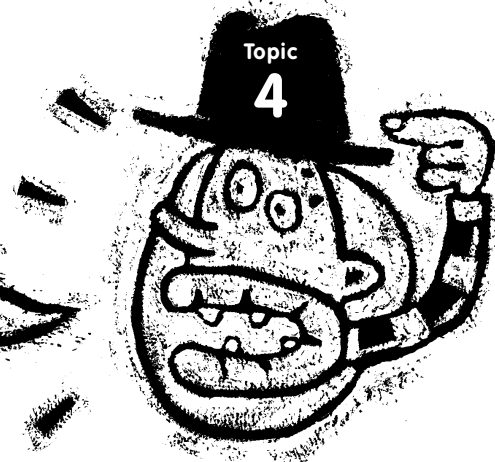


PRESSURE GROUPS AND POLITICAL PARTIES



Having cast a vote you might think that your civic duty is over for another four years. However, healthy democracies rely on voters to stay active between elections. Electors may follow issues, express views on a government policy or become involved in pressure groups or political parties.

A pressure group is a group of people who share one or more interests or concerns, and who try to influence the course of public policy in relation to their interests. Pressure groups are similar to political parties because their members share a political aim. However, pressure groups differ from political parties in two main ways:

- A pressure group usually has a narrow program dealing only with its own particular interests, while a political party usually deals with a wide range of issues.
- A pressure group very rarely nominates candidates for elections to public office, while this is one of the main activities of political parties.

Examples of pressure groups

Pressure groups are active in almost every aspect of Australian politics. They vary enormously in their motivation, size, organisation and degree of activity. Pressure groups in Victorian politics include:

- **Trade unions:** Australian Council of Trade Unions, Trades Hall Council, Australian Education Union, Australian Nurses' Federation.
- **Business organisations:** Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Business Council of Australia, Housing Industry Association, Victorian Farmers' Federation.
- **Environmental groups:** Australian Conservation Foundation, Wilderness Society, Greenpeace.
- **Other groups:** Women's Electoral Lobby, Right to Life, Coalition for Gun Control, Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia, Returned Servicemen's League, Royal Automobile Club of Victoria.

The operation of pressure groups

Pressure groups seek to influence government policy by lobbying. This means that they attempt to gain support for their cause by presenting their case to those who have the power to decide government policy, such as ministers, bureaucrats, political parties, members of Parliament and the public in general.



Lobbying can occur through formal submissions and participation in official bodies, and through informal contacts. At times (usually when other means of access have failed to bring about the desired result), pressure groups seek to influence public opinion through publicity campaigns.

Political parties

Citizens who have a wider, more general and persistent interest in the political process may become active citizens by joining a political party. A political party is a group of people organised together to further a political aim. These aims are based on the common interests of the members. The political parties that currently hold seats in the Victorian Parliament are the Australian Labor Party, the Liberal Party and the National Party.

The Labor Party

The Australian Labor Party is the oldest political party in Australia. The Victorian branch was formed in the 1890s. The ALP is a federation; each state has its own membership, rules and policies. These branches then join together to form the national ALP organisation.

(Adapted from the ALP website.)

The Liberal Party

The Liberal Party was formed by Sir Robert Menzies in 1944. In Victoria, it was Sir Henry Bolte that brought the Victorian branch into power during the 1950s. The Party was founded in the belief that having the largest number of members would allow the Party to be truly representative of the whole Australian community. (Adapted from the Victorian Liberal website.)

The National Party

The National Party was formerly known as the Country Party and originally began in Western Australia in 1914. The Victorian Branch was established in 1916. As its former name suggests, this party is most concerned with the needs of rural Victoria, its regional towns and cities. While this party is smaller than the ALP and the Liberal Party it has still been able to have considerable influence by joining other parties to form a coalition government.

(Adapted from the National Party website.)



At 1 September 2005 there were 10 registered Victorian political parties. These were:

- Australian Democrats (Victorian Division)
- Australian Labor Party (Victorian Branch)
- Christian Democratic Party (Fred Nile Group)
- Citizens Electoral Council – Victorian Division
- Country Alliance
- Democratic Labor Party (DLP) of Australia
- Liberal Party of Australia – Victorian Division
- National Party of Australia – Victoria
- The Australian Greens – Victoria
- Socialist Alliance (Victoria).



Choose one of the political parties to investigate further. Using the library or internet, find out about the history of the party, its ideals and policies and party leaders. Report your findings back to the class.

How do political parties achieve their aims?

One of the main ways in which political parties try to promote their objectives is to become the party in government by winning a majority of seats in the Lower House (Legislative Assembly). Once in Parliament, members of the political party can act together to achieve their party's program.

Why do political parties apply for registration?

Parties can apply to the Victorian Electoral Commission for official registration. This gives one main advantage – it allows the party to have its name printed on the official ballot paper next to the endorsed candidate. As well, registration makes nomination of candidates and registration of how-to-vote cards easier for a party.

If a party gets enough votes in a State election, it is entitled to public funding for those votes.



1. Briefly explain the reasons why either a political party or a pressure group forms.
2. Why do political parties seek registration?
3. Over a period of two weeks, read a local or daily newspaper and keep any articles that you think describe the activities of pressure groups. These might be pressure groups that act on issues at either Commonwealth, State or local government level. (Pressure groups act all the time, not just at the time of elections.)

Select one of the articles and describe the:

- area of interest of the pressure group;
 - people who are members of the group;
 - people who the group is trying to influence;
 - what the group were doing to try and influence opinion; and
 - specific target group in the article.
4. Find out the main objectives/platform of the pressure groups listed above.
 5. Debate/argue/discuss the aims/views of the pressure groups.
 6. Explain three reasons that you can think of for joining a political party.

