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Annual Review of Political Science

How Lobbying Matters

Alex Garlick,[1] Wiebke Marie Junk,[2] and Heath Brown[3]

[1]Department of Political Science, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA; email: alex.garlick@uvm.edu

[2]Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark; email: wiebke.junk@ifs.ku.dk

[3]John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

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Abstract

For decades, political scientists have struggled to provide empirical evidence that lobbying influences policymaking. A considerable gap arose between widespread public suspicions of lobbying and the literature's findings, which failed to document systematic lobbying influence in politics. This gap has closed within the last decade. Causal inference strategies, high-quality data sets, and attention to lobbying in multiple venues have allowed researchers to document the ways in which lobbying matters. In this review, we summarize three ways lobbying has an effect, as documented in this new literature. First, in line with public suspicions, lobbyists have transactional relationships with public officials in which they exchange money for political access and influence. Second, lobbyists persuade public officials by providing information that changes the positions taken by policymakers. Third, successful mobilization of citizen support or lobbying coalitions helps lobbyists attain policy aims. Jointly, these influence pathways nuance our view of lobbying as both harmful and beneficial for democratic representation.

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INTRODUCTION

Lobbyists have long been a fixture in the halls of power in Washington, London, Brussels, and beyond. In 1869, a journalist remarked that the "huge, scaly serpent of the lobby" was corrupting business in the US Congress (Byrd 1987). Lobbyists have not been slayed in the decades since. On the contrary, in 2022, they reached new heights, with a record $4.1 billion being spent on lobbyists before the US Congress (Giorno 2023) and the number of lobbying organizations in the EU Transparency Register tripling within a decade to well over 12,000 (Bernhagen & Hüttemann 2024). This growth in lobbying activity suggests that both interest groups with in-house lobbyists, such as business associations, trade unions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the clients of lobbying firms consider it worth their while. They expect returns on the money and time they spend on lobbying, while the public worries about the excessive influence of well-resourced lobbies, such as those representing agricultural giants, pharmaceutical manufacturers, or social media companies.

Surprisingly, for many years, political scientists have struggled to provide evidence to support these widespread expectations. Scholars treading in the footsteps of the pluralists and their critics (see McFarland 2007), who debated the grand normative question of whether interest group involvement benefited or harmed society, have long struggled to evaluate the actual effects of lobbying empirically. Early qualitative studies provided evidence of group influence (e.g., Hunter 1953), but when scholars attempted to move toward a quantitative approach to enhance coherence and generalizability in the study of lobbying influence (Baumgartner & Leech 1998), ambitious new studies yielded the surprising, and perhaps disappointing, conclusion that lobbying is a rather ineffectual process. A substantial number of studies "found no influence or emphasized how very limited that influence was" (Hojnacki et al. 2012, p. 384).

This conclusion does not fit anymore. In recent years, political scientists have clearly documented that lobbying influences policy outcomes and public debates. Benefiting from innovative methodology and a broader array of data of interest group advocacy, they have quantified ways in which lobbying matters. This literature on lobbying bears insights that nuance recent empirical and formal models of lobbying in the political economy literature (Bombardini & Trebbi 2020, Schnakenberg & Turner 2023), as it spans both inside lobbying, where interest groups approach public officials, and outside lobbying, where groups exert public pressure. Lobbying from this perspective can be defined as the activities taken by or on behalf of an interest group with the aim of affecting political decisions or public debates.[1] Such a definition encompasses the diverse ways in which lobbying organizations attain their political aims.[2]

Our review highlights new evidence of lobbying influence published since the last *Annual Review of Political Science* article on the topic (Hojnacki et al. 2012), with a focus on lobbying in the United States and Europe.[3] A major benefit of this recent line of research is that it has moved beyond questioning if lobbyists are capable of wielding influence to identifying the mechanisms by which lobbyists make a difference. After tracing new research designs enabling the aforementioned sea change, our review showcases new findings regarding three pathways to lobbying influence. First, lobbying provides a platform for interest groups to have transactional relationships with policymakers: Lobbyists exchange money for political access and even influence. Second, lobbyists

[1] Our use of the term interest groups spans a diverse set of organizations, such as business associations, trade unions, NGOs, governmental units, and corporations lobbying on their own behalf (cf. Aizenberg 2023).
[2] de Figueiredo & Richter (2014) define lobbying as private information transmission, which would cover only inside lobbying.
[3] For studies of lobbying in the global South and nondemocratic contexts, see Grömping & Teets (2023) and Rozbicka & Mahrenbach (2023).

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persuade public officials by providing information that changes political priorities and the policy positions taken by policymakers. Third, they mobilize the public, other interest groups, and stakeholders, increasing their likelihood of achieving their policy aims.

ADVANCES IN THE MEASUREMENT OF LOBBYING INFLUENCE

The study of interest group lobbying faces several methodological hurdles. First, lobbying scholarship is ultimately interested in different forms of power. Since Dahl, when scholars seek to assess lobbying influence, they typically ask questions related to instrumental power, or situations where A (a lobby group) makes B (a policymaker) do something that B would not otherwise have done (McFarland 2007). The underlying counterfactual—the outcome that would have prevailed had the group not lobbied—is very difficult to establish. A corollary to this challenge is that policymakers may be more likely to act in the interest of Actor A because they perceive that what is good for Actor A—say, a major trade association—is good for the economy at large. Scholars refer to this as structural power (Witko et al. 2021), where certain groups attain their preferences even without making a formal request through lobbying. While empirical studies of structural power constitute an important new research agenda (Culpepper 2015), our review focuses on studies with an underlying curiosity about instrumental power actively exerted by lobbyists.

