Aidan Chin

Nana K. A. Prempeh

English Writing 112

29 March 2023

Lobbying Has a Problem

Have you ever wondered why the government seemed to work against the people? The answer is lobbying. The government wasn’t always this way but there is a system that is being abused by powerful and wealthy companies in power. As it turns out, it is not illegal to effectively bribe politicians. Since the 50s companies have been taking full advantage of this. Private interest bills get passed time and time again to serve only businesses and boost profits. But not all is lost, there is a way we can turn the government back around to serve the people. The Oxford Dictionary describes lobbying as “seek to influence (a politician or public official) on an issue.” This definition seems very innocent, but in its innocence, there is a large outlet for exploitation. In the time after the mid-century, companies caught on that they can use this for their gain. This raises the question; How do companies directly influence these politicians? Lobbying in America has a few more steps than presented in the dictionary.

The first, and most important aspect, is money. You would think that this is bribery, if a politician is being paid by a 3rd party, and you would only be partly correct. In the United States, bribery is illegal, so businesses need to work around this to be able to give money to politicians. The way they do this is by donating to their campaign. In this way, the politician can spend their campaign money however they please. Companies have an addiction to this practice, together spending a total of 2.6 billion dollars, which is more than the 2 billion dollars used to fund the house and senate combined. Private, for-profit lobbying gets, on average, 34 times more funding than public interest bills (Drutman). Unfortunately, this goes about just as well as one would expect. Ultra-wealthy people and businesses, through this version of lobbying, hold more power over the government than the average voter. This is why it seems like the government keeps only helping businesses and not the people. An example that we will all have to deal with living in America is taxes. Around the world, taxes are done automatically, so why is it, in the wealthiest country in the world, we must manually do them each year? It turns out that TurboTax has been lobbying to keep people doing taxes themselves so they can profit (NBC News). All those hours spent doing taxes, and all the stress caused by not wanting to get in trouble with the IRS is solely an American experience. In other countries, the manual, archaic system is long gone.

Another offender that may not seem obvious at first is prisons. As is with everything else in America, prisons are run by private, for-profit companies. This time, their lobbying is more egregiously against the public interest. What these companies lobby for is depressing at best. They have increased the number of people in private prisons by nearly 800%, and increased taxpayer spending on prisons by 2x, all since 2000 (Tufts University). It has even been made so the government is incentivized to make more arrests, encouraging wrongful incarceration. As a result of this, we have an incarceration rate that is so insane that 25% of the earth's prisoners are all in America while only having 4% of the Earth’s population (World Population Review). The downsides don’t end there, studies have found that lobbying may not even be beneficial to the economy. According to a report made by the Center for American Progress, a phenomenon called rent-seeking has appeared from companies getting addicted to lobbying. Rent-seeking is a practice in that, instead of creating new goods/services that a consumer is willing to pay for, the seller will instead chase increasing profits on existing products. Companies have always been incentivized to chase short-term profits, and right now, the fastest way to profits is to change legislation so they can use loopholes and lobbying to skirt the law and save as much as they can. Companies now see it as losing money when they attempt to innovate and create better products. This negatively impacts the economy because there is no more growth, only optimization. The companies are no longer making new wealth for the economy, instead, they are just grabbing more from the same pool, leaving less for competitors and the people.

Despite all these ways lobbying has been abused, there are still some upsides to having the system in place. It is important for letting there be an outlet for direct communication with our politicians. This is important for ensuring that the citizens’ voice is heard, and their concerns are taken seriously. Moreover, it is worth noting that not all uses of lobbying are for personal gain. Companies like Mary Kay, the notorious pyramid scheme, has actually used their influence and lobbied for human rights acts. Especially their push to renew the Violence Against Women Act. Since the 80s this company has been pushing for better women’s rights in America (Peterson). Unfortunately, the fact remains the same social issues only get a fraction of the lobbying money that for-profit interests get.

