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## UK politics

# Sample essay on pressure groups

*Evaluate the view that pressure-group success is dependent on media attention.*

**This sample essay should be read alongside 'Publicity and pressure' by Maria Egan.**

A pressure group is a membership-based organisation whose aim is to influence policymaking without seeking power. Pressure groups have a variety of aims and employ a range of methods that can often prove controversial. In April 2023 the Grand National was interrupted by Animal Rebellion and the World Snooker Championship was disrupted by Just Stop Oil. These events are designed to grab the headlines. The view that pressure-group success is dependent on media attention is a valid argument to some extent. Media attention can significantly influence the outcomes of pressure-group activities by shaping public opinion, putting pressure on policymakers, and raising awareness about specific issues. However, it is important to recognise that success is influenced by a combination of factors, and media attention is just one of them. Ultimately, pressure groups can achieve their aims without being dependent on media attention.

Many pressure groups, particularly outsider groups campaigning for causes the government may not support, would argue that media attention can lead to name recognition and mass public support. Groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil can only put pressure on the government if they can attract people to take part in their direct action and civil disobedience campaigns. There is clearly no relationship between throwing soup over a Van Gogh painting and the government's climate policy, but it certainly generated media attention and name recognition for Just Stop Oil. Extinction Rebellion's entire strategy revolved around overwhelming the state through mass arrests during the occupation of five key bridges in central London in 2018. Such strategy needs mass participation, which can only come through generating press attention. However, the clear counterargument to this is that there is no straightforward correlation between media attention and public support. This is most clearly seen by the fact that negative media attention can leave the public hostile to the actions of disruptive pressure groups. In February 2022, YouGov polling revealed that most Britons (78%) believe this kind of protesting hinders, rather than helps, a cause. If public opinion is overwhelmingly against a pressure group, the antipathy for the group may begin to overshadow the worthiness of the cause. Ultimately, media attention does not always encourage new membership or mass participation.

It could be argued that if a pressure group's main aim is to influence policymakers, then media attention can prove highly successful. After Extinction Rebellion caused massive disruption in central London throughout 2018 and 2019, the UK Parliament voted to declare a 'climate emergency' in May 2019, which had been a key aim of the protests. Media attention can hold policymakers accountable for their actions or inactions. When protest groups receive media coverage, it creates a public record of their activities and demands. If policymakers fail to address the concerns raised by pressure groups, they risk being portrayed unfavourably in the media, which may hurt their chances of re-election. This can incentivise policymakers to respond to pressure-group demands in order to avoid negative publicity. A notable example is the Cameron government's U-turn on the selling of Britain's national forests in 2011, after the grassroots website 38 Degrees started a petition which attracted

more than 531,000 signatures and the National Trust mobilised its 5.4 million members against the proposal. Nevertheless, a compelling counterargument to this is that media attention is transient, and politicians may use negative media attention to score political points with voters by coming out against certain groups, and even legislating against protest. Once Parliament had declared a climate emergency in 2019, press coverage of Extinction Rebellion fell away, and activists and scientists now believe the government is not acting fast enough. The hostile press and public reaction to Just Stop Oil has encouraged the current Conservative government to speak out against the group. The government has also specifically referenced Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion in its controversial Public Order Act, which attempts to limit disruptive protests. Far from helping these groups to achieve their aims, the negative media attention generated has allowed policymakers to ignore the groups' demands.

Finally, media coverage provides pressure groups with a platform to present their arguments to a wider audience. By harnessing the power of the media, pressure groups can raise awareness for their cause. This can be particularly influential when pressure groups are advocating for niche or overlooked issues that may not otherwise receive attention. A prime example of this would be the campaign groups protesting against contamination of British beaches and rivers. Surfers Against Sewage has leveraged the media so successfully that it now has over 20,000 members, and support from celebrities, high-profile politicians and even members of the royal family. This would suggest that media attention can take a small but worthy issue and raise it to one of national attention. Despite this, it is clearly an overstatement to suggest that pressure groups are entirely dependent on media attention to be successful. Often, the strategic position of a pressure group — how important the group's issue or membership is to the British economy or functioning of society — is far more important. This is inherently linked with whether the government will listen to a group, and therefore grant them what is known as insider status. A prime example of this would be the National Farmers' Union. Rarely will the NFU generate wide media coverage, and yet the government routinely consults it on legislation and the NFU's president has had several meetings with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. The British Medical Association is not as headline-grabbing as Just Stop Oil, but as the recognised trade union for doctors it is vital for UK national infrastructure, and is therefore critical to the ongoing pay negotiations for British doctors.

In conclusion, media attention plays a significant role in the success of pressure groups, as it can shape public opinion, influence policymakers and raise awareness about important issues. However, it is not the sole determinant of success. Factors such as the strategic position, financial influence and the tone of the media coverage also contribute to pressure-group effectiveness. Pressure groups that can effectively combine media strategies with other forms of advocacy are more likely to achieve their goals, but it is not correct to say that pressure groups are dependent on media attention.

### Student tasks

- Highlight the line of argument in this essay. You can find it in every paragraph.
- Rewrite the line of argument using the opposite view: that pressure-group success *is* dependent on media attention.
- Carry out research into the Public Order Act of 2023. This case study can be used as evidence in a range of A-level politics topics such as Parliament (ping-pong), Democracy (does the Act take away fundamental rights?) as well as the topic in this essay.

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