

Volume 35, issue 4, April 2026

US politics

Interest groups and US democracy

This sample Edexcel-style essay should be read alongside ‘Pluralist pressure: Evaluating the impact of PACs, Super PACs and non-profits’ (pp. 24–27).

Evaluate the view that interest groups promote democracy in the USA. (30 marks)

Although interest groups in American politics can widen participation and representation, improve policy-making and play an educational role, increasingly their impact on democracy is negative. The role of donations, secrecy and the elitism generated by the power of certain groups is damaging and has led to a decline in pluralism and widening distrust in the system.

Commentary: this introduction explains the debate, includes some of the key arguments and relevant terminology that will be discussed, and suggests the line of argument.

A weaker argument is that Political Action Committees (PACs) and Super PACs allow the US to function well as a pluralist society, helping a wide range of interest groups to engage with election campaigns and support chosen candidates. A central principle of the US Constitution is free speech, and as the Supreme Court ruled in the *Citizens United* case of 2010, corporations and associations should be free to fund candidates. PACs exist for a wide range of reasons, including those supporting female candidates such as EMILYs List or the Super PAC NextGen Climate Action, which has an environmental focus. This suggests that PACs do not just represent narrow elite interests. However, a more convincing argument is that PACs and Super PACs do the opposite of what they claim to do. They reduce – rather than widen – representation, allowing powerful and well organised minorities to have undue influence on elected politicians. For example, in the 2024 election cycle, American PAC – founded with the support of Elon Musk – spent over \$170 million. Super PACs are allowed to raise unlimited amounts of money, which they use to fund their own campaigns to support candidates. The 2024 presidential and congressional elections were the most expensive elections ever, with spending reaching \$16 billion. This shows that interest groups have helped to erode democracy in the USA, allowing wealthy interests to dominate at the expense of the majority.

This paragraph uses information from the article to discuss the role of PACs and includes relevant and contemporary examples. The judgement at the end explains why the more convincing argument is stronger: PACs damage democracy because they strengthen the influence of wealthy donors, rather than supporting pluralism (an essential element of liberal democracy).

A weaker argument is that interest groups bring important issues to the attention of politicians that otherwise might be ignored. This clearly benefits democracy by widening representation and encouraging pluralism. For example, the American Civil Liberties Union works to protect the rights of marginalised and vulnerable groups such as trans people, or those in ICE custody. They play an

important role in raising the profile of these issues. However, a stronger argument is that due to the power of certain groups, politicians do not weigh up competing arguments on a level playing field. Poorer outsider groups do not have connections to the heart of power. There exists what is known as the 'revolving door' system, where politicians and lobbyists move between these two job roles. For example, in 2012, 64% of the members of Congress who were not re-elected became lobbyists. This creates close connections and encourages secrecy and, potentially, corruption. Therefore, interest groups damage democracy because although in theory they should create pluralism, in reality – in a system dominated by money – they allow for more representation of narrow interests.

This paragraph examines the theory that interest groups support pluralism by representing minority interests. It includes relevant examples, and the judgement shows that although it might appear that they widen access, this is an illusion.

A final weaker argument is that pressure groups provide expertise and technical data for 'generalist' politicians and have vital information to improve the quality of legislation. They can provide specific advice to ensure the effectiveness of bills. However, a much stronger argument is that their information and advice is likely to be one-sided. Therefore, when helping to write legislation, they will ensure that it is designed specifically to protect certain groups, such as the oil and gas industry. For example, during the creation of private prison legislation, private prison corporations such as the Corrections Corporation of America were involved, which could be seen as a conflict of interest. Although the expertise that interest groups provide is valuable and could improve democracy by helping to create balanced and fair legislation, it is more likely to damage democracy by leading to legislation that is written to suit the interests of a particularly powerful group.

This paragraph examines the view that the expert nature of some interest groups will help in the legislative process. However, the judgement shows that we need to consider *why* interest groups would offer their support and resources to do this. They clearly want to influence the wording to protect their own interests.

In conclusion, although it might appear that interest groups improve representation, accountability and participation in US politics, thereby improving democracy, in fact they make the system elitist and represent corporate minority interests instead of the majority.

Student task

- 1 Add another paragraph to this essay, looking at the role that interest groups play in widening participation, allowing citizens to get involved in politics in a different way, and between elections.
- 2 Rewrite this essay with the opposing line of argument: that interest groups benefit democracy.
- 3 Class discussion: what does it mean to 'promote democracy'?

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