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REASSESSING THE INTEREST GROUPS INFLUENCE: DEMOCRATIC RISKS AND REGULATORY RESPONSES IN US POLICY-MAKING

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Interest Groups Influence in US, Campaign Finance Regulation, Lobbying and Transparency, Democratic Accountability, National Strategies	The influence of interest groups in United States policy-making process is undeniable. This study critically examines that how interest groups shape public policy in the United States and evaluates the democratic risks their influence poses, alongside regulatory and institutional responses designed to mitigate those risks. This research evaluates negative impact of interest groups on US public policy from a critical perspective. The study, based on qualitative and institutional analysis, examines that how the mechanisms of campaign financing, lobbying practices, and Supreme Court decisions have altered relationship between political participation and democratic fairness. This reassessment underscores that managing the interest group influence is not about the exclusion but about calibrating engagement to uphold democratic ideals. The study does not dispute constitutional right to advocate and engage politically; it just asserts that the current system gives an unfair advantage to moneyed interests, eroding public trust and making democracy less responsive. Finally, the article offers a set of specific regulatory reforms intended to make the US policy-making process more transparent, to curb undue influence, and to create a fairer environment for the interaction between organized interests and the public good than what exists today.
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INTRODUCTION

Interest groups play a significant and, at the same time, a very controversial role in the United States (US) policy-making system. They do this by lobbying, financing campaigns, suing, and advocating for the public. Moreover, first ones to criticize interest groups' power were, and still are, the classical pluralists who even called them the necessary evils of the system (Dahl,

1961). They argue that, by accepting existence of such groups, government has to grant access to decision-makers those groups represent. However, very recent political events have made it necessary to question very existence of aforementioned idealized balance under the existing institutional and legal conditions. In the course of last few decades, combination of changes in regulation of campaign finance with paving of professional lobbying and growing political divisions has impacted the way of interest groups' influence. The judicial decisions, such as landmark cases of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) and *McCutcheon v. FEC* (2014), have widened limits of political spending that is constitutionally protected. Result has been that wealthy organizations have come to enjoy regular and often one-sided access to policymakers.

Thus, solicitors and political leaders wonder more and more whether the activities of interest groups are a cause of the unequal distribution of the political influence rather than a means of supplying the broad-based representation (Hasen, 2016; Lessig, 2011). This article reconsiders the impact of interest groups by looking at the way modern practices influence democratic accountability, the setting of public agenda, and trust in government. It investigates degree to which prevailing legal frameworks, though constitutionally justifiable, may unintentionally lead to policy capture and decrease in transparency. One of main points of inquiry is whether the presently enforced regulatory controls on influence are strong enough and at same time do not violate basic rights to free speech, forming associations, and petitioning government. The study, still asserts that the interest groups cannot be done without in the policy process because of their expertise, citizen mobilization, and contribution to informed debate. Thus, the main issue is how to enable participation of interest groups in the democratic systems while at the same time reducing the risks of unequal power distribution. Through a critical analysis of regulatory responses and institutional safeguards, this research aims to demonstrate how US policy-making process could effectively equilibrate political liberty with democratic fairness & accountability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The participation of interest groups in political system of US has been studied widely and has undergone some theoretical interpretations among which most important ones are pluralism, elite theory and regulatory capture. Each of them gives a different point of view on the way organized interests influence the final outcomes of policies, still no one is sufficient by itself to reveal the full picture of changing relationships between interest groups and US government of today.

Pluralist Perspectives & Democratic Participation

Pluralist scholars contend that interest groups are vital to the democracy's active participation by showing the different interests of society and making the communication between citizens and the policymakers easier. In this view, political struggle among factions reduces the chance of a single actor taking over the whole process and makes government more sensitive to the people's needs. Drawing from pluralism, empirical studies put forward perception of interest groups as being the partners of the legislatures in areas like setting agendas, providing policy

expertise, and mobilizing public, and this is particularly the case in complex matters where legislators run the risk of being poorly informed (Berry, 2010; Hall & Deardorff, 2006). On the other hand, detractors point out that pluralist models are based on the premise of a relatively equal distribution of political resources, an idea which has become difficult to maintain in the light of the increasing political contribution costs and the use of professional lobbyists. With the interest group being more institutionalized, the differences in the capacity and financial resources of organizations have led to the questioning of pluralist competition in terms of its inclusiveness.

