From the eight-hour workday to social safety nets such as Medicare, we owe many of the rights we take for granted to the work of special interest groups. Yet many of these organizations have been criticized in recent years for their enormous influence on American politics, whether by endorsing candidates, funding political ads, or in lobbying for legislation favorable to their interests. There are thousands of such advocacy groups today in the U.S. We took a look at a number of factors, including membership numbers, finances and history, to rate the top 10 most influential special interest groups in the U.S.

10. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

The NAACP still retains great influence in the political arena.
Some believe the organization that helped stop lynching and racial segregation should also become a relic of the past. Pundits point to Barack Obama’s presidency as a symbol of the organization achieving its goals. Others acknowledge racial discrimination remains, but that the NAACP must expand its focus to champion a more diverse array of social issues and services. The NAACP makes a point of highlighting much more recent political victories, such as working to abolish the death penalty in Illinois, Connecticut, New Mexico and Maryland; registering almost 375,000 new voters for the 2012 election; and leading the push to outlaw NYPD’s notorious “stop-and-frisk” policy.

9. National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League

The Center for Responsive Politics reported this pro-choice group spent $170,000 on lobbying efforts in 2012. But as with every other group on this list, NARAL’s reputation and influence in swaying politicians and the public alike far exceed its monetary assets. Whenever a prospective new Supreme Court justice is nominated, for example, the NARAL examines the candidate’s past record and statements on abortion and reports them in position papers. In one notable instance, research the NARAL conducted on Robert Bork pointed out contradictions in his record, leading the U.S. Senate to vote against his confirmation to the high court in 1987. It should be mentioned that the country’s oldest and largest pro-life group, National Right to Life Committee, spent $2.3 million during the last presidential election. Another $1.5 million came from its Right to Life Victory Fund. One-hundred percent of its donations went to GOP candidates.
8. AFL-CIO

The AFL-CIO has expanded its membership in recent years, despite a lower level of unionization in America.

In the face of union membership falling from 35 percent in the 1950s to 11 percent today, the AFL-CIO has grown by 2.5 million members since 2009. The largest organization of its kind in the U.S., it now represents 12.5 million workers across 50-plus unions. Home health care workers, taxi drivers and domestic workers have driven recent growth. The AFL-CIO is also capitalizing on general frustration over stagnant wages, as well as momentum from nontraditional labor groups such as fast-food workers who have organized strikes. At the organization’s 2013 convention, leaders vowed to bolster member numbers and the group’s influence by partnering with other progressive groups, including the NAACP and Sierra Club. Some labor movement experts contend this combination of strong membership and alliances could turn the tide for the organization responsible for championing laws to mandate the 8-hour workday and safer working conditions.

7. American Israel Public Affairs Committee

Fortune Magazine once labeled the AIPAC the second most powerful lobby in America. According to AIPAC’s website, the 100,000-member group has championed the passage of more

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee actively promotes issues affecting Israel.
than a dozen bills to impose tougher sanctions on Iran and bolster security assistance to Israel in the past 15 years. Israel has been by far the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid since World War II, to the tune of almost $3 billion per year over the past quarter-century. AIPAC certainly deserves some of the credit for that continuing cash flow. While AIPAC doesn’t officially make contributions to candidates, it does coordinate a political financing network of sorts, mobilizing wealthy Jewish-American donors on both sides of the political aisle — including tycoons Sheldon Adelson and George Soros.

6. MoveOn.org

MoveOn.org has had great success mobilizing progressives on a variety of issues.

From its early days as an email group, this organization has used online tools to drive petitions on many liberal/progressive issues, from raising the minimum wage to protecting whales. It now counts more than 5 million members, many of whom were involved with Occupy Wall Street. What MoveOn.org lacks in donation size (individual donations in 2014 averaged $20), it makes up for in donor volume, boasting more than 300,000 different monetary supporters since 2010. The group claims several major achievements in recent years, including its work to end the Iraq war, pass health care reform, and elect and reelect President Barack Obama.

