

# How Do Interest Groups Set Their Lobbying Agendas?

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January, 2011

## **Abstract**

How do lobbyists set legislative priorities, and are some organizations better able to choose which policies they will work on? Interest group capacity to invest time and resources on issues their care about represents a key determinant of relative power. I examine legislative priority setting and demonstrate that organizations that form partnerships with legislative champions and allied coalitions are better able to prioritize issues in their policy portfolios. While factors such as internal resources, political ideology, and membership preferences also matter, these effects are conditional on legislative timing. Through two sets of interviews conducted with lobbyists during the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, I show that organizational resources mattered at the beginning of the congressional session, but their influence waned as the congressional agenda narrowed. The influence of legislative champions and strong coalitions remained powerful regardless of congressional timing.

**Key Words:** Lobbying, Interest Groups, Coalitions, and Agenda-Setting

## Introduction

Interest group researchers historically focus on two separate spheres of activity: mobilization and lobbying effects (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998). Insufficient attention has been given to interest group activities that connect these two functions. Once groups form to represent their members, how do they determine which issues to prioritize? What internal factors matter and how do organizations interact with the policy environment to decide where to spend time and resources?

In the absence of answers to these questions, we cannot fully understand the practical implications of a well developed body of research on group mobilization. My research tests implications drawn from group mobilization theories stemming from the work of Olson (1975) and Walker (1983) and connects these implications to questions that have yet to be fully answered regarding lobbying effects.

Interest group scholars have been unable to come to consensus about lobbying effects (Nownes 2006, Baumgartner and Leech, 1998) in part because they have not asked lobbyists why they choose to work on particular issues. The existing implication seems to be that lobbyists choose to work on whatever issues or policies they believe are relevant to their membership, when, in fact, lobbyists' decisions about where to direct their efforts are constrained by a variety of internal and external factors. I address this shortcoming and argue that partnerships with policy makers and allied coalitions are important determinants in group success.

For this research, priority setting is defined as the amount of attention or effort spent by an interest group on a policy issue that involves lobbying the U.S. Congress. I analyze legislative priority setting through two sets of interviews conducted with national interests working on agriculture, cultural/religious, and health care issues during the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. The effects of various factors on the level of priority or effort put behind policy

issues vary by political context. At the beginning of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, interest group priority setting was related to factors internal to the organization as well as those imposed by the congressional agenda. At the close of the session, internal differences were less important and limits mandated by a narrowing congressional agenda dominated group priority setting. At both points of time, legislative champions, defined as supportive members of Congress and their staff, and allied coalitions, held the key to allowing organizations to focus on their policy issues.

The effects of organizational factors such as revenue and association with a political action committee (PAC) were significant at the beginning of an emergent policy window in the summer of 2009 when issues such as health care reform and cap and trade environmental protections dominated the congressional agenda and Democrats controlled the White House and both chambers of Congress. In other words, groups with greater resources and PACs were able to put more effort behind their policy issues than other organizations. Such characteristics were less closely associated with an organization's ability to focus on their policy issues as the policy window began to close in the summer of 2010 and less room remained on a shrinking legislative docket. On the other hand, external partnerships such as the presence of a legislative champion or a supportive coalition were statistically significant in both years.

The implications of this research are relevant to both political scientists and practitioners. For scholars, these findings allow us to better understand the goals and priorities of groups working to affect the policy making process. Interest groups do not simply spring from their memberships and seek to influence public policy. They are motivated by internal factors and considerations which often must be altered to fit within narrow policy windows. For practitioners, my findings illuminate which strategies allow organizations to support their political agendas. They explain when internal resources are

most important and how poorly funded organizations might work with allies in Congress and supportive coalitions to achieve their goals.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Are some organizations less constrained than others when setting their lobbying agendas? The literature on interest group mobilization and lobbying effects provides a rich background with which to form hypotheses to examine this question.

Conventional and scholarly wisdom suggest that business groups and professional trade associations dominate the realm of organized interests while fewer groups represent civil rights concerns, the poor, elderly, or disabled (Walker 1983). Arguments about the role of interest groups often focus on the degree to which they balance the voices of all Americans or focus disproportionately on the wealthy. Through disturbance theory, Truman (1951) argued that societal changes result in increased fragmentation of social groups. While groups theoretically begin in a state of equilibrium, balance is disrupted by societal changes. Disequilibrium provokes a response from disadvantaged sectors seeking to restore lost benefits. On the whole, citizens are represented by interests that organize and speak to their concerns. Dahl (1961) expanded pluralist concepts arguing that groups compete in a relatively balanced political world and that government primarily acts as a mediator. While inequalities inevitably arise among groups, such inequalities are not cumulative and competition among groups results in balanced representation over time.

The pluralist view of interest group politics has been widely criticized with many arguing that policy making is systematically dominated by wealthy elites and professional interests. Shattsneider (1975) famously articulated this argument by stating that the problem with the pluralist chorus is that “it sings with an upper-class accent.” These arguments have led to consensus among interest group scholars that business and industry

hold an advantage in a dysfunctional pluralist world. Some have focused on the instruments available to these lobbies, such as overlapping boards of directors that help leaders align preferences through group strategies, while others have examined structural advantages such as “capital flight” (Hart 2004, Hacker and Pierson 2002, Smith 2000, Domhoff 1996, Block 1987, Linblom 1977, Mills 1956).

Advantages to these organizations are also theorized to begin at the organizing stage where, as Olson (1975) described, concentrated interests such as those typically pursued by business organizations have an easier time organizing since they are better equipped to avoid the collective action problems faced by groups seeking collective benefits. It is logical to assume that these advantages correspond to an interest group’s ability to expend effort on political issues that they want to support or oppose. The question is: do we see these advantages when it comes to the amount of effort groups representing business and industry are able to put forward on policy matters? Similarly, do organizations with greater financial resources and more politically sophisticated lobbying techniques have an easier time mobilizing on their issues?

Research on group mobilization is far more robust and conclusive than research on actual lobbying effects. Determining the effects of lobbying on congressional behavior has proven surprisingly elusive (Nownes 2006; Baumgartner, Leech 1998). In part, our inability to identify clear lobbying effects may be because groups are likely to support members of Congress who already agree with their positions, meaning lobbying support and contributions often follow votes rather than the other way around. Moreover, the preponderance of lobbying activity occurs during legislative drafting and the forging of compromise well before votes are cast. Studies focused on the final votes on the chamber floor or even in committee are therefore unlikely to reveal the full magnitude of lobbying effects.

