

Is political lobbying a corruption of democracy in theory and/or practice?

Lobbyists play a critical role in global politics and have great influence over which laws pass, which politicians get elected, and fund various programmes and parties to ensure politics benefits the lobbyists in one way or another. However, a report on the transparency and integrity of lobbying by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development found that lobbying is the number one reason for the stealth decline in confidence of politicians over the last decade, and that it is a “major problem at the heart of the democratic system” (OECD, 2014). In this essay I will focus in particular on political lobbying in the UK and argue that fundamentally lobbying is a corruption of democracy. Using examples such as the Owen Paterson scandal and the opposing elitism vs pluralism debate, I will demonstrate the various ways in which lobbyists strategically fund specific governments or individuals, and how political parties allow this as a means of financial aid for themselves. This essay will also address the difference between political lobbying in theory and in practice, highlighting how in theory anyone can lobby and lobbying should be a vital part of a functioning democracy, but in reality, is often used by large corporate companies targeting governments to agree with or shut down laws that may benefit or disadvantage the company by bribing politicians with funding. Ultimately, political lobbying is a corruption of democracy in practice and despite the democratic theory that lobbying can be for the good of society, it is rendered insignificant in comparison to the reality.

UK Parliament (2022) define lobbying as when “an individual or a group tries to persuade someone in Parliament to support a particular policy or campaign” and it is widely argued that anyone has the power to lobby their MP or parliament, suggesting lobbying is not a corruption of democracy. Citizens have the right to speak freely to their parliamentary representative and try to impact important decisions that are to be made by government. Pluralism theories of lobbying such as those proposed by Dahl (1978) suggests that lobbying is conducted by people with non-hierarchical interests who do not have a monopoly represent their views, essentially defending the practice of political lobbying. This early work has been used as a foundation for more recent academic work that argues lobbying is a positive democratic force, for example Grant (2000) argues that lobbying allows

organisations to express their views about political issues more frequently than once per election cycle. However, these modern theories also take into account the changing and increased influence that businesses and organisations have over governmental decisions compared to 40 years ago when the pluralist theory focused heavily only on citizen lobbying. By failing to recognise that lobbying often is only available to those who already have money, power or political influence, the theory of pluralism is rendered out of date and is replaced by the theory of elitism. Early elitist theorist Wright Mills (1956) argues that lobbying is for corporate and state elites supporting one another and excluding less powerful members of society from influencing decision making. This argument shows validity through time as this view is still widely agreed with in the current political climate in the UK and highlights the corruption of the elite within politics. Therefore, in theory anyone has the power to lobby for change which suggests a correctly functioning democracy, but over time theories have shown citizens and less powerful sections of society have found it increasingly hard to lobby or feel heard, being overshadowed by the corrupted practice of lobbying by big corporations and businesses.

Another reason political lobbying in practice is a corruption of democracy is that it is mainly conducted by large businesses for profit or self-gain. Austen-Smith et al. (1996) researched the relationship between lobbyists and legislators and concluded that they engage in a “mutually beneficial exchange of campaign contributions for votes”. By accessing party conferences, industry roundtables and consulting outside agencies, firms can make personal connections with powerful politicians, offering them monetary donations or support in return for a push in legislation that will benefit their business. One industry in particular that uses this lobbying model to reach their own objectives is the alcohol industry. This is because alcohol, as well as other industries such as cigarettes and firearms, are scared they may get regulated so pay a substantial amount of money to those in power to secure themselves and achieve “their own coincident objectives” (Hall and Deardorff, 2006). Given the public health concerns surrounding excessive alcohol consumption it is clear why many in power push for tighter restrictions on the sale of alcohol. However, as this industry actively engages with the government as well as providing open party support and financial aid, these lobbyists are “involved at every stage of the policy process” (Hawkins and Holden,

2014) and therefore do not have to worry about parliament imposing regulations that would harm their industry. Therefore, large industries and businesses lobby the government for profit and power despite the clear implications these decisions may have on wider society, showing how in practice political lobbying is a corruption of democracy.

