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Interest Groups and Journalists in the States

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ABSTRACT

Interest groups have many tactics to choose from in pursuing their policy goals. While inside tactics have received considerable scholarly attention, outside tactics have been adopted increasingly by groups of all kinds. We explore one such lobbying tactic by examining the relationship between interest groups and journalists in the American states. Through a survey of statehouse reporters, we find that lobbyists are useful sources of information for these reporters, who even rank them above many more traditional sources of information. Our data also show that contact between interest groups and journalists varies systematically across the states. Specifically, interest groups in states with large or small numbers of interest groups have more contact with journalists than interest groups in states with an average number of groups. Furthermore, journalists in states where interest groups are relatively powerful claim to interact with those groups less than journalists in states where interest groups are less powerful.

SCHOLARS HAVE LONG TRIED to understand how interest groups influence the American political system. Traditionally, these scholars have focused their attention on tactics groups use to influence legislators and legislation directly, such as lobbying (Wright 1990). But recent research suggests that interest groups often pursue their policy goals by engaging in more indirect tactics, that is, activities that do not target government officials or institutions directly (Kollman 1998). One of the most commonly cited but least understood means of such outside lobbying involves working through the mass media.

We assume that interest groups attempt to influence the media to slant the news in their favor. If they are successful in doing so, we expect that the content of news coverage will be more favorable to certain groups. Considering the importance of the mass media in setting the public agenda and

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priming evaluations of politicians (Iyengar and Kinder 1987), knowing how interest groups affect it can help us explain why some groups are more successful than others in advancing their interests.

We examine the interest group-journalist relationship in the context of American state politics. We focus on the states for four reasons. First, although some recent scholarly attention has been paid to the role of interest groups in the states (Gray and Lowery 1996; Hrebenar and Thomas 1987, 1993a, 1993b; Nownes and Freeman 1998), studies of national politics still dominate the literature on interest groups (Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Gray and Lowery 2002). As such, our understanding of interest groups in state politics is still limited. Second, with rare exception (Cooper 2002; Rosenthal 1998), almost no scholarly research has been done on the role of the mass media in state politics. Third, devolution has given state governments increased policy responsibilities, so the states provide substantively more important places to investigate politics. Finally, the American states constitute 50 different institutional, cultural, and political contexts, thus providing a theoretically and empirically rich laboratory for the study of this important subject.

INTEREST GROUPS AND THE MEDIA

Getting a message into the mass media is a form of outside lobbying that can be useful for a politician or interest group in communicating information to the general public, as well as for simply legitimizing their perspective on an issue (Kollman 1998). While interest groups work to influence the public and policymakers in a variety of ways (Baumgartner and Leech 1998), working through the media can be an efficient and highly effective means of agenda-setting. Interest groups can get their messages in the media either by purchasing "advertorials" (Brown and Waltzer 2002) or through making news in some way. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses. While paid media makes it easier to control the content, citizens tend to discount the legitimacy and veracity of paid messages (Shea 1996). Earned media is the distinct opposite of paid media in these respects; while citizens are more likely to trust news reports than paid advertisements, the content of news media coverage is more difficult to control. Earned media coverage can help win elections and influence government decisions, but it may also backfire, with groups, positions, and politicians sometimes not being covered in the best light.

The pitfalls of earned media notwithstanding, many interest groups try to advance their policy and political goals by working with journalists. Indeed, Danielian and Page (1994) find that interest group representatives are the

most frequently used sources for major television network news, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between journalists and interest groups. In his seminal work, *Outside Lobbying*, Kollman (1998, 35) reports that 76 percent of his sample of groups at the national level reported “talking with the press” regularly, with this tactic ranking as the third most frequently used lobbying tactic, behind only “contacting Congress personally” and “entering coalitions with other groups.” In an earlier study, Schlozman and Tierney (1983, 357) report that 86 percent of the Washington, DC, groups they surveyed “talk with people from the press and the media.” Nownes and Freeman (1998, 92) found that large majorities of state-level lobbyists and organized interest groups also “talk to media.” Even at the local government level, Cooper and Nownes (2003) find that 92 percent of big-city citizen groups at least sometimes talk to the media (as opposed to never talking to them), while 89 percent of big-city lobbyists do so. The lesson here is clear: lobbyists and groups at all levels of government regularly interact with the media, and it is safe to assume that all this activity is probably thought of by these groups as a form of outside lobbying.

