



# Political Parties and Interest Groups

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American National Government

Topic 9

# Overview

- What role do political parties and interest groups play in American democracy?
- Why does a country as large and diverse as the US have only two major parties?
- How do interest groups affect American politics?
- What problems and challenges do interest groups present to democracy?

I – What role do political parties and interest groups play in American democracy?

# Conceptualizing Political Parties and Interest Groups

- What is a **political party**?
  - A team of elites organized for the purpose of gaining & keeping control of the government, w/o actually ending democratic forms of government
    - Distinct from juntas or authoritarian movements
    - Distinct from interest groups
- What is an **interest group**?
  - Associations of citizens combining and cooperating to further a shared interest
    - Don't run candidates for office
  - Can be narrow self-interest, the good a specific group, or something more general
    - Not necessarily self-serving, but most are

# Why Political Parties?

- Founders worry about “factions”
  - Federalist No 10; Washington’s farewell address
- Factions represent internal fractures within society, along which conflict occurs (religion, class/occupation, culture)
  - In history, factional conflict regularly led to civil war/fall of republics
  - Challenges old idea of civic unity, plus new unity of nation



# Why Political Parties?

- Fear of parties also based in 18<sup>th</sup> century understanding of the “illegitimacy” of opposition
  - The idea of opposing the government (people currently in office) but not wanting to overthrow the regime (constitution) was new
    - Opposition traditionally seen as subversive; dangerous revolutionary force
  - Parties must tolerate “loyal opposition” rather than curb or eliminate it
    - If parties can’t lose to opposition, the people can’t choose their leaders and lose the ability to punish representatives for bad performance

# Why Political Parties?

- Despite framers' fear, we get political parties anyway
  - Many framers critical of factions help found the first parties; e.g. Madison, Jefferson
- Parties are too useful in representative democracy not to have been invented
  - They help citizens and elected officials accomplish essential tasks

# Democratic Functions of Political Parties

- Why are parties essential to democracy?
  - Formulate and share a wide vision of the public good
    - In elections, parties stake out positions on policy in line with this vision that inform vote choice
    - In office, they coordinate policies in pursuit of this vision



# Democratic Functions of Political Parties

- Why are parties essential to democracy?
  - Parties organize and clarify political conflict
    - Clarify the stakes of elections for voters
    - Make it possible for busy voters to take part in the democratic process
      - Schattschneider says parties made democracy; this is key reason why

# Democratic Functions of Political Parties

- Why are parties essential to democracy?
  - Serve as a utility *in elections*:
    - Recruit and vet candidates
    - Organize nominations (primaries & caucuses)
    - Help get out the vote (mobilize and inform voters)
  - Serve as a utility *in government*:
    - Help get things done in Congress by organizing power
      - Ex: 2023 GOP-held House struggles to elect a Speaker
    - Help overcome separation of powers system (get president and Congress to work together) to get things done

# Interest Groups and Democracy

- What about interest groups? They can\* also serve several useful functions in democracy:
  - They can monitor what representatives are doing about a particular set of issues and can tell the public about representatives' bad behavior
    - Help manage the principal-agent problem
  - They can monitor certain issues 'on the ground' and in the opaque setting of executive agencies, and can tell elected representatives when there's a problem
    - "Alarm bell" oversight
- \* they can do these things, but don't necessarily actually do so

# Interest Groups and Democracy

- Interest groups can serve several useful functions in democracy:
  - Interest groups can discover and convey potentially useful information on the issues they care about to representatives (at least when it advantages them)
  - They can provide an alternative route to elections for citizens to communicate their opinions to their representatives
    - Can convey more detailed information this way
    - But we'll see they don't this for everyone equally

II – Why two parties?

# Two Party System

- There are two kinds of political party systems in the world
  - Two party systems
  - Multiparty systems
- United States has traditionally had a two-party system—purest in the world
- Might seem strange for such a large country to have only two parties
  - So why do we have a two party system?

# Two Party System

- Why only two parties?

- Duverger's Law

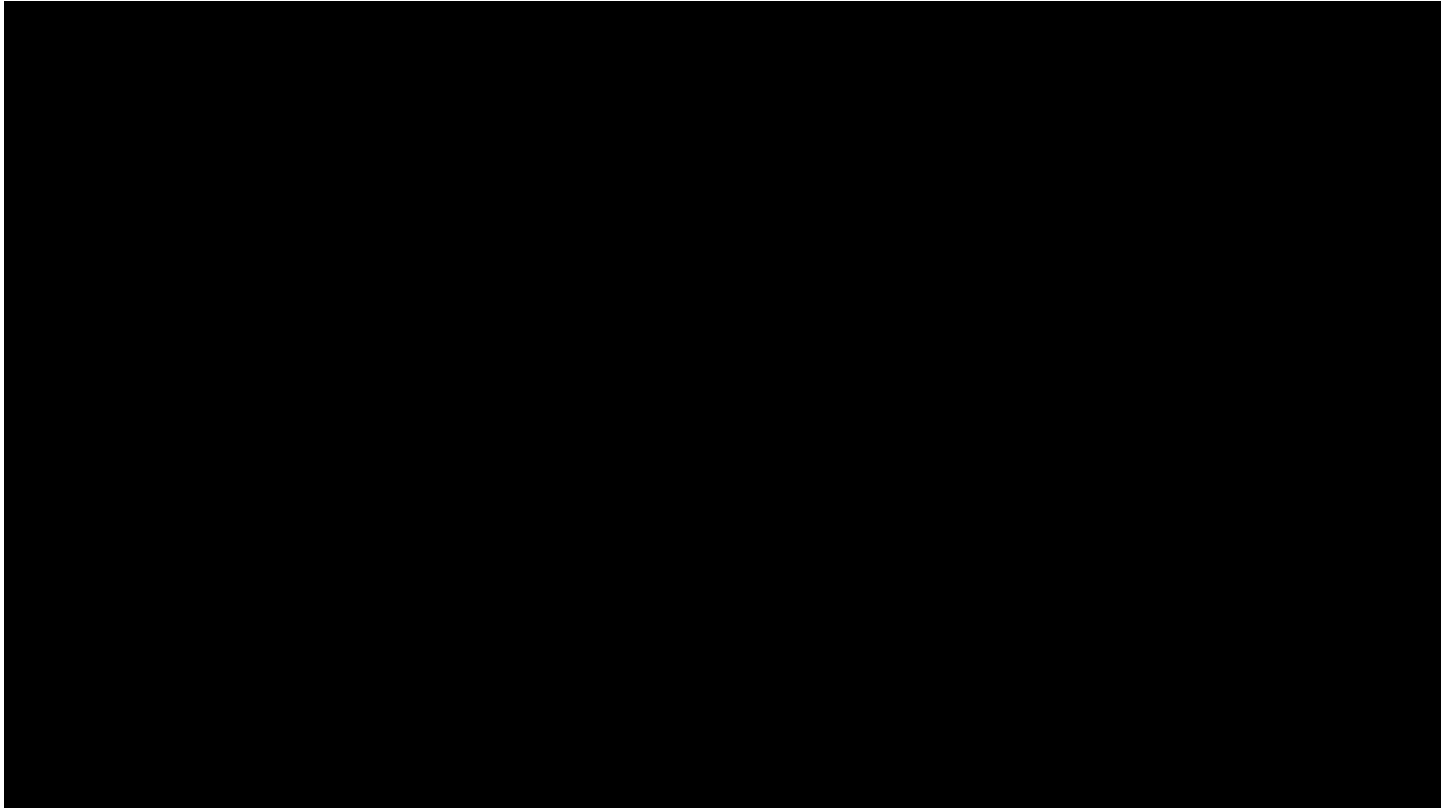
- Single-member plurality electoral systems (First Past The Post or FPTP) tend to lead to two party systems
    - Small parties have incentive to join with larger parties to win
    - Voters strategically support one of these two parties, even if they don't love them, because they're most likely to win

