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The Public in Public Policy

Making tough decisions is never easy. Now imagine having to make decisions for thousands or millions of people. That's exactly what legislators do. Legislators are elected by people to make decisions on their behalf. Those decisions are a huge part of what goes into creating **public policy**—the government's stance or course of action for solving a problem that affects its people.

But there's a catch. Every public issue has two or more conflicting sides. People who voted for a legislator expect them to protect *their* interests over other people's, and those voters don't always agree on public issues. What about the people who didn't vote for the lawmaker? Legislators are responsible for looking out for them, too. So whenever a legislator is contemplating public policy, they have to consider everyone's interests. That's how things get complicated. People on each side of an issue pressure legislators to act in their favor. These people or groups become **influencers**. That's right, influencers. But instead of promoting trends on social media, political influencers attempt to shape public policy. How? That depends on the type of influencer involved. Influencers exist in different forms with varying levels of influence. But all of them ensure that the voices of the people are involved in creating public policy.



The Power of One?

Does one person really have the power to influence a legislator? Yes, they do! An individual can communicate their concerns to elected officials through emails, letters, petitions, phone calls, or by visiting the representatives in person. If an issue is a local one, an individual can attend and speak up at government meetings. Why would a legislator listen? Because an individual's most powerful influence is their vote and their ability to vote a representative out of a job.

If one person's voice and vote have power, then imagine the impact of multiple people saying or demanding the same thing. It's like a sports event. If there are 20 people in the audience clapping and cheering, they will affect the players. But if the stands are full of people clapping and cheering, the energy can be downright inspiring. There's power in numbers, and it's the same for pressuring legislators. That's why people join interest groups.



A woman asks a question at a town hall meeting about community environmental issues.

CCO/Down Arlotta via Public Health Image Library

Groups of Interest

Interest groups are organizations whose members share the same... well... interests. They can be small and community based, like members of a local historical society. They can be statewide, like an iron workers union or alliance of workers. Or they can be national, like the National Organization of Women.

Interest groups that start at the community level are called **grassroots organizations**. No, they aren't advocating for nice lawns. **Grassroots** means from the ground up—local people getting together because they share similar concerns. Grassroots groups influence public policy by raising awareness through informational websites, social media campaigns, community meetings, protests, rallies, mass mailings, and phone campaigns. Has someone ever come to your door with a petition or asked for a donation to their cause? They were probably representing a grassroots organization. Such groups continually recruit people or make alliances with other groups. Why? Because with more people, they can raise more money and represent more votes, which means they gain more political influence. Are you starting to recognize a formula here?



Photo: Michael Smith/Newsmakers via Getty Images

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) started as a grassroots organization but grew into a national movement with the power to influence the passage of national and state laws.



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Where grassroots organizations may have a few thousand people, statewide or national interest groups can have hundreds of thousands, even millions of members. Such groups tend to be more structured, and their size gives them a special advantage—the ability to raise an enormous amount of money. That money allows them to run numerous TV, radio, and online ads, hold large rallies, produce merchandise for sale, conduct research, and hire lobbyists.

Lobbyists are professionals whose job is to meet with and encourage legislators to support or defeat particular bills or causes. All interest groups can hire lobbyists. But large interest groups can hire many lobbyists—and that can be very influential! Let's say the legislature is debating a tax hike on steel products. Lobbyists for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers would visit multiple legislators and provide them with studies (funded by the alliance) with charts, statistics, and predictions that show how a proposed steel tax would hurt the automobile industry and the economy over the next five years. Lobbyists can testify before legislative hearings and work with legislators to help them write or amend a bill so that it supports their group's needs. The one thing lobbyists can't do is give a legislator money to influence their stance on a policy. That job falls to Political Action Committees.



Photo: Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images

Actors and celebrities can lobby for government action. Seth Rogan prepares to testify before a Senate committee in 2014 about the rising cost of Alzheimer's care in the U.S.



Photo: Alex Wong/Getty Images

Senate candidate Jim Webb (VA) speaks in 2006 as members of the International Association of Firefighters stand behind him to show their support.

Rally the Troops

If legislators have one thing in common, it's that they want to keep their jobs. To do that, they need votes. To get votes, they need a well-run election campaign. But campaigns are expensive and require a great deal of labor. Not to worry! Interest groups are here to help. They can raise money and create **Political Action Committees (PACs)**. PACs are separate organizations that give campaign donations to politicians' campaigns. They can mobilize their members as campaign volunteers, and they can **endorse**, or publicly support, a candidate. Have you ever seen a politician surrounded by a group of teachers or other workers holding signs supporting that candidate? The group is endorsing the politician and offering them block voting. **Block voting** is when a group pledges that all its members will vote for a certain candidate. (They can't force people to vote that way; they can only promise it.) Why would interest groups do so much work for a candidate? Because they hope that once their candidate is in office, they will support public policy that favors their group's interests. And because elected officials feel indebted to these groups for getting them elected, they may comply—which makes interest groups powerful influencers.

