**Interest groups** are defined as groups of individuals and/or institutions united by shared opinions or interests and organized together in an effort to influence political outcomes.6 Interest groups sometimes try to pressure government directly and, at other times, prefer to keep their distance from government even while they seek to shape public attitudes and beliefs. In comparing how interest groups operate across countries, we will see that interest groups can be either partners or competitors with government.

**INTEREST GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES**

Interest groups in the United States use a number of strategies in their efforts to influence politics. **Direct lobbying** is a strategy whereby interest groups make personal contact with political officials or their staff and try to persuade them to support the aims of the interest group.

The number of interest groups lobbying government at any single time can be mind-boggling to outsiders. In 2009, the number of lobbyists registered to lobby the U.S. Congress exceeded 13,000. During the first year of the Obama administration, more than 4,000 lobbyists were deployed by interest groups trying to shape health care reform. While these numbers were high, they were not necessarily surprising to Washington insiders. After all, in 2003, 358 different interest groups had mobilized to support the Bush administration’s Medicare bill. In earlier years, when health care reform was being debated during the first Clinton administration, members of Congress reported scheduling nightmares as they tried to accommodate lobbyists representing chiropractors, dance therapists, social workers, masseurs, and other care providers, all competing to convince Congress to include their respective treatments in any health care reform bill.7 Similarly, when Congress reformed tobacco legislation, convenience store owners and asbestos industry representatives joined cigarette manufacturers and tobacco farmers in flooding Congress with professional lobbyists. Why were these different groups so interested in tobacco? The National Association of Convenience

Stores lobbied to prevent stringent congressional regulations on how convenience stores could display tobacco products, not an inconsequential matter considering that tobacco items represented almost 30 percent of all convenience store sales.8 Asbestos corporations lobbied Congress to require tobacco companies to help pay for lawsuits won by individuals suing asbestos manufacturers because, the asbestos lobby asserted, smokers were at greater risk for asbestos-related lung cancer than were nonsmokers.9

Direct lobbyists target public officials carefully. Rather than maximizing the number of officials with whom they meet, lobbyists tend to concentrate on contacting a small group of officials whom they identify as key decision makers. For example, during the congressional debates on health care reform in 2009–2010, lobbyists from the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) focused special efforts on persuading Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus to accommodate pharmaceutical concerns, insofar as Senator Baucus was strategically central in drafting, amending, and negotiating details of the Senate’s version of health care reform. Similarly, in 2009, when coal industry representatives lobbied Congress in opposition to stringent greenhouse-gas emissions regulation, industry officials identified 26 key senators with whom to meet. No matter the policy in question, direct lobbyists seek out the political leaders whose support can be of greatest assistance to their particular interest group.

Therefore, when sugar producers wanted to maintain tight restrictions on sugar imports as a means of keeping the price of domestically produced sugar high (approximately twice as high as international prices), lobbyists focused their efforts on members of the House and Senate Agricultural Committees, both of which had jurisdiction over the writing of such laws.10 Similarly, when Southwest Airlines sought to influence congressional decision making on airline taxation levels in 1997, its spokespeople gave special attention to lobbying Senator Trent Lott, who, not coincidentally, was the Senate majority leader at the time. During the lobbying effort, Southwest Airlines announced it was preparing to begin service to Jackson, Mississippi. What was this about? Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that Senator Lott was from Mississippi and had complained loudly about the lack of airline service to his state. The success of lobbying efforts is often linked to two factors: the expertise of the lobbyist and the ability of the lobbyist to establish close connections with influential decision makers. Lobbyists who are professional experts on an issue tend to have a tremendous advantage over their less experienced counterparts. Indeed, lawmakers have often remarked that they depend on lobbyists to provide them with technical information. A lobbyist who can do so makes offi ceholders look good and sometimes saves them from making embarrassing mistakes. Imagine, for example, how you might have felt had you been a member of the Senate Finance Committee in 1992. Committee members received a letter informing them that a proposed tax law had placed certain tax deduction provisions in the wrong section of the tax code; these provisions, having to do with deductions for club dues, had been written into Section 172 but technically belonged, the lobbyist explained, in Section 264. A congressional staff member later admitted that this writer probably understood these tax provisions better than anyone in Congress or in the U.S. Treasury Department. When the tax code was later revised, the writer’s proposed revisions were included. As former House of Representatives member-turned-lobbyist David Skaggs remarked in an interview in 2010, lobbyists who can be trusted as having accurate information and who can use that information to educate elected officials on complex policy questions can be especially effective in promoting their interest groups’ objectives.

