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Canada's Lobbying Industry: Business and Public Interest Advocacy from Harper to Trudeau

Nicolas Graham¹ , Bryan Evans²  and David Chen³ 

¹Department of Sociology at Glendon College, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada, ²Department of Politics and Public Administration, Toronto Metropolitan University, 112 George Street unit S 802, Toronto, ON M5A 2M5, Canada and ³Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, 725 Spadina Ave., Toronto, ON M5S 2J4, Canada

Corresponding author: Nicolas Graham; Email: njgraham@uvic.ca

Abstract

This article provides an empirical overview of federal lobbying in Canada, examining lobbying contacts by field and sector from 2011 to 2022. We track shifts in lobbying representation over this period, including across Harper Conservative and Trudeau Liberal administrations. The study reveals the dominance of business interests in lobbying in Canada and a high level of lobbying concentration. By sector, export-oriented industries with high environmental and climatic impacts—namely, agriculture, fossil fuel and manufacturing industries—predominate. With the transition to Trudeau, we find a significant increase in overall rates of lobbying and a modest increase in the ratio of public interest representation. Overall, the lobbying industry is characterized by greater access but unequal voice.

Résumé

Cet article donne un aperçu empirique du lobbying fédéral au Canada, en examinant les contacts d'influence par domaine et par secteur entre 2011 et 2022. Nous suivons l'évolution de la représentation des lobbyistes au cours de cette période, y compris entre les administrations conservatrices de Harper et libérales de Trudeau. L'étude révèle la prédominance des intérêts commerciaux dans le lobbying au Canada, ainsi qu'un niveau élevé de concentration. Par secteur, les activités orientées vers l'exportation et ayant un impact élevé sur l'environnement et le climat - à savoir l'agriculture, les combustibles fossiles et les industries manufacturières - prédominent. Avec la transition au gouvernement Trudeau, nous constatons une augmentation significative des taux globaux de lobbying et une augmentation modeste du ratio de représentation de l'intérêt public. Dans l'ensemble, l'industrie du lobbying se caractérise par un plus grand accès, mais une voix inégale.

Keywords: lobbying; interest groups; power structure; neo-pluralism; corporate power

Mots clés: pression; groupes d'intérêt; structure du pouvoir; néo-pluralisme; pouvoir des entreprises

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Introduction

The policy advocacy that lobbying entails is an important modality of corporate “business activism,” which grew substantially in the latter half of the twentieth century (Carroll and Sapinski, 2018: 11). The lobbying arm of business encompasses a heterodox community of organizations, including industry associations, multisectoral business councils, chambers of commerce, and corporations. These organizations provide the platform for lobbying activities seeking to engage with the government policy advisory system and thereby inform and shape public policy in the interest—general or specific—of business. In this sense “corporate power reaches beyond the economy” and projects itself into political society (Carroll and Sapinski, 2018: 100).

On the other hand, lobbying is also undertaken by civil society groups and public interest organizations. These encompass a still more diverse spectrum of organizations, such as trade unions and policy advocacy nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to specific policy issues such as housing affordability, anti-poverty, environmental protection and much more. The question is, are these heard equally by government decision makers? The precise impact of lobbying is not measurable, but the breadth of lobbying activism and engagement with government is.

There is a large body of scholarship on lobbying in the United States and in Europe (Brulle, 2018; Dommert *et al.*, 2017; Drutman, 2015; de Figueiredo and Richter, 2014; Schlozman *et al.*, 2015). However, lobbying, in comparative terms, continues to be overlooked by Canadian scholars (Boucher and Cooper, 2021). We seek to help fill this gap through an empirical overview of lobbying contacts by field and sector from 2011 to 2022. The longitudinal vantage allows us to consider changes in lobbying over time, including across Harper and Trudeau administrations. In providing such an overview, our overarching concern is with (un)equal representation within a crucial but understudied area of the policy process. Our study, among others, raises serious questions respecting the significant unevenness by which policy preferences and the interests mobilizing behind these preferences are heard within venues for government policy agenda-setting and policy development.

Literature Review

Defining lobbying

Framing a working definition of what is meant by *lobbying* is necessary but not straightforward. Baumgartner and Leech assert that “the word lobbying has seldom been used the same way twice by those studying the topic” (1998: 33).

