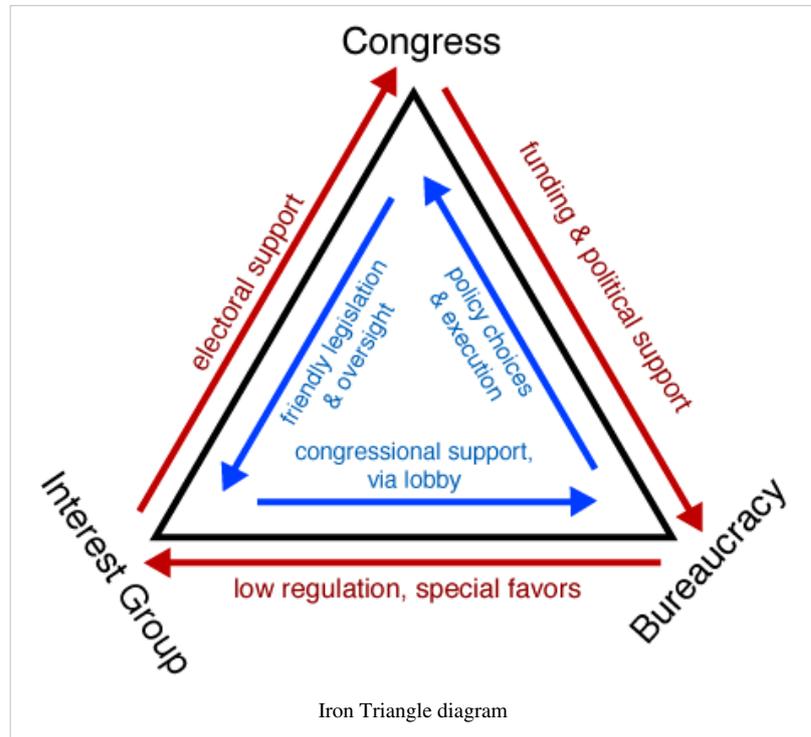


# "Iron Triangle"

## Wikipedia

In United States politics, the **iron triangle** is a term used by political scientists to describe the policy-making relationship among the congressional committees, the bureaucracy (executive) (sometimes called "government agencies"), and interest groups.

For example, within the federal government the three sides often consist of: various congressional committees, which are responsible for funding government programs and operations and then providing oversight of them; the federal agencies (often Independent agencies), which are responsible for the regulation of those affected industries; and last, the industries themselves, as well as their



trade associations and lobbying groups, which benefit, or seek benefit, from these operations and programs.

Probably the earliest concept of the "iron triangle" was on January 17, 1919 by Ralph Pulitzer. It was the post World War I era when Pulitzer wrote a statement <sup>[1]</sup> referring to the Paris Peace Conference between the allied Governments. He stated, "Three forces are laboring for such a sinister peace: (1,) the bourbonism of politicians...; (2,) the materialism of industrial...; (3,) the militarism of professional soldiers..." and "If the Peace Conference is allowed to remain between governments instead of between peoples it is apt to degenerate..."

An often-used example of the term is with reference to the military-industrial complex, with Congress (and the House and Senate Committees on Armed Services), defense contractors, and the U.S. Department of Defense forming the iron triangle. The term iron triangle has been widely used by political scientists outside the United States and is today an accepted term in the field.

## Central assumption

Central to the concept of an iron triangle is the assumption that bureaucratic agencies, as political entities, seek to create and consolidate their own power base. In this view an agency's power is determined by its constituency, not by its consumers. (For these purposes, politically active members sharing a common interest or goal; *consumers* are the expected recipients of goods or services provided by a government bureaucracy and are often identified in an agency's written goals or mission statement.)

Much of what some see as bureaucratic dysfunction may be attributable to the alliances formed between the agency and its constituency. The official goals of an agency may appear to be thwarted or ignored altogether at the expense of the citizenry it is designed to serve.

## Cultivation of a constituency

The need of a bureaucracy for a constituency sometimes leads to an agency's cultivation of a particular clientele. An agency may seek out those groups (within its policy jurisdiction) that will make the best allies and give it the most clout within the political arena.

Often, especially in a low-level bureaucracy, the consumers (the supposed beneficiaries of an agency's services) do not qualify as power brokers and thus make poor constituents. Large segments of the public have diffuse interests, seldom vote, may be rarely or poorly organized and difficult to mobilize, and are often lacking in resources or financial muscle. Less-educated and poorer citizens, for example, typically make the worst constituents from an agency's perspective.

Private or special interest groups, on the other hand, possess considerable power as they tend to be well-organized, have plenty of resources, are easily mobilized, and are extremely active in political affairs, through voting, campaign contributions, and lobbying, as well as proposing legislation themselves.

Thus it may be in an agency's best interest to switch its focus from its officially-designated consumers to a carefully-selected clientele of constituents that will aid the agency in its quest for greater political influence.

## Dynamics of an iron triangle

In the United States, bureaucratic power is exercised in the Congress, and particularly in congressional committees and subcommittees. By aligning itself with selected constituencies, an agency may be able to affect policy outcomes directly in these committees and subcommittees. This is where an iron triangle may manifest itself. The picture above displays the concept.

At one corner of the triangle are interest groups (constituencies). These are the powerful interests groups that influence Congressional votes in their favor and can sufficiently influence the re-election of a member of Congress in return for supporting their programs. At another corner sit members of Congress who also seek to align themselves with a constituency for political and electoral support. These congressional members support legislation that advances the interest group's agenda. Occupying the third corner of the triangle are bureaucrats, who are often pressured by the same powerful interest groups their agency is designated to regulate. The result is a three-way, stable alliance that is sometimes called a *subgovernment* because of its durability, impregnability, and power to determine policy.

Consumers are often left out in the cold by this arrangement. An iron triangle can result in the passing of very narrow, pork-barrel policies that benefit a small segment of the population. The interests of the agency's constituency (the interest groups) are met, while the needs of consumers (which may be the general public) are passed over. That public administration may result in benefiting a small segment of the public in this way may be viewed as problematic for the popular concept of democracy if the general welfare of all citizens is sacrificed for very specific interests. This is especially so if the legislation passed neglects or reverses the original purpose for which the agency was established. Some maintain that such arrangements are consonant with (and are natural outgrowths of) the democratic process, since they frequently involve a majority block of voters implementing their will through their representatives in government.

## Other examples

- Agriculture: agribusiness (the food industry) is an interest group constituency that seeks to benefit from certain government agricultural policies, such as agricultural subsidies. The U.S. Department of Agriculture services these constituencies. Senators and representatives wield enormous power, and are unlikely to obtain office in agriculture-driven regions if they oppose these policies. This results in certain agricultural products being subsidised by taxpayers.

- In the European Union, there is an iron triangle consisting of agricultural ministers, agricultural officials in the European Commission, and farming interests at the European level, particularly in France and Germany. This grouping long resisted any reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and limited change could only take place in 1992; EU and US agriculture are still governed by a relatively protectionist regime.<sup>[2]</sup>

## See also

- Regulatory capture
- Military-industrial complex

## Notes

[1] [http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?\\_r=1&res=9407E1D71339E13ABC4052DFB7668382609EDE&oref=slogin](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9407E1D71339E13ABC4052DFB7668382609EDE&oref=slogin)

[2] Hix, Simon. *The Political System of the European Union*, pp. 251, 255. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

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