Summary
In the American political system, there are a wide variety of interest groups that are organized for the sole purpose of exerting influence on governmental actors and institutions. These groups play a central role in deciding who gets what, when, where and how in legislative and budget processes. They also play a significant role in deciding which values will be promoted and enforced by the government.

Interest groups attempt to influence public policy in a variety of ways. One major way is through contributing money to the campaigns of political candidates. Interest groups cannot give money directly to candidates in federal elections—they must form political action committees or PACs. When an interest group's PAC gives money to a candidate, they hope to help elect someone who is favorable to their cause. After the election, they hope to be able to have access to and work effectively with the people they supported. Whether or not interest group influence is good or bad for democracy has been a long-standing debate.

Related Readings
3.2. The Role of Interest Groups
Reading: Sparknotes: “Interest Groups”

3.2.2 Interest Group Campaign Activities and Support
Reading: USA Today: Frederka Schouten: “Incumbents Attract Late Primary Donations from Special Interest Groups”
Web Media: FactCheck.org: “FactCheck’s Post-Election Conference”

3.2.3 Impact of Political Action Committees (PACs) and 527s on the Electoral Process
Web Media: C-SPAN Video Library: “Political Action Committees and 2012 Elections”
Instructions
The Center for Responsive Politics, a national “watchdog” group that tracks money in U.S. politics and its effect on elections and public policy, annually ranks the biggest campaign contributors in federal-level politics. More recently, they compiled a list of interest group “heavy hitters”—those who have contributed the most amounts of money to congressional and presidential candidates from the 1989-90 election cycle to the present. The top donors are listed below:

1. ActBlue
2. AT&T
3. American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME)
4. National Association of Realtors
5. Service Employees International Union
6. National Education Association
7. Goldman Sachs
8. American Association for Justice
9. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
10. Laborers Union

For this assessment, you will learn more about each of these interest groups—their goals and purpose, contribution trends (how much and to whom), and what issues they lobby for or against. Click on the link to each group on the CPS website, which has detailed information on their issues and contribution trends, to assist you in answering the questions for each group listed.

Once you have completed the assessment, refer to the guide to responding more information about each interest group.
Research Questions
“Interest Groups”

1. Read about the various types of interest groups from the reading in subunit 3.2. In which category does this interest group belong? Why?

2. Write a short description of the group’s purpose, goals, and/or mission (This can usually be found on the group’s official website).

3. Describe what types of individuals and/or businesses comprise this group’s membership base (This can also be found on the group’s website).

4. Determine the group’s history of campaign contributions in federal politics from each election cycle since 1989. What is the total dollar amount the group has donated from 1989 to 2012? What percentage of this amount has been given to Republicans? To Democrats? These amounts can be found on the CPS website.

5. Click on the hyperlink for each group found on the CPS website above and click on the “Summary” tab. Describe the major issues that matter to this group. Also, click on the “News” tab and read some of the recent news articles about the group. Use this information to help you analyze why they would contribute more money to one party over another (or, why would they give equally to both). What would be their strategy in doing this? How does the group’s agenda either coincide or clash with Republican/Democratic party philosophy? It also may be helpful to refer back to the “Comparing Political Parties” assessment to assist you in answering this last question.