While many other methodological concerns have been noted in studies of lobbying effects, perhaps the largest problem involves a lack of clarity regarding the goals of lobbyists. If scholars cannot understand lobbyists' goals, it is unlikely they will be able to determine whether groups are successful in Congress or any other policy environment.

The lobbying literature envisions at least three different goals of lobbying: exchange, persuasion, and subsidy (Hall, Deardorf 2006). Lobbying can be thought of as a form of exchange in which money and other favors are traded for votes. When lobbying is conceived of in this way, researchers quantify the intensity of the transaction between lobbyist and member and then determine the effect. For example, many studies measure the effects of campaign contributions on congressional votes.

A second category of lobbying goals focuses on persuasion. In this scenario, legislators are uncertain about how to vote and lobbyists possess either knowledge about what is most important to constituents or policy expertise. In such a perspective, lobbying is primarily about the flow of information between lobbyist and policy maker with the hope that this information influences congressional decision making (Wright 1990).

Hall and Deardorf (2006) model lobbying as a legislative subsidy rather than an effort to buy votes or change minds. In this third model, lobbying is predominantly a "matching grant of policy information, policy intelligence and legislative labor." The goal of influence in this model is to affect how hard members work rather than change their opinions or purchase votes.

Traditional studies of lobbying appear mired in an inability to distinguish among these goals. If congressional lobbying is mostly about exchange, we could simply examine PAC contributions and determine whether they influence votes. If lobbying is about persuasion, we should be able to examine legislative interactions with undecided members and find evidence of vote changing. If subsidy is the primary goal, such models are turned

upside down. Lobbying and contributions will seldom change votes because they are typically targeted at supporting allies who already intend to vote in the desired manner.

Yet, analyzing the ability of lobbyists to reach any these goals may be premature. In order to exchange contributions for votes, persuade policy makers to change their minds, or subsidize congressional effort, lobbyists must first decide where to spend their time and how much effort to put behind a particular issue. Our inability to understand how organizations make such decisions represents a fundamental gap in knowledge about congressional lobbying and the relative success of competing interest groups.

More recently, scholars have envisioned interest group actions not as a two-way transaction between lobbyist and policy maker but as the collaborative effort of policy makers and coalitions of aligned lobbyists on one side of an issue versus policy makers and their aligned lobbyists on the other (Baumgartner et al 2009). While this is a useful description of group behavior within the congressional arena, such a view does not address whether individual lobbying organizations are able to work on the issues that are important to them.

Lobbyists are likely constrained by a variety of factors when they select where to direct their resources and are not entirely free to make up their own minds about this important decision. To fully understand this line of decision making, we must first analyze the factors affecting how groups prioritize their time across policy issues. Understanding how groups make such decisions provides an essential link between research on group mobilization and the unsolved puzzle of interest group effects.

## **Theory**

Interest group priorities are set in a political context marked by long periods of incremental policy making punctuated by shorter time periods during which greater policy

change can occur (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Policy makers have limited attention and can only address a finite number of issues on the congressional agenda. Studies of interest group priority setting need to consider differences in how groups are mobilized as well as how they interact with limited space for attention in Congress.

I hypothesize that organizational differences will have their greatest effect at the beginning of a congressional session, especially during times of political change and one-party dominance when groups see policy change as possible across issue areas. During such periods, organizational resources are one of the primary limits on their lobbying activity. A group may be solidly behind inclusion of a public option in health care reform proposals or adamantly opposed to more stringent regulations on carbon emissions, but they can only put as much effort behind these efforts as they have resources to get the work done.

As the congressional session moves forward, many issues drop from the legislative agenda. In the second half of a congressional session, I expect differences in resources will mean less when it comes to interest group priority setting. An organization may have vast resources to throw behind support for a public option, but if the issue has lost traction in Congress, there is not much point in directing resources to support it. Similarly, an organization may be prepared to mount a substantial effort to oppose regulations on carbon emissions, but if Congress subsequently drops plans for such legislation, there is little justification for a defensive lobbying campaign.

At these times, groups seeking policy change will be limited by the congressional agenda and whether or not they can partner with others to keep their priorities under consideration. Under such circumstances, alliances with legislative champions and coalitions will maintain their importance even as organizational resources are less relevant to differences in group priority setting. Even if an issue has lost traction on the overall

congressional agenda, groups will hold out hope for the future (and even this legislative session) if they have the encouragement of a legislative champion or the consensus of a strong coalition.

Support for legislative champions as a factor influencing group priority setting draws from theories based on lobbying as information flow and legislative subsidy. According to such theories, lobbying is about providing information and additional staff support to policy makers to support their goals where they align with a particular interest group. Hall (2006) theorizes that lobbyists can influence congressional effort more effectively than congressional positions and that they subsidize the work of legislative offices in order to make efforts less expensive when it comes to their favored issues. Moreover, lobbyists cannot work on just any issue they would like and are typically limited to those bills members of Congress will sponsor and prioritize. We should therefore expect lobbyists to work harder when a member of Congress takes up their cause.

Similar partnerships are formed across allied interest groups. Coalitions, defined as coordinated efforts by groups to lobby together, are a common strategy among Washington lobbyists (Hall 1969; Loomis 1986; Heinz et al. 1993; Baumgartner and Leech 1999; Hula 1999; Grossman and Dominguez 2009; Baumgartner et al. 2009). Groups engage in coalitions because they see them as an effective tool with which to influence public policy (Hula 1999; Scholzman and Tierney 1986; Heaney 2004; Nownes 2006). We should therefore expect coalition lobbying to be associated with higher levels of priority or lobbying effort.

This initial set of theories provides three testable hypotheses:

**H1:** Organizational differences such as revenue and associations with political action committees (PACs) will be associated with higher levels of priority or lobbying effort during the first year of the 111<sup>th</sup> congressional session, but not in the second.

**H2:** Partnerships with legislative champions will be associated with higher levels of priority or lobbying effort during both years of the 111<sup>th</sup> congressional session.