It is not just the lobbyists who conduct unethical decision-making that leads to the corruption of democracy, but also the politicians themselves. A recent example in the UK of lobbying abusing the political systems is Owen Paterson and the second job scandal. By law MPs are forbidden from taking money in exchange for campaigning for issues put forward by that donor, and Paterson was accused and subsequently investigated by the Commissioner for Parliamentary Standards for breaking these lobbying rules. Alongside his job as MP for North Shropshire and prominent cabinet member, Paterson was also being paid for consultancy work by Randox. This company subsequently was awarded a £133 million (The Independent, 2021) Covid-19 testing kit contract in exchange for the support they were giving Paterson and the conservative party, a clear corruption of a democracy that promotes transparency and integrity. In light of this lobbying scandal the standards committee has proposed a reform of the system that updates the conduct rules for MPs, advising a ban on paid parliamentary advice by lobbyists (McGuinness, 2021) as well as resulting in Paterson himself resigning. Ultimately, this kind of behaviour by politicians and lobbyists themselves abuses the democratic systems and therefore lobbying is a corruption of democracy.

It can be argued however that some large companies lobby for important issues that ultimately benefit society suggesting that despite the profitability, strategic lobbying can be a positive democratic force and not a corruption. If pressure groups and think tanks are advocating for social change and progressive legislation, leaders and parties are forced to listen and deliver on the basis that the lobbyists are helping them out financially. Individuals and activist groups often lobby their MPs, civil servants, or the government for proposed policy change for issues such as poverty, homelessness, and health related problems that are currently not being addressed by the elites. When larger companies also lobby for these

important issues, government can no longer ignore such problems. It can be argued that the Child Poverty Action Group in the 1960s and 1970s is the most successful lobbying group in terms of social policy change in British history. They used campaign money and charity donations to lobby the government, whilst using the media to push the image of the horrific living conditions and sometimes homelessness of children across the UK. The impact of these media campaigns resulted in increased pressure from outsider companies and third-party lobbyists (Whiteley & Winyard, 1989) who joined forces with CPAG to push child poverty eradication legislation through parliament. However, this presents the “moral dilemma” (Monaghan & Monaghan, 2014) of political lobbying – is the effective bribery of giving money to government in exchange for power acceptable when the legislation does end up benefiting wider society? Therefore, political lobbying can impact positive change which implies that it is not a corruption of democracy, but the underlying principle that money can buy large businesses power in politics in any capacity will always be a hindering factor of democracy.

A strong argument that also suggests political lobbying is a corruption of democracy is the lack of transparency between what deals occur between lobbyist and politician, which can often be seen as hiding illegalities. Hansen (1991) suggests that lobbyists “determine the kinds of information about constituents that are available and the kinds of information that are not” highlighting the issue of politicians misleading the public by not being forthcoming in their involvement with lobbyists. Opposing the previous argument that highlighted how lobbying can be for the good of society, there have been many occasions in which the implications of lobbyists influence has led to global disasters such as the 2010 BP oil spill (Espinosa, 2020), which politicians involved with were very keen to keep their involvement private and out of the media. An OECD (2021) study into the transparency of lobbying worldwide found that the “information disclosed is not enough to allow for public scrutiny”, emphasising the problems with policy making in the current political environment. It also adheres to the elitists view of lobbying in which the report suggests that because of the hidden information and power dynamics, it has become virtually impossible for ordinary members of the public or smaller charitable organisations to lobby with any effect or outcome. Therefore, in practice lobbyists use politicians for commercial interests which

results in politicians not being open to the public in how they obtained money, spent it, or why they have pushed through certain policies, ultimately showing that political lobbying is a corruption of democracy.

Politicians know that lobbying in its most popular form is not democratic, and the system needs reform, but ultimately the practice of lobbying provides politicians with more benefits than drawbacks. Political lobbying usually occurs between large corporate companies with specific agendas and they target politicians who can benefit them through law and legislation by giving them money. This effective bribery is unconstitutional, and despite the coming to light of multiple scandals such as Owen Paterson and the second job scandal within the Conservative party, the majority of targeted political lobbying in the UK is kept under wraps from public knowledge. Despite this, there is reason to believe that lobbying can sometimes be for the good of society, with financial aid being put towards good causes such as child poverty, and lobbyists using the media to lobby the government in implementing beneficial policies. This sparks the moral dilemma in whether the unethical practices of lobbying and donating money can be excused if it is going to a good societal cause and is often why lobbying is not heavily regulated. Ultimately, in theory political lobbying should be a practice available to everyone and individuals should be heard equally to those larger businesses, highlighted through the theories of pluralism. However, in practice political lobbying is for the good of capitalism and individual sectors rather than for the good of society and is therefore a corruption of democracy.

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