Second, even if a scholar is not attempting to make causal claims about such power, it remains difficult to observe the association between lobbying activities and patterns in political decision-making. The mere question of whether lobbying is correlated with more favorable policy outcomes for an organization is empirically demanding because data on lobbying activities and the policy preferences of organizations are difficult to come by. Third, this problem is exacerbated by the fact that lobbying takes place in many different political venues at once: Groups can lobby legislators, bureaucrats, or the public or mobilize by legal means. This multi-venue nature of lobbying complicates the analysis of its effects.

The last decade has witnessed major progress on each of these problems. New research designs have been used to identify causal effects of lobbying. Data availability has improved considerably, and lobbying practices are being observed in multiple venues beyond legislatures. In the following sections, we review this progress, which we see as three solutions to problems in the measurement of lobbying influence.

Causal Inference Strategies

Causal inference methods establish the causal effect of lobbying activities by introducing random treatment allocation or exploiting other forms of (quasi)random assignment or exogenous variation. Among these strategies, experiments and survey experiments are now well-established methods in interest group studies (e.g., McEntire et al. 2015, Miller 2022), but other causal inference techniques, such as instrumental variable approaches (Goldstein & You 2017) and difference-in-difference models (Payson 2020), are also used. In the following, we review a few examples of these new research designs.

To identify causal effects, field experiments introduce random assignment by varying lobbying practices for a treatment group and a control group in actual lobby interactions. Their implementation usually depends on cooperation with an interest group or a lobbying firm. Grose et al. (2022), for instance, collaborated with an education group to randomize which members of a US state legislature were lobbied in a social setting, in a traditional office situation, or not at all. Similarly, Junk & Rasmussen (2023) worked with a consumer organization to test the effect of an upcoming public campaign on a representative sample of citizens. Other experimental studies work as audit studies, where researchers vary key characteristics of the groups contacting a

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legislator, for instance, to test the effects of campaign contributions (Kalla & Broockman 2016) or connections to grassroots movements (Fenton & Stephens-Dougan 2022). Moreover, survey experiments, where respondents are exposed to randomly varying scenarios, have frequently been used, such as for assessing how congressional staffers reward ideologically aligned lobbyists (Furnas et al. 2023), how groups affect citizens' positions (Dür 2019), or when corporations lobby through associations (Aizenberg 2023).

In addition to designing these experimental studies, interest group scholars have begun to exploit external variation to assess the causal effect of lobbying. Goldstein & You (2017), for instance, rely on an instrumental variable approach to understand returns to municipal lobbying before Congress using the existence of a direct flight as an instrument. Zacher (2023) uses the uneven distribution of shale gas underneath American states, which allows for fossil fuel extraction through fracking, as an exogenous source of variation in the strength of the energy industry lobby. Furthermore, given time-series cross-sectional data, difference-in-difference models are a promising tool to identify a causal effect by comparing trends in a treatment group and a control group before and after an event of interest. Payson (2020), for instance, employs such a design around the hiring of lobbyists by local governments to understand the effects on state funding sent to cities. The feasibility of this, however, depends on the availability of panel data, which were rarely found in the past. Considerable advances have been made in recent years in this respect, for instance, regarding the interest group populations in the states (Garlick & Cluverius 2020, Holyoke 2019). This brings us to our second strand of solutions to the measurement problems in studies of lobbying.

New Data Sources

Even when not attempting to make causal claims about lobbying, correlational research has long been limited by the lack of high-quality data to map the activities and preferences of interest groups and their links to policy outcomes. Recent years have witnessed several waves of progress when it comes to the availability of data on populations of interest groups, their lobbying spending, bill-specific activities, and political access.

Data on the lobbying activity of interest groups has improved as laws related to lobbying transparency have been implemented around the world. At the national level in the United States, congressional lobbying disclosure reports have become far more reliable in the wake of the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 (though reporting thresholds still mean that less-resourced organizations tend to be underrepresented) and provide researchers with insight on the individual bills and policy areas that interest groups are pursuing (Kim 2017). Although such bill-level reporting is uncommon in other countries, more than 17 major democracies (Chari et al. 2020), as well as the European Parliament and European Commission, have introduced different forms of lobbying registers and/or reporting on lobbying activities. This trend toward increased lobbying transparency is still ongoing, as many countries began regulating lobbying only in the past decade.

Subnational governments also regulate lobbying, particularly in the United States, where state legislatures have a long history of requiring documentation of lobbyists. While these data were once collected and organized by scholars only on a decennial timeframe (Gray et al. 2015), the National Institute for Money in Politics now makes them available on an annual basis, and researchers have further systematized these data, for instance by policy area and group type (Holyoke 2019). This rich historical and newer subnational data has also enabled time-series analyses, which were a near impossibility until recently. Strickland (2021), for example, collects archival records to analyze the growth of state interest group populations since 1949 to assess changes in the compensation of revolving door lobbyists. Other state-level studies compare interest group influence on high- and low-salience issues for different levels of opposition and in different phases in the

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policy cycle (Grasse & Heidbreder 2011, Miller & Butler 2021). Notably, several state laws are more stringent than federal regulations, requiring lobbyists to disclose not only what bill they are advocating on but also their specific position on the legislation. This is a unique feature, given the persistent challenge of identifying the positions of lobbyists, that has been used to measure their degree of preference attainment (Dür 2008).