Elite Theory & Unequal Influence

Theorists of the elite question the optimism of pluralism by showing the political power of the economic elite and organized business interests. The classical elite theory states that the policy outcomes represent the preferences of the rich people rather than median voter. The empirical research of the today brings to light this issue even more. Gilens and Page (2014) prove that economic elites and interest groups that support businesses have a much larger influence on public policy in the US than the average citizens or grassroots organizations. The situation of imbalance is also made worse by the way campaign finance is structured and by the courts' decision that the political spending is a form of free speech and therefore protected. Research indicates that the financially strong interest groups get preferential treatment in terms of the access to legislators, regulators, and the decision-makers of the agenda, thus influencing the content of the legislation and the priorities of the policies (Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Drutman, 2015). The influence of elites does not, however, allow for the certainty that the policy of choice will be enacted in all cases. Yet, the very constancy of such influence throughout the different areas of the issues raises most basic questions about the people's representation in a democracy.

Regulatory Capture & Institutional Dynamics

Theory of regulatory capture adds another dimension to criticism of the elite by showing how the access and influence of the interest groups are in no way limited to the elected institutions only. This is asserted that the power over regulatory agencies gets transferred to the industries through the very large-scale lobbying, lack of adequate information, and the interchanging of the employment that is of a common nature. The research done later on emphasizes the point that the technical know-how which organized interests possess helps them to control the rule-making process, mostly in areas like finance, energy & healthcare that are specialized (Soucy, 2024). In comparative institutional studies, it is advised as regulatory capture is not inevitable occurrence but gets determined by factors like transparency requirements, disclosure rules, & enforcement mechanisms. Existence of systems with strict lobbying regulations and campaign finance limits, lowering the perceived capture democratically, is clear indicator of institutional design's decisive role in the process of shaping interest groups' influence (Lessig, 2011; Hasen, 2016).

Comparative & Cross-Sectoral Variations

A rising number of studies are taking comparative approach to examine variations in different policy areas and political systems. According to research, corporate interest groups tend to

achieve their goals more in economic and regulatory policy fields while public interest groups have more influence in the symbolic or low-cost policy areas like civil rights or environmental awareness (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010). Cross-national studies show that democracies with proportional representation and public subsidies for campaigning usually lessen inequalities in interest group access. However, these comparisons have not been made in US scholarship, especially about idea of changing interest group behavior through regulatory reforms over time.

Research Gaps

The analysis of interest group influence has already undergone major shift, but some missing points still need to be covered. To begin with, the major focus of the literature is on outcomes of policy rather than the processes of decision making, especially the informal meetings of the interest groups with the regulatory agencies which are the least studied part of whole process. Next, the prevalent empirical studies have put the economic elites upon the spotlight while balancing public interest as well as grassroots organizations against elite power has not been subjected to sufficient scrutiny. Moreover, there exists little systematic analysis that looks into the long-term effects of regulatory reforms, like the ones that are related to disclosure laws and lobbying restrictions, on the interest group strategies and entire democratic accountability process. In this connection, the comparative studies are still isolated, and even if a common framework to evaluate the different regulatory regimes in terms of the democratic risks from interest group influence was to be provided, that would still be the shortcoming in the area of research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research takes qualitative analytical research design as a method to explore interest group influence's democratic risks and regulatory response's effectiveness in US policy-making. A qualitative method is suitable for evaluating institutional practices, legal frameworks, and power differentials that cannot be properly reflected through quantitative measurement only. The analysis is based upon pluralist theory, elite theory, regulatory capture theory. Pluralism forms basis for perceiving interest groups as legitimate critics and participants in democratic governance (Dahl, 2013), while elite theory points out unequal political influence distribution among economically powerful. Regulatory capture theory goes on to intricate how regulatory bodies might turn into allies of the industries they were meant to regulate. Publicly available sources yielded data, like congressional records, campaign finance and lobbying disclosure reports, court rulings, and regulatory documents. Besides, a targeted review of peer-reviewed academic literature was performed to provide empirical observations with a context. Thematic content analysis was employed for the data analysis in the study, which located the recurring themes about influence mechanisms, regulatory constraints, and democratic accountability. This method grants a fair and critical evaluation of power of interest groups in the US political system.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The results study are discussed in this section to extract desired information used for reaching conclusion.

