

This is Chris Micheli with the Sacramento governmental relations firm of Aprea & Micheli and an adjunct professor at McGeorge School of Law in its Capital Lawyering program.

Today's podcast is on interest groups and their influence on policymaking in California. When we think of special interests, we most often associate them with lobbying of legislators.

However, interest groups not only actively lobby in the legislative arena, but they're also active in efforts to influence state agencies and regulatory activities.

These interest groups vary, depending on the role and the function of a particular state agency. Ultimately, many interest groups attempt to influence policymaking in California by advocating for their interests before both the legislative and executive branches of government.

What and who are these special interests? Arguably, anyone with a point of view on a matter of public policy is a special interest.

However, we generally characterize such interest groups as those with specific public policy agendas that they try to advance with the legislative and executive branches of government. They are generally those with vested interests, who are politically active in the lawmaking processes.

What makes interest groups effective? The keys are often being politically powerful and socially popular. For example, teachers, labor unions, and public safety groups enjoy public support, in general.

They are politically powerful, because they utilize mandatory dues from their members for political campaigns and lobbying of government.

These groups raise and spend enormous sums of money for political campaign contributions. In addition, their members walk precincts, telephone voters, and get people to the polls for voting for their selected candidates.

These special interest groups also participate in the public policy process through grassroots activities, such as writing letters, making phone calls, visiting in their district with their state elected officials.

The most influential groups are politically active, and most often found to be involved in the legislative arena. Again, sometimes their activities progress to the executive and judicial branches of government.

There are varied special interests that participate in the legislative process. Discerning which ones are more or less influential is often made clear by their activities inside and outside of the state Capitol.

In other words, a powerful special interest group is one that achieves success inside the Capitol with its ability to pass or defeat legislation that's important to the interest group's membership, as well as success in helping to elect or defeat candidates for office.

The most powerful groups are often listed high on the annual rankings posted by the Secretary of State on those groups who spend the most on lobbying activities.

Several groups consistently rank among the largest spenders on lobbying, such as the Western States Petroleum Association, the California Teachers Association, the California Chamber of Commerce, and the California Labor Federation.

Their influence on the legislative process is often highlighted by the news media when discussing public policy measures being debated by the Legislature.

In terms of the California Legislature, special interests lobby as organizations, and they employ lobbyists. They also often utilize grassroots support, and even grassroots activities.

These interest groups can take the form of trade associations, individual businesses, labor unions, nonprofit groups, and even other government entities.

What are some of the key ways that interest groups, including even other government agencies, utilize to attempt to influence the Legislature and state agencies?

In order to influence policymaking in the legislative arena, interest groups obviously lobby legislators, their staff, committee staff, and ultimately, the Governor's office in support of or in opposition to proposed legislation.

They lobby both in person and by written communications, such as letters, emails, faxes, and even the utilization of different forms of social media. Facebook and Twitter have become popular forums for discussions about major public policy issues.

There are a myriad of interest groups that employ lobbyists, from corporations to nonprofits, even the public sector, which is often the largest spender of lobbying dollars. There's even a trade association for lobbyists, IGA, the Institute of Governmental Advocates.

By recent count, there were over 1,400 registered lobbyists, more than 450 lobbying firms, and just over 3,000 lobbyist employers. These groups spend tens of millions of dollars every year on lobbying measures before the legislative and executive branches of California state government.

Lobbying the Legislature often involves several different approaches, including direct lobbying and indirect lobbying, which includes grassroots, local elected officials, and public opinion. Public opinion could involve the use of earned or paid media.

Some interest groups nearly always include a media component to their lobbying efforts by sending out press releases, holding press conferences and rallies, and pitching favorable stories to the news media.

Members of these interest groups try to establish relationships with individual legislators, staff, legislative staff, and the administration.

On some occasions, special interests work with groups that share their perspective, thereby creating coalitions of varied groups who will lobby the Legislature with a united voice.

These interest groups can and often do utilize the legislative arena to influence public policy debates.

These interest groups occasionally work with individual legislators or leaders to get them to hold special hearings, launch investigations by the state auditor or the legislative analysts. They even introduce specific legislation sponsored by these interest groups.

Another approach is attempting to influence the news media. By profiling an issue, one or more legislators might introduce a bill on that topic. This is often referred to as legislating by headline.

Legislators want to be responsive to their constituents and their concerns. Those are often shaped by what they hear and read in the media. As such, the media can often help determine which issues legislators focus on, based upon news reporting and editorials.

Similarly, in terms of executive branch policymaking, these same interest groups can instigate media attention and positive or negative press regarding an agency's rulemaking.

Sometimes, unwanted media attention can cause a state agency to act quickly to resolve an issue or to give up trying to make a change that would be publicly or politically unpopular.

In order to influence policymaking in the regulatory arena, these interest groups lobby state agencies by utilizing the extensive opportunities for the public to participate in the rulemaking activities of state entities.

These guidelines are found in the Administrative Procedure Act, which affords opportunities to be publicly noticed well in advance, to review and comment on proposed regulations, to provide written and public testimony at hearings, and to challenge regulations, even after they've been formally adopted.

In addition, note that any interested party can petition a state agency with a proposal to amend, adopt, or repeal an existing regulation.

Most interest groups go beyond simple participation in the regulatory process. Similar to lobbying the Legislature in the State of California, these interest groups cultivate relationships with individual board members, as well as agency heads and executive department staff.

They often work behind the scenes to build coalitions of other interest groups who will lobby the state boards and their executives on a united front.

In addition, it's not uncommon for these interest groups to work with the Governor to have their own candidates or other sympathetic individuals actually be appointed to a particular board or commission.

Interest groups can also resort to working with the Governor as a means of pressuring state agencies to act or not act. If the Governor's persuaded, then his or her direction to the line authority agencies is very influential in rulemaking.

Also, the ballot box is often a popular place for influencing public policy in the State of California by special interests.

Even the threat of a ballot measure, either an initiative to propose a new law or change an existing one or a referendum to overturn a recently enacted statute, may be enough to successfully lobby the Legislature.

For example, Amazon used the threat of a referendum to influence the language of a bill that California enacted in 2012, which requires sales tax to be collected from consumers by purchasing certain goods over the Internet.

Opponents of 2014 legislation to ban the use of plastic bags in grocery stores put before the electorate in November 2016, a referendum.

The final avenue for interest groups to utilize in public policy development is the third branch of government, that is, take an issue to court. As the saying goes, if all else fails, litigate.

Although this approach can be costly and time-consuming, in some instances, challenging an enacted bill or regulation may be the only chance left for an interest group to get its way.

Similarly, with an agency's regulations tied up in court, interest groups can create additional pressure for compromise in the legislative process or the regulatory process.

All of these actions are ones that interest groups take when lobbying the legislative and executive branches of state government. Some approaches may be more beneficial to different groups and at different times.

There isn't a cookie-cutter approach to special interest lobbying, but many of them have similar activities.

I hope you enjoyed this brief overview of how interest groups influence policymaking in the state of California.