

Educational Curriculum Development

Political Parties, Interest Groups, and Mass Media

There are three formal branches of the United States government: executive, legislative, and judicial. Each branch has a distinct role, and although interrelated, is fundamentally independent. These three branches perform *checks and balances*. In other words, each branch plays an important role in maintaining an effective government, with no one branch having ultimate or singular power.

Although these formal bodies are the decision making authorities, there are many influences on how and what decisions are made. Government exists within a culture and a body of people with varying ideas and focuses on issues. Impacting the branches of government are political parties, interest groups, and the mass media. Each is profoundly important to the functioning of government, and as a whole, guide the direction of the government in many ways. It could be said that these actors are the voice of the people – through organizations designed to share perspectives and messages directing governance.

Political parties organize agendas around which they rally their members. Political parties are the bodies that promote candidates for election, presenting those candidates to the public for consideration and ultimately election. The United States has a two-party system, meaning there are two primary political parties from which individuals are elected: Republican and Democratic. There are in fact additional political parties, and there is no prohibition on the growth of these parties. There are also factions within each party. These factions come about in the organizing of agendas. Underlying each political party is a core set of ideals, a formal and informal set of beliefs about how government and the country should be run and the focus of priorities.

Interest groups can be formal or less formal groups of people with overlapping interests seeking to influence governance. Political action committees (PACs) are formal interest groups which abide by certain laws, and attempt to sway the political agenda. PACs may raise and spend money on behalf of issues or candidates, as well as attempt to influence the public support for these issues or candidates. While highly influential, PACs are often criticized. PACs have the ability to guide politics and policy, sometimes with unrestricted amounts of money. They also have the power to lobby for their issues – directly influencing the political and policy decision makers. PACs are not inherently negative. The organized support of issues is essential to our political system. However, sometimes the perception and reality of PACs is that they have undue influence because money is a powerful motivator and obligator.

The mass media has been called the “fourth estate,” implying both independence from, and influence on, the government. It is the media’s role to present facts, but facts can be interpreted in various ways and the media often uses their powerful public connection to express facts (and sometimes distort them) to meet a political agenda, and to turn a profit. That is not to say all media is biased. Most media aims to present an objective account of news. However, even in the choice of what news to cover, the media has an influence on the public. It could be argued that the media has the most powerful impact on the public, as it is a direct link to the general public through television, radio, print media, and the Internet – which has the unique ability to band people together through social networking. The media determines when and what information is shared, the context, and the tone. The mass media can reach people nearly instantly and globally, and broadly speaking, the mass media is seen as less biased than many other influential groups.

While political parties, interest groups, and the mass media are not the only players in shaping government and politics, they have a powerful and essential role. Their role is also complex, with the potential for abuse that can be either avoided or exploited.

Questions

The objective of the lesson is to help students understand the basic form and function of political parties, interest groups, and the mass media. These exist within a cultural framework, impact the workings of government, and relate to one another.

The questions assess the achievement of the objective through an examination of the foundation of political parties, and a comparison of different purposes and guiding principles.

The first question addresses a broad understanding of why and how political parties and the government they run differ from one another, and have a fundamental ideological underpinning that focuses each party.

The second question is a specific example of how actors have different motivations and ethical obligations.

The correct answers are in **bold** and an explanation of why each answer is correct/incorrect is in (*italics*) below.

- 1. Why might political parties have different core ideals and beliefs from one another?**
 - a. They need their members to rally around them, so they design their ideals and beliefs around their members.
(*This answer presents a conceptual flaw. Political parties, like democracies, are representative not individualistic.*)
 - b. Although we all live in one culture, within a culture people have varying ideas and put their focus on different issues.**
(*The fundamental difference between political parties is about a world view and priorities.*)
 - c. They are attempting to get funding from different PACs and attention from different media groups.
(*Although this may be true, it is not the reason political parties differ.*)
 - d. It is part of American culture that people are allowed to disagree.
(*This is also true, but not the reason we have distinct political parties.*)

- 2. The mass media receives and spends large amounts of money which is used to influence the public. Why is the mass media not considered an interest group, like a PAC?**
 - a. Some mass media acts like an interest group, and gets away with it.
(*This is knee jerk response that feels true, but it is not a thoughtful position.*)
 - b. Because of free speech, the mass media has a right to present the news as it sees fit.
(*Free speech is a distractor because it seems relevant. Whether or not the media has free speech, it is not addressed as a topic.*)
 - c. Even though the mass media is not totally unbiased, it has an ethical obligation to attempt to be objective. PACs do not.**
(*It is important for students to realize that while ideals and standards are difficult to achieve and may not be fully met, they are still essential.*)
 - d. The mass media does not work for a specific political candidate or agenda.
(*This may be true, but it is incidental to the question.*)