When the law does not require lobbying positions to be reported, text-as-data techniques have enabled researchers to measure lobbying positions on an unprecedented scale. Nonautomated methods to establish group preferences, such as surveys (Boräng et al. 2023), interviews (Dür et al. 2015), and hand coding (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2019, Rasmussen et al. 2018), cannot easily scale up to large samples of bills and interest groups. Using automated text analysis, scholars are now able to estimate the positions of large numbers of groups, for instance, based on public consultation responses (Klüver 2013). Textual data have also been used to estimate text similarity between groups' public comments and final rules or pieces of legislation (Dwidar 2022a, McKay 2022) or to understand groups' levels of analytical information in legislative hearings (Ban et al. 2023). All these methodological developments in using text as data have advanced the analysis of whether and how lobbyists secure preferential treatment in a way that goes beyond binary ratings of favoring policy change (Baumgartner et al. 2009). This enhanced precision in the measurement of group preferences and legislative change have enabled more nuanced accounts of how lobbyists exert influence, for instance, when small changes in legislative texts give specific groups far-reaching advantages (McKay 2022).

Attention to Influence in Multiple Venues

A third improvement in recent studies of interest group influence is their attention to lobbying activities in other political venues, such as the executive branch, courts, and the public sphere. Cameron & Kastellec (2023), for instance, describe how increasing interest group involvement in US Supreme Court confirmation debates has radicalized the composition of the court. Also, amicus curiae briefs filed by advocacy organizations help explain decisions issued by US Supreme Court justices (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2013). In the executive branch, Haeder & Yackee (2015) use comments filed before the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to identify how business groups affect rulemaking by US bureaucrats. Administrative data have also been used to assess the representation of marginalized groups in federal agency rules (Dwidar 2022b). Other studies have revealed lobbying influence by focusing on the ties between interest groups and political parties with cross-country survey data (Allern et al. 2024, Røed et al. 2023).

Furthermore, outside lobbying aimed at affecting public opinion or public discussions has been addressed more systematically in newer studies of lobbying influence. Recent studies evaluate both the effect of lobbying campaigns on citizens (Dür 2019, Jungherr et al. 2021, Junk & Rasmussen 2023, McEntire et al. 2015) and the indirect effect of outside lobbying in the media on lobbying success in terms of attaining political preferences (e.g., De Bruycker & Beyers 2019).

These advances notwithstanding, only a few studies assess how groups cross barriers between venues or branches of government (Jourdain et al. 2017). An exception is Ban & You (2019), who trace how financial firms lobbied Congress while regulatory legislation was under consideration and continued to lobby the specific executive agency after the bill had been signed into law. We see such cross-venue research as a promising avenue for further research.

In sum, new studies offer three solutions to the measurement problems in studies of lobbying: causal inference strategies, increased data availability, and the study of lobbying in multiple venues. These have opened great new possibilities for scholars to uncover how groups exert influence through lobbying.

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INFLUENCE PATHWAYS

Recent studies have profoundly advanced our understanding of how lobbying matters. While earlier empirical studies found little evidence of the influence of interest groups (Hojnacki et al. 2012), the recent literature documents several distinct pathways through which different types of lobbying ultimately affect public policy.

In the following sections, we review new empirical findings that speak to three distinct ways in which lobbyists exert influence: (*a*) transaction, where groups provide material incentives to policymakers, for instance, through campaign finance; (*b*) persuasion, where interest groups affect policymakers' positions through the provision of new information; and (*c*) mobilization, where groups exert political pressure by activating the public and other stakeholders to take political action.

We see the former two pathways as the more established foci in the literature on lobbying influence. Economists term these models quid pro quo lobbying (transaction) and informational lobbying (persuasion) (Bombardini & Trebbi 2020). In addition to summarizing new political science perspectives on these mechanisms, we expand the account of how lobbying matters by including the mobilizing role it plays by activating citizens, other interest groups, and ultimately policymakers into political action. While this is not an entirely new theoretical focus, recent studies have integrated the citizen-focused and collaborative activities of interest groups into empirical studies of their influence. Together, these three pathways provide a much more nuanced picture of lobbying influence in modern democracies than we have had in the past (**Table 1**).

Transactional Lobbying

There is a prevalent public perception that lobbying is mainly about money or outrightly corrupt. This belief has been stoked by high-profile yet rare prosecutions of lobbyists such as Paul Manafort, President Donald Trump's former campaign manager. Scholars have addressed how both legal and illegal funding supplied by lobbyists relates to policy outcomes. In this review, we focus on legal financial transactions, such as party and campaign contributions, as part of organizations' lobbying strategies, while bribes and other illicit transactions with policymakers are treated in the literature on corruption (Thompson 2018, Treisman 2007).