Patterns of Interest Group Influence in US Policymaking

Interest groups always remain the powerful players in US policy-making process via channels like lobbying, campaign-finance, litigation, and public advocacy. Lobbying is a method that is very consistent which the organized interests use to influence the outcome of policy. In other words, scholars tell that the interest groups build up steadily the relationships with elected officials and the bureaucrats providing the experts and policy preferences are directly tailored to the decision-makers. Such interactions take place both in legislative and executive branches thus mirroring how much interest groups have access through official and informal venues Frontiers (Hill & Varone, 2021). Money is the primary means of influence besides lobbying. Political Action Committees (PACs) and Super PACs allow the organizations to campaign for candidates and ballot measures that are sympathizing to their causes by making the campaign donations. The Supreme Court's ruling in the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (2010) is one such judicial decision that has granted interest groups the power to spend money on independent political campaigns without limit thus increasing role of money in influencing politics.

These changes have cemented the presence of wealthy interest groups in political and policy spheres thereby paving the way for them to maintain access to the policymakers. Moreover, beyond lobbying as well as campaign financing, interest groups play the role in policy making through the provision of policy analyses, expert testimonials, research briefs, and model laws. The information they provide can affect both the setting of the agenda and the drafting of the law, especially in highly technical areas like healthcare and financial regulation. The net effect of these tactics is to make the influence of interest groups everywhere in the policy process: agenda-setting, implementation, and even beyond, thus disclosing an intricate and the diverse picture of organized advocacy. It is a must to fill these gaps if there is any hope to reconsider the democratic consequences of the activities of interest groups, along with the identification of the proper regulatory measures that can be applied in US policy-making process (Carnes, 2024).

Table 1
Constructive Interest Groups and their role in US Public Policy

Category	Key Interest Groups (Examples)	Primary Agenda	Main Methods of Influence	Contribution to Democratic Process
Labor and Professional Associations	American Federation of Labor and Congress Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); National Education Association (NEA); and the American Medical Association (AMA)	Labor rights and decent wages, occupational safety, healthcare access, and professionalism	Actively engage in collective bargaining, lobbying and endorsing political campaigns	Champions the representation of the working and middle classes, and calls for avenues of protections, be they social or economic
Civil Rights and Social Justice Organizations	The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); the National Organization for Women (NOW); the Human	Equality of races, rights of gender, protection of minority, and anti-discrimination	Any legal action, advocacy, public programming, and public campaign	It increases legal protection and participation in politics for marginalized

Rights Campaign				laws are just some of the many topics gaining importance in today's multicultural democratic society.	is part of this work	groups
Environmental & Public Interest Groups	Sierra Club; Resources (NRDC)	Club; Defense	Natural Council	Environmental protection, climate regulation, public health, and sustainability	Policy Advocacy, Dissemination of Scientific Research, Litigation and Headlines of Public Awareness.	Represents the dispersed and long-term interests of the society.
Consumer and Public Advocacy Groups	Consumer America; Public Citizen	Federation of		Consumer protection, regulations, corporate accountability	Policy analysis, testimonies before congress, and watchdog activities	Reinforcements of governance accountability and transparent process
Health and Welfare Advocacy Groups	American (ACS); Association of Persons (AARP)	Cancer Society	American Retired	Medicine, the forgotten humans count on to maintain their existential schema, counteracts his portfolio's cascading implications for the economy, medicine.	Coalition building, Lobbying and public education	Supports inclusive welfare policies and social safety nets

Source: Developed by Author

Working within the confines of normative democratic model, this category of interest groups has as main objectives facilitation of participation, the raising of policy accountability, and the collective well-being promotion. But, their power is frequently limited due to their inability to secure hefty financial resources, are corporate and elite-driven interest groups' main means of influence.

