is congress really for sale?

Many Americans lament the way special interests sway politicians with campaign contributions and lobbying, procuring privileged treatment even when the public is opposed. Research shows, however, that contributions and lobbying determine public policy much less than most people think. When major issues arise, party, ideology and public opinion matter much more.

“Lobbyists Are the Loudest in Health Care Debate,” read the New York Times headline in August 1994. President Clinton’s proposal for health care reform had provoked hundreds of interest groups into spending well over $100 million to influence the congressional response. Opposition was intense; political action committees (PACs) were reported to be spending over $2 million a month to modify the plan or kill it outright. And they got what they wanted; by the end of September Bill and Hillary Clinton’s health plan was dead.

The fight over health care was unusually intense but otherwise typical, according to journalists’ conventional wisdom about American politics: interest groups get what they want, regardless of the public’s needs. Paul Krugman informed his readers in the New York Times last year, for example, that there would be no anti-pollution legislation under the Bush administration because “the big polluters get what they paid for in campaign contributions.” Frank Rich, also in the Times, claimed that the Clinton administration did Enron’s bidding on a power-plant project after getting $100,000 in Enron contributions. And Molly Ivins, writing from Texas, stated that CSX (formerly headed by Bush’s new Treasury Secretary John Snow) got $164 million in federal tax rebates in return for the “investment” of a “mere $5.9 million in campaign contributions.”

The result, William Raspberry wrote in the Washington Post, is the “increased influence of moneyed interests while the ordinary voter seems to dwindle to insignificance.”

Most Americans agree with this view. Three out of five people polled for the American National Election Studies said in 2000 that “the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves” rather than for the benefit of all the people, and almost as many agreed that public officials don’t care much about what “people like me” think. Early in 2002, a Gallup poll showed that two-thirds of the public believe that no matter how campaign finance laws are reformed, “special interests will always find a way to maintain their power in Washington.” Public cynicism about the federal government has become so pervasive that many observers fear the public is withdrawing from politics, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the public’s retreat opens the way to even more special interest power.

Does anyone dissent from this view? Yes—many academic experts on American politics do, particularly those in political science and economics. For decades, a pattern of research has emerged that has surprised them as much as anyone else: A major study shows that campaign contributions or lobbying have little influence on policy. The findings are met with disbelief. Researchers refine their theories and methods, anticipating that more sophisticated studies—looking at more aspects of the policy process—will show that campaign contributions and lobbying have a powerful effect. Contrary to expectations, the new studies find that money and the efforts of special interest groups have little influence, and the cycle repeats.

For Kids, http://www.toobaccofreekids.org/
One recent review (by political scientist Stephen Ansolabehere and his colleagues), found that on most issues studied PAC contributions have no effect on legislation. A review April Linton and I conducted considered the effect not only of PAC contributions, but of other ways of influencing policy as well—lobbying, demonstrating, union organizing—and found that they have no effect at all at least half the time. When groups do have an effect, it is typically slight. Even business lobbying and campaign contributions typically have little impact.

How can campaign contributions and lobbying have little or no effect on policy? Here it is important to be precise about what the issue is. Even though stories in the mass media highlight how much money is spent to influence policymakers, that is not what concerns the public most. The crucial questions are: Do campaign contributions and lobbying get legislators to act differently than they would have in the absence of contributions and lobbying? Do contributions and lobbying influence enough legislators to tip the balance on important votes? And, most critically, do contributions and lobbying enable interest groups to get what they want over the opposition of the public?

It turns out that the effect of campaign contributions and lobbying is limited for several reasons: Campaign contributions are not really that large; most lobbyists cannot even get to see members of Congress, much less influence them; members of Congress are more strongly affected by their parties, ideology, and constituents than by interest groups; and when some are influenced by campaign contributions or lobbying, the number is often too small to determine the outcome of key votes. The effect of campaign contributions and lobbying is overestimated because people tend to remember the egregious but atypical cases of apparent influence, ignore other influences on members of Congress, and don’t consider how the sheer complexity of modern politics affects policy change.

campaign contributors

In most accounts, interest groups have two ways to influence politicians: contributing to their campaigns and lobbying. Campaign contributions are often seen as especially powerful, bordering on legalized bribery. We are told constantly that American political campaigns are awash in money. Every campaign costs more than the previous one, and the total amount spent on campaigns for Congress and the presidency—$3 billion in the 1999-2000 election cycle—seems astronomical. How can such huge sums not turn into tremendous interest group influence?

