Money and Access: Some Empirical Evidence

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Political scientists have pointed out that access is an important motivation for campaign contributions, but their evidence to date is based largely on case study observations, on the opinions of participants and observers, and on inferences from indirect quantitative evidence. This paper provides more direct quantitative evidence on the topic, using data from the Commission on Administrative Review of the House of Representatives in the 95th Congress. It uses tobit analysis to estimate the impact of PAC campaign contributions and several other independent variables, including indicators of a member's tenure, legislative position, and electoral security, on the number of minutes that members spent in their office with representatives of organized interest groups during a typical workweek. The results suggest, but do not prove, that money does indeed buy access.

The nexus between campaign contributions and congressmen has fascinated both political scientists and economists. Members of both disciplines have agreed that one possible motivation for campaign contributions is to influence the voting behavior of congressmen, and considerable empirical research has been devoted to determining whether this influence actually exists (Silberman and Durden, 1976; Malbin, 1979, 1980; Kau and Rubin, 1982; Chappel, 1981, 1982; Nelson, 1982; Welch, 1982; Sabato, 1984). The findings, as well as the methods, have been quite mixed.

Political scientists have pointed out that access is another motivation for campaign contributions (Heard, 1956; Milbrath, 1963; Truman, 1971; Alexander, 1972; Bauer, Pool and Dexter, 1972; Ornstein and Elder, 1978; Malbin, 1980; Hrebenar and Scott, 1982; Nelson, 1982; Herndon, 1982; Gopoian, 1984; Sabato, 1984). They contend that access is a precondition for having influence over public policy. Contributions themselves have

*The author wishes to thank Charles Brasher and Albert Connerly for their assistance

little meaning for a congressman, because they do not carry any "message." Only access, or some other form of direct or indirect communication, can translate money into influence. While much has been written about the critical importance of access and the perception that interest groups use campaign contributions to "buy" access, there has been no direct measure of access. As a result, research on the relation between money and access has provided only subjective or indirect evidence. This paper provides a more direct measure of access than previous investigators have used: the number of minutes that members of the House spend in their office with representatives of organized interest groups during a typical workweek. It uses tobit analysis to determine whether the allocation of time to this activity is influenced by interest group campaign contributions, holding other variables constant. The paper proceeds by specifying the variables in the tobit model, discussing other methodological concerns, and presenting the empirical results.

Data and Model Specification

Previous studies of the link between campaign contributions and access have used indirect measures to assess whether access is a motivation for contributions (e.g., Gopoian, 1984; Herndon, 1982), or they are based on the observations of politicians, lobbyists, and scholars. This study uses survey data from the Commission on Administrative Review of the U.S. House of Representatives (known as the Obey Commission). The Commission selected a random sample of 92 members of the House from the 95th Congress and observed how they spent their time. The Commission's data are a record of activities during a single workweek, and include items such as the number of minutes spent responding to quorum calls or votes, attending full committee hearings and other full committee functions, attending subcommittee hearings and other subcommittee functions, sitting in the office with constituents and other individuals and groups, talking to staff and others, traveling to the home district, visiting in the home district and elsewhere, working at home, and engaging in many other activities as well.[1] Of particular interest in this study is the item recording the number of minutes in the sample workweek that the member spent in his office with organized groups (or their representatives). Of all the items in the Commission's data on a member's activities, this item most clearly constitutes a measure of face-to-face contact with interest groups. It would have been possible to add to this item the number of minutes spent with individual constituents, who might also represent interest groups; time spent on the telephone or at events;

[1] The data were collected between May and July of 1977. As the commission itself notes, "The time period during which the survey was conducted no doubt influenced the results obtained" (U.S. Congress, Commission on Administrative Review, 1977, p. 630).

and time spent outside Washington, D.C., and outside the home district. Any one of these (or other) activities could entail relatively direct contacts with lobbyists. However, these activities also reflect time spent with staff, with other members, or with executive branch or state and local officials. Using only the time spent with organized groups in the office understates the time members actually spend with lobbyists. Estimates of intercepts will be biased downward, but if the degree of understatement is independent of the other variables in the analysis, estimate of parameters should not be affected by what is assumed to be random measurement error in the dependent variable.

Data from the Obey Commission on the number of minutes spent with organized groups and the number of minutes worked in the sample week were paired with data from the Federal Election Commission on total and non-party, non-individual (i.e., PAC) campaign contributions to the member during the period January 1, 1975, through December 31, 1976, which is the campaign period that preceded the 95th Congress (Federal Election Commission, 1977).