- The American electoral system of FPTP is an important part of what creates and locks in the two-party system

- Especially the national single member district of the presidency

# Two Party System

- FPTP causes electoral competition to break down into two large groups





# Two Party System

- Advantages of the two-party system?
  - Parties tend to be broad coalitions fighting for center
    - Median Voter Theory
      - Both parties fight for that voter in the middle, the 50%+1<sup>th</sup> one
      - Leads to moderation & policy stability, in theory
    - Keeps politics from unraveling along racial, ethnic, or class lines
    - Simplifies choice for voters

# Two Party System

- Disadvantages of two-party systems?
  - Idiosyncratic groups & small minorities often lack a voice in government
    - Leads to alienation, depresses turnout
  - No real choice (i.e., parties too similar)
  - Prone to polarization when social cleavages map onto the political cleavage

# Multiparty Systems

- Multiparty systems are created by Proportional Representation electoral systems
- There might be as few as three or four or a dozen or more parties
  - Multiparty systems can become “fragmented” when there are many parties

Country	Effective number of parties
<a href="#">Australia</a>	3.17
<a href="#">Austria</a>	3.94
<a href="#">Belgium</a>	9.70
<a href="#">Brazil</a>	16.46
<a href="#">Canada</a>	2.79
<a href="#">Colombia</a>	6.38
<a href="#">Costa Rica</a>	4.73
<a href="#">Denmark</a>	5.85
<a href="#">Finland</a>	6.36
<a href="#">France</a>	3.00
<a href="#">Germany</a>	5.58
<a href="#">Guatemala</a>	6.73
<a href="#">Iceland</a>	6.54
<a href="#">India</a>	2.17
<a href="#">Indonesia</a>	7.47
<a href="#">Ireland</a>	5.98
<a href="#">Israel</a>	8.52
<a href="#">Italy</a>	2.90
<a href="#">Netherlands</a>	8.54
<a href="#">New Zealand</a>	2.61
<a href="#">Norway</a>	5.56
<a href="#">Peru</a>	6.20
<a href="#">Portugal</a>	2.87
<a href="#">Romania</a>	4.30
<a href="#">South Africa</a>	2.57
<a href="#">Spain</a>	4.68
<a href="#">Sweden</a>	5.63
<a href="#">Switzerland</a>	6.47

# Multiparty Systems: How Many Parties?

- What determines how many parties there are in a democracy?
  - Number of parties determined by district magnitude & thresholds (as well as history and geography)

# Multiparty Systems: How Many Parties?

- **District magnitude** (M) refers to the number of representatives elected from a district
  - In a single member district,  $M = 1$
  - If you elect four members from a district,  $M = 4$
  - Between 3 and the total size of the legislature can get different numbers of parties
- **Thresholds** require parties to win a minimum percentage of the vote to win any seats
  - High thresholds (>5%) prevent small parties from winning seats
  - Prevents fragmentation of party system, reduces representativeness

# Common Parties in Multiparty Systems

## Left Parties

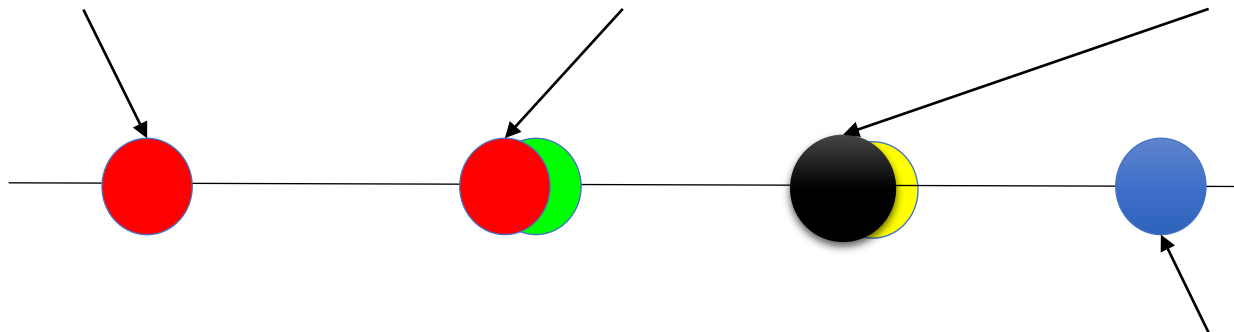
- Democratic Socialist
- (Former communist)

## Center-Left Parties

- Social Democratic
- Green

## Center-Right Parties

- Christian Democratic
- 'Liberal' (Libertarian)



## Emerging Parties

- Pirate
- ??