Documenting that interest group spending (e.g., financial campaign contributions, lobbying expenditures) results in favorable outcomes has long been difficult. However, recent studies have shown at least three ways in which financial resources allow outside actors to have a say in

Table 1 The three influence pathways and key findings

	Transaction	Persuasion	Mobilization
Central resources	Material incentives	Information	Attention and legitimacy
Typical target audience	Public officials	Public officials	Citizens and other interest groups
Primary tactic	Inside lobbying	Inside lobbying	Outside lobbying
Selected findings	Campaign contributions secure political access (Kalla & Broockman 2016) and financial and legislative benefits (Furnas et al. 2019, McKay 2022) Revolving door lobbyists sell political connections (LaPira & Thomas 2017, McCrain 2018)	Lobbyists target diverse legislators (Miller 2022) Lobbyists' informational input matters for outcomes (Flöthe 2019, Haeder & Yackee 2015, Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019) Policymakers' responsiveness to information varies (e.g., Furnas et al. 2023)	Lobbying success depends on public support (Rasmussen et al. 2018) and coalition characteristics (Dwidar 2022a, Junk 2019, Lorenz 2020) Advocacy campaigns can influence attitudes and public behavior (Dür 2019, McEntire et al. 2015)

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policymaking. They provide clear evidence that campaign contributions secure political access and financial and legislative benefits. Moreover, staff rotation between the lobbying profession and political institutions is an increasingly well-documented way to buy political connections. Altogether, these studies show that lobbying works by leveraging money in politics, meaning that the skeptical public perception of lobbying is at least partly warranted.

Campaign contributions secure political access. A crucial stage in the lobbying process is getting invited in the door, what scholars have termed access. Access, or when a group passes a threshold controlled by relevant gatekeepers (Binderkrantz et al. 2017), is not easily attained, especially in a crowded lobbying landscape (Halpin & Fraussen 2017). When deciding whom to prioritize, officials may give preferential treatment to organizations that have provided financial support. For example, former US Representative Mick Mulvaney said, "We had a hierarchy in my office in Congress. If you're a lobbyist who never gave us money, I didn't talk to you. If you're a lobbyist who gave us money, I might talk to you" (Axios 2018).

This anecdotal evidence is corroborated by Kalla & Broockman (2016), who conducted a field experiment where a political organization requested meetings for individuals who had donated to congressional offices while randomizing whether or not information about their donations was revealed in the meeting request. This study provides causal evidence for a large effect of (disclosed) campaign contributions: When their offices were informed that a meeting seeker was a donor, members of Congress were more than three times as likely to meet with them.

Documenting that donations lead to access is all the more consequential when paired with longitudinal studies of donation strategies that reveal the motivations of lobbying groups to gain access to powerful incumbents. Fouirnaies & Hall (2018) leverage data on 440,000 committee assignments and campaign contribution portfolios in all 99 US state legislatures over the past three decades. In a series of difference-in-difference designs based on changes in legislators' committee roles, they show, first, that interest groups directly contribute to committee leaders with policy jurisdiction over their businesses and, second, that they target legislators with high procedural power in committees. Campaign contributions are, therefore, a highly targeted (Fouirnaies & Hall 2018) and effective (Kalla & Broockman 2016) access-seeking strategy.

Campaign contributions secure financial and legislative advantages. In addition to transactional lobbying securing access, there is evidence that campaign contributions pay off financially (at least for the lobbying industry) and through effects on (micro)legislation. Regarding the financial effect, Furnas et al. (2019) use data on the campaign contributions of lobbying firms to operationalize their ties to different parties. In panel regression analyses spanning data from 2008 to 2016, they show that firms receive quarterly financial benefits worth between $5,000 and $6,000 per lobbyist when they donate to the majority party in the US House of Representatives. Put differently, campaign contributions to the majority party increase a firm's ability to raise lobbying revenues from its clients. It is likely that clients reward campaign contributions in this way because they expect access advantages when lobbying firms have these transactional ties (Kalla & Broockman 2016) or an outright increase in the influence the lobbying firm can exert on legislative outcomes on their behalf.

There also have been findings of actual policy change following campaign contributions. McKay (2022) assesses US interest groups' lobbying influence in the context of the 2010 Affordable Care Act. She relies on a unique collection of campaign contribution data and amendment requests submitted to the US Senate Finance Committee to show how individual requests later became law after lobbyists made campaign donations. Compared to constituents and average lobbyists, lobbyists who contributed to members of Congress were more likely to see their requests introduced as legislation and to achieve a larger portion of their legislative goals. Importantly,

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McKay's (2022) analysis highlights that the requested changes to legislation are minute, entailing discrete benefits for a small segment of an industry (i.e. microlegislation), and highly covert, given that the amendment requests were never discussed publicly. In that sense, McKay's work also reveals why previous studies are likely to have missed the influence of interest groups and their transactions with policymakers: Aggregate analyses of (binary) policy change underestimate how organizations' preferences are served through minor changes to legislation texts.

Staff rotation can buy political connections. Finally, a dimension of transactional lobbying that has attracted considerable attention is the circulation of staff between interest groups or lobbying firms and political institutions. LaPira & Thomas (2017) link the professional biographies of several thousand lobbyists to Lobbying Disclosure Act reports to show that formerly high-ranking congressional staffers (but not former members of Congress) who become lobbyists attract clients from a wider variety of economic sectors than their counterparts without this work experience. They infer that those well-connected congressional staffers are selling their access to congressional decision-makers, instead of selling substantive expertise. The so-called revolving door is typically approached with such a transactional understanding, where lobbying firms invest in staff with political connections to secure monetary gains.