Simply finding a correlation between money and access is insufficient evidence of a causal connection. Interest groups apparently target their contributions and seek access where the expected return is greatest, and it is necessary to isolate the effects of these attributes from those of campaign contributions. Contributions are likely to be directed at powerful and influential members, at members whose electoral needs are greatest, and at members whose ideology is most compatible with that of the donor.[2] Holding a committee or subcommittee chairmanship and having relative seniority are two indicators of a member's legislative status. But the responsibilities of position and tenure may alone be enough to require and demand access. It is thus necessary to remove the effects of position and tenure in order to determine whether money, rather than the trappings of power, influences the time spent with organized groups. Unfortunately for the scholarly investigator, the Obey Commission did not record the activities of full committee chairmen in its data base, so the measure of formal position separates only subcommittee chairmen and full committee ranking minority members, and the Budget Committee chairman from the ranking minority members of subcommittees and other members who hold no formal position. This understates the variance in a critical independent variable.

Previous studies have found that campaign contributions are allocated to electorally insecure members and to members whose ideology closely resembles that of the donor (Wright, 1985; Poole and Romer,

[2] Wright (1985) points out that two different allocation strategies are implicit in a set of variables: one is geared at influencing elections and the other is designed to influence legislative behavior. His findings suggest that the former is a more important motivation for the donors than the latter.

Since the demand for access may also be systematically related to these factors, it is necessary to include them in the analysis in order to isolate the effects of money on access. For example, a visit with a safe member may be a more valuable commodity than face-to-face discussions with members who may not be around long enough to take meaningful action; issues persist longer than some congressional careers. A visit with a safe member may consequently be more costly than a visit of similar length with a marginal member, making it necessary to incorporate electoral marginality in the model to estimate the separate influence of money.

Ideology is also a potentially important determinant of access. Liberal members may be more open to a broader range of interest groups than conservatives. Alternatively, conservatives, especially if they are well funded, may be more sought after than liberals. Thus it seems reasonable to include two indicators of ideology in the model: political party and score on the AFL's COPE index.

Finally, the total length of the member's workweek is included in the model not only because it is an obvious determinant of the amount of time a member has available to spend with organized groups, but because it is also likely to be associated with the other independent variables in the model (O'Donnell, 1982), and must be held constant if the influence of money on access is to be estimated with as little bias as possible.[3]

Methodological Issues

Studies of the influence of campaign contributions on legislative voting behavior typically hold many other variables constant that this study ignores. Because these studies are issue specific, they also include indicators of the district's union membership (for labor-related issues), indicators of the district's involvement in aircraft or shipbuilding (for defense-related issues), etc. The contribution data are equally specific, pinpointing contributions from labor or from aircraft or shipbuilding industries, as appropriate to the issue. Unfortunately, the Obey Commission data indicate neither the number nor the nature of the organized interests with whom the member met. Thus, separating campaign contributions into labor and business contributions, examining the proportion of the member's district that belongs to unions, and adding other such variables to the multivariate analysis would be meaningless since it is impossible to tell whether a business (or labor) contribution

[3] An alternative to including the total length of the workweek on the right-hand side is to use the percent of time spent with organized interests as a dependent variable rather than absolute time. This is undesirable for two reasons. On substantive grounds, contributors surely seek minutes with a member, not relative or proportionate time. On methodological grounds, length of workweek would still have to be included on the right-hand side of the model because it is associated with other independent variables and, for computational reasons alone, with a percentage dependent variable as well.

"buys" time with a business (or labor) interest group. For the omission of these variables to bias the estimate of the impact of total PAC contributions on time spent with organized groups, one would have to argue that total PAC contributions and total time spent with organized interests are both associated with particular constituency characteristics of the member that denote specific issues. While it makes sense to contend that particular PACs may give to members whose constituency contains large numbers of persons the PAC represents, it is not so clear that PACs, taken as a whole, give contributions to and seek visits with members from particular kinds of districts. Using aggregate time and aggregate contribution data may thus simplify the specification of the tobit equation.

Nonetheless, while the resulting estimates may not be affected by this source of specification bias, they may be flawed by a type of aggregation bias. Specifically, if the estimates reveal that dollars buy time, there is no guarantee that the interest group giving the dollar is the same group spending time with the member. In fact, it is even possible that none of the contributing PACs actually obtain access, and that the groups obtaining access do not make any contributions. Despite the aggregate nature of the information on access, several factors make it nonetheless reasonable to use it. First, disaggregate information on the specific interest groups that individual members spend time with is unlikely ever to be shared publicly by more than a handful of representatives. Second, the data in this study, though aggregate, provide a more exact measure of access than that used in other quantitative studies, where access has been inferred as a motive rather than measured directly (Herndon, 1982; Gopoian, 1984). Third, the use of quantitative data makes statistical control possible. Most previous research concerning the impact of money on access has relied on qualitative data. Qualitative approaches have many advantages, but the ability to subject causal claims to statistical control is not one of them.[4]