**H3:** Partnerships with supportive coalitions will be associated with higher levels of priority or lobbying effort during both years of the 111<sup>th</sup> congressional session,

Of course, the literature on interest group lobbying suggests several competing hypotheses. Based on the hypothesized advantages to groups representing business and industry, one might expect such interest groups to be able to put more effort behind the policies for which they advocate.

**H4:** Groups representing business and industry will be associated with higher levels of priority or lobbying effort during both years of the 111<sup>th</sup> congressional session.

Interest groups typically represent members either as individuals or as affiliated organizations. One could reasonably expect membership priorities to influence the level of priority or effort given to policy issues. Furthermore, particular types of priorities might hold greater sway independent of broad membership priorities. In particular, when membership organizations or individuals are affected by a policy at a financial level, one might expect a greater level of lobbying effort.

**H5:** Issues that are a membership priority will be associated with higher levels of priority or lobbying effort during both years of the 111<sup>th</sup> congressional session.

**H6:** Issues that affect memberships at a financial level will be associated with higher levels of priority or lobbying effort during both years of the 111<sup>th</sup> congressional session.

One might reasonably believe that political ideology would relate to how much attention an organization gives various issues. During the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, Democrats held majorities in both chambers of Congress and had just captured the White House. Based on party control of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, I expect liberal organizations to be better able to

prioritize their issues while conservative groups have difficulty finding traction to work on their policy issues.

**H7:** Liberal organizations will be associated with higher levels of priority or lobbying effort during both years of the 111<sup>th</sup> congressional session.

**H8:** Conservative organizations will be associated with lower levels of priority or lobbying effort during both years of the 111<sup>th</sup> congressional session.

Finally, organizations will work on issues that are affected by the events of the day. For example, interest groups will respond to food safety scares or other external crises and events and leverage these moments to gain attention in Congress. Ebola outbreaks covered in the media will give advocates for greater regulations optimism and a reason to work for stronger regulations. Similarly, opponents of such regulation will muster their resources to oppose the momentum gained by their adversaries.

**H9:** External events will be associated with higher levels of priority or lobbying effort during both years of the 111<sup>th</sup> congressional session.

## **Data and Methods**

This study is based on two sets of interviews with health care, agriculture, and cultural/religious interest groups during the summers of 2009 and 2010. I randomly sampled 40 nongovernment interest groups from each of these issue areas from the *Washington Information Directory* (2008-2009), the CQ Press directory of government agencies and nongovernmental groups in the Washington, DC area. This process resulted

in a diverse sample of organizations from all three issue areas with annual revenues ranging from less than one hundred thousand dollars to hundreds of millions of dollars<sup>1</sup>.

In the absence of existing databases of lobbying activity, the use of elite interviews is one of the few methods available for interest group research. Fortunately, it is also one of the most helpful. Elite interviews help establish clear and even causal relationships because the lobbyists themselves can explain what factors encouraged or discouraged them from working on an issue. In many circumstances, there are good reasons for political scientists to be skeptical about explanations offered by either elite interviewees or survey respondents. Respondents may not possess clear insights about their own behavior and some interviewees might have reasons to exaggerate or even lie. In this case, however, lobbyists were in a position to explain why they worked at various levels on specific policies. These were not general discussions about overall lobbying approaches. In these interviews, lobbyists explained why they worked on concrete issues and could point to specific explanations such as encouragement from legislators or external crises covered in the media. Guaranteeing confidentiality reduced any systematic incentives for interviewees to lie in order to gain credit for victories or avoid the consequences of unethical behavior. In short, I talked directly to the sources who can best describe the reasons behind specific lobbying decisions and have removed potential barriers to honest reporting.

These interviews owe a debt to the work of Kingdon in his analysis of congressional decision making (1989). While Kingdon asked members of Congress about decisions made before voting on legislation, my research examines the field of forces affecting the effort interest groups put behind specific policy issues. While it is not difficult to understand why

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<sup>1</sup> While it would be possible to generate a broader sampling frame by including additional groups found in records of congressional testimony or media reports, such methods would invariably bias the frame toward larger, wealthier, and more prominent organizations.

an organization might support a range of issues that benefit its members, determining which ones receive the bulk of their attention is a more challenging matter.

Sampled organizations did not all fit the classic definition of membership organization. Each organization, however, had affiliated organizations or individuals whom they sought to represent while lobbying Congress. Some of their memberships consisted of the classic model of dues-paying individuals or organizations. In other cases, groups relied on support from those they sought to represent and other third-party benefactors in lieu of formal and typically annual membership status. Both membership models were permitted in the sampling frame. The sampling frame did not include organizations that represent only themselves such as individual corporations, but national associations of corporations were included.

After sending introductory letters and calling each organization up to five times, I successfully interviewed representatives from 81 organizations in the summer 2009 on 224 policy issues<sup>2</sup> and re-interviewed 70 of them on 183 of these same issues in the summer of 2010. This represents a 67.5 percent response rate in 2009 with 86.4 percent of these organizations re-interviewed in 2010. Information gained from these interviews was supplemented with data from 2009 annual reports, federal 990 forms, and Federal Election Commission records.

Interviews were held in person at the lobbyists' Washington area offices or at nearby locations of their choosing. Meetings averaged approximately 45 minutes in length<sup>3</sup>. I conducted the interviews with the highest ranking policy staff available from each organization. In some cases, this was the organization's president or executive director

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<sup>2</sup> Issues may repeat. For example, multiple organizations listed health care reform, food safety, or environmental protections.

<sup>3</sup> In a few cases, the second round of interviews was held over the phone when respondents were unable to participate when the in-person interviews were scheduled.

while in most cases it was their vice president or director of public policy or government affairs<sup>4</sup>. I asked interviewees about the most recent two policy issues they had worked on and a third issue which they had not been able to give as much attention as they would like. Issues sampled through these two types of questions were combined in the analysis so that any single interview covered up to three issues.

#### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for this research is the *Priority/Lobbying Effort* given to each policy issue. I asked lobbyists “On a scale of 1-100, how would you rate the priority or level of effort your organization has been able to devote to this issue?”