Table 2
Elite-influence Interest Groups in US Policy-Making

Category	Key Groups	Interest	Primary Agendas	Methods of Influence	Democratic Implications
Corporate & Business Lobbies	US Chamber of Commerce; Business Roundtable; National		Reduced taxes, deregulation, and business-friendly trade and labour policies.	Campaign contributions, direct lobbying, regulatory negotiations, voter registration	The policy favours corporations, minimizes labor and environmental protection.

		Association of Manufacturers (NAM)				
Financial Groups	Sector	American Bankers Association; Securities Industry and Financial Markets Association (SIFMA)	Financial deregulation, favorable banking and investment rules	Funding for political activities, lobbying regulators, and providing technical advice	Increased systemic risk; regulatory capture	
Defense & Security Industry		Lockheed Martin PAC; Northrop Grumman PAC; Aerospace Industries Association	Expanded defense budgets, weapons procurement	Lobbying Congress, revolving door employment, and strategic alliances	Militarization of policy priorities; budgetary imbalance	
Energy & Fossil Fuel Lobbies		American Petroleum Institute; ExxonMobil PAC	Fossil fuel subsidies, relaxed environmental regulations	Lobbying, media campaigns, funding political action committees	Environmental degradation; delayed climate action	
Ideological Mega-Donor Networks		Koch Network; Heritage Action	Market fundamentalism, limited government, conservative judicial appointments	Super PAC spending, think tanks, grassroots mobilization	Disproportionate elite influence; political polarization	
Gun Rights Lobby		National Rifle Association (NRA)	Opposition to gun control legislation	Campaign endorsements, scorecards, lobbying	Legislative gridlock despite public safety concerns	

Source: Developed by Author

Democratic Risks & Unequal Influence

The pluralist theory proposes that the engagement of different interest groups in competitive manner may lead to an increase in democratic representation, however, the evidence points to the fact that this picture is still somewhat idealistic when one looks at contemporary situation in US One of major risks to democracy is the issue of unequal influence, where economically powerful and business-oriented groups have a greater say in policy decisions than others. One of the most frequently quoted empirical results in this research domain is study conducted by [Gilens and Page \(2014\)](#), shows that organized business interests and economic elites affect US policy significantly and independently, while the average citizens and mass-based interest groups only have slight impact ([Gilens & Page, 2014](#)). This situation, is frequently referred to as biased pluralism, is seen as a structural bias in political responsiveness, which favors well-resourced actors. The studies support idea that in US states with more stringent lobbying laws, political inequality in area of policymaking is less pronounced, hence the regulatory context does play a role in determining levels of democratic equity ([Flavin, 2015](#); [Stegmueller et al., 2024](#)).

[Verdier \(2021\)](#) says that this uneven power has two different ways of threatening democracy. One, in cases where interest groups have totally opposite preferences from the general public, the policymakers may be influenced by the interests of a few rather than by major public. To

illustrate, the large industry groups tend to back policies that coincide with priorities of high-income constituents and this can lead to greater representational gaps and weaken the public's perception of fairness (Gilens & Page, 2014; Northwestern Now, 2014) Northwestern Now. Second, close ties between the interest groups and politicians raise an issue of policy capture, where regulatory and legislative institutions become more compliant to organized interests than to the general public they are supposed to serve. Another perspective is given by studies focusing on 'insiderness' and 'policy capacity' as major factors contributing to influence. The research in European Union context, for example, found that such interest groups are not only considered influential by public officials but get their views amplified, mainly during times of high advocacy salience. Although study is not specific to US, it still points out that different factors, namely capacity & insider status, not only formal channels, shape perceived influence, thus indicating the elite-driven advantages are not limited to the American politics (Anzia, 2022).

