



The Other Kind of Political Money

Kay Lehman Schlozman, Boston College

Our conversations about money in politics are dominated by concern about campaign contributions or, perhaps, bribery in its many forms. We tend to overlook another kind of political money, spending on lobbying by organized interests, perhaps because lobbying so clearly enjoys First Amendment protection. The reported sums expended on lobbying at the federal level approach the blowout spending on the 2012 presidential election. Moreover, the reported sums underestimate substantially the real amounts spent through organizations pursuing political influence. Underreporting happens, for example, because spending on grassroots lobbying does not need to be reported.

Why is so much spent? Campaign donors make contributions for two reasons: they seek not only to influence who wins or loses but also to have an impact on what the winners do once in office. Thus, we need to pay attention to what happens after the election: that is, to the follow-up that happens when policies are actually being made.

When individual citizens seek to make their voices heard in politics, the well-educated have many advantages. However, when politically active organizations seek influence, the critical resource is money. An organization with a large budget will hire the expertise it needs — lobbyists, researchers, tax attorneys, public relations experts, and so on. Hiring high-priced talent helps to ensure political effectiveness. Hiring more of these political professionals allows an organization to multiply the volume of its political input substantially. In short, well-educated individuals are likely to have many other attributes that make them effective as activists. Affluent organizations can purchase those characteristics.

The aggregate sums are staggering. According to opensecrets.org, the Web site of the Center for Responsive Politics, registered expenditures for lobbying have exceeded \$3 billion in every year since 2008. What is of particular concern, however, is not so much the level of lobbying spending as its distribution. It is the affront to the democratic tenet of equality among citizens — embodied in the principle of one person, one vote — that makes the other kind of political money so worrisome. Some kinds of people and some political perspectives — most notably, the affluent — receive much more vigorous representation.

Aggregating the various kinds of organizations that represent business in national politics shows that the bulk of organized interest representation is centered around business, which constitute 53 percent of all organizations and 74 percent of the those organized around economic roles and interests. Business organizations account for 72 percent of lobbying spending.

Among the handful of organizations representing the less privileged are labor unions, which constitute roughly 1 percent of organized interests active in Washington politics and 1 percent of the lobbying spending. But, as is well known, rates of union membership, which are currently much higher for workers in the public than the private sector, have plunged over the last generation. Interestingly, because public-sector professional workers like teachers are relatively likely to be unionized, professionals have, overall, higher rates of union membership than do service, sales, or production workers.

There are a handful of organizations that represent the poor — most of them social service providers like the Red Cross and Goodwill Industries. Together they account for 1 percent of the organizations active in Washington and less than 1 percent of the lobbying spending. There are no organizations — and, hence, no lobbying spending — for recipients of means-tested government benefits like SNAP, the EITC, or TANF acting on their own behalf. There are, similarly, no organizations representing children in Head Start programs, those awaiting trial on felony charges, or women at home.

What, if anything, is to be done? Probably not much — given the protection afforded to lobbying by the First Amendment. Besides, not only is lobbying constitutionally protected but it performs important functions in

American democracy — most importantly, providing policymakers with detailed information about the possible consequences of policy alternatives. Still, it would be useful if policy makers showed more awareness of way that unequal resources shape what they hear.