## Right Parties

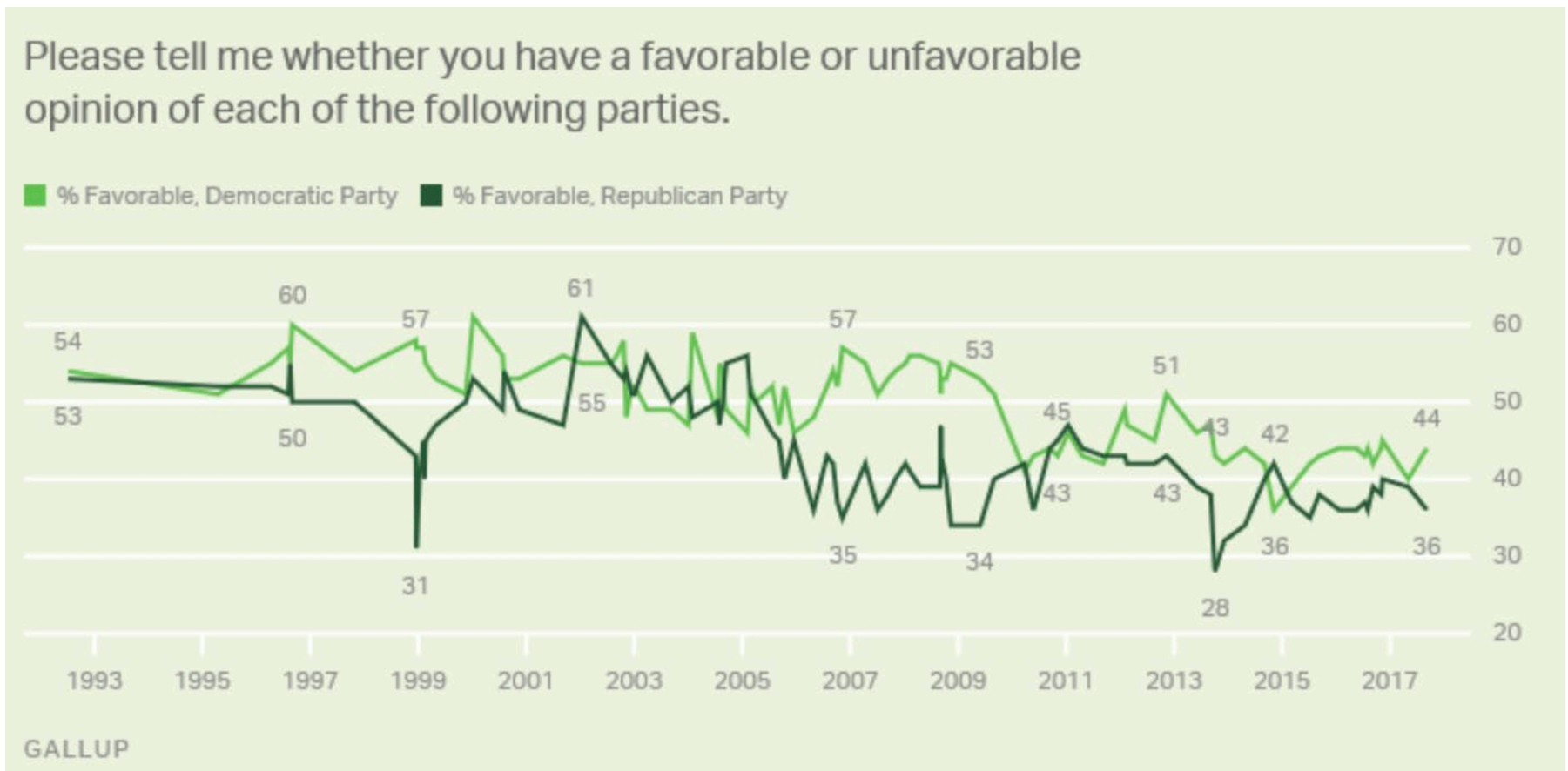
- Nationalist
- Populist
- (Neo-Nazi)

# Multiparty Systems

- Advantages of multiparty systems:
  - Better representation of citizens
  - More choices for voters
  - Higher turnout, more equal political engagement
- Disadvantages of multiparty systems
  - Stasis, gridlock, possible ungovernability
  - Unclear lines of accountability
  - Fragmented party system can make voter choice more difficult
- Precise consequences will depend upon the degree of fragmentation, which can be controlled

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Parties and the Current US Party System

- Approval of the two parties has declined





## 3<sup>rd</sup> Parties in the US

- US has the purest two party system in the world
  - Other FPTP systems have minor 3<sup>rd</sup> parties, often regional parties, but not US
- 3<sup>rd</sup> parties fairly common in US history but rarely last
  - Voters often reluctant to support third party candidates, even if they love them, because they know they can't win (Strategic voting)
  - Exception is the Republican Party which replaced the Whigs
- Fewer important 3<sup>rd</sup> parties since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century partly because of laws passed by the two major parties designed to protect their duopoly
  - Ballot access laws make it very difficult for minor parties to compete

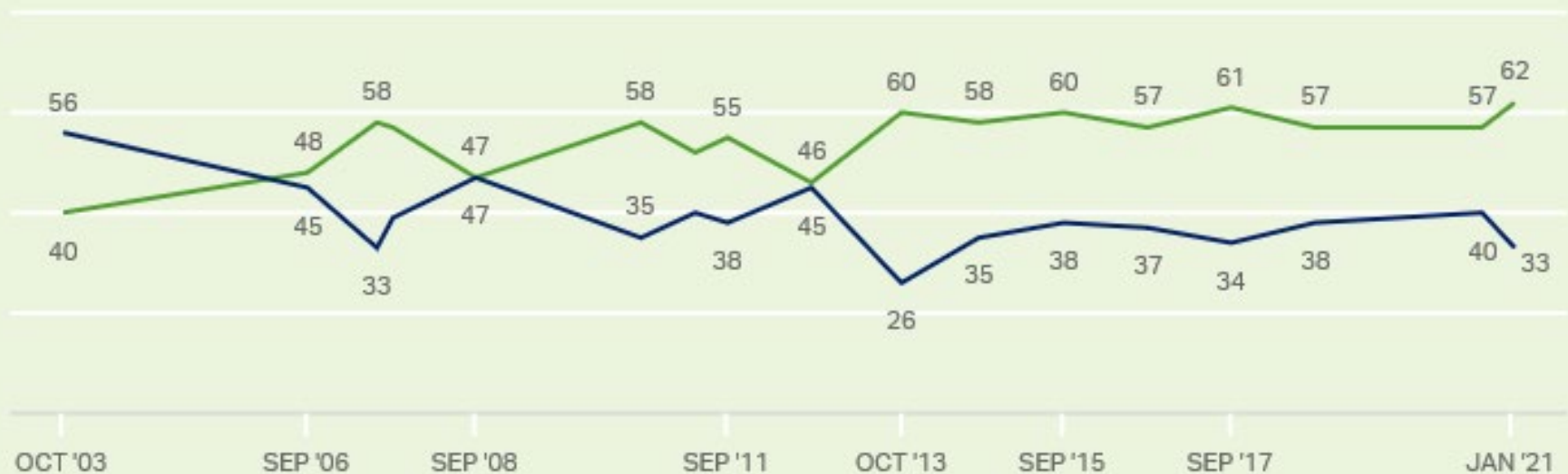
# 3<sup>rd</sup> Parties

- Desire for a 3<sup>rd</sup> party has long been high and is rising

## Perceived Need for a Third U.S. Political Party at High Point

In your view, do the Republican and Democratic parties do an adequate job of representing the American people, or do they do such a poor job that a third major party is needed?