Despite popular press accusations of partisan bias in the media (Goldberg 2001), most scholars believe that any such bias is not the result of the intentional slanting of stories, but rather results from a much more subtle process in which journalists seek to obtain information with minimal costs and tell a clear and concise story (Gans 1979). Interest group representatives who understand this provide factual and timely information to journalists, while perhaps focusing on information that supports their group’s viewpoint. If groups can develop goodwill with journalists in this way, they are more likely to have their information used by journalists and, thereby, to have stories reported in a way that benefits their interests. In this sense, a lobbyist’s relationship with the news media parallels his or her relationship with legislators (Wright 1996). Providing services leads to goodwill and favorable treatment in subtle but important ways.

How might lobbying for policy preferences through earned media take place in practice? After all, the goal of these groups is to translate their preferences into policy, not simply to gain news coverage. This could be done in two ways, one direct and one indirect. First consider the indirect process. An interest group presents information to a journalist, who records it, interprets it, folds it into a story, and presents it to his or her readers. Citizens then consume this news, interpret it themselves, and either change their minds or (more likely) increase the salience of the issue at hand, potentially inspiring them to express their opinions to policymakers or evaluate candidates based on that issue. Therefore, this process by which interest groups may affect

public policy through the media is indirect, complicated, and tenuous, requiring that journalists and citizens receive, accept, and sample the message that originated with the interest group (Zaller 1992). However, we know that the media are an extremely important source of information about state politics and policy for citizens (Delli Carpini, Keeter, and Kennamer 1994), and if policymakers try to reflect the values and preferences of their constituents, then this indirect approach can be effective. Second, stories with an interest group's information may reach policymakers directly, since we know that legislators (and other elected officials) are voracious consumers of the news (Herbst 1998; Weiss 1974). Simply stated, legislators receive interest group information through the media, both directly and indirectly.

Certainly policymakers are influenced by information that comes their way through the media. We know that interest groups provide decisionmaking cues to legislators directly, but the media is also an important source of such cues. For example, Powlick (1995) finds that the media is an extremely important source of information for American foreign policy officials, more important than many overtly political sources, such as interest groups. Kingdon (1973) finds that while it is not as important as some other sources, the media is a source of information for congressional voting decisions, particularly on salient issues. Mooney (1991) also finds that while information from legislators, staff, and other more proximate bodies can be more important, the mass media are still a valuable source of information for many state legislators. Indeed, Herbst (1998) finds that the media are the most important means by which state legislators assess public opinion.

Thus, interest groups may exert more influence on policymakers than we currently understand if they are successful in using the media to transmit their messages both to policymakers themselves and to policymakers' constituents. But many of the linkages in this process are not yet well understood.

QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

We work to clarify part of this process by exploring the frequency and types of contacts that journalists have with interest groups. We do this by asking three basic questions about statehouse reporters. First, do journalists have frequent contact with interest groups? Second, how important are interest groups to journalists as news sources compared to other sources? Answering these two questions will help us to better understand how journalists gather information and how interest group representatives stack up to other sources. This analysis will also help us determine whether lobbying the media

occurs at the state level to the extent that Kollman (1998) finds it occurring in Washington. If interest groups pursue this outsider lobbying tactic, we should find that journalists and lobbyists have frequent contact. But given that journalists may perceive lobbyists as biased sources and that they tend to focus their attention on public officials (Cook 1989), we expect to find that lobbyists are less important than other more official sources such as legislators.