Besides potential problems of data aggregation, there is another respect in which a finding that money influences access (or votes) could be suspect. Money is just one means by which PACs and their allied interest groups seek influence and access. Of particular importance are the in-kind favors that interest groups provide members, such as information and campaign manpower. In-kind assistance may be nearly as useful as monetary aid, and may therefore help "buy" access. Since not all in-kind

[4] Methodological "triangulation" is warranted whenever the data available to study a particular phenomenon are imperfect (Greene and McClintock, 1985; Reichardt and Cook, 1979; Trend, 1979). Triangulation refers to the use of multiple data sources—for example, interviews, documents, and personal observation. The study of the nexus between campaign contributions and access has, to date, relied on interviews and personal observation. This paper adds another form of data. When multiple, though imperfect, sources of data point to the same conclusion, one's confidence in the conclusion (and the data) increases, perhaps to the point where uncertainty can be eliminated.

contributions are likely to be reported, virtually all quantitative studies of political money may unintentionally measure this variable inaccurately, thereby introducing a potential source of specification error.

Findings

The data reveal that, for the sample of 92 drawn from the population of House members from the 95th Congress who are not chairmen of full committees, the average member spends proportionately very little time in his office with organized groups. During the sample workweek, the mean percent of time devoted to face-to-face contact with organized groups in the member's office is just 1.1. There is considerable variation, however; most members spent no time with organized groups, while others spent up to 7.4% of their time meeting with organized groups in their office. On an absolute basis, the average member spent 37 minutes with organized groups out of a total average workweek of 3248 minutes (or 54.1 hours). The shortest workweek was 480 minutes (or 8 hours); the longest was 5340 minutes (or 89 hours). The longest time that a member spent with organized groups was 240 minutes (or 4 hours).

Because 37 of the 92 members in this study spent no time in their office with representatives of organized interest groups during the sample workweek, and because the value of the dependent variable cannot be less than zero, the use of multiple regression analysis to estimate the effect of contributions on access holding other variables constant would yield biased estimates (Aldrich and Nelson, 1984; Goldberger, 1964). As a linear probability function, multiple regression is very likely to result in negative expected values of the dependent variable, even though such an outcome is impossible for the behavior being studied. Tobit analysis applies a maximum likelihood estimation procedure to a statistical model that conforms to theoretical expectation, and is thus preferable to the more familiar multiple linear regression model (Goldberger, 1964, pp. 251-255).

Table 1 lists the variables in the tobit analysis, describes how they are measured, and gives the data sources. Table 2 shows the tobit results for several variations of the basic model.

The first two models include the independent variables discussed in the previous section, but PAC contributions are measured in two ways; in thousands of dollars, and as a percentage of total contributions.

According to the first two parts of table 2, the goodness-of-fit chi-square indicates that all seven independent variables, considered jointly, have a significant effect (at the .01 level) on the dependent variable. However, only two individual independent variables are significant: the total time the member spends in the office (at the .025 level), and the contribution variables (at the .05 level), whether measured in dollar or percentage terms. All the significant variables have the expected positive sign. (Unlike

TABLE 1

LIST OF VARIABLES

VARIABLE	DESCRIPTION	SOURCE
Time spent with organized groups in office	Minutes in sample workweek	U.S. Congress, Commission on Administrative Review (Obie Commission)
Total time spent at work	Total minutes in sample workweek	Same as above
Party	1=Democrat 2=Republican	Michael Barone, Grant Ujifusa, and Douglas Matthews, *1978 Almanac of American Politics* (NY: Dutton, 1977)
Position*	1=Subcommittee chairman, Budget committee chairman, or Ranking minority member of full committee 0=Ranking minority member of subcommittee, or no formal position	Same as above
Tenure	Number of terms (1=first term, 2=second term, etc.)	Same as above
Electoral margin	Winner's % of vote in 1976 minus (sum of) losers' %	Same as above
Nonparty contributions	Total monies received from nonparty related political committees (in 1000's of dollars, Jan. 1, 1975 - Dec. 31, 1976)	Federal Election Commission, *FEC Disclo... Series No. 9: 1976 House of Repre... tives Campaign Receipts and Expenditures*
Total contributions	Total receipts from individuals, party and nonparty committees, loans, interest, and miscellaneous income (in 1000's of dollars, Jan. 1, 1975 - Dec. 31, 1976)	Same as above
Pro-labor ideology	Score on AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education (COPE) rating scale, based on 1977 votes	*Congressional Q... Weekly Re...* (April 15, 1... 914-915

*No full committee chairmen were included in the Obie Commission sampl...