#### Independent Variables

I asked interviewees what factors caused them to give the issue this level of priority or effort. After the interviewee finished responding to this question, I inquired if there were any other internal or external factors that made them work harder on this issue and then whether there were any other internal or external factors that made them work less hard on this issue. I did not ask lobbyists about a preset list of particular factors and instead simply followed up on the factors as they raised them.

Organizational factors such as budgets and associations with PACs were identified through research using annual reports, 990 forms, and FEC data after the interview.

The unit of analysis for this research is the 224 policy issues discussed during the first interview and the 183 issues discussed in the second. My model estimates how various internal and external factors relate to the level of priority or effort given to each issue. Some factors are the same across all issues for each organization while others are specific to the particular issue sampled. For example, an organization’s total revenue would be

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<sup>4</sup> Interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality in accordance with policies set by the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Internal Review Board.

constant across all policy issues discussed in that interview, but particular factors such as the support of a legislative champion would vary for each of the issues. This analysis includes all factors that were mentioned as affecting ten percent or more of the policy issues discussed in the interviews.<sup>5</sup>

### *Organizational Variables*

I interviewed agriculture, health care and religious/cultural organizations. For the model presented in this paper, I include a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not the organization represented *Agriculture*.

I include a dichotomous variable indicating whether an organization represents a membership comprised of businesses or a particular industry. Information to construct the *Business/Industry Members* variable was readily available during the interviews and was double checked through the organizations' annual reports.

I include dichotomous variables indicating whether the organization is conservative or liberal. I classified organizations that used certain key words during their interviews (conservative, limited government, or control, reduce or limit spending) as *Conservative*. Similarly, I classified organizations that used certain key words (social justice, liberal, or progressive) as *Liberal*. The majority of organizations were not classified as either liberal or conservative. For example, the American Psychiatric Association<sup>6</sup> represents a particular profession and would not typically be considered part of either political ideology.

Internal resources serve as important independent variables. Using FEC data, I recorded a dichotomous variable indicating whether an organization is associated with a

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<sup>5</sup> The following variables were estimated through a one-tailed t-test: Agriculture, Business or Industry Membership, PAC, Total Revenue, Congressional Agenda, Insufficient Resources, Legislative Champion, Membership Priorities, Membership Financially Affected, Other Priorities, and Outside Events. The following variables were estimated through a two-tailed t-test: Conservative, Cultural/Religious Organizations, Health Care, Liberal, Offense, and Strength of Coalition.

<sup>6</sup> The American Psychiatric Association was not interviewed for this research.

*PAC*. For *Total Revenue*, I calculated the logged value of each organization's total revenue based on data listed in federal 990 reports.<sup>7</sup>

(Insert Chart 1 Here)

### *Issue Variables*

*Issue Importance* serves as the first independent variable. For each issue, I asked lobbyists, "On a scale of 1-100, how important is this policy issue to your organization?"<sup>8</sup> Once the rated importance of the policy issue is held constant, an organization's capacity to marshal its internal resources to address its issues in Congress represents an important indicator of group strength. Otherwise, erroneous comparisons would be made between high and low priority issues.

This 1-100 rating for importance also permits the combining of responses from the two sets of sampling questions by controlling for differences in the types of issues these questions might elicit. Differences between these types of issues can be controlled for by including information on issue importance and other independent variables included in the model.

Whether or not an issue is perceived as being on the *Congressional Agenda* is another important control variable. If an organization indicated the issue was not on the congressional agenda, they received a -1. If they did not mention the congressional agenda, they received a 0. If they indicated the issue was on the congressional agenda, they received a 1.

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<sup>7</sup> I also recorded the number of policy staff working for each organization, but this value was highly collinear with revenue and was dropped from the models in this analysis.

<sup>8</sup> I told interviewees that the combined importance or priority of all of their issues was not limited to 100. In other words, organizations could list multiple 100 scores. A 100 in importance indicates that an issue is as important as any issue could get. Similarly, a priority score of 100 would indicate they are able to devote as much effort to the issue as possible.

Lobbyists also mentioned *Insufficient Resources* as a constraint, and this was recorded as a dichotomous variable. Similarly, some organizations mentioned that other policy priorities or organizational concerns distracted them from the policy issue. *Other Priorities* is included as a dichotomous variable.

If an organization indicated they did not have a *Legislative Champion* or their champion asked them not to work on the issue, they received a -1 for this variable. If they did not mention a legislative champion, they received a 0. If they indicated they had a legislative champion on this issue, they received a 1.

If an organization indicated they did not have a coalition or that their coalition was ineffective or disorganized, they received a -1 for *Strength of Coalition*. If they did not mention a coalition, they received a 0. If they indicated the issue was supported by a coalition, they received a 1.

Lobbyists also mentioned membership concerns. If an organization said the issue was not a *Membership Priority* they received a -1 for this variable. If they did not mention membership priorities, they received a 0. If they mentioned that the issue was a membership priority, they received a 1. *Membership Finances* is a dichotomous variable.

Lobbyists mentioned issues where they were either working to support a policy change or oppose change. If an organization is trying to make a legislative change to current policy (on “offense” rather than “defense”), this was indicated through a dichotomous variable for *Offense*.

Organizations also listed *Outside Events* as influencing work on particular issues and this was included as a dichotomous variable. If an organization indicated there was an outside event affecting the allocation of attention or priority, they received a 1..

(Insert Chart 2 Here)

## Findings

In the following models, *Priority/Effort* is a reported value ranging from 1 to 100. I use a simple ordinary least squares regression and cluster the standard errors around each of the 81 organizations since each group generated two to three policy issues.<sup>9</sup>

(Insert Table 1 Here)

Both models explain a substantial amount of the variation in interest groups priority setting. The most obvious finding is the difference between what influenced lobbying effort in 2009 and in 2010. In 2009, many group and issue variables were statistically significant. In 2009, group revenue, association with a PAC, and whether the group was conservative or associated with agriculture were all statistically significant. By the summer of 2010, all but agriculture lost statistical significance. The majority of issue variables, however, retain their relationship with lobbying priorities.

At the onset of a window for policy change such as at the start of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress when the President and both chambers of Congress were controlled by the Democratic Party, organizations appear to perceive a wide range of the threats and possibilities. At this time, organizational resources may be a primary limitation. Groups believe they can work on a broad range of issues, but they are nevertheless limited by organizational capacity. As the window prepares to close in the summer of 2010, the congressional agenda narrows. Internal group differences are less important at this point. An organization may have vast resources to throw at a lobbying issue, but if that issue is not going anywhere on the agenda those resources would likely be wasted.

