**INTEREST GROUPS**

**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.

**Part A**: Read this page on potatoes in school lunches, and then fill in the box at the bottom of the page.

**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 (USDA) 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...

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**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.

**Interested?**

The people on all sides of this argument have an **interest** in the outcome of the debate. That just means they are interested or concerned with how things end up. People pay attention to things that will likely affect their lives.

**How might limiting starchy vegetables like potatoes affect...**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Students?** | **Potato Farmers?** | **Schools?** |
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**Part B**: Read this page on how interest groups work, and then think of the goals or desires of the two opposing groups at the bottom of the page.

How does individual interest in a debate lead to action? What if people with these interests have other interests (like working or going to school) and can’t spend their entire day learning what is happening and doing something about it? Potato farmers and nutritionists have little time for marching in front of the USDA or making speeches to the public!

**Grouping Interests**

One way people can have their voice heard is to find others with the same concerns. **Interest groups** gather people and resources to support public policies that help their members. They work to persuade policy makers like senators and representatives to support government actions that help their members and oppose actions that hurt them. They also work to influence public opinion by educating the general public about their point of view. In this way, interest groups **advocate**, or promote, the needs and wants of the group. There are hundreds of interest groups in the United States working on many different types of issues.

**Taking Sides**

In the school lunch potato battle, one group that supports the limits on starchy veggies is the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). The CSPI is a strong advocate for nutrition and food safety from a scientific perspective. On the other side of the discussion is the National Potato Council (NPC), which advocates for government policies that help U.S. potato growers prosper. Both groups work to inform the USDA and elected officials that their position on the issue is the correct one.

**Think of two goals each group might have that would either support or oppose the new USDA limits on potatoes in school lunches.**

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| **CSPI supports less potatoes in school lunches. What might be two of their goals?** | **NPC supports more potatoes in school lunches. What might be two of their goals?** |
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**Part C**: **The Potato Problem**. Think back to our Bell Ringer and the debate about school lunch. Follow the steps provided to create your OWN interest group and participate in the debate about potatoes in school lunch!

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.) |
| **Step Six**: Use the internet to search for images to create a logo or mini-poster that would represent your interest group and its position on school lunches to the public. |