

# Businesses don't always get what they want, but try to get what they need

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Although most citizens tend to believe that big business owns Washington D.C., a team of researchers suggests that business may have a less dominant and more complicated relationship with government than previously thought.

In a study of randomly selected federal policy decisions between 1998 and 2002, the researchers found that when citizen [interest groups](#) and other competitors opposed businesses on policies, businesses had roughly an equal chance of success as the citizen group. When the researchers examined a shorter time period, businesses were only successful about a quarter of the time.

"We were pretty convinced that we were going to find that [business](#) did have an advantage, but, when going head-to-head against these citizen groups, government officials and other groups that represent occupational interests, business has no inherent advantage," said Marie Hojnacki, associate professor of political science, Penn State.

However, businesses may be better suited for certain types of legislative battles, according to the researchers, who report their findings in the forthcoming issue of *Interest Groups and Advocacy*, available online now.

For example, Hojnacki noted that when business interests back specific, more technical projects, such as funding for the Army's CH-47 helicopter, they draw little opposition and have a better chance at

success.

Lobbyists for businesses also have the resources to outlast citizen groups and pursue a variety of policy changes simultaneously. Because citizen groups often lack resources, they tend to focus their influence on the biggest and most contentious issues.

"Businesses are much better funded and staffed to be able to lose battles, but still win the war," said Hojnacki.

In a related finding, when business groups are unopposed, their success rate is greater than the rate of success enjoyed by other types of interests, according to the researchers. After four years, business has an 89 percent success rate, while the success of citizen groups is only 33 percent.

The study suggests that some other cynical memes about politics—that votes do not count, or that citizen action groups have limited effects—may be incorrect.

"Businesses have a lot of money and can outgun citizen groups in terms of personnel, but that doesn't mean that people being part of interest groups and raising their voices is meaningless," said Hojnacki. "We see that it matters and these groups can contest the things that business puts forward."

She also added that the last two years of the study, when businesses were more successful, occurred during the more business-friendly era of the George W. Bush administration.

Hojnacki noted that the tendency to equate the legislative agendas of citizen groups with the will of the people is an over-generalization.

"They may be citizen groups and we think of them as representing citizen interests, but when you look at their positions, they may be at odds with what a majority of the citizens want," she said.

The researchers created case studies on 98 different issues in the U.S. Senate that were being pursued by randomly selected lobbyists. Initially, the researchers interviewed representatives from each organization to determine that group's legislative priorities and the types of opposition it was facing. They then interviewed opposition representatives. During the next four years, the researchers followed the progress of the cases to determine the success rates of the lobbyists.

"We emerged at the end of this period with a firm grasp on who got what they wanted and who did not on all 98 issues," the researchers said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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