In such cases, the line between lobbying for a law or policy and actually writing the law or policy is blurred. It is not, in fact, unusual for lobbyists to participate actively in drafting legislation for introduction in Congress. In 2009, America’s Natural Gas Alliance, a consortium of 28 natural gas companies, worked closely with Senators John Kerry and Barbara Boxer to write environmental legislation to designate natural gas as a clean energy source that could help the United States transition to green energy technologies. Members of Congress have also been known to consult with lobbyists working for electric utility companies when drafting laws to regulate utilities and to look to the cigarette industry lobby when passing laws to regulate cigarettes. With respect to the latter, for example, when Congress passed legislation in 1965 requiring labels on cigarette packages, the legislation enacted included provisions proposed by the cigarette industry. A 1995 bill to roll back protections for endangered species introduced by Washington Senator Slade Gorton was written by lobbyists hired by Idaho Power

Company, Chevron, and Kaiser Aluminum, all companies interested in reducing species protection and opening up lands for mining, logging, or commercial development. Knowing the importance of expertise, interest groups often look to professional consulting firms when hiring direct lobbyists. In fact, it is not uncommon for interest groups on different sides of an issue to employ lobbyists from the same professional firm. Hospitals favoring higher taxes on cigarettes and the U.S. Tobacco Company opposed to such taxes hired professional lobbyists from the same firm when both groups were lobbying Congress on public health issues. The Association of Trial Lawyers of America and the National Association of Life Underwriters did likewise when they needed lobbyists to work on behalf of a cause of special importance to both groups. Even though the two groups were on opposite sides of the issue of whether the government should impose caps on medical malpractice fees, both hired lobbyists from the prestigious fi rm of Patton, Boggs & Blow to try to convince Congress of the merits of their respective positions. In a case that was brash but not unusual in revealing how lobbyists can be comfortable in working both sides of the same issue, the National Journal, in February 2000, reported that an experienced Washington lobbyist approached a newly elected member of Congress to ask how the congressperson felt about sugar price supports. Before the leader could answer, the lobbyist pointed out that if the member opposed the supports, the lobbyist could line up contributions from his candy manufacturing clients, whereas if the congressperson favored the price supports, the lobbyist could secure financial contributions from his sugar-producing clients. The member of Congress decided to let the lobbyist choose which group of clients would have the honor of supporting the congressperson with their contributions.

Interest groups may also pursue strategies of campaign involvement. Interest group activity in campaigns has taken the form of registering voters, convincing candidates to support positions favorable to the interest group, joining political parties and shaping party decisions from the inside, or making campaign contributions. The NAACP, for instance, set out to register 1 million African-American voters in an effort to shape the outcome of the 1996 elections. Other groups have pressured political party members to support certain nominees over others. During the 2008 Democratic Party presidential primary season, labor unions tended to support Hillary Clinton or John Edwards over Barack Obama; after Obama won the Democratic nomination, most unions shifted their support to his campaign. In seeking interest group support during primary contests, candidates may repackage themselves or their political opinions. Such was the case during the 1996 Republican presidential primaries, when conservative religious interest groups tried to pressure Texas senator Phil Gramm to agree with their stands on abortion. A frustrated Gramm was reported to have snapped that his interest was politics, not religion. However, later, apparently fearful of losing their support, Gramm tried to appease religious conservatives by sending out mass mailings in which he expressed his Christian beliefs, in particular his faith in the impending second coming of Christ