One lobbyist for an agricultural organization described this situation as a learning process. “At the beginning of a session, especially one like this, you have to treat everything seriously. You think you know what is going to move, but you don’t really. As

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<sup>9</sup> Hierarchical modeling could not be used because only two to three issues are sampled per organization.

time goes on, bills come and go on the Hill, and you end up knowing where to spend your time.”

The tightening of the congressional agenda from the first to the second year works much as my theory predicted. The congressional agenda is positive and statistically significant in both years. As one lobbyist put it, “It’s like if you asked a robber why he robs banks, he’ll tell you that’s where the money is. If you ask a health care lobbyist why they are working on health care reform this year, he’ll tell you because that’s where the action is.” On the other hand, many said they were not able to work on an issue because Congress would not consider it. For the most part, lobbyists can only work on an issue if it has some traction in Congress. Other issues typically must wait until political forces align to make them part of the debate.

Chart 3 reveals that, in addition to being the most frequently mentioned policy factor, the congressional agenda was also substantively significant. Being on or off what lobbyists perceived as the congressional agenda was the second most influential independent variable impacting the priority an organization gave an issue in 2009 out of thirteen statistically significant variables, second only to what the organization saw as the issue’s level of importance to their organization. In 2010, the importance of legislative champions climbed into second place, but the congressional agenda was still the third most influential variable out of the eight variables that remained statistically significant.

In short, organizations work on what Congress is willing to address.

My core predictions held up very well against the power of this narrowing of the congressional agenda. The first three suggested hypotheses are all supported.

#### *Organizational Resources*

Both revenue and association with a PAC are positive and statistically significant in 2009. As stated earlier, at the opening of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, many organizations saw

themselves in a position to affect the issues of their choice. While health care reform is the most obvious example, groups advocating on issues ranging from gun control to environmental protections saw new policies as possible. Other groups perceived multiple threats and believed many of them would come to fruition unless they lobbied against them. While groups were constrained by what could move on the congressional agenda, progress on many policy issues remained a possibility and groups were limited by their ability to muster internal resources either to oppose or support them.

In 2010, revenue and association with a PAC were no longer statistically significant. This is likely because the legislative agenda narrowed. In 2009, groups were limited by their internal capacity to address the issues that were important to them. In 2010, many of these issues were no longer on the legislative agenda and external restrictions became more important.

As one lobbyist with concerns about proposed food safety legislation in 2010 explained, “I don’t want that bill to pass. It’s stalled over there [in Congress]. So why would I go up to anyone and start talking about it?”

Another lobbyist in support of a different bill said, “I could throw everything I have at this, but they don’t want to talk about it right now. Pretty much you can only work on what is moving. These guys focus on what is in front of them that week.”

Perceptions of insufficient resources were still statistically significant in both years. However, this variable is not the same as an organization’s revenue. Ironically, perceptions of insufficient resources were inversely correlated with revenue, meaning that wealthier organizations were more likely to see themselves as not having enough resources to work on a particular issue. Of course, statements about the relationship between priority and resources come in the context of what groups are experiencing as points of comparison. It may be that as organizations gain more staff, they perceive greater opportunities for

lobbying activity and are more likely to say that they have insufficient resources.

Interpreting this variable is difficult because groups are likely to have different reference points (Mertons 1968). Wealthier organizations may be more likely to compare themselves to the best resourced organizations and believe there is even more they could be doing with a larger budget or additional staff.

Perceptions of insufficient resources are therefore less tied to objective indicators of organizational resources.

### *Legislative Champions*

As predicted, legislative champions are positively correlated with priority given to a policy issue. In 2010, the substantive influence of a legislative champion even surpassed the influence of the congressional agenda. In other words, lobbyists are typically tied to what their champions will do. As the policy window closed in 2010, lobbyists were able to work on those issues for which they had champions carrying water for them in Congress or, conversely, they worked on issues that members of Congress were telling them to support.

While securing legislative champions are clearly associated with greater interest group effort, the relationship is not as one dimensional as it may appear. Lobbyists frequently discussed the need to balance the demands of key legislative offices with what their members wanted or what could move on the congressional agenda.

A health care lobbyist working on rural access described how complicated these scenarios can become. “This is the bill they [our two legislative sponsors] want to pass, but I want this other bill to move instead. I can’t offend [representatives names], so I have to work on it somewhat to satisfy them. I’m not going to give it my full attention unless this other one bogs down, but I can’t stop working on it because I want them to keep supporting us.”

While legislative champions are significantly and substantively related to lobbying effort, the relationship is not one-way. Instead of simply subsidizing congressional effort, the relationship can run in the other direction with interest groups contending with demands for their lobbying output.

For the most part, however, legislative champions were seen as a valuable asset. One organization working on health care issues said, “We didn’t even have a bill for this until [representative’s name] came into the picture. We did a press event, and he came up to us afterwards and said he’s been thinking about writing a bill on [particular health issue]. We wrote the bill, and it didn’t go anywhere. Then he hired a new health L.A. who really got it. She’s the reason we got a hearing.”

The evidence points to the importance of legislative champions beyond the goal of legislative subsidy. The relationship is not one dimensional with lobbyists supporting the work of legislative offices and encouraging them to work on desired areas. The relationship works both ways with lobbyists asking interest groups to support their issues.

### *Coalition Strength*

A strong coalition was positively associated with the priority given to policy issues in both years. Lobbyists said they were able to work on issues because they had a consensus in the advocacy community and were able to share resources and information. Many smaller organizations said they relied on better resourced allies for information and support. One lobbyist working for a conservative organization on cultural policy matters said, “[Our larger partner] provides us with information and technical expertise that we just don’t have. There’s only two of us in this office. In return, we give them grassroots credibility.”

Other lobbyists indicated that issues without a coalition or with a divided coalition were more challenging to work on. Interestingly, coalitions are one of only two factors

mentioned by substantially more organizations in 2010 than in 2009, pointing to the tendency to shift attention away from internal factors and focus on those issues maintaining momentum as the policy window closes.

