special interests exert this disproportionate influence, in part, by relying on lobbyists who have special access that is not available to all citizens. Although lobbyists can sometimes play a constructive role ..., their service in privileged positions within the executive branch can perpetuate the culture of special interest access that I am committed to changing.”

—President Barack Obama, June 18, 2010

“Many lobbyists ... embody what government reform efforts seem to consider the noble lobbyist; one who does not attempt to influence with political contributions, but relies solely on the strength of their argument ... New reforms which treat these lobbyists like any other “special interest” promise to ... marginalize these professionals and their causes. ... These current reforms are curtailing the ability of these lobbyists to state their cases. This ... marginalization has exponential impacts on the voices of many Americans who will now be more unlikely than ever to be heard.”

—Darrell K. Smith, Executive Vice President, IMA-NA, February 3, 2010

Connect to Your World
1. Understand (a) How does the Obama directive limit lobbyist influence in Federal Government? (b) What does Mr. Smith suggest limits most lobbyists? (c) Are both concerns valid? Why or why not?
2. Draw Conclusions (a) Does lobbying reform violate the 1st Amendment? (b) Which do you think poses a greater danger: restricting lobbyists or giving them practically free reign? Why?

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