Subsequent studies explore this phenomenon in the United States, the European Union, and other national contexts (e.g., Coen & Vannoni 2016, Lee & You 2023, Rasmussen et al. 2021, Shepherd & You 2020). McCrain (2018), for instance, deepens LaPira & Thomas's (2017) earlier conclusions by showing that revolving door lobbyists' increased value as lobbyists is primarily driven by them maintaining their connections to former congressional coworkers, not just their connections to Congress in general. This supports the interpretation that lobbying firms can buy connections by hiring a revolver.

McKay & Lazarus (2023) further assess the revolving door effect by studying earmarked funds for US colleges and universities over time. They show that revolving door lobbyists bring a benefit in the form of a higher probability of receiving an earmark, but only to entities that spend relatively less (below $90,000 a year) on lobbying. The authors argue that this may be because almost all institutions at high levels of expenditure (especially over $500,000 annually) use revolving door lobbyists. Alternatively, given that there still is considerable variation in the use of revolvers at medium-to-high expenditures, attracting revolving door lobbyists could give less well-resourced organizations a potential path toward influence.

Finally, there also is evidence of a reverse revolving door, where lobbying firms gain connections when one of their lobbyists enters government service. The economic size of this effect is substantial, with a 36% revenue increase, or roughly $320,000 per year (Egerod & McCrain 2023).

In sum, the literature has come a long way in the last 15 years when it comes to documenting transactional lobbying. The puzzling finding that the resources employed by lobbyists are unrelated to policy change (Baumgartner et al. 2009) has been nuanced by both correlational evidence that resources and lobbying success are related (Binderkrantz & Pedersen 2019, Crepaz et al. 2022) and causal evidence that money helps secure political access and other advantages. Some might feel that with this evidence the story about lobbying has been told. However, this would leave the reader with a one-sided perspective on lobbying. As a wealth of studies have underlined, there are important mechanisms in lobbying other than just exchanging money for influence. The next sections review the two most important ones: persuasion and mobilization.

Persuasion

Scholars disagree about whether lobbying organizations provide information in an attempt to persuade opposing or undecided legislators or as a subsidy to like-minded legislators (Hall &

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Deardorff 2006). In recent years, there has been a resurgence of theoretical models of informational lobbying, where groups exploit an informational advantage over legislators (Awad 2020, Miller 2022, Schnakenberg 2017). Although the literature still provides less direct evidence when it comes to the role of informational lobbying compared to the role of money (Bombardini & Trebbi 2020), three important insights have emerged from newer studies of the role of lobbyists in persuading policymakers: Lobbyists attempt to persuade diverse legislators, lobbyists' informational input matters for political outcomes, and there are severe biases in policymakers' responsiveness to information provided by different types of lobbyists.

The supply and demand sides of information. Following Hall & Deardorff's (2006) seminal study on legislative lobbying, several studies have nuanced the view that lobbyists target allies rather than seek to persuade undecided or opposed legislators. Regarding this supply side of information provision, Miller (2022) uses a conjoint experiment with federal lobbyists and policy advocates to show that information is actually targeted at members of Congress who are undecided on or weak supporters of the proposal of interest. Lobbyists also target members who hold institutional roles, providing lobbyists with influence over the proposal at the particular stage of the policy process. Finally, contacts with allied legislators serve as a conduit for lobbyists to reach persuadable members they otherwise would not be able to access (Schnakenberg 2017).

On the demand side of information provision, Ban et al. (2023) rely on a data set spanning nearly 75,000 congressional committee hearings and more than 750,000 witnesses from 1960 to 2018. They show that committees seek out witnesses who can provide high levels of analytical information (subject to partisan-driven conditions). They also show that, after think tanks, representatives of associations and hired lobbyists are most likely to fill that demand. This latter result documents policymakers' demand for informational input from both in-house and hired lobbyists. Paired with the finding that lobbyists attempt to persuade policymakers, especially those who are pivotal for the specific proposal at hand (Miller 2022), this means that recent studies have begun to document both the supply and demand sides of actual information provision in exchanges between lobbyists and policymakers.

The type of information matters. Evidence that the type of information transmitted by organizations matters for policy outcomes is provided in Haeder & Yackee's (2015) study of the US OMB. They show that more lobbying is associated with more regulatory change across 1,500 rules, particularly when industry groups are united and submit more technical policy-related information to officials. These technical comments are more likely to be correlated with regulatory action than comments featuring data on mass opinions submitted by public interest groups. Using data spanning 50 policy issues in five European countries, Flöthe (2019) similarly shows that the provision of technical information from experts increases the likelihood of lobbying success, while the provision of information on public opinion does not.

The relationship between lobbying input and (information about) public or constituency interests is, indeed, a critical one. Scholars have long been concerned that decision-makers are more responsive to lobbying, especially by some types of interest groups, than they are to citizen preferences (Gilens & Page 2014). Newer evidence even highlights that some interest group input actively distorts the representation of citizen or constituency preferences. Hertel-Fernandez et al. (2019), for instance, use a combination of survey evidence, observational data, and two survey experiments to show that congressional staff who rely more heavily on business and conservative interest groups misjudge their constituents' preferences. Relatedly, Giger & Klüver (2016) demonstrate that even when these preferences are known, ties to interest groups can obscure the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives. Their study of the voting patterns of 448 members of Parliament in Switzerland uses public referenda to get

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precise information about constituent preferences. According to this data, Parliament members' ties to business-oriented interest groups make them more likely to vote counter to constituent preferences. Conversely, ties to cause groups, such as NGOs, strengthen the link between voters and their representatives. This means that interest group input has an important dual potential: It can both obstruct and enhance the democratic representation of citizen interests.

