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Editorial: Lobbying in comparative contexts

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Editorial on the Research Topic Lobbying in comparative contexts

Lobbying occurs in a multitude of venues across branches of government, at different levels of government, and in different countries. Accordingly, scholars have devoted significant effort to studying how lobbying varies from place to place and how it has changed over time (Thomas and Hrebenar, 1999; Holyoke, 2003; McKay, 2011). Why should we study *where* and *when* lobbyists engage with policymakers? First, it helps us understand how context affects lobbying activity. Simply put, the rules of the game matter. Thus, while there are similarities, lobbying in Canadian provinces differs from lobbying the Canadian Parliament; the same is true of lobbying the Canadian Parliament vs. the French Parliament. And lobbying in parliamentary systems is different from lobbying in other systems. Further, lobbying laws, the party (or parties) in power, public opinion, and competition with other interests all influence lobbying. And because the political world changes rapidly and, in some cases, unpredictably, lobbying looks different at different points in time, even in the same place. Second, we should look at how and when lobbyists target different venues because it shows how lobbyists are adaptive. A pro-gun interest group may find limited ability to influence legislation in the California (USA) state legislature, where Democrats dominate. However, this interest may find success in targeting the judicial branch to block gun restrictions. In this case, the group may argue that the state law violates the U.S. Constitution and should be invalidated. Third, and related to the above reasons, studying where and when lobbyists lobby helps us better understand the separation of powers and how influence can occur in various places. While most people envision lobbyists trying to sway lawmakers, significant research finds that influence over the executive branch is not only common, but it may also be a more effective way for some interests to get what they want (Holyoke, 2003; Boehmke et al., 2006; McKay, 2011). In many countries, a great deal of influence occurs after a law has been passed (You, 2017). This is one reason we should consider other, non-legislative venues.

This Research Topic of *Frontiers in Political Science* includes several articles on lobbying and interest group activity in different venues. For our purposes, we employ a broad definition of *venue* to include the temporal and spatial locations where lobbying occurs. This includes both inside and outside lobbying. Together, the studies in this Research Topic help us better understand how context matters in lobbying behavior. This introductory essay begins with a brief overview of research on lobbying different venues. We then discuss some recent research we conducted comparing lobbying in Washington, D.C., to that in the American states. From here, we introduce some important works by scholars who study issues including the role of collective identity in the Black Lives

Movement protests in 2020 (Kann et al.), lobbying the executive branch in Canada, differentiating partisan advisors and public servants (Cooper and Boucher), how federated associations paved the way for modern lobbying (Chamberlain et al.), and how timing of lobbying is related to the budgeting process in American states (de Figueiredo).

We start with the premise that lobbyists will seek to influence policy and policymakers by lobbying in venues where they are most likely to achieve their goals (Newmark and Nownes, 2024). They can sometimes achieve these objectives by lobbying a single venue, but the approach often needs to be more balanced. For example, lobbyists engage in direct lobbying by contacting members of the executive branch, but they may also engage in indirect, grassroots tactics in the hopes of influencing public opinion or garnering media attention that will result in pressure on policymakers. And depending on the way power is organized, different levels of government may be targeted simultaneously. So, while lobbying tactics may be similar in federal systems of government compared to unitary systems, the former may involve lobbying both the central and subnational governments. This is one reason scholars such as Skocpol et al. (2000) and Chamberlain et al. have invested significant research attention in federated organizations. Some federated organizations have similar versions of the same organizations but at different levels of government, while others are more loosely affiliated because of the decentralized nature of politics.

Lobbyists may target different levels of government because of the vertical distribution of power. In federal systems of government, this might involve lobbying the federal government and one or more subnational governments. For example, in the United States, this means lobbying in Washington D.C. in addition to state capitals and perhaps even cities and counties. In Canada, this means lobbying in Ottawa and any of the 10 provinces and three territories with autonomy in many policy areas. The advantage of studying subnational governments is the variation across these units, allowing for comparison across contexts. Not surprisingly, American states have become fertile grounds for taking advantage of this contextual variation (Nownes and Freeman, 1998; Thomas and Hrebener, 1999; Strickland, 2021; cf. Gray and Lowery, 1996). In this Research Topic of *Frontiers in Political Science*, Kann et al. study the Black Lives Movement protests, which occurred in all 50 states, Chamberlain et al. study federated associations, which operate in the states, as well as nationally, and de Figueiredo studies the states during the budgetary process. Much of our own research also focuses on lobbying in the American states and how context matters in lobbying behavior (For example, Newmark and Nownes, 2024).

Another way to examine venues is to see if lobbyists lobby multiple branches of government, something we term horizontal lobbying. While interests routinely target the legislature to either promote the passage of legislation, influence the content of it, or stop it, the executive branch is responsible for both policymaking and policy implementation. For these reasons, the executive branch has received notable attention from scholars seeking to understand how interests try to influence the rule-making process and policy implementation (McKay, 2011; Nelson and Yackee, 2012; You, 2017). Cooper and Boucher note that elected and

TABLE 1 Lobbying different venues.

Branch	Washington, DC lobbyists	State lobbyists
Legislative	73% (610)	81.6% (1,731)
Executive	65% (543)	69.2% (1,467)
Judicial	14.5% (121)	9.5% (202)
Lobby Only 1 Branch	9%	13%
Lobby Two Branches	50%	60%
Lobby Three Branches	14%	9%
Lobby State Government	51%	—
Lobby National Government	—	39%

Ns are in parentheses. Percentages are based on whether or not respondents lobbied each separate branch; therefore, the totals do not equal 100.

non-elected officials within the executive branch are common targets of lobbying activity, and there are variations within the executive branch. Finally, even the judiciary is a target of lobbying, either through attempts to influence judicial elections, influence over judicial appointments, confirmation of judicial appointments, submission of amicus briefs, or using litigation to achieve objectives (Newmark and Nownes, 2024).