Finally, we ask whether journalist-interest group interactions are generally initiated by journalists or interest groups. We hypothesize that to the extent to which this relationship is symbiotic, journalists will approach lobbyists as often as lobbyists approach journalists. In the same way that politicians and journalists need each other to achieve their goals, journalists and lobbyists need one another. The degree to which this hypothesis is borne out in the data will indicate the nature of this relationship between journalists and lobbyists. If journalists approach lobbyists more often than lobbyists approach journalists, it would suggest that lobbyists value this relationship less than journalists. Likewise, if lobbyists contact journalists more often, then it is a sign that journalists do not consider the information they receive from lobbyists to be particularly important or useful.

After addressing these basic questions, we delve further into the journalist-interest group relationship by identifying the conditions under which journalists rely more or less heavily on interest groups for information. A careful reading of the state politics literature suggests that variations in at least three aspects of the context of state politics may affect the nature of the journalist-interest group relationship.

First, consider the impact on that relationship of interest group density, that is, the number of interest groups active in a state. The density of the state interest group community has been shown to have a variety of effects on interest group behavior (Gray and Lowery 1995, 1996, 2001), and it may affect their propensity to engage in outside lobbying and, thus, their efforts and success in influencing the media. However, the relationship between interest group density and journalist contact is likely not simple. Rather than a linear relationship, we hypothesize that journalists will interact most with interest group representatives in high- and low-density environments, with medium-density environments producing less interaction. Theories of density dependence suggest that the potential for interest group death is greatest in both low- and high-density environments (Nownes and Lipinski 2005). As such, interest groups should be more likely to seek allies and engage in outside lobbying in these high-risk contexts. Working with the media will be part of this strategy. To test this hypothesis, we operationalize density as

the number of groups registered to lobby government in a state in 1999.¹ This density measure ranges from a low of 202 groups (Hawaii) to a high of 2,272 groups (California).

Second, we expect that state legislative professionalism will affect the journalist-interest group relationship. Professionalism should reduce journalists' reliance on interest groups for information because highly professional legislatures offer journalists many other sources of information, especially legislative staffers (Squire and Hamm 2005). In general, we hypothesize that where fewer alternative sources of information exist, journalists turn to interest groups more. To test this hypothesis, we use King's (2000) measure of state legislative professionalism, which is based on a legislature's staff, session length, and legislator salary. We use the scale for the most recent years King reports (1993–94) in which California scores the highest (.900) and New Hampshire scores the lowest (.061).

Finally, we test the effect of overall interest group power in a state on the interest group-journalist relationship. In states where interest groups are more powerful, we expect them to be more closely connected to policy-makers and, thus, less reliant on outside lobbying and the media to achieve their policy goals. In states where groups are less powerful, they may need to pursue less direct tactics to achieve their goals, including cultivating journalists to promote their message. Hrebenar and Thomas (2004) have created a system that classifies the general interest group power in a state as either dominant, dominant/complementary, complementary, complementary/subordinate, or subordinate. Dominant states "are those in which groups as a whole are the overwhelming and consistent influence on policy making" (Thomas and Hrebener 2004, 121). Alabama, Montana, West Virginia, Nevada, and Florida had dominant interest group systems in their 2002 classification of states' systems. At the opposite end of scale are subordinate states, where groups are "consistently subordinated to other aspects of the policy-making process" (Thomas and Hrebenar 2004, 121). Although no states fell into this bottom category in 2002, Michigan, Minnesota, and South Dakota were scored as complementary/subordinate, the next lowest category.

DATA AND METHODS

The data we use to test our hypotheses on interest group-journalist relationships come from an original survey of statehouse journalists in the American states. As such, we are relying explicitly on journalists' perceptions of the interest group-journalist relationship. We do not have any direct measures of

interest group-journalist contact, nor do we have any data on the perspectives of interest group leaders or members regarding this relationship. However, we believe that this perceptual data is a good first step in understanding this relationship.