Regulatory Frameworks & Their Limits

In the United States, the legal and regulatory environment is a complex system of measures designed to lessen the impact of interest groups on the political process. The Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) and lobbying disclosure laws (Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995; Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007), judicial interpretations of First Amendment are some of the examples of these mechanisms. The aim of these frameworks is to provide a balance between democratic engagement, on one side, and transparency and accountability on the other (Anzia, 2024). Nevertheless, present-day regulatory arrangements reveal varying degrees of effectiveness. The Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling, which equates political spending with protected speech, significantly widened door for independent expenditures by both corporations and labor unions, which in turn has raised issue of money's contamination of the democratic process over the years (McKay, 2012; Hasen, 2016). In the same way, growth of "dark money" through 501(c)(4) non-profits as well as other organizations that do not have to disclose their donors, therefore, undermines the regulatory oversight and creates situation where it is difficult to identify the political influence by pinpointing the particular interests involved.

Although lobbying disclosure and reporting obligations have brought about some level of clarity, still there are gaps. A large number of organizations take advantage of loopholes and indirect methods to be heard, like forming coalitions and using third parties, thus avoiding full disclosure. In some instances, the regulators have not yet reacted to the advocacy tactics, such as social media mobilization and sending the specific political messages, which are now considered the most contemporary ones. Thus, it appears that the rules presently in place are not capable of handling the influence dynamics of today (Baumgartner & Jones, 2024). There is comparative evidence implying that stricter regulations on lobbying and campaign finances can lead to a more equitable representation and less policy capture; the places with the good disclosure rules and political spending limits show a lesser degree of elite control. This points to the fact that regulators need to innovate in order to deal with the democratic risks more efficiently.

Digital Advocacy & Emerging Challenges

The interest groups have modified their strategies in line with technological advancements, and they are making use of digital tools along with traditional influence ways to some extent. The public participation has been widened and diversified through online campaigns, social media mobilization, email outreach, virtual lobbying. The access to these tools can be made easier since access is opened up for everyone. Thus, by lowering the barriers to entry, smaller groups can also have their voices heard louder. On other hand, digital advocacy comes with its own challenges. Quick spread of information means that scenario where misinformation and extreme messaging get upper hand in influencing public and thus policymakers becomes worse. Also, use of data to target specific audience groups may lead to fueling the divide and thus making it harder to reach a consensus on issue of policy debated (Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). Digital methods have indeed expanded reach of interest groups but have not actually changed situation of unable power distribution that is dependent on economic resources and institutional access. Thus, more affluent groups are usually able to utilize digital platforms in skilled way and with more financial support, therefore, even more, consolidating the existing disparities.

Cross-Policy Domain Patterns

Dobbins et al. (2023) says that various policy domains analyzed show that the influence of the interest groups varies according to the issue area. The economic and business-oriented groups dominate the regulatory and fiscal policy domains, as a result of their ability to finance the costs of the sustained lobbying and to hire technical experts. Such groups usually influence legislation at very beginning, using their resources to control problem definition and policy solutions. To the contrary, public interest and grassroots organizations are more influential in areas with a wide public appeal such as civil rights or environmental protection where media attention and public participation can subsidize the elite-driven agendas. Nevertheless, even in these fields, the presence of the well-off players is still very powerful, especially when the public interest stories are the same as those of the economic and/or political elites (Gourevitch, 2021).

Table 3
Comparative Analysis of Interest Groups Influence

Dimension	United States	Other Democracies (UK, Germany, Sweden)	Notes / Implications
Legal Basis for Interest Groups	First Amendment is described as protecting speech, assembly, and petition;. Due to the drastic Citizens United ruling (2010), political spending has further bloomed.	United Kingdom (UK): No explicit guarantee of protection in the constitution; Germany: Basic Law safeguards the rights of associations; Sweden: Freedom of association secured by the Constitution.	The US grants extensive constitutional protection, which provides corporate and economic elites with more power and influence than in most European democracies.
Lobbying Practices	Lobbyists have become professional creatures that can access lawmakers and	UK: Highly regulated but with a lot less formality; Germany: State-funded lobbies essentially operate through party affiliated	Lobbying in the US is very much an institutionalized process that depends heavily on the use of

	executive agencies, and the "revolving door" is a common occurrence.	organizations; and Sweden: Stakeholders are brought together in formal consensus meetings.	resources, whereas the lobbying models in Europe focus on opening up and holding discussions.
Campaign Finance & Political Contributions	PACs and Super PACs allow for unlimited independent expenditures, although disclosure is limited according to the Federal Election Campaign Act, with dark money provisions removed.	UK: Strict limits on donations to parties and candidates; Germany: Maximal contributions and state support; Sweden: Limited place for private donations, predominately public funding	The financial disparities are exacerbated by the US system, while the European systems are based predominantly on public financing to mitigate the impact of money in politics.