Party Time

Interest groups aren't the only influencers that use a campaign strategy. Political parties, like the Republicans and Democrats, play a similar role. Political parties uphold a **party platform**. It's a document that outlines the party's beliefs and stances on important issues. The party provides campaign money and staff to candidates who promise to fulfill the party's platform. Once a candidate is elected, most vote in line with their party. But if a legislator considers voting against a bill that their party supports, then political parties can apply pressure. They can threaten to remove their support for the representative's re-election campaign, or they can have other party members convince the legislator to vote their way. Oftentimes, deals are made. In politics, nothing gets passed without a little help from your friends. So a party member may promise to vote for a legislator's bill if that legislator, in turn, promises to vote with the party on a separate issue—which makes elected officials another type of influencer.



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Private, Public, and Big Thinkers

There are plenty of other influencers who try to sway policy to support their interests.

Who?	How?	Examples
Private companies and corporations (businesses owned by individuals or run by a group of people)	Hire lobbyists, conduct research, offer large campaign donations, testify before the legislature, produce ads	Amazon, Meta, Pfizer, Comcast, Boeing, etc. They may advocate for changes in tax laws, trade agreements, and less restrictive labor laws.
Public agencies and institutions (organizations funded by the government in whole or in part)	Testify before the legislature, conduct research, produce ads, get public support	Amtrak, Center for Disease Control, public universities They may advocate for more funding in a specific area or to establish a new program.
Think tanks (a group of scholars and experts who analyze public policy)	Conduct research and produce reports that analyze the effectiveness of a policy and provide alternative solutions	The Brookings Institute, Pew Research Center, Heritage Foundation (Think tanks can be conservative, liberal, or non-partisan.)

It Isn't Easy Being Popular

When it comes to campaigns, what ultimately gets a politician elected is the vote of the people. So a major influencer on legislators and policy is public opinion. **Public opinion** refers to the way people feel about something as a whole. Polls and surveys gather views from a sample of people who represent the U.S. population. (You've probably seen one pop up when you're online). The pollster presents the results as a summary of the entire public's opinion. Because legislators want their actions to be popular, they use public opinion to shape their stance on public policy. But there is a catch.

What shapes people's opinions about public policy? The information they receive about it, of course. And where do people get their information? From the **media**—the means of communication that reaches large numbers of people. Television, newspapers, magazines, radio, movies, the internet, and social media all inform people's views about the issues. But the media is not always objective. Media outlets want to make money, so they focus on issues that will draw a large audience. Some media outlets will try to be objective in their reporting, but others won't. They may present **biased** reporting, dedicating more time and coverage to one side of an issue than another. Because the media is easily accessible and constantly distributes news and information, it, too, is a major influencer on public opinion and a legislator's views of the issues.



Choosing Compromise

With all these competing groups influencing legislators, how does a representative meet the needs of all the people? Well... they don't. That's why a final policy rarely contains what a representative promised it would. To get public policy passed, a legislator usually has to compromise to meet the needs of several groups—even if that means compromising their personal views on an issue. Public policy decisions aren't easy to make, and satisfying the interests of multiple interest groups can make the process even harder.



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A. Term Tag. Match the word with its definition. Write the letter of the definition next to the word it explains.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. _____ Grassroots organizations | A. Members of a group promise and cast their vote for a particular candidate |
| 2. _____ Political Action Committees (PACs) | B. The way people feel about something as a whole |
| 3. _____ Public opinion | C. A group of scholars and experts who review, research, and analyze public policy |
| 4. _____ Think tanks | D. Organizations that are created by special interest groups to raise money for candidates' campaigns |
| 5. _____ Block voting | E. Community based organizations that raise awareness through local meetings and rallies |