Evidence for competing hypotheses four through nine is far more mixed.

#### *Business and Industry Members*

Scholarly research on the organizing side of interest group activity or group formation has historically been more robust than research linking group activity to effects on congressional decision making (Baumgartner and Leech 1998). Olson (1965) argued that groups with smaller memberships and concentrated benefits have an easier time organizing. This could grant groups representing business and industry an advantage in that it would be easier to mobilize and raise dollars from their membership for a greater advocacy effort. This is not seen in this stage in the data. Holding other variables such as revenue constant, such groups are not able to give issues more of their attention than other types of membership organizations.

#### *Membership Priorities and Finances*

Organizations often work harder on issues they perceive to be important to their members. Controlling for this, they also work harder on issues that affect their members' finances. Interestingly, membership priorities were no longer significantly correlated with lobbying effort in 2010, indicating once again that as the policy window narrows external factors become more important to lobbyist decision making.

Lobbyists often stated that their members or volunteer leaders wanted them to work on an issue but that it wasn't going anywhere. A health care lobbyist working on legislation affecting inpatient hospital care said, "My members don't want me to compromise or give up on this. At board meetings, they'll come to me and say 'you don't understand. We want you to go for the whole maggilah.'" But politics is about what is

possible, and you have to educate them about that. Sometimes you have to compromise or stop working on an issue.”

Issues tied to members’ financial concerns, however, remained statistically significant in 2010. Lobbyists sometimes referred to policies that affect their members’ bottom line as “bread and butter issues.” These include matters of appropriations and eligibility for reimbursement in public programs. Members of Congress expected to hear from them on these issues, and groups did not need to check with their own members to see if these issues should be treated as a priority. Some lobbyists indicated that such issues were easy to deal with because they involved specific and concrete solutions such as changing reimbursement categories or rates rather than developing new policies.

As one health care lobbyist explained, “I love this issue. I know exactly what to ask for and what the solution is. Just add [our members] to the list of reimbursable providers. Members of Congress know what I am talking about, and I don’t have to explain anything too complex.”

Alternatively, it may be that memberships with financial ties to policy outcomes were easier to motivate and organize although this was not expressly stated in the interviews.

Also, these may be issues in which organizations work on their own rather than in coalition. The importance of their membership finances and the simplicity of the message may make it easier for them to communicate the issue to Congress. According to one health care lobbyist, “Nobody else is going to make sure we are included, so we have to do it. Everyone works on the big bill or appropriation, and then you got to do what you can to make sure your folks are not left out. This is where it gets competitive.”

Subsequent research will use this data to examine exactly when and for which issues organizations seek to work in coalition or go it alone.

### *Conservatives*

In 2009, conservative groups put less effort into their policy issues than non-conservative organizations. During the first round of interviews, some of these groups talked about being shut out of the legislative debate on their most important issues. In 2010, conservative organizations were no longer more likely to feel shut out of the congressional agenda, perhaps because many organizations had seen their policy windows narrow and relative differences between conservative and non-conservative organizations were less apparent. Changes in representation in the Senate might also explain this result.

Liberal organizations, on the other hand, did not have a statistically significant relationship with lobbying priority or effort.

### *Agriculture*

Agriculture groups were less likely to put out as much effort on their selected issues as cultural/religious or health care organizations in both 2009 and 2010. Some of the results of this study are likely related to timing affecting the entire legislative session. The Farm Bill was not up for reauthorization in either 2009 or 2010 and many agriculture groups indicated they needed to wait to address their issues at that time. Said one agricultural lobbyist, “For us, there are reauthorization years, implementation years, and planning years. Right now, we are in the planning stage and are developing our requests for the next reauthorization.”

### *Outside Events*

Outside events were statistically significant in 2009 but not in 2010. Some of the issues sampled in 2009 were brought onto the agenda by events such as food safety scares, the H1N1 outbreak, or the economic downturn in the fall of 2008.

Lobbyists discussed leveraging the events of the day to support their policy priorities. As one public health lobbyist said, “Basically, I have to wait until something

goes wrong and gets attention. If it's food safety, I look to increase our funding for those programs. If it's H1N1, then that's the priority. The field is underfunded, and we have to use these crises to call attention to our underfunded system."

A lobbyist working on health issues described the role of events in the following way. "You have a set of policies that you want to work on and you capitalize on events to make your case. The mental health system is weak and can use support for a variety of purposes. So we might respond to terrorist attacks by talking about PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) or the lack of school-based services after a school shooting."

By 2010, the relationship of outside events to lobbying effort was less clear. This is demonstrated by significantly fewer organizations listing outside events as a relevant factor in their decision making on these particular issues. It is likely that if I asked organizations for new issues in 2010, other issues would spring up that would be related to more recent events. One year out, events mentioned in 2009 have less impact on an organization's priorities, but there are likely other issues for which outside events are still powerful influencers on lobbying priorities.

One might make a similar argument about the differences in statistical significance of other variables in 2009 and 2010. In most cases, however, such differences would be reflected in changes in the importance assigned to the issue. If events had transpired to make a given policy issue less or more important, the interviewed lobbyist would give the issue an appropriate importance score on the 1-100 scale which would be controlled for in the analysis.

(Insert Chart 3 Here)

(Insert Chart 4 Here)

## Conclusion

How do groups make decisions about what issues to prioritize or where to spend their time? This research shows they are driven by what can move on the congressional agenda. Groups can only work on issues for which they can gain traction in Congress. Organizational differences matter, but their influence depends on timing. Interest groups with greater resources and sophisticated lobbying assets such as associations with PACs are able to put more effort behind their issues at the beginning of a legislative session, but such resources are no longer statistically significant as the congressional agenda narrows.

Two legislative techniques allow lobbyists to work on these issues even as the session draws to a close in its second year. Organizations that ally with legislative champions and supportive coalitions are able to put greater effort behind their policies. This does not necessarily mean that all an organization has to do is simply procure a legislative champion and supportive coalition. Surely many issues and organizations are unable find traction with either source of support, but this research demonstrates why lobbyists invest so much time courting legislative allies and partnerships among their colleagues.