If these perceptual data bias our results, it would likely be toward finding less contact with lobbyists, that is, working against our hypotheses. After all, journalists may not want to admit that they rely on lobbyists—sources commonly maligned by the public—for information. Given these negative perceptions, it is highly unlikely that they would exaggerate their contact with lobbyists. It is also unlikely that the degree to which journalists lie would vary systematically across states. Because of this, these perceptual data should not bias the results of our multivariate analysis. Furthermore, while analyzing data from both journalists and interest group representatives would be ideal, we believe that given a choice, it is likely that journalists can better help us understand this process than lobbyists. Journalists, not interest group representatives, determine what appears in the news. Interest group representatives would likely exaggerate their influence on the production of news.

Obtaining an accurate list of statehouse journalists to develop our national sample was difficult. We began with a list compiled by the National Conference of State Legislatures. This list was checked for both deletions and additions by telephone calls to each statehouse pressroom. Ultimately, we identified 489 statehouse journalists active as of July 2003. We designed and conducted our survey of these journalists following Dillman's (2000) tailored-design method. We sent the survey to all the journalists on our list in August 2003 and followed up with two waves of reminder postcards. Of the 489 journalists in our initial sample, 35 surveys were returned for incorrect addresses and 19 were returned with notes indicating that the reporter in question did not cover the statehouse. In the end, we received 133 completed surveys from 42 states, for a 31 percent response rate.² This outcome is slightly lower than the 36 percent response rate achieved in perhaps the only other survey of statehouse reporters (Boylan and Long 2003), but it surpasses that of many recent surveys of political elites (Abbe and Herrnson 2002; Cooper and Nownes 2003; Kedrowski 1996).

RESULTS

To start our analysis, we turn our attention to our first general question: Do journalists have frequent contact with interest groups? To address this question, we asked our respondents how often they used "interest group

representatives as sources when writing political stories.” One percent of our respondents replied “never” to this survey item, 5 percent responded “rarely,” 49 percent responded “occasionally,” and 45 percent responded “often” ($n=130$). To delve further into this issue, we asked our respondents to respond to the following statement: “Interest groups use newspapers and other media a great deal in their attempts to achieve their political goals.” One percent of our respondents strongly disagreed with this statement, 11 percent disagreed, 68 percent agreed, and 21 percent strongly agreed. In short, these results show that journalists rely on interest group representatives for information to a significant extent and that these journalists overwhelmingly believe that these groups try to use the media for political gain.

How important are interest groups as news sources compared to other sources? We addressed this question by asking our respondents to tell us how useful each of 16 sources of information was in covering the state legislature. As our results in Table 1 show, legislative floor action, printed or draft bills, and legislative staff are the three most useful information sources for our sample of statehouse journalists. Interestingly, while lobbyists’ rank tied with another source for seventh among the 16, they were seen by journalists as virtually as useful as rank-and-file legislators and minority party leaders. On average, lobbyists were seen as more useful than governors’ press releases, speeches on the floor of the legislature, stories by or conversations with other reporters, and news releases (which, in fact may be another source of interest group information, at least in part). In addition, lobbyists’ handouts (written information) were seen as either somewhat or very useful by 62 percent of these respondents. Thus, Table 1 provides further evidence that interest groups and their representatives are important sources of information for journalists covering the statehouse.

To assess who has the upper hand in the interest group-journalist relationship, we asked a series of questions to determine who initiates contact between them. We presented respondents with the six survey items³ in Table 2 and asked them to reply “never,” “rarely,” “occasionally,” or “often” to each survey item. Several things stand out in Table 2. First, our data show that interest groups contact journalists regularly. For example, 90 percent of respondents said that interest group representatives approached them to “tell their side of the story” at least occasionally, and 83 percent said that interest group representatives come to them with story ideas at least occasionally. But the data also show that this is not a one-way relationship. Specifically, 68 percent of respondents said that they sought out interest group representatives for advice at least occasionally. This said, Table 2 suggests that journalists were more likely to report that they had been sought out by an interest

Table 1. Statehouse Journalists' Views on the Usefulness of Various Sources of Information