— % Third party needed — % Parties do adequate job

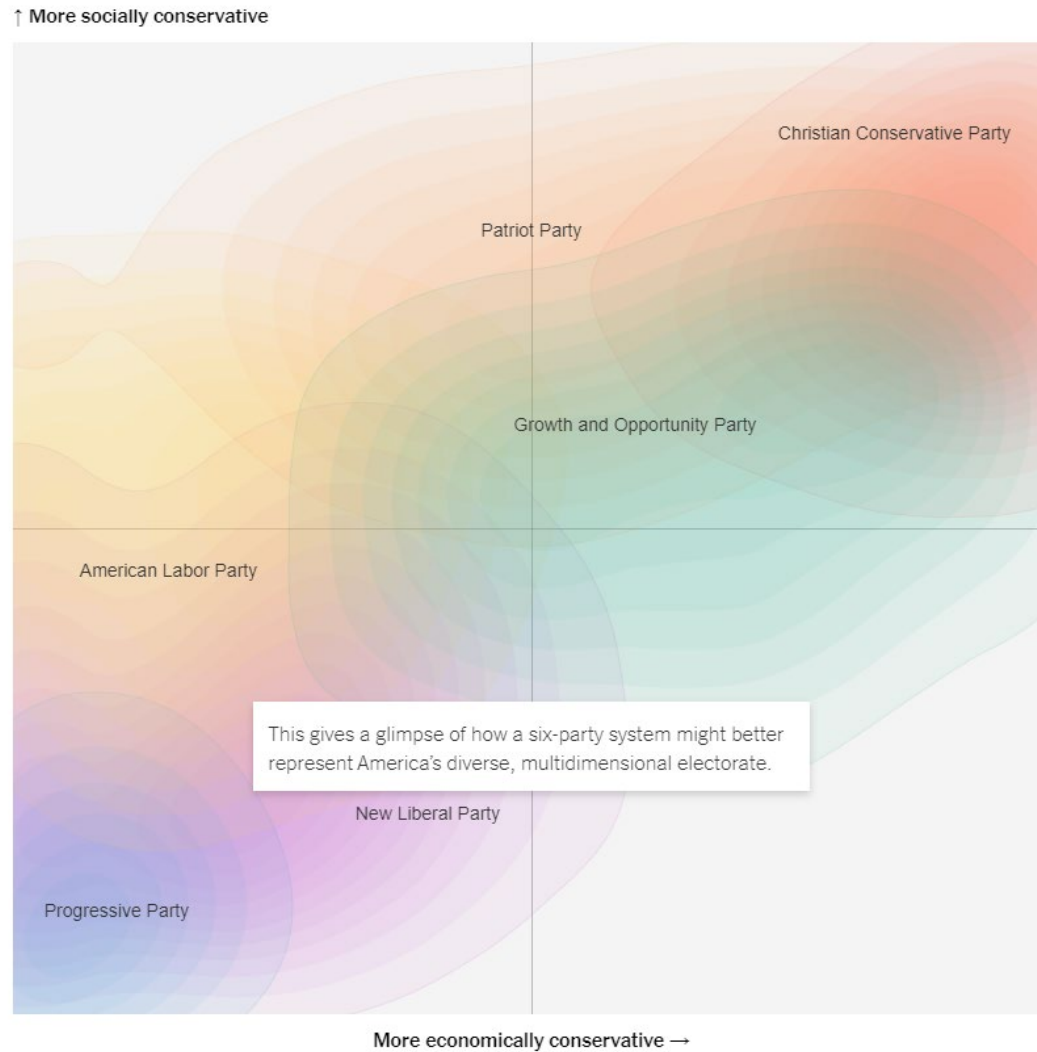


GALLUP

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Parties in the US

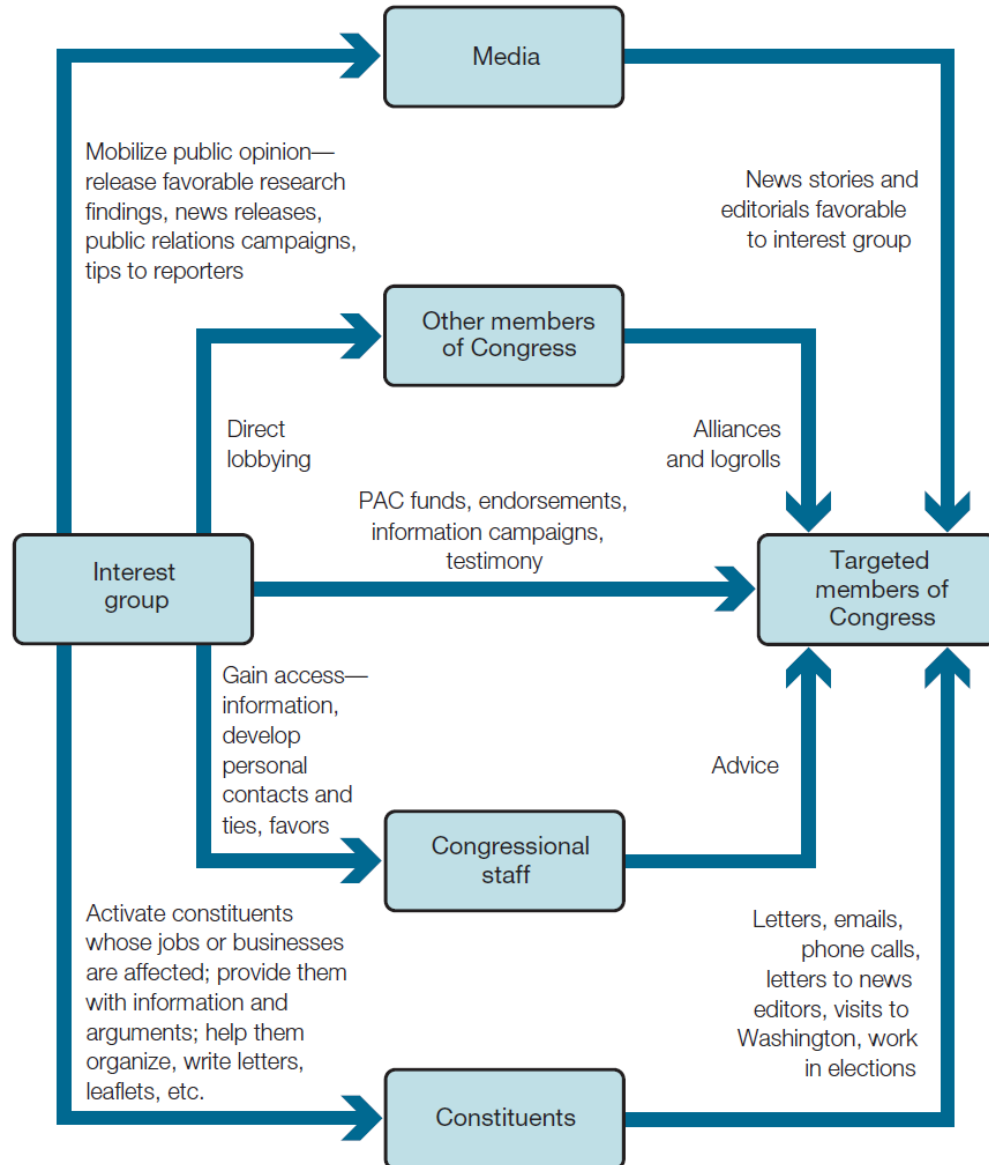
- When Americans say they want a third party, they don't actually agree on what that party should look like
  - Centrist? Conservative? Socialist?