Lobbyists from the United Methodist Women meet with Representative George Miller (D-California) to argue for increased child care funding, May 2002. Given his liberal beliefs, Miller probably needed little persuasion.

A closer look at the money—how much there is, where it comes from, and where it goes—provides some context. First, it may be argued that $3 billion isn’t really all that much money, when Democrats’ and Republicans’ efforts to win “market share” are compared to other industries. All the money spent to influence candidates and campaigns

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amounted to less per year than the combined amount that corporations spent to influence our choice of soft drinks (Coca-Cola Corporation’s advertising budget is $1.6 billion per year), phone companies (AT&T —$750 million) or computers (IBM—$650 million). In addition, only one-third of the total—about $1 billion—came from interest groups. 380 million dollars of this amount came directly, in the form of “soft money,” from corporations, unions, and other groups. An additional $600 million came from PACs. The rest came from individuals’ contributions directly to parties and candidates, and from government funds.

Most PACs contribute very little to campaigns. During the 2000 campaign, approximately 4,500 PACs were registered with the Federal Election Commission. Of these, one-third spent no money at all on the campaign. Of those that did, the average contribution to each candidate they aided was $1,700—approximately $1,400 from corporations, $1,700 from trade associations and membership groups, and $2,200 from labor unions. These amounts are not trivial, but considering that the average House candidate spent about $700,000 in 2000, and the average Senate candidate $5.7 million, it is difficult to see particular groups winning tremendous influence over most members of Congress through their campaign contributions. (Contributions from individuals aren’t very large, either. Ansolabehere et al. estimate that the average political contribution from an individual was $115 in 2000, while a study of top executives showed them contributing—as individuals rather than through PACs—an average of $4,500.)

Of course, campaign contributions are only one way to influence office-holders. Lobbying—attempts to persuade politicians how to vote—is important to consider as well.

**lobbying**

What interest groups don’t get through campaign contributions, they must get by lobbying, says the conventional wisdom. Indeed, there’s an army of lobbyists around Capitol Hill—more than 20,000 registered in 2002.

The sheer number of lobbyists shows why it is believed that campaign contributions go simply to win access. No member of Congress and his or her entire staff could possibly see more than a tiny fraction of all the lobbyists over the course of a year, even if they stopped spending any time meeting ordinary constituents, visiting their districts, taking part in hearings and casting hundreds of votes.

It is also important to remember that many organizations that lobby represent are organizations of ordinary people, not the business organizations frequently cited in critiques of the system. Members of Congress hear not only from the National Association of Manufacturers, but also from organizations representing teachers, college students, minorities, crime victims, truck drivers and parochial schools—organizations that, taken together, represent a substantial proportion of the American people. Thus, when Congress is affected by interest groups, the groups may very well represent labor (unions sometimes affect congressional action on taxes), the elderly (who have influenced policy on pensions), or ordinary citizens concerned about guns (both the National Rifle Association and its opponent, Handgun Control, have at times influenced members of Congress).

It still may be said that it is not the typical lobbyist who distorts the political process, it is the well-connected lobbyist representing powerful groups with guaranteed access to
members of Congress. Surely, there is something to this point of view. But when trying to determine whether access leads to influence, it is essential to return to the key questions: Do interest groups get members of Congress to act differently than they would otherwise? Do they get many members of Congress to do so? And do they win policies in opposition to what a majority of the public wants?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to ask how legislators would act in the absence of contributions and lobbying. Research consistently shows three factors to be especially important: ideology, party affiliation and public opinion.

**ideology and parties**

Every year, the *Congressional Quarterly*, journalists’ and academics’ primary source of information about Congress, lists what it calls “key votes”—votes that, in the editors’ opinion, determined the outcome on the most important and controversial issues Congress addressed. For 2002, it listed 11 votes in the House and 13 in the Senate. Some were on issues that most people wouldn’t think are subject to interest group influence in a conventional sense, including the use of force against Iraq, establishment of an independent commission on 9/11 and some homeland security measures. Votes on these issues were probably determined by factors other than special interest actions. On most votes, though, interest groups had a strong interest in the outcome: pharmaceutical manufacturers and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) in votes on a Medicare prescription drug benefit; energy companies and environmental groups in votes on oil and gas drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; agribusiness and small farmer groups in votes on farm subsidies, etc. What was most striking about many of the key votes was how often they were almost entirely along party lines. In the House vote on prescription drug benefits, 16 representatives crossed party lines, out of 427 voting. In the Senate vote on farm subsidies, 11 of 97. On drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 13 of 99. Divisions were similar on defense spending, welfare reform, total government spending, campaign finance reform and the estate tax.