The 111<sup>th</sup> Congress represented a significant policy window. As Kingdon (1990) might describe, long standing policy and problem streams lined up with the political stream. Studying interest groups at this time represents a key opportunity because this is precisely when we might expect lobbying organizations to have the most impact and bring their issues to Congress.

Within this legislative context, alternative theories bear only mixed results. Interest groups representing business and industry members were no more likely to put greater amounts of effort behind their lobbying issues. Membership priorities motivated

organizations to work harder on particular issues at the beginning of the session, but not in the second year. Issues affecting the membership finances, however, were more likely to be prioritized in both years. Conservative organizations felt shut out of the legislative process in the first year, but were apparently not so disadvantaged in the second. Organizations representing agricultural interests were less likely to put as much effort behind their issues, but this is potentially due to idiosyncratic timing issues that affected the entire 111<sup>th</sup> Congress.

To summarize, the congressional agenda holds powerful sway over interest group priority setting, and legislative champions and supportive coalitions are two tools groups use to survive a narrowing policy agenda. Other organizational and issue factors provide insufficient explanations for the effort groups place behind the policies they promote or oppose.

The study of interest group priority setting and decisions about lobbying effort has more fruit to bear. If factors such as having a legislative champion, a supportive coalition, or a secure place on the legislative agenda are associated with greater effort on policy issues, it is possible that some organizations are more likely to experience these circumstances. For example, the theory of legislative subsidy holds that groups work as adjunct staff for legislative offices to reduce the costs of legislative investment in key areas. If this is true, groups with more valuable legislative subsidies as operationalized through budgets or policy staff time should be more likely to secure such legislative support. Subsequent research will leverage these factors as dependent variables and determine what organizational characteristics are most associated with achieving them.

Many scholars have conducted surveys about the types of activities lobbyists engage in (Nownes 2006; Heinz et al 1997; Schlozman and Tierney 1987). Few study when organizations choose to engage in specific practices such as congressional visits, media

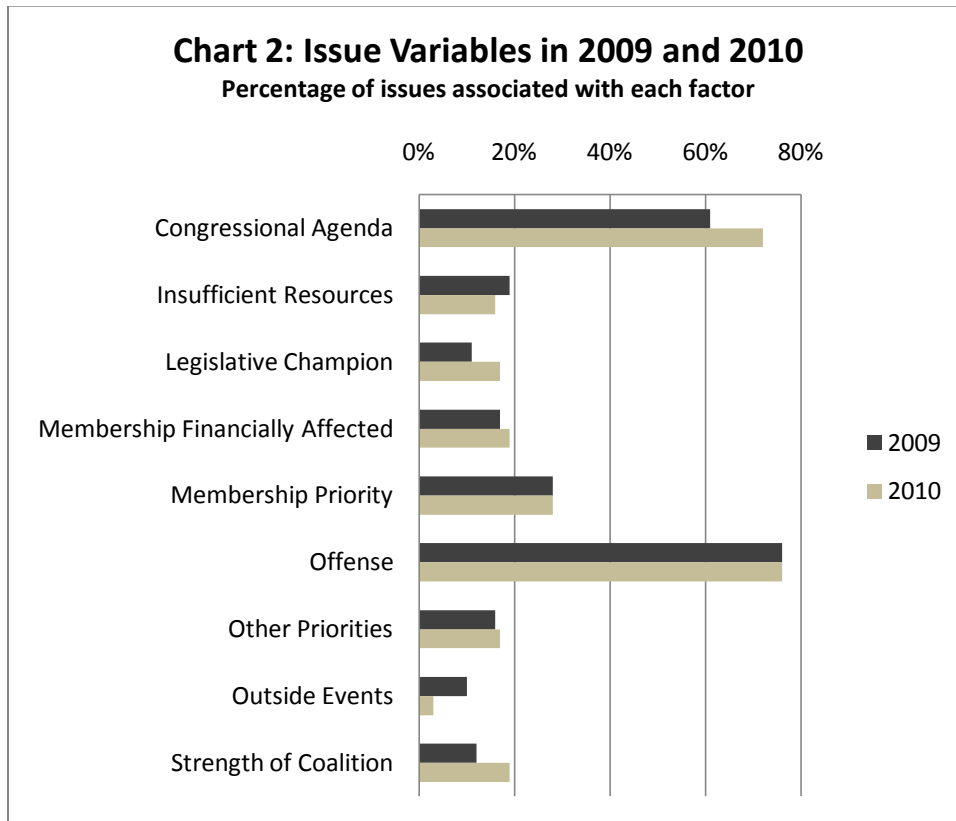
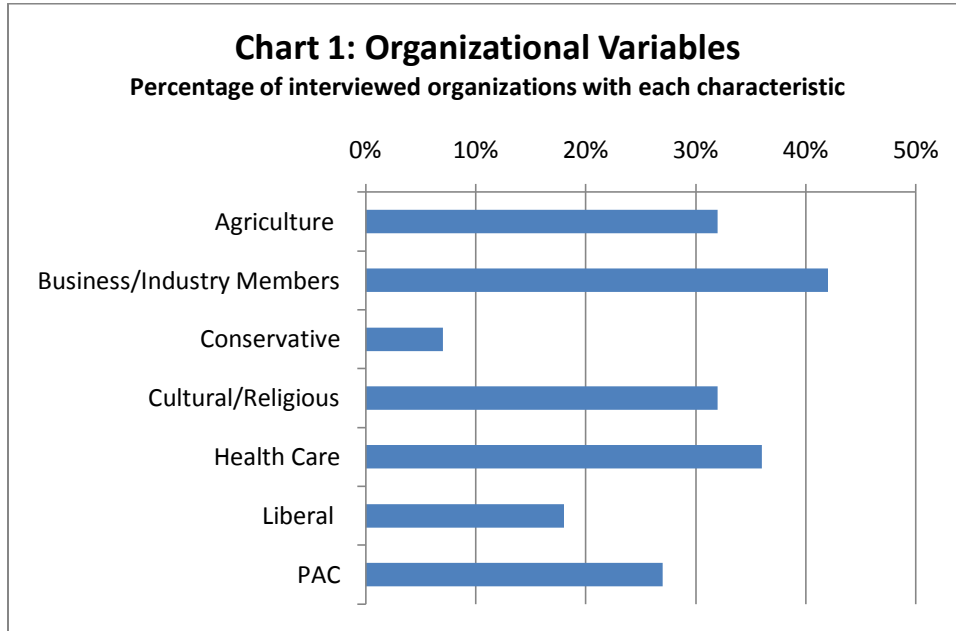
activity, voter education, or joining coalitions (although see Goldstein, 1999 for such an analysis of grassroots mobilization). Interviews conducted in both 2009 and 2010 included surveys of lobbying activities conducted on each issue. A next step in this line of research will examine how lobbying activities and strategies vary when an issue is on or off the legislative agenda, when lobbying champions have or have not been secured, and when groups work on their own or collaborate through coalitions.