# What Might a Multiparty US Look Like?

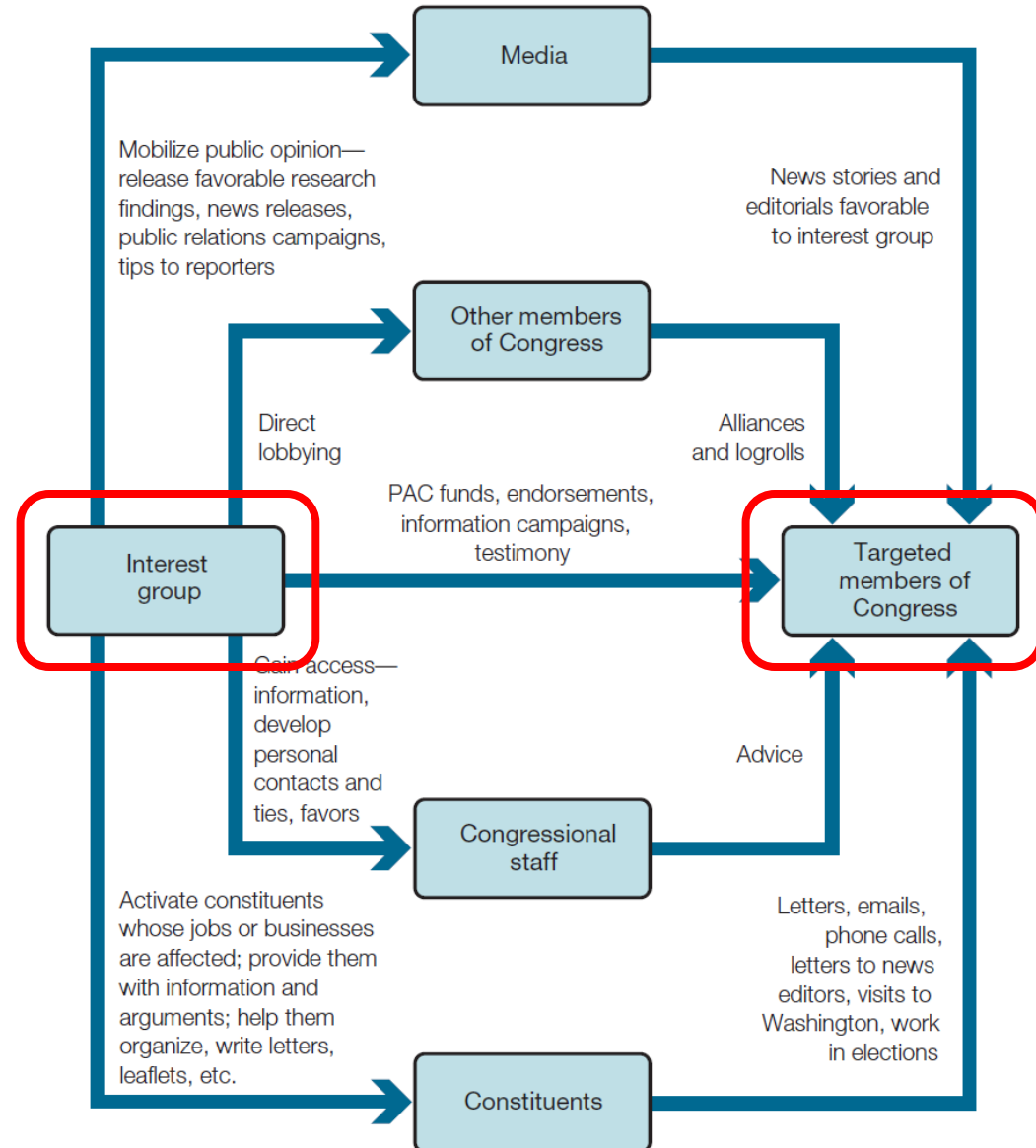


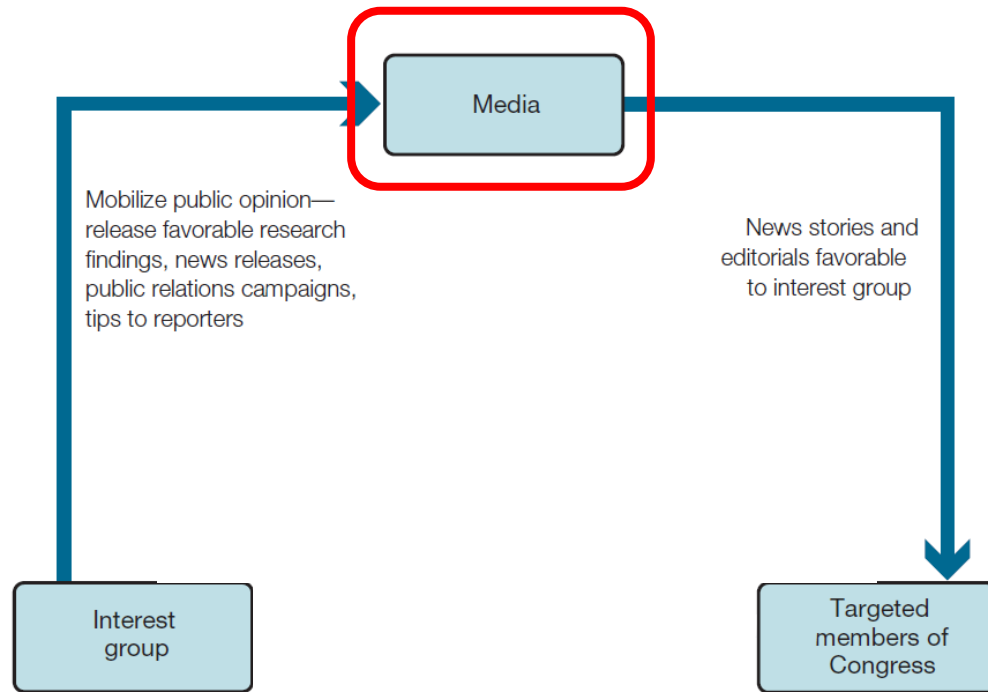
III – How do interest groups influence American politics?

If you understand this diagram, you'll understand most of the ways interest groups try to influence politics



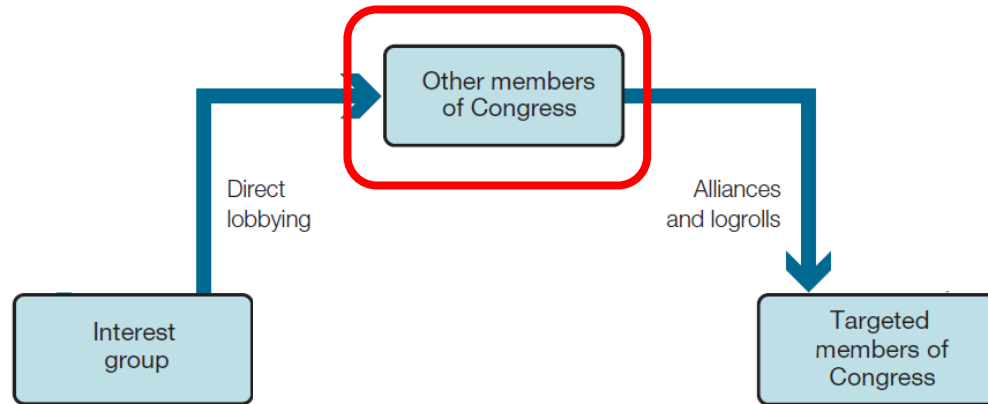
- Note the two central players in red:
- MCs are targeted when they're important for the issue the interest group cares about, such as because they're on a relevant committee
- All the other lines indicate ways groups try to influence MCs



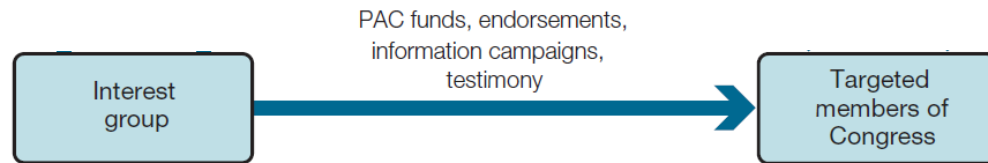