Why the differences between parties? One might argue that campaign contributions and lobbying led Republicans to vote one way and Democrats the other—that, for example, Republicans vote for Arctic drilling because of campaign contributions from the oil industry, and Democrats vote against it because of contributions from environmentalists. But if that were true, the energy companies could have outbid environmental groups and gotten what they wanted when the Democrats were in power. The party balance matters because the Republican party is ideologically committed to the needs of the oil industry, and the Democratic party to the environmental movement. Party and ideology matter far more than campaign contributions and lobbying.

But what about those who vote against their party, for example the eight Republicans who opposed drilling and the five Democrats who favored it? Campaign contributions and lobbying surely matter sometimes, but often those who vote against their parties are voting in line with their own long-standing, well-known views and with the views dominant in their regions. Among the five Democrats who favored drilling, three were rated by the League of Conservation voters as having voting records in 2002 (and for years before) very much like Republicans and very much in line with attitudes in their region, while three of the Republicans who defeated consistently voted with Democrats on environmental issues, in line with the more liberal stance of the New Englanders they represent.

Also consider the Clinton health care plan. Among those who got the most in campaign contributions from health and
insurance industries were Edward Kennedy and Newt Gingrich. Yet nothing could have turned Kennedy, a staunch Democrat, against health care reform, or dissuaded Gingrich from using opposition to the plan as the basis for the Republicans’ ultimately successful fight for Congress in the 1994 election. These are not isolated examples. Though it is very difficult to separate the effect of party affiliation from ideology (because ideology influences choice of party and vice versa), there is little question that party and ideology together have far more effect on congressional action than interest groups do, even on issues usually seen as greatly influenced by interest groups, such as taxes on corporate profits and capital gains. Even when political scientists very carefully estimate how many legislators are affected by interest groups, they usually find the number too small to determine the result.

Political scientist John R. Wright’s work provides a particularly interesting illustration. Wright gauged interest group influence on congressional voting on tobacco. He began his research soon after an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) claimed that congressional opposition to tobacco control was clearly due to tobacco-industry PAC contributions to members of Congress. Wright was dubious, however, because the JAMA article hadn’t considered how voting might have been affected by members’ political ideology. When he took ideology into account (using ratings by Americans for Democratic Action), it turned out that campaign contributions may have had some effect, but not as much as ideology and, most importantly, not enough to affect the outcome of the vote. Tobacco industry contributions went mostly to conservatives and Republicans who were already predisposed to vote against regulations of any kind.

The power of interest groups to get legislators to change their votes in the face of personal ideology and party commitments is real but very limited. But what is arguably the most important question remains: Do interest groups get what they want against the opposition of the public?

When Clinton’s task force began developing plans for health care reform, 71 percent of the public said they approved of what they heard or read about it. When the plan was announced in September 1993, 59 percent of the public supported it. Yet it lost. What explanation could there be but interest group influence?

According to the New York Times, the fate of the Clinton health care plan was a stark example of special interest lobbying “overwhelming the decision-making process.” The process, in this case, is the democratic process. The claim is that interest groups won out over the public.

It is easy to see why people believe this. When Clinton’s task force began developing plans for health care reform, 71 percent of the public said they approved of what they heard or read about it. When the plan was announced in September 1993, 59 percent of the public supported it. Yet it lost. What explanation could there be but interest group influence?

The explanation, many analysts have come to believe, is public opinion itself. In 1992, even before Clinton took office, health policy analyst Robert Blendon and his colleagues published an article in the JAMA describing public opinion on health care. They showed that the public was interested in health care reform, but was concerned about costs, coverage, the extent of government control and other issues. Presented with competing plans during the Clinton administration, the public turned out to be opposed to increasing income taxes to pay for universal coverage, and were much more interested in improving their own care than in providing care for the uninsured. Given a choice among possible plans, no single one was favored by a majority. By the time the plan was defeated, it had the support of only 43 percent of Americans. As Theda Skocpol has written, only “steadfast majority public support” could have gotten Congress to act, but such support “was gone by the time the Democratic congressional leaders finally got bills to the floor of the House and Senate.”

