

# THE ROLE OF CONGRESSIONAL CAUCUSES IN POLICY MAKING: DON'T IGNORE THEM?

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This essay briefly discusses congressional caucuses, the important role they play in policy making, and why interest groups that want to expand their contacts on Capitol Hill should not ignore them.

Congressional caucuses can be defined as “voluntary groups of members of Congress with shared interests.” Publisher’s Note, *Congressional Caucuses in National Policymaking*, Susan W. Hammond, Johns Hopkins University Press (1998). They are “*prime players* in influencing policy and setting the legislative agenda.” (Emphasis added) *Id.* Within caucuses, “members share information, coordinate legislative plans, seek ways to influence colleagues, and even strategize on agenda setting.” *Id.* Caucuses also lobby for specific legislation and meet with the Speaker of the House and other influential members in furtherance of their legislative agenda. Erin M. Prangley, “Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues,” *Informal Congressional Caucuses & the Policy Process*, A Woodrow Wilson Center Policy Seminar, November 19, 1998. These efforts are often successful because caucus membership “has an independent effect on floor votes ‘at a statistically significant level.’” Hammond. *Id.* At a minimum, caucuses serve as an information clearinghouse for members of Congress, “furnishing them with taking points on . . . legislation and attempting to clear up misinformation.” Andrew Bernstein, “Congressional Member Organization for the Arts.” *Id.*

Several ethnic groups have recognized the value of congressional caucuses to advance their interests. In this process, “[c]ongressional caucuses may also be critical actors in proposed legislation . . . . The purpose [for caucuses], quite simply, is to have significant political players in Congress committed to the agenda of an ethnic community, for the critical concern is to ‘become part of the system’ by having ‘a place at the table’ where decisions are made.” Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

Over the past several Congresses, there have been over 250 caucuses formed. They range from the Ad Hoc Congressional Committee for Irish Affairs to the Zero Capital Gains Tax Caucus. Among the better known caucuses are the Congressional Black Caucus, The Coalition (“The Blue Dog Democrats”), the Congressional Caucus for Women’s Issues and the Republican Study Committee.

A number of caucuses focus on foreign affairs. These include: Senate Friends of Norway Caucus; Friends of Switzerland Caucus; House Republican Israel Caucus; House Portuguese American Caucus; Congressional Ukrainian Caucus; Congressional Caucus on Hellenic Issues; Baltic Caucus; and the Congressional Caucus on Central Europe.

Examples of the purposes for which such caucuses are formed are the House Republican Israel Caucus, *i.e.*, “meet to educate Members on the importance of U.S./Israel relations” and the Congressional Ukrainian Caucus, *i.e.*, “[t]he Congressional Ukrainian Caucus is a bipartisan group of legislators dedicated to strengthening U.S. - Ukrainian relations.”

In sum, interest groups value caucuses because caucuses offer them an easy way to get their message out to a dedicated and bipartisan congressional group that is interested in their issues.

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