**INTEREST GROUPS**

**Part A**: As you read this page, highlight all the ways that you can find in which individuals, interest groups, and media can influence government.

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| To **MONITOR** the government means to closely observe what officials, agencies, or branches are doing. For example, following a bill that is passing through Congress. | To **INFLUENCE** the government means to persuade members of the government to adopt policies or programs you prefer. |

Political parties are not the only groups that can influence government policies. **Individuals**, the **media** and special **interest groups** can monitor and be influential to government in many ways.

**KEY TERMS**:

**Public Policy**: The actions that the government takes about a problem.

**Public Opinion**: The collection of opinions or attitudes of the people.

**Interest Group**: A group of individuals with common interests that seeks to influence public policy.

**Lobbyists**: People who represent interest groups and communicate with lawmakers.

**INDIVIDUALS**

Any **individuals** can impact the government. Often, individuals attempt to influence the government by running for public office. People do not have to run for office to influence the government. By simply carrying out one of their most important civic responsibilities, voting, individuals play a major role in changing the government. Whether it is voting a candidate into office or out of office, or voting in favor of or against an amendment to the Florida Constitution, citizens change the government during every election. Petitioning the government, collecting signatures on issues, speaking at meeting, sending letters or e-mail messages, making campaign contributions, and using social media are additional ways that individuals can influence the government.

**INTEREST GROUPS**

An **interest group** is a group of individuals with common interests that seek to influence public policy. There are thousands of interest groups for all types of interests such as the environment, gun ownership, and medicine. **Interest Groups** use their First Amendment rights of peaceable assembly, free speech, and petition to monitor and influence the government. They attempt to influence people by working together for their goal. **Political Action Committees (PAC)** are often connected to interest groups. They raise money and contribute to campaigns of candidates that they support. When interest groups work with members of **Congress** or with other elected legislators to get laws passed, it is referred to as **lobbying.** Groups may hire **lobbyists,** who meet with lawmakers to try to get support for a bill that would benefit the issue the **PAC** supports. An interest group can also educate its members on issues it wants the group members to support. For example, interest groups ask their members to vote and give money to candidates that the interest group supports.

**THE MEDIA**

**Media** refers to methods of communicating to large numbers of people. The media includes newspapers, magazines, radio, television programs, internet websites, blogs, and social media. The media act as a **watchdog** to investigate and report on the government. They question government officials and research government activities to identify issues and to expose possible wrongdoing by government officials.

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**Part B**: After completing the reading, use what you have read and highlighted to help you to answer the questions below.

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| **QUESTION** | **ANSWER** |
| 1) What does it mean to **monitor** government? |  |
| 2) What does it mean to **influence** government? |  |
| 3) What are four ways that individuals can influence the government? |  |
| 4) What is an interest group? |  |
| 5) How do interest groups try to influence government? |  |
| 6) What are three ways that the media can monitor, or watch over, government? |  |
| 7) Of the answers you’ve provided, what do YOU think is the best way to influence the government, and why? |  |

8) Pretend that an interest group called the Council for Healthy School Lunches wants to make your lunch in the school cafeteria more healthy for students by adding fruits and vegetables and limiting the amount of fried foods. What are actions that they might take to influence the government to support their position?

A) Hire a lobbyist to meet with lawmakers to convince them to pass a law about healthy school lunches.

B) Create advertisements to educate the public about the importance of nutrition in school lunches.

C) Ask members of their interest group to vote in elections for candidates who have made funding school lunches a priority.

D) All of the above.

ANSWER:

**Part C**: **The Potato Problem**. Think back to our Bell Ringer and the debate about school lunch. Read the section below, and then follow the steps provided to create your OWN interested group and participate in the debate about potatoes in school lunch!

**Food For Thought**

What’s on the school menu today? French fries, chips, or baked potatoes? Believe it or not, people debate about what is and should be on your school lunch tray. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is responsible for creating nutritional guidelines for school lunches and wants to limit the amount of white potatoes and other starchy vegetables to one cup a week, or two servings. This proposal affects everyone from the potato farmer to the cafeteria worker to the students eating the tater tots. Not surprisingly, all of these people have differing opinions...

**Eat Your Broccoli**

Supporters of limiting potato servings argue that potatoes are often served fried or topped with high calorie items like sour cream, cheese, and bacon. They also worry that when students are given a choice between French fries or something like carrots or green beans, they too often choose the fries. Poor eating choices made early in life lead to obesity and numerous long-term health problems like diabetes and heart disease.

**Would you like fries with that?**

Opponents of the proposed change offer that potatoes are full of nutritional value, and aren’t always served in unhealthy ways. Fries can be baked rather than fried, and baked potatoes can be topped with healthier alternatives, like salsa. They also argue that potatoes are a cheap and plentiful option for a vegetable serving and that limiting potatoes would increase school lunch costs across the nation.

How would YOU enter this debate over potatoes in school lunches?

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| **Step One:** Which group do you want to be a part of and represent? (Highlight one)  Students  Potato Farmers  Schools  Nutritionists |
| **Step Two:** What is your position on including potatoes in school lunches? (Highlight one)  I think it is a **great** idea.  I think it is a **bad** idea |
| **Step Three:** What do you want to name your interest group? |
| **Step Four:** What reasons can you give to support your position? Try for at least two! |
| **Step Five:** Gather support! What are two things that your interest group might do to advocate for your position? (Use the reading for ideas.) |
| **Extra Credit**: Use the internet to search for images to create a logo or poster that would represent your interest group and its desires on school lunches. |