5. Americans For Prosperity

Americans for Prosperity is the best-known conservative group affiliated with the Koch brothers.

While the Koch brothers have been linked to conservative organizations from the Heritage Foundation to FreedomWorks, arguably their best-known effort is Americans for Prosperity. The Washington Post recently called Americans for Prosperity, “America’s Third-Biggest Political
With a multistate reach, it staffs up for elections and conducts local endorsements for campaigns much like a political party. The Post also claims AFP’s planned spending on the 2014 electoral push heading into 2016 would reach an estimated $100 million, with messages specially tailored to reach veterans, Latinos and youths. Thus far, Americans for Prosperity has more than doubled staffing levels to 240 full-time employees, comparable to levels for the entire Republican Party.

4. AARP

The AARP, which began as the American Association of Retired Persons, claims 37 million members and represents the interests of Americans aged 50-plus. When the AARP expresses interest in an issue, politicians, the media and the public take note. Look no further than the AARP’s endorsement of the Affordable Care Act (aka health care reform). In addition to offering its endorsement of the law, the AARP championed provisions such as annual wellness and preventive screenings and measures to close the infamous Medicare Part D donut hole. Of course, the AARP also has additional influence through its role selling millions of supplemental health insurance policies to seniors.

While The Association of Mature American Citizens and other groups have emerged as “conservative” alternatives, the AARP contends it supports private options (a bone of contention among right-wingers) as long as Medicare remains a viable option. With 10,000 boomers turning 65 every day, the AARP shows no signs of becoming a fossil as more seniors of all backgrounds and political leanings are staying active and living longer.
3. American Medical Association

The American Medical Association spent $18.25 million on lobbying efforts in 2013.

A frequent supporter of Republican candidates, the AMA spent around $306 million in lobbying from 1998 to 2014, second only to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. In 2013, it ranked eighth out of more than 4,100 organizations surveyed in terms of lobbying, spending $18.25 million. Again, money isn’t everything in the world of politics. When the AMA announced its support of the Affordable Care Act legislation in 2010, health-care supporters widely trumpeted the news; when a group with more than 200,000 members in a highly respected occupation — physician — supports your cause, that type of influence is almost priceless. Not surprisingly, Medicare and Medicaid represent the top issues lobbied by the AMA in 2013.

2. U.S. Chamber of Commerce

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce spends more money on lobbying than any other U.S. organization.
The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the biggest organizational spender in American politics, according to the Center for Responsive Politics OpenSecrets.org site. Between 1998 and 2014, this organization representing more than 3 million members spent a whopping $1 billion — equivalent to the GDP of countries like Mongolia and Belize. This figure dwarfs the second-biggest spender on the list, the American Medical Association, at a comparatively paltry $306 million. Not surprisingly, the Chamber has overwhelmingly supported GOP candidates — so much so that donations to the group have been deemed “controversial” for some companies with a broad, global customer base; in 2009, for instance, Apple and Nike were among the corporations that “quit” the member-organization, due to its opposition of policies to proactively address climate change.

1. National Rifle Association

An active membership and hefty bank account make the NRA the envy of other special interest groups. The NRA claims 5 million members, and according to BusinessInsider.com, in 2010 it boasted revenues of almost $228 million and assets of $163 million. The NRA’s membership and financial health give it enormous clout both in influencing the public and politicians. Think back to the aftermath of the school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012. While polls showed public support for more restrictive gun-control legislation, and President Barack Obama pushed extensively for changes, the NRA’s lobbying — and the omnipresent threat it posed to Democrats in conservative districts and states — defeated the effort to impose new gun controls. In fact, the NRA cited recent federal efforts to enact new gun-control measures with bringing in hundreds of thousands of new members.
Michelle Leach’s love of writing has taken her to Sydney, Australia, London, U.K. and other exotic locations like Grand Island, Neb., and Clio, Mich. She has developed pieces for TV and radio stations, PR departments, newspapers and magazines. A graduate of Northwestern University and Lake Forest College (also in Illinois) she enjoys running marathons and likes to say when not writing, she’s running — but she tries not to mix the two activities.