Responsiveness to different sources of information. Many studies address differences between types of interest groups, such as NGOs, trade unions, business groups, and firms, in their ability to inform policymaking. Many of them find considerable, although not always consistent, group type differences. Several studies underline a bias in favor of business (or well-resourced) organizations. Haeder & Yackee (2015), for example, show that when only industry groups lobby on a proposed rule, rule change is more likely, but the same is not true for public interest groups.

However, this bias in favor of business lobbying is not a consistent finding. Indeed, whether business lobbyists have advantages or disadvantages in securing access to and influence on policies seems to be context dependent. Using a Danish case, Binderkrantz et al. (2015) show that access to Parliament and the bureaucracy favors different types of interest groups, with public interest groups enjoying more access to Parliament than business groups and business groups enjoying this advantage in the bureaucracy. Moreover, Dür et al. (2015) find that business groups are, on average, less successful than citizen groups in attaining their preferences on policy proposals by the European Commission. When conflict over a policy is low, however, business groups can protect their interests. These findings illustrate that the ability of different types of interest groups to inform and influence policymaking varies considerably, especially by institutional context and type of issue.

Other types of biases are of partisan or ideological nature. In a survey experiment on the US Congress, Furnas et al. (2023) show that congressional staffers favor policy evidence provided by ideologically aligned sources. For example, they are more likely to rely on ideologically aligned information to make legislative action recommendations, and this effect is especially strong among ideological extremists and strong partisans. This finding links the question of the responsiveness to interest group input to patterns in the polarization of politics (Crosson et al. 2020). If interest organizations as sources of expert information become more partisan or ideological in nature, we might, after all, return to a situation where persuasion by interest groups is rare and informational lobbying is best understood as a subsidy to ideologically aligned policymakers.[4]

In sum, persuasive lobbying is increasingly well documented, pointing to important variation in the types and sources of information, targets, and broader issue context. Still, this influence pathway merits further research to advance our knowledge of how lobbying actually informs policy.

Mobilization

Our last influence pathway involves the mobilizing role of interest groups in the larger policy ecosystem. The intense battle around the European Copyright Directive of 2019 illustrates that winners and losers in lobbying can ultimately come down to success or failure in the outside arena. This proposed directive attracted fierce public lobbying efforts by both copyright holders, who supported the proposal, and tech firms such as YouTube and Google, which were intent on

[4]Brock (2024) shows how lobbyists served as the connective tissue between Republicans and Democrats in Congress to pass a farm bill with mutual benefits. This stands as an example of how lobbyists can change a policy outcome by mobilizing legislators, which is described in the next section, without necessarily changing the positions of individual legislatures.

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stopping it with the help of public support from civil society groups and alarmed citizens. The latter alliance failed, as civil society activists who shared the tech lobby's positions were discredited as "Silicon Valley's useful idiots" (Heermann 2023, p. 2287). The directive passed, exemplifying the pivotal role of representational and legitimacy concerns when organizations mobilize public support.

We define mobilization as the activation of the public or political stakeholders to raise attention and exert pressure on an issue. It can take several forms, including heightening public attention and triggering action, such as protesting, letter writing, or other forms of political behavior. When mobilization works, it sends a signal to policymakers that the public or a large share of groups cares about an issue. This can affect policymakers' incentives to be responsive to a lobbying effort, ultimately leading them to promote or oppose new legislation. However, as the Copyright Directive example above underlines, mobilization is also connected to big normative issues about the representation or misrepresentation of individuals.

Arguably, the ideal behind mobilization is that interest groups can serve as a link in the chain of representation for individuals in the political system (Albareda 2018, Halpin 2006). Interest groups can serve as "self-appointed representatives" (Montanaro 2012, p. 1094), for instance, of historically marginalized communities, and their efforts may compensate for a community's lack of representation in electoral politics (English et al. 2019). In such a case, lobbying matters, first of all, because it draws attention to otherwise underrepresented interests and forgotten issues (Marchetti 2014).[5] At the same time, this form of representation raises new risks, as groups representing a diverse community may draw attention to the issues of some but not all of its members (English 2019, Strolovitch 2006).

Next, we review some of the rich evidence on the effects of mobilization in lobbying with a focus on how mobilization helps secure policy influence. We hold that new studies enhance our understanding of mobilization by documenting that ultimate lobbying success depends on the level of public support for an organization's position and that public advocacy campaigns can affect public attitudes or citizen behavior. Moreover, in addition to public support, lobbying success depends on the characteristics of coalition partners that unite for a common cause.

Lobbying success depends on the level of public support. Gilens & Page's (2014) noteworthy study kindled public debates on how mass opinion intersects with or is overwhelmed by lobbying. This line of research has grown to show how public opinion impacts lobbying success in several ways. First, in a study spanning 50 policy issues in five European countries, Rasmussen et al. (2018) show that public support for an organization's policy position impacts its lobbying success. Diffuse interest groups, like citizen-based advocacy organizations, are especially dependent on public support. At the same time, the importance of public support varies for different types of issues. When issue salience in the lobbying community is low, public support is less conducive for lobbying success. Second, the results of research by De Bruycker & Hanegraaff (2023) suggest that public opinion can counteract the bias in favor of well-resourced interest groups that are out of step with the public. Their findings suggest that organizations that act in line with public opinion are better at translating their resources into higher influence than organizations that counter what the public wants.