With lobbying being such an easy policy to exploit, there must be a solution. Indeed, there is, even though companies hold all this power, thanks to state laws we can fight smaller battles to win over the federal government. The changes that could be made are clearly outlined by RepresentUs: Stopping congress members from receiving money from people and businesses that they have jurisdiction over, stopping lobbyists from fundraising so they cannot “raise” money to influence the politician, preventing politicians from becoming lobbyists in the future (to prevent a pay raise promise) and to make the definition of lobbying more robust, so it is easier to regulate. This unfortunately is easier said than done. To implement these changes we would have to work against the most powerful forces in America. The overwhelming majority of the money in America is in the hands of the people who do not want to see change. To get around this we will need to play the same game they are. If we utilize the local governments over the federal system, we can make small changes, one step at a time. Just like legalizing gay marriage or marijuana, if states independently make these changes, the federal government is essentially forced to pass the changes.

In conclusion, lobbying is a problematic system that allows corporations and the wealthy to hold a disproportionate amount of power over the government than the average voter. Through what is essentially bribery, these wealthy few can influence the law in their favor, often against the needs of the people. While there are a few upsides to lobbying, such as advocating for the rights of the people, the downsides greatly outweigh the few positive aspects. We must address this issue and reduce the amount of influence money has in politics. This may entail supporting candidates who do not take corporate donations or advocating for better campaign finance laws. Ultimately, we need to put the power back into the hands of the average voter. It must be made that the government works for the American people and not just the wealthy few.

Works Cited

Drutman, Lee. “How Corporate Lobbyists Conquered American Democracy.” *The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company*, 20 Apr. 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/04/how-corporate-lobbyists-conquered-american-democracy/390822/.

Waltz, Daniel E, et al. “At a Glance: Government Lobbying in USA.” *Lexology*, Squire Patton Boggs, 7 Apr. 2021, https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=cd164787-6823-4db9-a32d-1eab693572ae.

“Is Lobbying Good or Bad?” *RepresentUs*, 3 Jan. 2023, https://represent.us/action/is-lobbying-good-or-bad/.

Wallach, Philip A. “America's Lobbying Addiction.” *Brookings, Brookings*, 29 July 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2015/04/13/americas-lobbying-addiction/.

Weiser, Daniel. “Why Lobbying Is Legal and Important in the U.S.” *Investopedia*, Investopedia, 13 July 2022, https://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/043015/why-lobbying-legal-and-important-us.asp#:~:text=Lobbying%20is%20an%20important%20lever,to%20gain%20power%20in%20numbers.

“Lobbying.” *OECD*, https://www.oecd.org/governance/ethics/lobbying/.

Peterson, Kyle, and Marc Pfitzer. “Lobbying for Good (SSIR).” *Stanford Social Innovation Review: Informing and Inspiring Leaders of Social Change*, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/lobbying\_for\_good.

Director, Sarah Nadeau Associate, et al. “How Campaign Contributions and Lobbying Can Lead to Inefficient Economic Policy.” *Center for American Progress*, 27 Mar. 2023, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/how-campaign-contributions-and-lobbying-can-lead-to-inefficient-economic-policy/.

"lobby, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2023, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/109496. Accessed 29 March 2023](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109496.%20Accessed%2029%20March%202023).

“Turbotax, H&R Block Spend Big Bucks Lobbying for Us to Keep Doing Our Own Taxes.” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 23 Mar. 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/business/taxes/turbotax-h-r-block-spend-millions-lobbying-us-keep-doing-n736386.

“Prison Contracts: Profits & Politics.” *Tufts University Prison Divestment*, https://sites.tufts.edu/prisondivestment/prison-contracts/.

Hananel Director, Sam, et al. “Fighting Special Interest Lobbyist Power over Public Policy.” *Center for American Progress*, 29 Mar. 2023, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/fighting-special-interest-lobbyist-power-public-policy/.

“Corruption Is Legal in America. This Is How We Make It Illegal.” *RepresentUs*, 21 Mar. 2022, https://represent.us/the-strategy-to-end-corruption/.

“Incarceration Rates by Country 2023.” *Incarceration Rates by Country 2023*, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/incarceration-rates-by-country.