- One way that interest groups exert influence is through the media
  - They try to gin up coverage of their group or issue in a way that favors them by releasing research, tipping off reporters to stories, & thru PR campaigns
  - If successful, the media will report stories that can then influence members of Congress who hear these stories



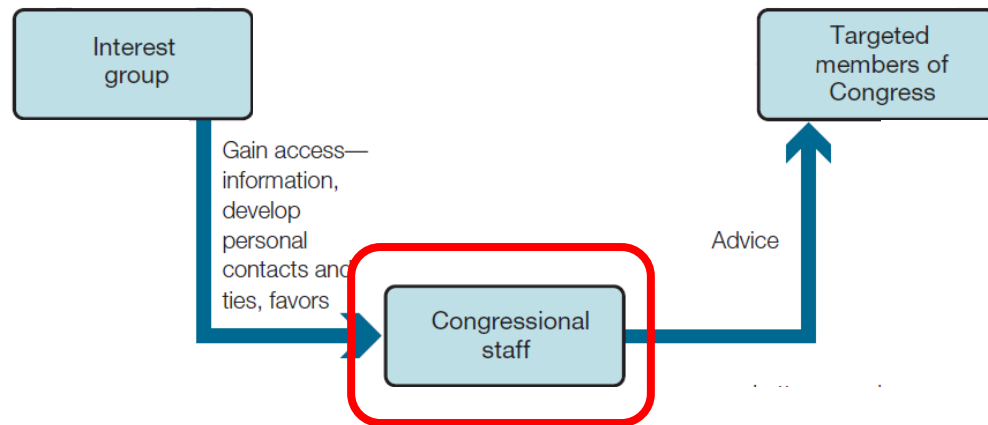


- Another way interest groups exert influence is via other members of Congress
  - By pressuring other MCs, interest groups can get them to ally with targeted MCs or engage in **logrolls**, or vote trading between MCs
    - Interest groups can facilitate these trades

