

Polarization has increased US economic inequality according to study

June 10 2015, by George Diepenbrock

As national politics has become intensely more partisan in the past three decades, new research co-authored by a University of Kansas researcher links political gridlock to increased economic inequality as well.

"Lobbying now takes place within a highly polarized environment in which business and corporate interests can use their substantial resources to maintain and increase high levels of [economic inequality](#)," said Burdett Loomis, professor of political science, who co-authored the essay "Advocacy in an Era of Inequality" with Anthony Nownes, a University of Tennessee professor of political science. Nownes earned his doctorate at KU.

The essay by Loomis and Nownes appears as a chapter in the newly released ninth edition of book "Interest Group Politics," co-edited by Loomis, Nownes and Allan Cigler, KU professor emeritus of political science.

Loomis said businesses tend to have an advantage over time because it is difficult to get new policies passed amid a highly polarized environment, especially in Congress. Lobbyists representing organized interests have substantial resources and can often quickly mobilize and reach out to senators and representatives to advocate for certain policies, often creating narratives that define the issues.

Citizen-type groups and private employee union groups have less ability to work that fast, he said, although public employee unions are an

exception.

"I do think you have a situation in which policy making, whether in Congress or within the bureaucracy, is highly complex and often highly technical," Loomis said. "It really requires resources to affect these policies. So I think that's one place where corporate lobbyists have a big advantage because there's certainly been just a disproportionate amount of lobbying."

According to the study, the top 15 interest group spenders in Washington in 2012 and 2013 were all corporate or professional organizations, while civil rights groups, consumer groups, environmental groups, labor unions and other groups, like charities and churches, were further down the list.

"It's not that citizen groups are irrelevant. They aren't, but I do think that money often comes to swamp the citizen groups," Loomis said.

The fact that Republicans seem to have moved further to the right than Democrats have moved to the left in recent decades also likely has influenced how Congress has addressed economic inequality, the study found.

"In many ways the people who are furthest out there to the right are people for whom gross inequality doesn't seem to be a problem," Loomis said. "They are very much against government programs that would address inequality. They are highly oriented against taxes."

This also makes it more difficult to compromise on issues, because when Republicans such as House Speaker John Boehner or South Carolina's GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham floats a compromise, they are often attacked instantly.

While the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court decision extended to

corporations, labor unions and other associations' unlimited independent political expenditures, Loomis said lobbying was at least equally important when it came to increasing rates of economic inequality.

"We're arguing that although elections play a role in that, lobbying is where far more money is spent and really is most essential," Loomis said. "You will not get very far trying to limit lobbying, which is constitutionally protected free speech. But you can try to understand better what is going on and report on how much money is being spent."

This edition of "Interest Group Politics" also includes a chapter on the evolution of the LGBT movement by Don Haider-Markel, professor and chairman of KU's Department of Political Science, and Steven Sylvester, a KU graduate student in [political science](#).

Loomis said while there has been progress recently both in the courts and state legislatures on LGBT rights, including gay marriage, that such an issue is essentially irrelevant to businesses, so it has had little effect on economic inequality.

"It's not that some disadvantaged groups can't win in this society. They can, and in a host of different venues, such as the courts," he said. "But when you get to a lot of other issues, who can afford to go to court? Big corporations have far more resources to use the judicial system, and they can use that venue if they choose."

Provided by University of Kansas

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