

lobbying: let the buyer beware

John S. Robey

As we begin a new decade, several economic changes are being made in our nation as new demands are being placed on our political system. It's becoming clear that the era of unlimited energy and resources is over. Many commentators are forecasting a "deep" recession in 1980. Little progress has been made to control inflation, our balance of payments deficit continues to spiral upward, the value of the dollar is declining overseas. There's a move on in many states to call a constitutional convention to make the federal government balance the budget and the voters of California have passed Proposition 13 telling the state that they have reached their limit in tolerating big government and high taxes. Against this backdrop, President Carter has recommended an austere social services budget to the Congress.

The Cooperative Extension Service hasn't been able to escape the effects of this recommendation or the glum economic news in general. In fact, our federal appropriations in recent years haven't kept up with inflation. Because of these developments, some people have suggested that Cooperative Extension Service should consider hiring a professional lobbying group to represent its interests. In addition, many Extension agents may be faced with questions from groups they work with that are debating whether to employ a lobbyist to represent their interests in legislative or governmental bodies.

This article reviews the impact lobbying groups have on the policy-making process. To examine the effectiveness of lobbying in the policy-making process, we'll look at what and who lobbyists are, how they operate, and what the studies show as to the efficacy of general interest group lobbying efforts.

Lobbyists and What They Do

Lobbyists have always been part of the policy-making process in America. There are as many definitions of lobbying as there are commentators who write on the subject. The

John S. Robey: Associate Professor of Political Science and Coordinator, Master of Public Administration Program, East Texas State University—Commerce. Accepted for publication: November, 1979.

Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act of 1946 defines a lobbyist as someone "... who seeks to influence congressional legislation..."¹ The *Congressional Quarterly* says the term lobbyist in its "broadest" sense is "... any organization or person that carries on activities which have as their ultimate aim to influence the decisions of... legislatures or of government administrative agencies..." In a "narrower" sense, a lobbyist is "... any person who, on behalf of some other person or group and usually for pay, attempts to influence legislation through direct contact with legislators."²

Thus, while the definition of a lobbyist is imprecise, we can establish certain characteristics of lobbying. For example, lobbying is related to decision making in government and the desire to influence that decision making. Further, the term usually "... implies the presence of an intermediary or representative as a communication link between citizens and governmental decision makers."³

A quick look at the 1973 edition of *The Directory of Registered Federal and State Lobbyists* shows there are over 1,000 lobbyists in Washington, D.C., who represent over 8,000 organizations. Due to the growth of new federal regulations, this number has increased drastically in 1979.⁴ The lobbying industry has grown to such an extent that it's sometimes referred to as the "Fifth Estate."

In the April 21, 1975, issue of *U.S. News and World Report* lobbyists were ranked as the 10th most powerful institution in the United States—ahead of the cabinet, banks, both political parties, and religion.⁵ Among the top lobbying spenders in Washington are groups like the United Federation of Postal Clerks, AFL-CIO, American Farm Bureau, American Medical Association, Record Industry Association, National Automobile Dealers Association, National Association of Letter Carriers, American Legion, American Hospital Association, National Farmers Union, and many others, including foreign nations.

Techniques and Tactics Used

To put lobbying into a larger and more dynamic perspective, we must realize that lobbying isn't an isolated event, but part of an ongoing public policy and decision-making process within the political system. As Sinclair has written:

to appreciate the full range of interest group activities, however, we must realize that lobbying takes place repeatedly within the context of the policy process, that is, the entire range of activities surrounding government action in a particular area.⁶

Further, while it's true that most research on lobbying has concentrated on the legislative arm of government, lobbyists often try to influence the administrative and judicial branches of government as well as through the bureaucracy. But how do lobbyists try to influence the policy-making process? Deakin, who covered the lobbying industry in Washington for 12 years for the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, writes:

Lobbying methods fall into three main categories: direct contact with members of Congress and congressional staffs; indirect or grass roots campaigns to stimulate pressure on Congressmen from the public; and cross-lobbying. This last term refers to a common practice in which one special interest group gives its endorsement and assistance to another group on an issue in which the first organization may not be primarily interested, in return for a similar favor later.⁷

Berry administered a questionnaire to lobbyists for 83 national public interest groups in Washington, D.C., during 1972-73. The tactics used by the lobbyists and the effectiveness of the tactics are seen in Table 1.⁸

Another interesting piece of survey research was conducted by Scott and Hunt who asked members of Congress what techniques they thought were effective in getting favorable

Table 1. Tactics used by lobbyists.

