

Module 3: Congress

Topic 3 Content: Influencing Public Policy

Introduction



Demi Tracy: Senators and Representatives are supposed to speak for and vote on legislation representing the interests of their constituents. But how do constituents make their wishes known to those who represent them? Our congressional expert, Pilar de la Casa, joins us to discuss how individuals and groups influence the legislative process.

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Individual Influence on Public Policy



Pilar de la Casa: I appreciate the introduction, Demi. Let's begin by defining public policy: public policy refers to the laws and policies that our government puts into place for citizens to follow. There are three ways that you, as an American citizen, can influence these policies.

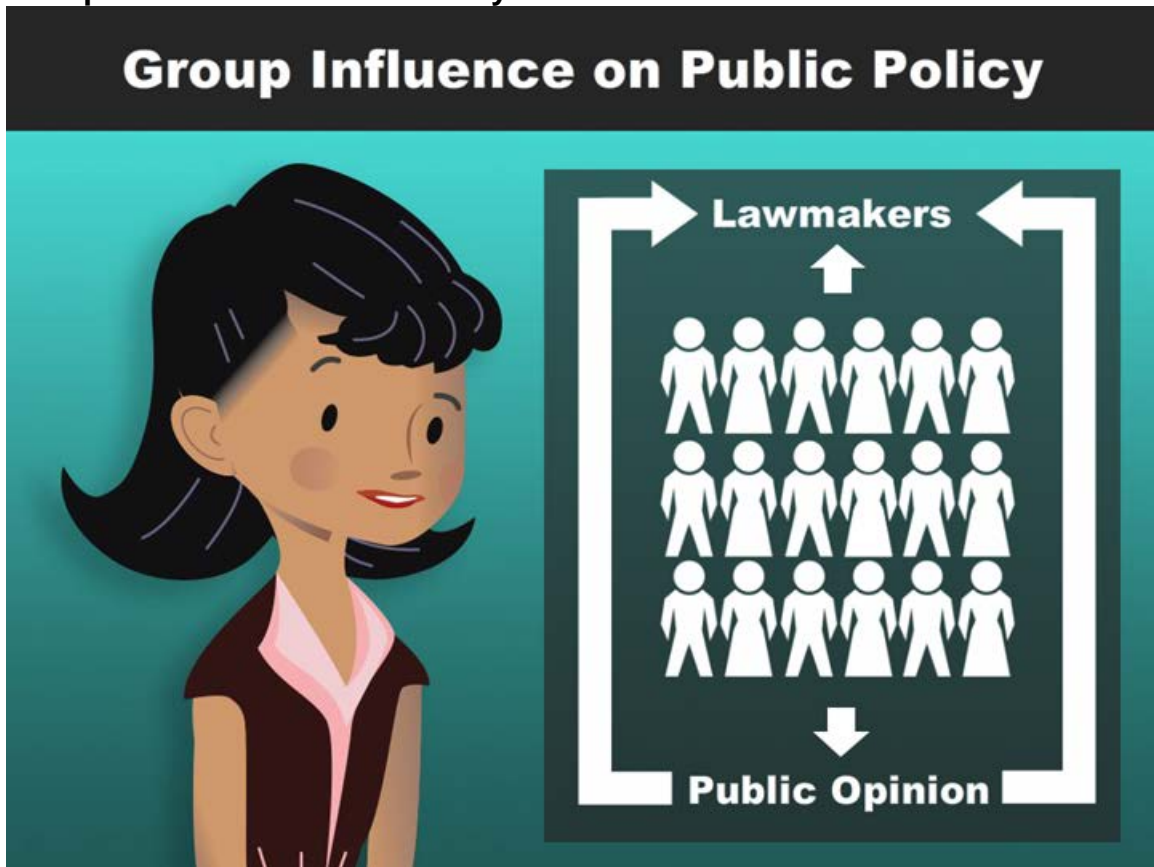
The first way people show their influence is through active participation in politics. You can do this by voting in elections, campaigning for candidates, or even running for public office yourself.

Another way people can exert their influence on the government is by communicating their opinions publicly. You can express your opinions to lawmakers and policy enforcers by demonstrating, writing, speaking at public meetings, petitioning, and meeting with public officials, among other things. These ideas might sound a little difficult to complete, but it is actually as simple as writing to your congressional representatives or creating a blog where you share your opinion.

The third option is to join a political party or a special interest group. Let's examine how an interest group can influence public policy.

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Group Influence on Public Policy



Pilar de la Casa: An interest group is basically a bunch of like-minded people who join together to influence public policy. They are able to accomplish this in two different ways. The first is working to directly influence the decisions made by members of Congress. This is known as lobbying, which is an attempt to persuade a lawmaker to share the point of view of the interest group.

The second method is to influence public policy indirectly by working to sway the public's opinion on a political issue. Public opinion is the prevalent view that a society holds on a topic at any point in time. Using different media like television, radio, print media, and the Internet, an interest group attempts to persuade the public to support its agenda. If public opinion can be influenced in this way, the interest group gains more votes for representatives who support its cause.

When an individual wants to influence public policy, he or she can vote, petition, demonstrate, and contribute time and money to campaigns. Interest groups do the same things, but with much more impact, due to the combined influence of many individuals working together.

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Ending of Episode



Demi Tracy: We hope you have gained some insight into how you can participate in the political process and influence public policy. Without understanding how you can help bring about change, you'll never be able to exercise your rights as an American citizen.