B. Say It Your Way. Define the following terms in your own words.

1. Public policy _____

2. Interest group _____

3. Endorse _____

4. Party platform _____

5. Lobbyists _____



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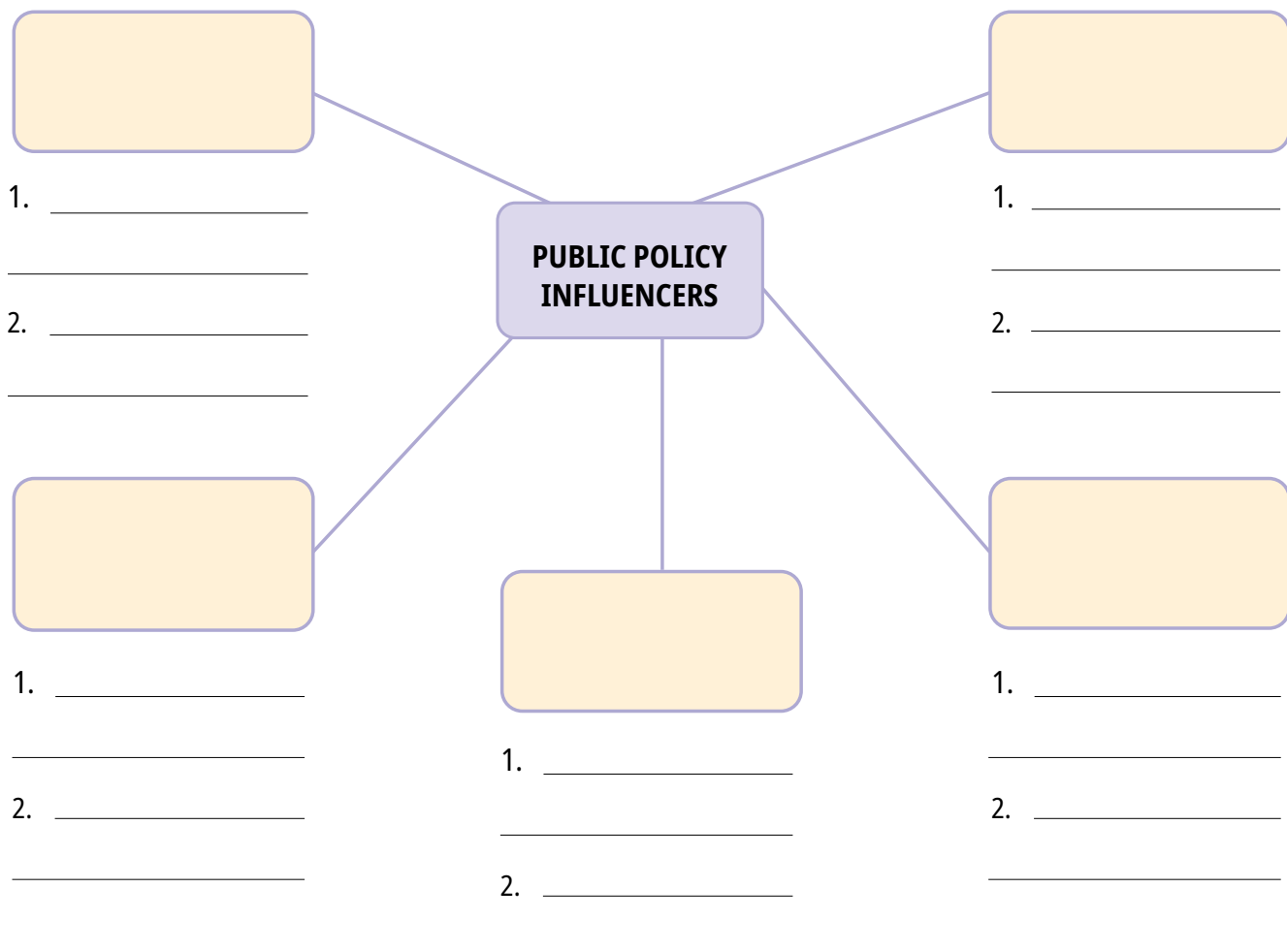
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C. Power Play. Answer both prompts and include two reasons in each answer.

1. Explain how and why the size of an interest group can affect its influence on a legislator.

2. How do you think individuals and grassroots organizations compare with businesses and corporations when it comes to influencing public policy? Explain your answer.

D. Mapping Influence. Review pages 1–2 of the reading. Write the names of five influencers in the boxes and list two actions each influencer can take to sway public policy.





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E. Pressuring Policy. Read the following scenario and answer the questions on the next page.

The problem: Residents in the Johnston neighborhood complain that their local public library is falling apart. The roof leaks, the heat is broken, and half the computers don't work. They want the city to build a new library.

The proposal: A City Councilor has proposed that the city set aside \$2 million in tax money to rebuild the library.

Supporters

Parents, teachers, librarians, and social workers say a new library will benefit the well-being of children and the community.

Students say they need a place to meet, do homework, and find resources for schoolwork.

Construction labor unions believe the project will create more jobs.

Small businesses say that a new library will draw more people to the area and increase business.

Tech4Elders, which holds its classes for senior citizens in the library, says a new facility will let them reach more people.

Opponents

City Councilman Jones holds TV interviews and says that the proposal is too expensive and that fixing bridges is the priority.

Police and firefighters associations argue that they need the money to hire new staff.

A drug rehabilitation center argues that they need the money to provide life-saving services.

Businesses say a new library will attract more students who will drive away other customers.

Residents near the library say that the construction will be disruptive and cause traffic, which is already bad, to increase in the area.

A town hall meeting is held. The City Council listens to the pros and cons of spending \$2 million on building a new library.

The policy: The city agrees to give \$1 million to rebuild the library but requires the library to fundraise the rest of the money. The fire and police unions are given \$500,000 to hire more staff, and another \$500,000 is set aside for bridge and road repairs.



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E. Pressuring Policy. (continued)

1. Identify four interest groups involved in the public library proposal scenario.

_____	_____
_____	_____

2. List two arguments in favor of the proposed policy and two arguments against the policy.

In Favor	Against

3. Choose two groups from the scenario. Give two suggestions for what actions each group could take to raise public awareness about the issue or influence the legislators voting on the proposal.

Group: _____

Group: _____

Actions: _____

Actions: _____

4. You are a member of the City Council and have to vote on the proposal to rebuild the library. Review the arguments from both sides and then answer the questions.

A. Would you have voted for or against this proposal? Explain your answer.

B. Do you agree with the compromise made in the final policy? Was there another compromise that could have been proposed to deal with this issue? Explain your answer.

C. What was the most difficult part about deciding to vote for or against this proposal? Explain your answer.