Information Source	Usefulness			
	Mean	Not at All Useful	Not Very Useful	Somewhat Useful
1. Printed or draft bills	3.51	1% (1)	3% (4)	40% (50)
2. Legislative floor action	3.50	0% (0)	7% (9)	35% (44)
2. Legislative staff	3.50	2% (2)	2% (3)	40% (50)
4. Conversations with majority party leaders	3.48	1% (1)	3% (4)	43% (54)
5. The Internet/ computer based sources	3.42	0% (0)	6% (7)	47% (59)
6. Other ("rank and file") legislators	3.35	0% (0)	7% (9)	50% (63)
7. Conversations with minority party leaders	3.34	1% (1)	10% (12)	45% (56)
7. Lobbyists	3.34	0% (0)	5% (6)	56% (70)
9. Governor's press conferences	3.02	2% (3)	16% (20)	23% (29)
10. Floor speeches	2.93	2% (3)	21% (26)	18% (23)
11. Stories by other reporters	2.87	2% (2)	22% (28)	13% (16)
12. Legislators' press conferences	2.77	1% (1)	26% (32)	5% (6)
13. News releases	2.67	3% (4)	32% (40)	6% (7)
14. Conversations with other reporters	2.66	6% (7)	30% (38)	56% (70)
15. Handouts from lobbyists	2.62	5% (6)	34% (42)	57% (71)
16. Committee minutes	2.08	33% (40)	31% (38)	31% (38)

Source: Authors' 2003 survey of 133 statehouse journalists.

Note: Ns vary for individual survey questions due to item nonresponse. Mean scores are based on the following coding: 1=not at all useful, 2=not very useful, 3=somewhat useful, 4=very useful.

Survey item: "Reporters use a number of sources in covering the legislature. We would like to know what sources are most useful and what sources are least useful to you in covering the legislature. Please rate the following on a four-point scale where 1 means not at all useful and 4 means very useful by circling the number next to the response."^a

group representative than that they had sought one out. Table 2 also shows that interest groups lobby journalists more than journalists ask for advice. While the overwhelming majority of journalists reported being approached by group representatives with story ideas or to tell their side of the story, only 19 percent of respondents said that interest group representatives contacted them “for advice on how best to achieve their political goals through the media” either occasionally or often. And only 9 percent said that interest group representatives came to them “for advice on political tactics” either occasionally or often.

Altogether, the data in Table 2 support the perception that interest groups do not only work to achieve their policy goals through direct lobbying of policymakers, but they also actively engage in what Browne (1998, 343) calls “all-directional” advocacy by targeting the media and, by extension, the public. Our data also suggest that groups’ efforts may have stimulated a relationship in which journalists have learned that these groups are a good source of news and relevant information, and therefore, journalists regularly seek them out on their own accord.

What Explains the Extent of Journalist Contact with Interest Groups?

The journalists in our survey differ a great deal in the extent to which they rely on interest groups for information. To explore why some journalists rely on interest group information more than others, we created an additive scale of responses to the six survey items in Table 2. We assigned each “never” response a value of 1, each “rarely” response a value of 2, each “occasionally” response a value of 3, and each “often” response a value of 4. As such, the scale has a theoretical range of 6–24. The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale is .64. We used this additive index (which we will call *interest group contact*) as the dependent variable in an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model with the following independent variables: *density/1000* (number of groups per state divided by 1000),⁴ *density/1000 squared*, *interest group power* (complementary/subordinate=1, complementary=2, dominant/complementary=3, dominant=4), and *state legislative professionalism* (which we describe above). As discussed above, we expect interest group power and state legislative professionalism to be negatively related to the dependent variable interest group contact. We expect that density has a nonmonotonic relationship with the index, where density has its greatest effect at its highest and lowest values.

