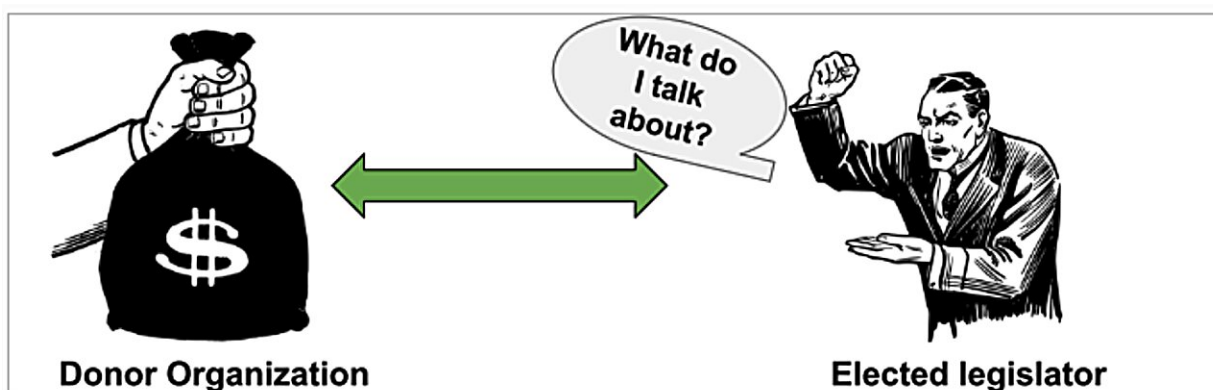


US political donations are associated with policy issues prioritized in congressional speeches

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A visualization capturing the core finding of this new work: a robust association between a legislator's organized donors and what they talk about on the floor of the US Congress. Credit: Pranav Goel (made using images from the public domain), CC-BY 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

The first comprehensive analysis of the relationship between campaign donations and the issues legislators prioritize with congressional speech is published in the open access journal *PLOS ONE* this week.

While prior research reaches mixed conclusions on associations between [political donations](#) in the U.S. and voting patterns of legislators, this research suggests there are substantial associations between donations

and policy priorities expressed in congressional speeches, and marks [language use](#) as an interesting and viable arena for looking at the impact political donors may have on congressional behavior.

Publicly traded corporations and labor unions in the U.S. routinely raise funds and donate money to candidates for political office. In the 2020 [election cycle](#), this amounted to nearly \$500 million in donations.

Although it has been shown that donations have an impact on policy outcomes, until now the focus has been on voting on congressional bills and congressional committees.

Dr. Pranav Goel of the University of Maryland, and colleagues, pulled together publicly available data on U.S. House representatives from 1995 to 2018. This included committee assignments, legislative speeches and donation records. The various sources of information were linked together through a combination of computational and manual effort.

The researchers identified patterns of donation for corporations and unions, suggesting that their donations are not strictly partisan and are given to both Democrat and Republican candidates. Using a machine learning approach, they found that political donations are associated with legislators prioritizing the relevant issues in their congressional speeches: when legislators are associated with donors with a particular policy interest, more of their speaking time is dedicated to that [political issue](#).

While it might be assumed that variables such as party affiliation, home state, and committee assignment dictate how representatives prioritize their time speaking on the floor of Congress, the research suggests that legislators' issue-attention is more strongly linked to who their donors are than to these factors. The researchers also noted that businesses donate to more legislators on average and have a significantly higher association with issue-attention than [labor unions](#).

The team was also able to identify relevant speeches that occur in [close proximity](#) to donations, though they stress that their findings do not suggest causality between the two events. They share that methodology, which could be an avenue for investigative journalism. The framework, data, and findings are all openly available for others to use, and taken together can help increase the transparency of the role of money in politics.

The authors summarize, "Understanding the role of donations is a crucial part of understanding how our democracy works. In this work, we developed new methods for analyzing how donations by Political Action Committees (PACs) relate to the language that legislators use, and we found a robust and substantial association between the congressional donors that donate to U.S. House legislators and the issues those legislators prioritize when speaking on the floor of Congress."

More information: Donor activity is associated with US legislators' attention to political issues, *PLOS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0291169](#). [journals.plos.org/plosone/article/journal.pone.0291169](#)

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