TABLE 2

RESULTS OF TOBIT ANALYSIS

VARIABLE	COEFFICIENT	STD. ERROR	T-VALUE
Party	-36.24	25.88	-1.400
Position	21.24	24.81	.856
Tenure	2.73	3.59	.762
Nonparty contribs.	.73	.39	1.865*
Electoral margin	-.07	.37	-.185
COPE score	-.36	.46	.792
Minutes in workweek	.035	.017	2.214**
Chi-square = 21.34 ($p < .01$)			
Party	-34.76	25.62	-1.353
Position	7.94	25.29	.314
Tenure	1.04	3.62	.286
Nonparty contribs. as % total	1.29	.68	1.913*
Electoral margin	-.15	.37	-.396
COPE score	-.44	.44	-.983
Minutes in workweek	.036	.016	2.345**
Chi-square = 23.32 ($p < .01$)			
Position	33.45	22.93	1.459
Tenure	.51	3.57	.142
Nonparty contribs.	.80	.38	2.100**
Electoral margin	-.02	.36	-.055
COPE score	-.04	.40	-.106
Minutes in workweek	.034	.016	2.207**
Chi-square = 19.40 ($p < .01$)			
Position	19.96	23.47	.850
Tenure	-1.00	3.48	-.288
Nonparty contribs. as % total	1.37	.69	1.997**
Electoral margin	-.15	.37	-.421
COPE score	-.10	.39	-.252
Minutes in workweek	.037	.015	2.437***
Chi-square = 21.58 ($p < .001$)			
Nonparty contribs.	.82	.32	2.592***
Minutes in workweek	.033	.014	2.419***
Chi-square = 15.56 ($p < .001$)			
Nonparty contribs. as % total	1.57	.54	2.929****
Minutes in workweek	.038	.014	2.771****
Chi-square = 20.66 ($p < .001$)			

*Significant at .05 level (1-tail test)
**Significant at .025 level (1-tail test)
***Significant at .01 level (1-tail test)
****Significant at .005 level (1-tail test)

coefficients estimated using multiple regression, tobit coefficients have no straightforward interpretation beyond their sign and statistical significance. The implications of the coefficients will, however, be considered after other variations of the model are evaluated.)

Because party and the COPE score were so highly correlated in the sample (r = .71), and because multiple regression of each independent variable on the remaining independent variables yielded the highest R^2's when party and the COPE score were used as dependent variables, it seemed possible that the two variables were somewhat collinear. Their collinearity could raise the standard errors of other variables in the model. The third and fourth parts of table 2 show that deleting party as an independent variable did not substantially alter the previous results. The overall models remain significant at the .01 level, and the same two independent variables have positive and significant coefficients, although their significance level is less: contributions are significant at the .025 level, and the total length of the workweek is significant at the .01 and .025 level, depending on the model.

The final two models dropped all of the insignificant variables. Because the models now have more degrees of freedom, the goodness-of-fit chi-square becomes significant at the .001 level and the individual coefficients become significant at the .01 level in the model containing PAC contributions measured in dollars and at the .005 level in the model containing nonparty contributions measured as a percentage of the total.

Overall, these results show that PAC contributions appear to significantly influence access. Other variables that previous research has shown are related to contributions and that were included in this study because they might also affect access in fact appear to have no significant impact on the amount of time members spend in their office with representatives of organized interest groups.

Table 3 lends a substantive interpretation to the simplest of the models in table 2. It illustrates, for selected values of the dollar amount of nonparty campaign contributions (the mean, one standard deviation above and below the mean, and two standard deviations above the mean), and for a hypothetical member whose work week is fixed at the average, the number of minutes of access the contribution appears to "buy."[5] The table reveals that one hour costs about $72,300, which is two standard deviations above the mean contribution of $28,360. The mean contribution yields over one-half hour of access, and a $6,400 contribution, which is

[5] These calculations are based on the formula in Goldberger (1964, p. 254) that transforms the maximum likelihood estimates in table 2 into values of the dependent variable. The transformation guarantees that no predicted values of the dependent variable are less than zero.

standard deviation below the mean, produces just under one-half hour of "private" time with a member. The relation between money and votes is clearly nonlinear, since the first 25 minutes are a lot cheaper than the next 25 minutes.

TABLE 3

PREDICTED MINUTES OF ACCESS FOR SELECTED CAMPAIGN CONTRIBUTIONS FOR A MEMBER WITH AN AVERAGE WORKWEEK

CONTRIBUTION	MINUTES OF ACCESS
$72,300	60
$50,330	47
$28,360	35
$6,390	25

It is possible that these findings are not generalizable beyond the sample used in this study. Moreover, because the results are also based on aggregate data, the estimates could be biased. Nonetheless, the evidence in this study concerning the link between money and access is consistent with the personal observations of many scholars, lobbyists, and members. In addition, unlike conclusions based on these beliefs, the findings in this study have been subjected to statistical controls.

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