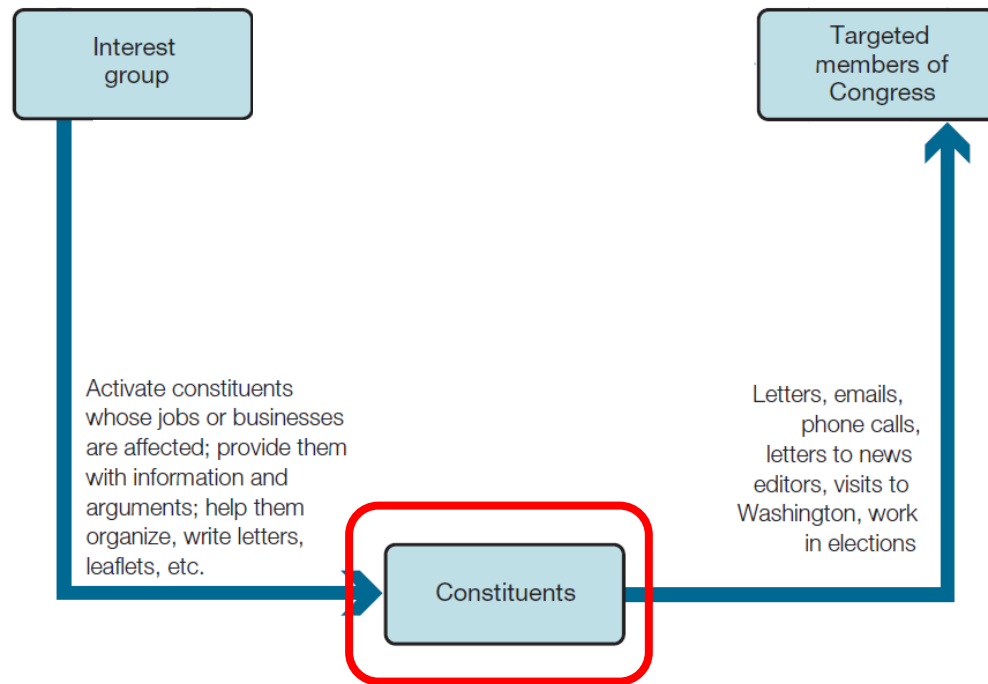


- The classic, direct ways interest groups influence MCs are some you may have heard of
  - These include providing campaign funds via **political action committees (PACs)**, securing endorsements from important individuals, conducting info campaigns to inform MCs about their issues, and providing testimony in congressional hearings

- Another way interest groups try to influence MCs is through gaining **access** to their staff
  - By developing a relationship with staffers such as by doing them small favors, interest groups can induce them to provide advice to the targeted MCs friendly to the interest group



- Final way interest groups try to influence MCs is by persuading constituents to pressure them
  - Activate constituents of targeted MCs to contact them
  - Interest groups may ‘help’ citizens organize themselves. Often derided as phony “**astroturfing**” when not many constituents are involved & the group is the main driver (as opposed to authentic “**grassroots**” movements)



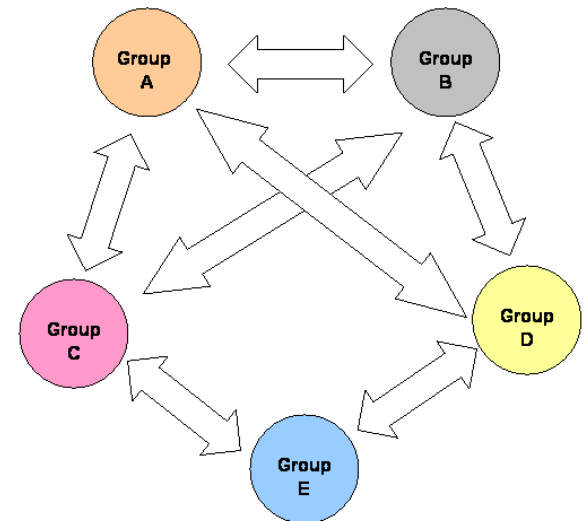
IV – What alternatives and problems do interest groups present to democracy?

# Interest Groups in Comparative Perspective

- There are two main types of interest group systems in the world:
  - Pluralist
  - Corporatist

# Pluralism

- US's interest group system is pluralist
  - Many different interest groups (factions) compete in a free-for-all to influence government and shape public policy
    - Federalist No. 10 describes pluralist politics
  - Uncoordinated, open, and anarchic system



# Corporatism

- Corporatist systems organize and coordinate society's main interests, above all those of labor and capital
  - **Peak organizations** are central players
    - Example: One peak org unites all employers in an industry or sector of the economy; another peak org all the employees in it
    - Relatively few in number
  - Peak orgs participate formally in government policy making
  - Organized, orderly system



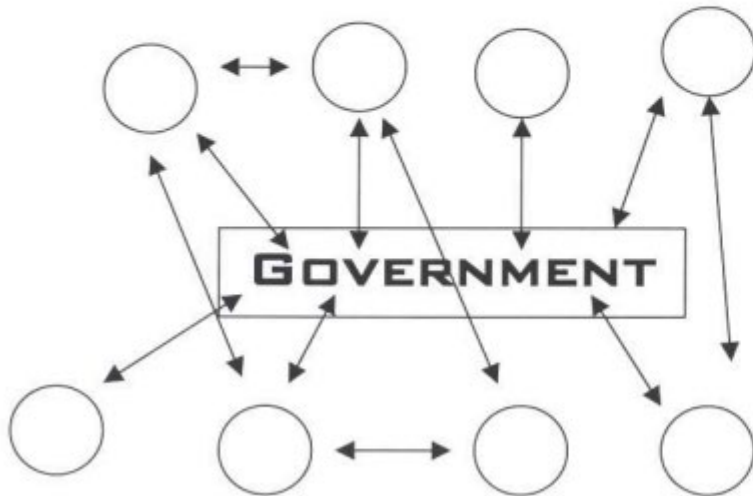
Solidarity, June 30, 1917. The Hand That Will Rule the World—One Big Union.



# Pluralism vs Corporatism

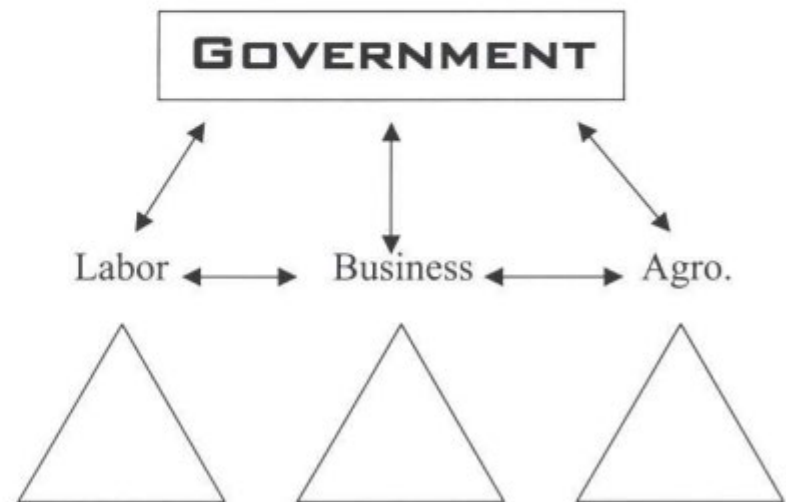
## Pluralism (US; UK)