	Very effective to effective	Effective with qualifications	Not effective	Use but cannot evaluate	Do not use	Total
Personal presentation	53%	14%	7%	10%	16%	100%
Testifying at congressional hearing	20	16	42	10	12	100
Litigation	29	12	5	5	49	100
Letter writing	47	8	4	9	32	100
Contact by influential member of constituency	34	11	1	16	38	100
Political demonstrations	8	5	5	6	77	101
Contributing money to candidates	6	0	0	0	94	100
Releasing voting records	18	6	4	4	68	100
Releasing research	30	15	6	17	31	99
Public relations	24	6	0	9	62	101

congressional action. Among the more effective techniques were testimony at committee hearings, office calls, and individual letters.⁹

Are Lobbyists Effective?

Any group thinking of employing a professional lobbying group to represent its interests should examine the literature as to how effective these groups are in affecting changes in the policy process. Unfortunately, because the researchers seem somewhat divided on this point, it isn't an easy question to answer.

For example, a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on the education lobby in Washington, D.C., found that "most observers acknowledge that it (the education lobby) is bigger and more sophisticated than it was a few years ago."¹⁰ However, Summerfield, after examining the same interest group maintains that it's "beyond question" that lobbyists have an impact on policy; however, ". . . the 1960's and the early 1970's showed the lobbies to be rather ineffectual in getting their way in authorizing legislation."¹¹

. . . Perhaps the old Latin maxim *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware) is the best guide since the decision of who represents us may determine the success or failure of any lobbying efforts that are undertaken.

Sinclair finds that ". . . the interest group system does indeed produce results, but not for enough people. It thus falls short of the power and promise traditionally ascribed interest groups by most Americans."¹² Also, Milbrath found, "the weight of the evidence that this study brings to bear suggests that there is relatively little influence or power in lobbying per se."¹³

A survey of members of associations that are affiliated with the national Chamber of Commerce found that 67% of the businessmen and 50% of the professional people responding thought the effectiveness of the lobbying activities of organizations they belonged to was at least "good."¹⁴ On the other hand, three prominent political scientists in another study concluded that

. . . the lobbies were on the whole poorly financed, ill managed, out of contact with Congress, and at the best only marginally effective in supporting tendencies and measures which already had behind them considerable congressional impetus from other sources.¹⁵

One of the most respected commentators on lobbying and interest group theory, Zeigler of the University of Oregon, writes:

In lobbying, as in any other profession, there are successes and failures. In fact, it is hard to avoid making the comment that many of the droves of lobbyists swarming around Capitol Hill really accomplish little except to convince their membership that the flow of dues should continue On the other hand, there are a number of expert lobbyists who know the vagaries of the legislative process and are adept at getting along with politicians.¹⁶

Summary

We've tried to address ourselves to three questions: Who are lobbyists and what do they do? What techniques do lobbyists employ? Are lobbyists effective?

Lobbyists are individuals who wish to influence decision making in government. The lobbyist serves as a "communication link" between interest groups and legislators, administrators, and other governmental officials.

Lobbyists use a wide variety of techniques to affect the policy-making process. Among the tactics are: testifying before congressional committees, personal presentations, writing letters, arranging for influential constituents to contact the legislator, conducting public relations efforts, and publishing relevant research.

Are lobbyists effective? The literature is divided on this point. As Zeigler notes, some lobbyists are successful and others are failures. Since there's an element of chance, we should be cautious in the selection of who represents us. Perhaps the old Latin maxim *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware) is the best guide since the decision of who represents us may determine the success or failure of any lobbying efforts that are undertaken.

Footnotes

1. James O. Wilson, *Political Organizations* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973), p. 305.
2. *Legislators and the Lobbyists* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Service, 1968), p. 4.
3. Lester W. Milbrath, *The Washington Lobbyists* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1963), p. 7.
4. Alan Baron, "Friends and Lawyers," *Politics Today* (March-April, 1979), p. 8.
5. "Who Runs America," *U.S. News and World Report*, LXXVIII (April 21, 1975), 28-34.
6. John E. Sinclair, *Interest Groups in America* (Morristown, New Jersey: Silver Burdett Co., 1976), p. 39.
7. James Deakin, *The Lobbyists* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1966), p. 184.

8. Jeffrey M. Berry, *Lobbying for the People* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 214.
9. Andrew M. Scott and Margaret A. Hunt, *Congress and Lobbies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966), pp. 73-78.
10. Cheryl M. Fields, "Higher Education's Washington Lobbyists," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 19, 1979, pp. 17-18.
11. Harry L. Summerfield, *Power and Process: The Formulation and Limits of Federal Educational Policy* (Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1974), Chapter 2.
12. Sinclair, *Interest Groups in America*, p. 7.
13. Milbrath, *The Washington Lobbyists*, p. 354.
14. "A Study of the Views of Members and Association Executives," in Donald R. Hall, *Cooperative Lobbying—The Power of Pressure* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1969), p. 15.
15. Raymond A. Bower, Ithiel de Sola Pool, and Lewis Anthony Dexter, *American Business and Public Policy* (New York: Atherton Inc., 1963), p. 324.
16. Harmon Zeigler, *Interest Groups in American Society* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 149.