In sum, the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government are all subject to lobbying activity. To study multi-venue lobbying, we recently surveyed lobbyists in Washington D.C. and 35 U.S. states to examine their choices of venues to achieve their goals. We used Qualtrics to administer surveys in 2018 and 2019 to lobbyists registered with the appropriate state agency (usually the Secretary of State's Office or Board of Elections) where email addresses were available. For the Washington D.C. lobbyists, we obtained addresses from the WashingtonRepresentatives.com lobbying database.¹ Both surveys were similar in design and conducted within a year, allowing us to compare Washington, D.C., and state-level lobbyists.

Table 1 shows the choice of venues for both Washington and state-level lobbyists. The cells indicate the percentage of lobbyists who report lobbying a given branch, so the percentages do not total 100 percent. The results reflect that most lobbyists lobby two branches, most often the legislative and executive branches. At both levels of government, lobbyists lobby these branches, with a somewhat higher percentage lobbying the legislature. Not surprisingly, judicial lobbying, which we define as involvement in judicial appointments/elections, filing amicus briefs, or using litigation, is uncommon. Some lobbyists do not report formally engaging with any branch of government. These lobbyists likely work behind the scenes, engaging in activities like conducting research, working with members of their organizations, or working on public relations or media outreach. Lobbyists may help organize protests, yet they may not have direct contact with policymakers. We also note that lobbying only a single branch of government is somewhat uncommon, but so is lobbying all three branches.

¹ For a full description of the research design, see Newmark and Nownes, 2024.

Turning to vertical lobbying, over half (51 percent) of the Washington lobbyists in our sample report lobbying at the state level. Some of these lobbyists actually lobby in multiple states as well as nationally. A slightly smaller number of state-level lobbyists also lobby nationally (39 percent). Again, some of these lobbyists are also active in multiple states.

Articles in this Research Topic

Many lobbying studies are conducted at a single time point, usually due to convenience or data availability. Other times, research takes advantage of the zeitgeist of politics, which could be said of the [Kann et al.](#) study of the Black Lives Matter protests, which are considered the largest set of protests in US history. The study is not about a specific choice of venue but rather a political movement at a particular time when many Americans have demanded racial justice following the murders of several Black Americans at the hands of police. The article focuses on decision-making related to the location of these protests. Protests occurred in every state, often in large urban areas, so advocates' selection of Houston, Los Angeles, and Chicago was a practical and logical decision. The study adds to our understanding of how interest and collective identity relate to protest participation. And the results suggest that we may have overestimated the role of collective identity in political participation. Surely, collective identity matters in overcoming collective action problems, but interest matters more, according to this research.

The [Cooper and Boucher](#) article adds to a growing body of literature examining how the type of institutional structures influence venue selection. In this study, the venue is the Canadian parliament, and the focus is on lobbying the executive, which is common in various governmental systems. As these authors correctly note, not all lobbyists are the same, nor is the executive a single, monolithic institution or person. We know of the variation in lobbyist type and how this can affect which venues to target and the number of them. For example, contract lobbyists appear more likely than other lobbyists to lobby the executive branch, possibly due to greater resources ([Newmark and Nownes, 2024](#)). But while many scholars have compared lobbyists including contract, in-house, consultant, grass-roots, and hobbyists, [Cooper and Boucher](#) also focus on the type of executive lobbied. This includes senior public servants, non-senior public servants, partisan advisors, and ministers. The implications here are that we could expect differences in lobbying targets depending on the rank of a public official and whether or not they are elected. And their longitudinal data provide a picture of lobbying activity in Canada at multiple time points rather than at a single time.

[Chamberlain et al.](#) add to our body of knowledge by allowing us to consider lobbying both temporally and spatially. While many examinations of lobbying focus on changes over time, studies often focus on what lobbying is like at a given time, with little consideration of the historical context shaping future lobbying. If we want to know what lobbying was like in the 1950s and 1960s, we might look to [Schattschneider \(1960\)](#); if we want to know what it was like in the 1980s, we will read [Schlozman and Tierney \(1986\)](#); if we want to focus on lobbying in the 1990s, we might look to works by [Thomas and Hrebener \(1999\)](#) or [Gray and Lowery \(1996\)](#).

Similarly to [Skocpol et al. \(2000\)](#), [Chamberlain et al.](#) offer a rich historical view of associations and how this has influenced current interest group politics. In addition to temporal considerations, this research also focuses on American states, evaluating federated associations that may lobby nationally but also have state-level affiliates. This is most important in federal systems, where lobbying multiple levels of government is prevalent. Furthermore, the case studies of agriculture, railroad, and banking interests allow comparison across important policy sectors of the time.

[de Figueiredo's](#) work also uses the U.S. states to examine the timing of lobbying activity during the budgetary process. Specifically, this paper examines budgeting as a window in which policy-making occurs, which prompts increased lobbying activity. As we know from previous research, businesses and trade groups account for much of this activity. However, other groups are responsive to timing related to the budgetary process. While most scholars focus on the political context in which lobbying occurs, this paper adds timing to the mix. It also suggests that while businesses and perhaps other advantaged groups may have the resources to increase their activity level, other groups are also cognizant of when the legislature is actively working on the budget.

Taken together, the works in this Research Topic add to our understanding of lobbying and interest group activity in different contexts. The articles display a range of venues, methodologies, and contexts. They provide both historical origins of lobbying and modern examples that reflect current lobbying. And they contribute to our understanding of how interest group activity varies at different times and places.

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