Some observers have objected that although Congress acted in line with public opinion, public opinion itself had been influenced by interest groups pouring vast sums of money into media campaigns against the plan. This raises an interesting
point. If interest groups devote great effort to changing public opinion, perhaps that is because they see public opinion as the prime mover behind policy change. In fact, as political scientist Ken Kollman has recently shown, that is how interest groups often see the political process. Interest groups of all types (labor, business, public interest, etc.) expend considerable resources on what he calls “outside lobbying”—attempts to mobilize citizens outside the policymaking community to pressure public officials. Naturally, interest groups would like to alter public opinion, but that is usually difficult. As a practical matter, what they try to do most often is take advantage of public opinion—to mobilize the public when it already favors their views.

It makes sense for interest groups to take public opinion seriously, because systematic studies comparing the effect of public opinion to that of lobbying and campaign contributions find consistently that public opinion matters more. For example, political scientist Mark A. Smith analyzed congressional action on over 2,300 issues on which the U.S. Chamber of Commerce took a stand between 1953 and 1996. He found that although business lobbying and PAC contributions had some effect on policy—it would be amazing if they had none—public opinion swayed Congress far more. Similarly, I found that interest group activity influenced employment discrimination legislation (which corporations were not enthusiastic about) far less than did public opinion. Similar results have been found for welfare policies and hate crime laws. Social scientists find it difficult practically to separate the effects of interest groups from that of public opinion, but the weight of the evidence to date clearly emphasizes the role of public opinion.
what about common sense?

In the face of findings that campaign contributions and lobbying have little effect on policy, and that party, ideology, and public opinion have far more, we still confront a key problem: the conclusions seem utterly contrary to everyone’s experience and common sense. Is it possible to reconcile the conventional wisdom with what research shows?

The conventional wisdom may be mistaken for three reasons: people are especially likely to remember egregious examples of interest group power; it is difficult to sort out the multiple influences on policy change; and people often mistake their own policy preferences for those of the majority.

One reason most people think lobbying and campaign contributions are crucial is because reporters say they are; and reporters think they are important because of the striking cases they can’t help but notice. But a focus on striking cases can be misleading. Discussions of interest group power return again and again to gun control, an issue on which a majority of the public, which favors gun control, is frustrated by the apparent power of the National Rifle Association. But the gun issue is an exception. Much less often do people systematically consider the role of interest groups on issues that matter more to most people but win less attention. Until very recently, the public was terribly afraid of crime and demanded government action; government at all levels responded by toughening laws, building prisons, and spending more money on police. The public always wants economic growth, and every administration works to bring it about. The quality of education rose in the public’s list of concerns during the 1990s, and both state governments and Congress responded with reforms intended to improve K-12 education. Any fair assessment of the power of interest groups would have to take into account all these issues, not only blatant cases of interest group influence.

Common sense tells us that campaign contributions and lobbying matter because the influence seems so obvious—as with the Clinton health care example, we see that lobbyists were active and that they got what they wanted, so it seems only natural to conclude that Congress acted as it did because of special interest influence. But frequently, as with Wright’s tobacco regulation example, it turns out that it is not really contributions or lobbying that matter most, but rather party, ideology or public opinion.

Finally, it sometimes seems obvious that interest groups control events because particular decisions seem so awful that there can be no other explanation—the decisions must have been opposed by a majority of the public. In fact, though, individuals are often mistaken about the majority’s preference. What’s more, on most of the hundreds of issues contemporary governments address, most people have no opinion at all. Most citizens neither know nor care about even some of the issues on which “key votes” occurred (such as competition in the telecommunications industry, fast-track trade procedures, farm subsidies or accounting standards). And the proportion that has meaningful opinions about the hundreds of other issues voted on by Congress every year (such as extension of copyright protection, tariffs on steel, federal funding of social science research, etc.) is small. The harsh truth is not that interest groups persistently win out over public opinion, but that on a wide range of issues, the public has no opinion. Many observers who view the results of decisions with dismay incorrectly assume that the general public shares their dismay—or would, if they only paid attention.

recommended resources:

Ansolabehere, Stephen, John de Figueiredo, and James M. Snyder, Jr. “Why Is There So Little Money in U.S. Politics?” Journal of Economic Perspectives (forthcoming). An analysis of how much money is given to political campaigns, the influence of campaign contributions on members of Congress and a discussion of why people contribute to campaigns.


Smith, Mark A. American Business and Political Power. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Smith analyzes how well bills supported by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce do in Congress, comparing the influence of business to that of public opinion.

Wright, John R. “Tobacco Industry PACs and the Nation’s Health.” In The Interest Group Connection, eds. Paul S. Herrnson, Ronald Shaiko and Clyde Wilcox. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1997. Wright shows that the apparent impact of tobacco industry PACs on Congress has been greatly exaggerated.