○ = Interest Groups



## Corporatism (Swed.; Aus.; Ger.)

△ = Peak IG Organizations



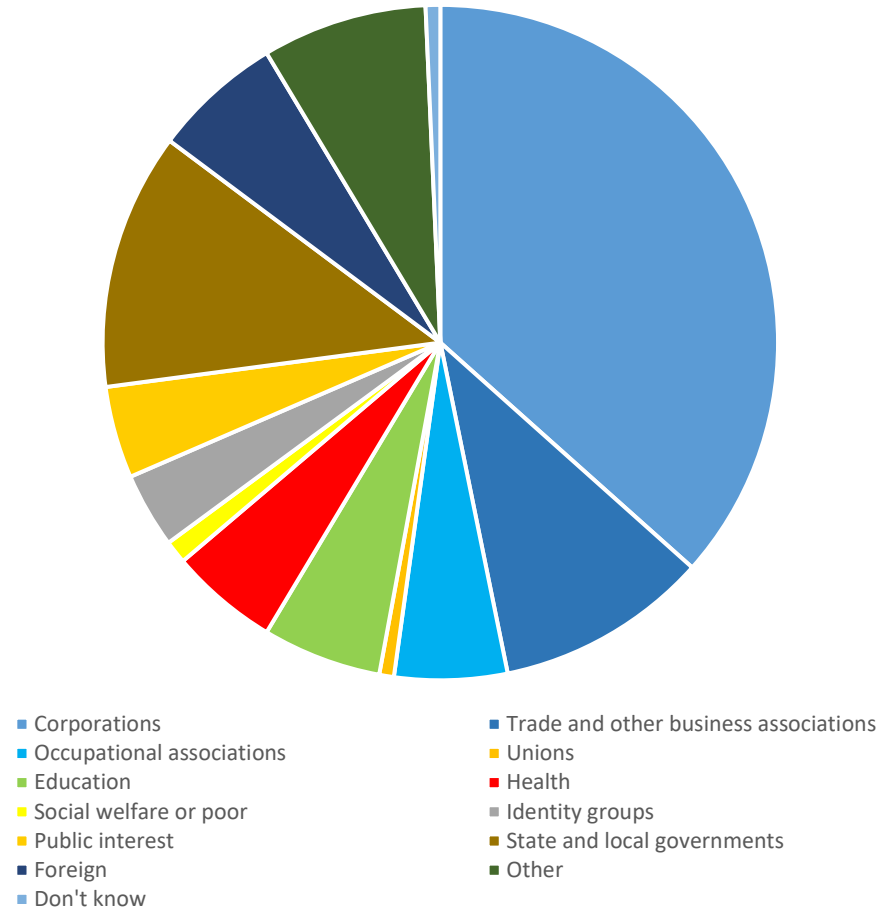
# Interest Groups in Comparative Perspective

- Pluralist systems open up more ways for interest groups to influence government
  - This might be bad if citizens can't see this influence, to hold representatives accountable for listening to it
- Regularized corporatist influence is easier to see, and so raises fewer concerns about accountability
  - Also tends to empower poorer citizens since labor is better organized and represented
  - But new issues that don't have well established peak organizations, such as environmental issues, may be neglected

# Interest Groups and Democracy

- US interest groups present clear dangers to democracy:
  - Usually represent big business & the rich and help them have greater influence over gov't
  - Evidence: Majority of interest groups represent corps, trade associations (groups of corps), occupational associations
    - This violates political equality and increases power of the rich ("oligarchy")
  - Only a small fraction serve the large majority (like social welfare & the poor)

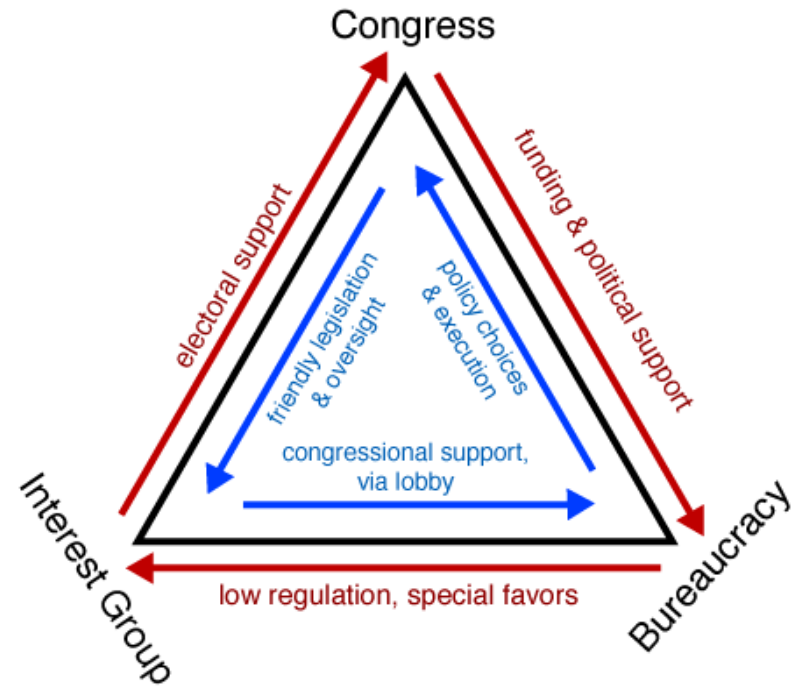
Interest Group Breakdown, 2011



Source: Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2018, p. 156

# Interest Groups and Democracy

- Another problem is that interest groups can prevent policy that serves the common good:
  - They can “capture” a policy area (via “**iron triangles**”) and impose costs on rest of society to benefit themselves
    - Example: Sugar subsidies; defense contractors. (See assignment in Canvas)
  - This **rent-seeking** harms the common good and is widely seen as a form of corruption



Iron Triangle

# Wrapping Up

- Despite their unpopularity, political parties are essential to democracy
  - Help solve numerous collective action problems
- America has the purest two party system in the world because of single member districts with plurality rule plus presidentialism
- Interest groups tend to empower the wealthy and business interests in a wide variety of ways through the US's pluralist interest group system