Finally, the relationship between public opinion and interest groups can also be approached in reverse: Interest groups might support (or distort) government responsiveness to voter preferences, as some of the previously reviewed literature implies (Giger & Klüver 2016, Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019). While these studies have partially underlined the misrepresentation of

[5]See also related work on grassroots organizers, where movement organizations can play a critical role (Gelbman 2021, Han et al. 2021).

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constituency interests, other studies stress the conducive role of citizen associations, particularly in strengthening the constituency–policy link. Using a sample of 20 policy issues across 30 European countries, Rasmussen & Reher (2019), for instance, show that a high level of citizen engagement in civil society organizations (i.e., citizen membership in associations) strengthens the relationship between public opinion and policy. Analyses that exploit variation over time support a similar conclusion. For example, Hopkins et al. (2019) show that lobbying by cause groups (which are often supported by individual members) strengthens the Canadian government's responsiveness to voters in a way that business lobbying does not.

These studies at the nexus between public opinion and lobbying document that lobbying also has the potential to improve representation. At the same time, they underscore the strategic importance for lobbyists of having the public on their side. As we summarize in the next section, recent evidence also tests when and how outside lobbying campaigns aimed at affecting public opinion are actually effective.

Advocacy campaigns can affect public attitudes and behavior. Survey and field experiments have been used to test the effect of advocacy campaigns on citizen attitudes and (intended) behavior. Dür (2019), for instance, conducted two survey experiments in European countries, showing that interest groups are able to sway citizens through the arguments they provide but not source cues. This means that citizens respond to interest group information but do not seem to differentiate the (types of) groups making these arguments. Connectedly, Jungherr et al. (2021) combine survey and field experimental evidence to show that many citizens are unable to assess the credibility of interest groups and that the ability of interest groups to sway citizens is not moderated by credibility assessments, whereas communication by political parties is. This implies that interest groups have the potential to persuade and activate citizens in a way that is less affected by previous priors about the source and thus arguably less polarized than partisan communication.

Moreover, several field experiments support the claim that interest group campaigns affect citizens' positions and intended (political) behavior. McEntire et al. (2015) employ a field experiment using the campaign of a human rights organization on the issue of sleep deprivation. Their results demonstrate that group efforts targeted at individuals, which they term micromobilization, are most effective at getting respondents to sign a petition when they use an appeal based on personal experience. Similarly, Broockman & Kalla (2016) show that canvassers can durably reduce transphobia by encouraging respondents to consider the perspective of transgender individuals. Both of these studies are in line with the broader study of mass behavior, which shows that interest group communication is capable of mobilizing the public into political action (Druckman 2022).

Adding the emphasis on micromobilization underlines the point that although (macro-level) public opinion emerges only from collective processes involving many actors at once (Baumgartner & Mahoney 2008), single interest groups can mobilize the section of citizens they target. Junk & Rasmussen (2023) demonstrate how a single advocacy campaign can result in such micromobilization: In a field experiment in the European context, they show that campaign material by a consumer group affected intended consumer behavior in future purchases. Repeated interaction with a target group can, in this way, have far-reaching consequences. For example, in a detailed case study, Lacombe (2021) shows how the National Rifle Association (NRA) succeeded in cultivating a gun owner identity among its members in the United States, which then led to ideological political behavior. Specifically, he shows how the language in the NRA's flagship magazine was later found in letters that its members wrote to editors of local newspapers.

These findings sharpen our view of how lobbying matters. Advocacy campaigns have measurable effects on citizens and their behavior, meaning that the importance of outside lobbying should not be underestimated. As Cameron & Kastellec (2023) show, based on the example of US

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Supreme Court nominations, outside tactics and grassroots mobilization have become much more widespread over time, and citizen and public interest groups are more prominent than before. This suggests that our story about how lobbying matters also needs to feature these actors and their ability to link citizens to the political process. At the same time, field experimental evidence reminds us that the type of advocacy campaign is pivotal for its effectiveness (Junk & Rasmussen 2023, McEntire et al. 2015), so not all advocacy campaigns can be expected to be equally effective. However, even in the absence of citizen support, the mobilizing role of interest groups can be pivotal in the sense that lobbying success depends on sets of groups that work toward a common cause, as we explain in the next section.

Lobbying success depends on coalition characteristics. Another dimension of mobilization is group-to-group mobilization, where organizations convince each other to support or oppose a policy proposal, either individually or collectively. A series of recent studies demonstrates that the different characteristics of a group's "coalition portfolio" (Heaney & Lorenz 2013, p. 251), meaning its multiple forms of ties to other groups, are central to understanding lobbying success.

A first important insight from these studies is that lobbying is a collective enterprise, where the size and pooled resources of lobbying sides on an issue impact their likelihood of success. This holds for recruiting government officials to become active proponents of one's position (Mahoney & Baumgartner 2015) and for measures of preference attainment that relate policy outcomes to interest group positions (Klüver 2013). Moreover, the mobilization of support from pivotal groups affects a group's success early in the legislative process (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2019).

