

Political Parties, Interest Groups, NGOs
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John Sweeney, head of the AFL-CIO federation of U.S. labor organizations, addresses a meeting.

(The following article is taken from the U.S. Department of State publication, *USA Democracy in Brief*.)

Citizens cannot be required to take part in the political process, but without citizen action, democracy will weaken. The right of individuals to associate freely and to organize themselves as they see fit is fundamental to democracy.

Political Parties

Political parties recruit, nominate, and campaign to elect public officials; draw up policy programs for the government if they are in the majority; offer criticisms and alternative policies if they are in opposition; mobilize support for common policies among different interest groups; educate the public about public issues; and provide structure and rules for the society's political debate. In some political systems, ideology may be an important factor in recruiting and motivating party members. In others, economic interests or social outlook may be more important than ideological commitment.



A Ugandan aid worker uses a solar-powered computer provided by an American NGO.

Party organizations and procedures vary enormously. On one end of the spectrum, multiparty parliamentary systems can be tightly disciplined organizations run almost exclusively by full-time professionals. At the other extreme is the United States, where rival Republican and Democratic parties are decentralized organizations functioning largely in Congress and at the state level – which then coalesce into active national organizations every four years to mount presidential election campaigns. Election campaigns in a democracy are often elaborate, time-consuming, and sometimes

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silly. But their function is serious: to provide a peaceful and fair method by which the people can select their leaders and determine public policy.

Interest Groups and NGOs

A citizen of a democracy may be a member of a number of private or volunteer organizations – including interest groups that try, in some fashion, to influence public policy and persuade public officials of their views. Critics may decry the influence of "special interests," but all citizens recognize that every democracy protects the right of such interest groups to organize and advocate for their causes.

Many traditional interest groups have been organized around economic issues; business and farm groups, and labor unions still wield powerful influences in most democratic systems. In recent decades, however, the nature and number of interest groups has grown and proliferated enormously to encompass almost every area of social, cultural, and political, even religious, activity. Professional organizations have risen to prominence, along with public interest groups that support causes – from improved health care for the poor to protection of the environment – that may not directly benefit their members. Governments themselves may function as interest groups: in the United States, associations of state governors, big-city mayors, and state legislatures regularly lobby the U.S. Congress on issues of concern to them.

The dynamics of interest group politics can be complex. Numbers matter – groups with large national followings will draw automatic attention and hearings from public officials. But in many cases, small, tightly organized groups that are strongly committed to their issues can exercise influence out of proportion to their numbers.

One of the most striking developments in recent decades has been the emergence of internationally based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In attempting to serve the needs of a community, nation, or cause, which may be defined globally, these NGOs try to supplement or even challenge the work of the government by advocating, educating, and mobilizing attention around major public issues and monitoring the conduct of government and private enterprise.

Governments and NGOs frequently work as partners. NGOs may provide expertise and personnel on the ground for implementation of government-funded projects. NGOs may be politically unaffiliated, or they may be based on partisan ideals and seek to advance a particular cause or set of causes in the public interest. In either model the key point is that NGOs operate under minimal political control of states.

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