As Table 3 shows the estimates for density and interest group power are statistically significant. The hypothesis of a nonmonotonic relationship between density and interest group contact is supported. This support sug-

Table 2. Journalist-Interest Group Contact Initiation

How often does each of the following occur?	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Often
1. You use interest group representatives as sources when writing political stories.	1% (1)	5% (6)	49% (64)	45% (59)
2. Interest group representatives come to you to "tell their side of the story" when you are writing political stories.	0% (0)	10% (13)	50% (66)	40% (52)
3. Interest group representatives come to you with story ideas.	0% (0)	17% (22)	52% (68)	31% (40)
4. You seek out interest group representatives for advice on newsworthy issues and topics.	12% (15)	20% (26)	49% (63)	19% (25)
5. Interest group representatives approach you for advice on how best to achieve their political goals through the media.	31% (41)	49% (64)	17% (22)	2% (3)
6. Interest group representatives come to you for advice on political tactics.	61% (80)	30% (39)	8% (11)	1% (1)

Source: Authors' 2003 survey of 133 statehouse journalists.

Note: Ns vary for individual survey questions due to item nonresponse.

Survey item: "How often does each of the following occur—never, rarely, occasionally, or often"

Table 3. OLS Regression Model for Interest Group Contact

Variable	B (SE)
Density/1000	-3.35** (1.60)
(Density/1000) ²	1.69*** (.56)
Interest group power	-.39* (.21)
State legislative professionalism	-1.48 (1.60)
Constant	18.62*** (1.17)
R ²	.059
N	129

*p<.1; **p<.05; ***p<.01 (two-tailed test)
Note: Standard errors were computed by clustering on the state and then adjusted using the technique suggested in Franzese (2005). The dependent variable is the index of the degree of interest group contact reported by a journalist.

gests that groups in both high- and low-interest group-density states have more contact with journalists than do groups in medium-density states. As we hypothesized, this is likely because interest group tactics vary with the probability of interest group death. These estimates also show that interest group power is negatively related to interest group contact. This finding suggests that when interest groups can exert influence directly over government officials, they do so and eschew using the media; but when their power to exert direct influence is blocked, interest groups will look outside government—to the media—in their efforts to influence government decisions.⁵

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to provide a basic description of the relationship between journalists and interest groups working in and around the state legislature. To summarize, our data indicate the following: (1) interest groups are important sources of information for statehouse journalists; (2) while groups are not the most important sources of information for journalists, they are more important than several other sources, including gubernatorial press conferences, legislative floor speeches, other reporters, and news releases; approximately as important as rank-and-file legislators and minority leaders, and nearly as important as the Internet; (3) a great deal of interest group-journalist contact is initiated by interest groups, but a significant amount is initiated by journal-

ists; and (4) the extent of the contact that statehouse journalists claim to have with interest groups is influenced by the number of interest groups active in the state and the overall level of interest group power in the state.

Our findings have two obvious implications. First, they highlight the importance of learning more about how the journalists who cover state legislatures gather their information. Second, they suggest that interest group density and interest group power—two variables that figure prominently in the state interest group literature—may influence the nature of politics in the states in ways that we do not yet understand.

In conclusion, we hope that our data have shed some light on an important but poorly understood relationship in American politics, the relationship between interest groups and journalists in the states. Interest group scholars have long understood the importance of outside lobbying, but to understand that phenomenon completely, we must gain a deeper and more theoretical understanding of the way interest groups use the media to set the agenda and frame the terms of political debate.

ENDNOTES

1. Thanks to David Lowery for giving us access to these data.
2. We received no surveys from Indiana, Maine, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Wyoming.
3. On their face, questions 4 and 5 may not appear to be directly relevant to contact initiation between journalists and lobbyists, but we include them in our analysis for the following reason. Much of the interaction between journalists and their sources is relatively informal and may not even relate directly to a specific story at the time. However these interactions are important for building trust, which eventually manifests itself in more direct ways, such as direct contact about stories and information. Building trust is a key precursor to developing sources (Cooper and Johnson 2006). Sources who are trusted more will find it easier to influence the news than those who have not built a relationship with a journalist.
4. We divide our interest group density variables by 1,000 to ease interpretation.
5. We also estimated the model using ordinal logistic regression without the last two questions of the scale in the dependent variable. The substantive interpretation of the results was similar with the only difference being that interest group power moved from $p < .1$ to $p < .05$.

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