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## Charts and Tables

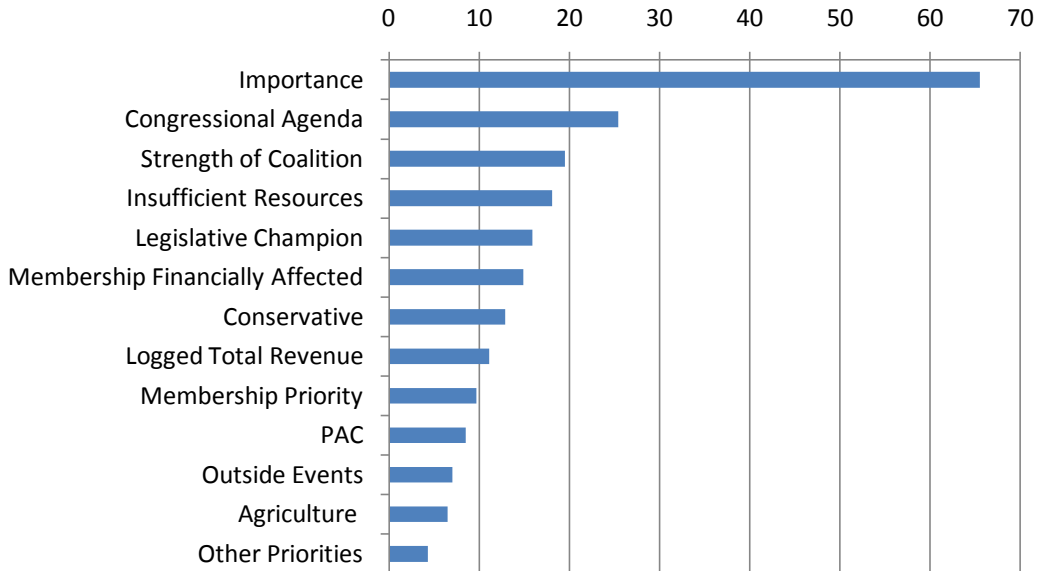


### Chart 3: 2009 Substantive Significance

Range of Effect on Lobbying Effort

(Lobbying Effort 1-100)

N = 224

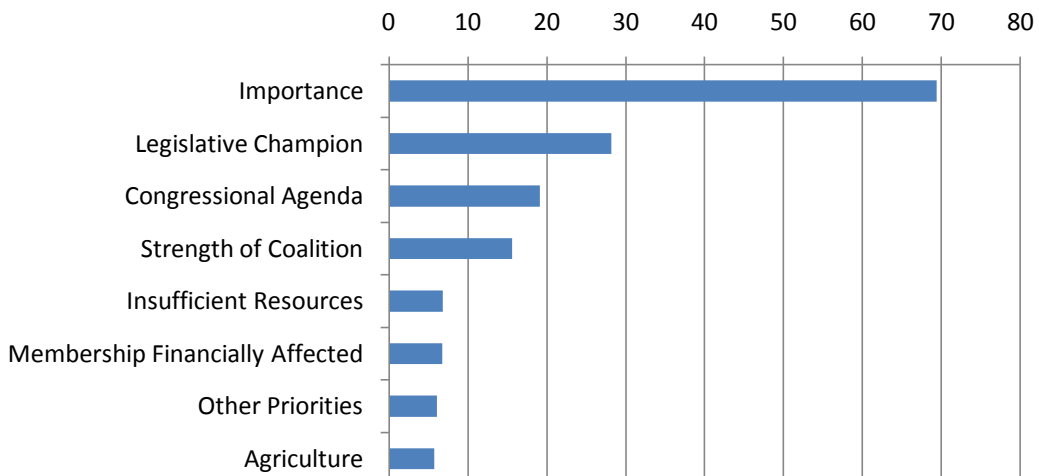


### Chart 4: 2010 Substantive Significance

Range of Effect on Lobbying Effort

(Lobbying Effort 1-100)

(N = 183)



**Table 1 Interest Group Priority Setting in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress**  
 Dependent Variable = 1-100 Rating of Priority/Effort Given to Issue  
 OLS Regressions (Clustered Standard Errors)

	2009	2010
<i>Organizational Variables</i>		
Logged Revenue	.662* (0.612)	0.774 (0.770)
PAC	8.513*** (2.756)	1.854 (3.975)
Bus/Industry Members	-5.949 (3.974)	-3.820 (3.478)
Liberal	-4.399 (3.523)	-3.800 (3.167)
Conservative	-12.897*** (5.014)	-0.754 (5.921)
Agriculture	-6.473* (3.680)	-5.723* (3.850)
<i>Issue Variables</i>		
Legislative Champion	7.951*** (3.097)	14.080*** (3.627)
Strength of Coalition	9.741*** (3.191)	7.801** (3.075)
Importance	0.701*** (0.052)	0.701*** (0.052)
Congressional Agenda	12.718*** (2.494)	9.568*** (2.901)
Offense	-5.668 (4.328)	-3.176 (3.929)
Member Finance	14.914*** (3.630)	6.762* (4.443)
Membership Priority	4.838* (3.525)	3.828 (3.320)
Insufficient Resources	-18.104*** (3.810)	-6.812* (4.287)
Other Priorities	-4.300* (3.223)	-6.094* (4.288)
Outside Event	7.000** (4.331)	-5.925 (9.773)

Constant	-5.603 (12.015)	-6.417 (11.820)
<hr/>		
N	224	183
Prob > F	0.000	0.000
Adjusted R-Squared	0.604	0.578
* Significant at .1    **Significant at .05    ***Significant at .01		