Second, the mobilization of support from diverse social or economic group types within a coalition can be an important path toward lobbying success. Dwidar (2022a) demonstrates that this is the case for bureaucratic implementation of public policy. Her study of organizations' cosigned public comments across nearly 350 federal rules proposed between 2005 and 2015 shows that agencies favor recommendations from organizationally diverse coalitions. Lorenz (2020) similarly finds that bills supported by coalitions with higher levels of interest diversity have a higher likelihood of receiving congressional committee consideration. In both cases, coalition diversity can act as a signal to decision-makers that a bill or rule can unite a broad group of stakeholders and should therefore be worth pursuing.

However, the success of diverse coalitions also depends on consensus between their members and other contextual factors. In a qualitative study, Gelbman (2021) highlights the challenges faced by the interest group coalition supporting the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s before Congress and how a lack of consensus hindered its efforts. Ultimately, the coalition's ability to speak "with one booming voice" helped secure the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (p. 1). Quantitative evidence from Europe speaks further to the factors that condition coalition success by showing that diverse coalitions have higher lobbying success on salient issues but not niche issues (Junk 2019).

Another key characteristic of a lobbying coalition is its relationship to incumbent policymakers. Outside lobbying efforts to bring citizens and other interest groups into a policy debate can be bolstered by having champions aligned with their efforts. For example, the massive protests in the United States following the murder of George Floyd led to policing reforms only in states where Black Lives Matter, the group that mobilized the protests, had legislative allies that they could later activate to carry out their policing reforms (Peay 2024). This study underlines the important cumulative effect of outside and inside lobbying, potentially including both mobilization and persuasion, over longer periods of time.

Studies of mobilization complement the stories about transactional and persuasive lobbying in important ways. Money is undoubtedly a now well-documented factor that helps secure access

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and potential influence. Moreover, the abundant informational input that lobbyists provide to decision-makers has documented—yet biased—impacts on policy. At the same time, it is important to stress that lobbying does not just take place in smoke-filled rooms away from the public eye. Lobbying (by some types of groups) also has the potential to transmit public preferences—and change them—or mobilize citizens and other interest groups into political action. It has also been documented that policymakers are responsive to the signals that diverse mobilization in the group community send about strong or broad support for a policy or bureaucratic rule. This third story about lobbying underlines its potential to strengthen rather than only distort participatory democracy.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE AVENUES

Within the last decade, anecdotes of undue influence have been matched with social scientific evidence that interest groups matter. In amassing large data sets on many aspects of lobbying and analyzing these data with sophisticated methods, it is now clear that political scientists have begun to unlock the interest group puzzle.

In this review, we summarized recent findings on three pathways through which lobbying has an impact. Many of the mechanisms involved have already been featured in earlier theoretical accounts of lobbying. However, they are enjoying newfound prominence and precision in today's applied literature, which provides clear empirical evidence based on extensive data and clever methods. The political science literature has been strengthened by attention to detail in lobbying relationships, which includes zooming in on micro-level interactions, such as individual interest group campaigns, and minute details in legislative texts. Empirical studies of lobbying have documented how lobbying influences policymaking, specifying the complex links between lobbying, public opinion, and public policy.

Despite these advances, our review also points to limitations and blind spots in existing work. While transactional perspectives are more prominent in US research, studies in Europe tend to pay more attention to mobilization. Researchers from each camp can learn more from each other and should, ultimately, study how the different influence pathways are linked, as emerging research on the lobbying–public opinion–policy nexus has begun to do. Moreover, our review shows that comparative work is still relatively rare. However, given the context-dependent nature of some of the findings we outlined, comparative analysis remains a key tool in furthering our understanding of when and how different types of lobbying are effective. Notably, our review highlights diverse methodological approaches to all three influence pathways, showing that correlational studies and causal identification strategies have gone hand in hand to explain each one. In our view, this diversity is important to retain, as experimental research on micro-level interactions cannot stand alone; rather, it is complemented by correlational, historical, and qualitative research that helps us understand how the effects of microinteractions aggregate in the policy system.

Finally, while evidence that lobbying matters is stronger than ever, the central question from the pluralism debates of what the influence of interest groups means for democracy and democratic representation remains. Findings in the campaign finance literature on access and influence are surely a cause for concern, and not just in the United States, where most of the campaign finance literature has originated. Campaign finance limits and transparency are vital to ensure that financial biases in access and influence are not exacerbated. In EU member states, many countries require disclosure of donors only above a considerable threshold, sometimes several thousand dollars. This means that transactional lobbying through party and/or campaign donations can take place covertly, with potential adverse effects on equal access opportunities and legislative outcomes as well as possible political polarization (Grumbach 2020). At the same time, evidence regarding persuasion and mobilization by interest groups highlights that interest

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groups can inform the actions of elected officials, benefit from public support, and shift citizen attitudes. These findings are not necessarily supportive of democracy, but they could be.

Evaluating further whether and when lobbying helps or hinders democratic representation should be a top priority for tomorrow's research. As we write this review, the threat of democratic backsliding, increased political polarization, and the spread of illiberal policies in several countries make evaluating how lobbying threatens or protects liberal democracies all the more relevant (Li & Disalvo 2023). Notably, our review focuses on lobbying in established Western democracies, but important studies of lobbying also cover the global South (Rozbicka & Mahrenbach 2023) and nondemocratic contexts (Grömping & Teets 2023), which merit reviews of their own. For all these reasons, our piece surely does not mark an end point in the study of lobbying but rather the beginning of a time when our subfield is mature enough to provide answers to the ongoing question of how lobbying influences politics.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors are not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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