Source: Developed by Author

Table 4
Comparative Analysis of Interest Group Influence

Dimension	United States	Other Democracies (UK, Germany, Sweden)	Notes / Implications
Transparency & Disclosure	Though the Lobbying Disclosure Act (1995) and the Honest Leadership Act (2007) were powerful tools to curb the lobbying activities, they were not enough to eliminate the dark money significantly.	UK has a consultant register, Germany has an active lobbying registry, and Sweden opts for the highest level of transparency within public records.	US has official reporting requirements, although loopholes might limit effectiveness.
Digital Advocacy & Public Engagement	Social media campaigns, email mobilization, online fundraising; COVID-19 expedited digital lobbying.	UK/Sweden/Germany: More use of digital tools, however, generally interwoven with consent-gaining forum processes.	The use of digital tools in the US has increased accessibility, situation may lead to a greater division and the upper class gaining more advantages.
Policy Impact	The fiscal and regulatory policy is controlled mainly by the interests of the economic and business sectors while the public interest groups have their say in the media spotlight areas.	The UK and Sweden have promoted the utility of multi-stakeholder forums, arguing that it would lessen the dominance of the elites, while Germany has been keen on balancing their influence through social partnership and corporatist input.	The US shows a more pronounced case of "biased pluralism," while the European Union member countries are using the power of state institutions to balance the social groups through consultations organized by the state.
Democratic Risks	Unequal access to and availability of resources create the potential for policy capture, i.e. the elite that sets the policy agenda.	The commitment to contemplate stronger safeguards against majority tyranny in consideration of allowing possibilities for wider public consultation in UK, Sweden, and Germany alike is basically an attempt to draw a line across elite dominance.	The US has structural democratic risks because of constitutional protections and campaign finance rules.

Source: Developed by Author

DISCUSSION

This research reveals the complex and sometimes paradoxical nature of interest groups' roles in the United States policy-making process. While, on the one hand, the groups continue to be constitutionally protected participants under the American democratic system while on the other hand, their power which is mainly through financial means, professional lobbying, and online advocacy has become major factor in making people more concerned about the already existing democratic imbalance, the rule or dominance of elites, and distortion of policies. The findings imply that the influence of interest groups is not always bad; instead, it is positive and negative depending on the organizational setup, the sources of funding, and regulatory supervision. According to the pluralist theory, the role of the interest groups in the American political scene is that of an enhancer of democratic representation through the aggregation of social interests and the provision of policy-relevant expertise to the policymakers (Dahl, 1913). The study's findings partially support this claim, especially when we talk about the mass membership and public interest organizations like AARP, environmental and the civil rights groups.

These organizations usually involve more people, give voice to the less fortunate, and through research, taking part in public discussions, and engaging with public, they provide legislators with more and better quality arguments. Their influence is more in line with democratic responsiveness than with policy capture (Smith & Yackee, 2024). The evidence, however, also strongly argues in favor of elite theory and regulatory capture theories, which maintain that interest groups with abundant resources dictate the outcomes of policies to a large extent. The corporate associations, political action committees supported by specific industries, advocacy networks backed by Super PACs have all shown a significant increased access to lawmakers and regulators. The post-Citizens United campaign finance system has given way to such inequalities by permitting unlimited independent expenditures, thus propping up a system where political access is more and more dependent on financial capacity rather than public support (Hasen, 2016). The disparity has a negative impact on the basic belief in democratic equality and brings up issue of whether the policy results are more favorable to rich than the poor.

