

# Unit 1, section 1.4 (pressure groups) background notes

## Notes from textbook

Pressure groups are organisations that seek to influence public policy. Pressure groups influence decision making—they are not part of government, so do not make decisions themselves. Pressure groups educate, informing the public about issues that may concern them and therefore helping them to develop their own views.

Pressure groups represent their followers in government, and political participation is easier for the public because pressure groups focus on a narrower range of issues, so more people may agree with them.

Pressure groups are different to parties in that they:

- do not seek power
- concern themselves with a narrow range of issues
- are not and do not have to be accountable for their actions
- sometimes act illegally or promote civil disobedience

Insider pressure groups have found a way into government and can influence MPs and ministers and policy directly through having a direct say in policy-making. This is good when many people may be disgruntled by something government does: government can consult the pressure group. If the pressure group was not inside, the government would not necessarily know the views of the public on a select, possibly local or localised issue such as farming or the banning of fox hunting. Outsider pressure groups still just have to influence and mobilise public opinion and then hope that they get enough of a following for government to notice them.

New social movements, forms of pressure groups, are often very fast-moving and grow rapidly, however they are prone to disappearing or merging with other, similar organisations, when they become popular and they see their task as done. An example of this is ‘Make Poverty History’ which had great success in 2005 but now seems to have disappeared.

Some pressure groups include:

- Greenpeace
- Shelter
- British Film Council
- Friends of the Earth
- Countryside Alliance

Smaller and larger groups exist. Larger groups include Age UK, Friends of the Earth, and the Countryside Alliance. Pressure groups tend to be less organised than political parties, and so more easily accessible to people as there is less hierarchy, however there are defined leaders and, particularly within insider pressure groups, those leaders may not listen to their following but push for themselves and their own, personal agendas, not those of the minority.

Pressure groups have increased in importance over the years, due to the public's disillusionment with the political parties, the narrowing of the political spectrum so the people being disgruntled about not having their select, possibly extreme views catered for, so to speak, or political parties' policies covering too wide and too general an area. Also, people find that joining a pressure group is better than joining a political party because fellow members don't believe in one or two things broadly related to, say, what party  $x$  stands for, but specifically (but not necessarily purely) the one specific thing that pressure group  $y$  stands for and campaigns for or against.

It is important to note that terrorist groups are **not** classed as pressure groups. Pressure groups should not be violent, however they can take what is known as direct action: protesting, lobbying, etc.

Pressure groups can succeed or fail, like all groups. Some reasons for success or failure may include:

- current political climate
- election proximity
- celebrity support
- opposition strength
- membership, money, and therefore resources
- organisation

Relating to the celebrity support mentioned in the list just above, Jamie Oliver campaigned not long ago for healthier school meals, which caused much controversy but also gained a big following.

Disadvantages of pressure groups within a democracy are that they are always in the way, they detract from main issues onto smaller issues that not everyone may care about, and they may have too much say or be too forceful. They are, however, advantageous in that they give a voice to the underrepresented, sometimes minority views, and/or actually do things instead of just talk about doing them.

## Definitions

**Pressure group:** An association that may be formal or informal, whose purpose is to further the interests of a specific section of society or to promote a particular cause by influencing government, the public, or both.

**Sectional/promotional groups:** Sectional pressure groups represent a section of society such as a trade union, whereas promotional pressure groups seek to promote causes.

**Insider/outsider groups:** Insider pressure groups operate inside the political system and have contact with ministers and official committees and are regularly consulted by government. Outsider pressure groups seek to influence by convincing the public.

**Pluralism:** Many different groups are allowed to exist and operate.

**Elitism:** Power monopolised by small groups of influential people.

## Information about Friends of the Earth from their website

Friends of the Earth are an environmental organisation who take action and campaign against climate change and other environmental issues such as food.

Their three main ideas are that:

1. everyone deserves a good life and have a fair share
2. the people and the environment need to work with the government, not against each other, and need to accept
3. people need to live within the limits of the natural world so that their children and children's children still have a planet to live on

Recently, Friends of the Earth have mounted (and won) a legal challenge regarding the recent solar panel Feed-in-Tariff reductions which claimed that the cut-off date—so soon after the announcement and before the end of the governmental consultation period—was unlawful, so they are acting in the interests of all the businesses and people affected by the downfall (due to this) of the (previously thriving) solar panel industry and its customers.