The debate also indicates that lobbying has transformed from a mere legislative advocacy to influencing regulations, initiating judicial process over amicus curiae briefs, and employing high-tech digital mobilization. These strategies, while effective in the policy advocacy, make accountability more challenging. The regulatory agencies are mainly singled out for being susceptible to constant industry pressure during the process of making rules, thus giving rise to fears about regulatory capture (Carpenter & Moss, 2014). This situation brings to light the necessity of gauging the impact of interest groups not only on the legislative front but also over the entire policy cycle. The argument is further solidified by comparative insights. When the US, which is one of most advanced democracies, is compared with others, its regulatory framework for interest groups looks relatively lenient. The countries having tighter campaign finance limits and lobbyists' transparency requirements show lower elite policy dominance,

which signifies that the design of institutions plays a significant role in influence of interest groups.

The lack of disclosure for certain nonprofit advocacy organizations in the US leads to non-transparency and erodes public trust (Brown, 2024). Consequently, the findings show that enhanced participation is not synonymous with better democracy. This raises doubts about the optimistic views of technology-assisted democratization and points to need for the setting up of ethical and regulatory standards for digital political engagement (Bimber, 2003). The discourse has unfolded structural conflict that is basis of American democracy: interest group coalition is still a necessary part of policy process, but lack of regulation is allowing a few to have full control of political arena. Solving this conflict be done by adjusting the regulatory processes instead of totally barring participation. The current research has, in the end, placed more weight on the argument that pressure groups are not just the means or the reasons for democracy to be in corrupt state. Their influence is a matter of context and that has to do with legal structures, institutions where they have access and distribution of resources. Realizing & dealing with the situation is a requisite for the democratic integrity in US policy-making to be preserved.

CONCLUSION

The research aimed to learn about the role of interest groups in US policy-making, the risks to democracy that arise from their growing presence, and the how effective regulatory responses are. The results of study point out that interest groups have a huge influence over legislative, executive and judicial areas mainly over lobbying, campaign contributions and their expertise in the policy. On the other hand, this influence is not shared equally. The richer and the better-connected groups can actually dictate the policy outcomes, which makes it difficult to ensure that current "majority" reflects people's opinion in democratic way. In course of considering the democratic risks, the research shows that interest groups can also be regarded as a positive factor for democracy by perspective of participation & expertise in policy area enhancement, but at the same time, it points out money-driven advocacy, the revolving-door practices, and opaque funding mechanisms as the main factors that undermine political equality and public trust.

Furthermore, the Supreme Court decisions like Citizens United have made these risks even more significant by legally allowing independent political spending to be expanded and at the same time reducing the regulatory oversight. Concerning regulatory answers, study reveals that the current frameworks – for instance, disclosure laws and lobbying regulations – cannot completely tackle issues of the elite supremacy and transparency gaps. The authors argue that, although these mechanisms do recognize constitutional legitimacy of interest group activities, they still fail in providing accountability and equitable competition between political players. To summarize, study states that the establishment of a genuine democratic balance demands regulatory changes that not only reinforce the transparency but also restrain the overbearing influence and protect the inclusive representation, all that without violating the constitutional rights.

Recommendations

In this study, a comprehensive reform strategy that includes various methods is necessary to tackle the democratic risks that have been pointed out and at the same time to allow for the constitutionally protected political participation. This means that first of all, the lobbying and campaign finance transparency requirements need to be better enforced and full disclosure of all political advocacy organizations, including 501(c)(4) entities, funding sources be required so that influence of “dark money” be lessened. Secondly, clearer and stricter revolving-door regulations should be adopted in order to limit conflicts of interest between the public office and private lobbying to minimum. Thirdly, campaign finance rules should undergo a review and adjustment process in order to diminish the power of financially strongest interest groups that have, possibly by introducing lower contribution ceilings and better public financing options. Fourthly, institutional capacity of legislatures should be boosted so that policymakers do not have to rely so much on expertise offered by interest groups when drafting legislation. Last but not least, the independent oversight bodies ought to be given the authority to make compliance & penalizing violations effective over their powerful enforcement. These measures collectively can advocate for the commitment of lawmakers, give back public's trust and make interest group participation a source of the democratic governance rather than a ruling by the elite.

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