The first scholarly definition stated that lobbying was “the stimulation and transmission of a communication, by someone other than a citizen acting on his own behalf, directed to a governmental decision maker with the hope of influencing his decision” (Milbrath, 1963: 8). The federal Lobbying Act in Canada defines lobbying as “communicating, with public office holders, for payment [payment of a lobbyist] with regard to: the making, developing or amending of federal legislative proposals, bills or resolutions, regulations, policies or programs; the awarding of federal grants, contributions or other financial benefits; and the awarding of a federal government contract” (Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada,

n.d.). An additional challenge in defining lobbying lies in the distinction between lobbying *activities* and the *act* of lobbying. Baumgartner and Leech (1998) point out that much of what lobbyists do is work in advance of the lobbying act—for example, policy research and data gathering, efforts to monitor what the government is doing, and even public opinion polling. When looking at the activity of firms or lobbyists, it can become difficult to draw the line of where and when that activity starts and stops and what it includes.

The various definitions share a common understanding, however, which is that lobbying is concerned with the means of how nonstate actors work to influence the policy process and its outputs.

Who or what does lobbying service?

Conceptualizations of lobbying in the literature can be seen to map onto long-standing pluralist versus power elite or power structure theory distinctions and reflect the broader assumptions and axioms of those traditions. While these are broad models concerning the nature and distribution of political power in society, we outline them below and clarify how they extend to lobbying.

Elite Power Structure

Power structure research, as Barrow (1993) suggests, views the organized control and ownership of key resources as the basis for exercising power. Neo-Marxist approaches—what we call elite power structure—have deployed power structure analysis to analyze the concentration of economic resources in large corporations and their deployment as a key source of power in capitalist societies (Miliband, 1969). Because of unequal control over capital, it is understood that corporations and corporate owners and executives can use economic resources to influence those who control other resources (including cultural or ideological and political or state resources). This capacity is enhanced by the tendency for capital to become concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer firms in the regular course of capitalist economic development (Marx, 1976; Porter, 1956).

Rooted in control over capital, corporations are understood to have a disproportionate ability to fund and hire lobbyists (Carroll and Sapinski, 2018; Domhoff, 2014) and to organize and mobilize external policy research via sponsorship of think tanks and policy groups (Plehwe, 2014). Membership in collective business organizations bolsters this capacity and the ability to mobilize collectively as a fraction of capital (a sector) or as a class (Cronin, 2017; Slavin, 1975; Waterhouse, 2021). Conclusions derived from a broad range of lobbying studies in North America and Europe tend to affirm such a perspective, insofar as business interests dominate lobbying activity (Boucher, 2018; Brulle, 2018; Dommert et al., 2017; Drutman, 2015; de Figueiredo and Richter, 2014; Graham et al., 2020).

From Interest Group Pluralism to Neo-pluralism

In the pluralism literature, lobbying is approached as an activity where multiple competing “interest groups” influence policy. Truman’s (1951) pioneering work viewed policy outcomes in US politics as reflecting a balance of power among

competing groups, while Dahl (1961), in developing a wider theory of pluralism, argued that those dissatisfied with the policy status quo will readily mobilize into interest groups, which in turn have the power to wield influence over policy.

These perspectives have been variously criticized. Notably, Olson (1965) and Schattschneider (1960) argued that the barriers to organize interest groups and participate in political process and policy making are far greater than suggested in interest group and pluralist analysis. Schattschneider (1960: 35) showed that even among citizen action groups, the interests represented are predominantly those of better educated, more affluent, and professional groups, observing that “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with an upper-class accent.”

Such critiques encourage the development of a second branch of neo-pluralism (McFarland, 2010) or “biased pluralism” (Gilens and Page, 2014). Neo-pluralists point to the proliferation in the 1960s and 70s of interest groups, such as civil rights, environmental and feminist organizations (McFarland, 2010), whose policy advocacy efforts follow from the professionalization of social movements (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Yet in neo-pluralism the growth of citizen interest organizations does not imply fair and representative policy-making processes. Indeed, theories of biased pluralism “generally argue that both the thrust of interest-group conflict and the public policies that result tend to tilt toward the wishes of. . . business and professional associations” (Gilens and Page, 2014: 567), while other interests, including those of the poor or the economic interests of ordinary workers, are hardly represented (Schlozman *et al.*, 2015).

Such an approach shares a fair bit with elite power structure approaches, especially those that hold a more “instrumentalist” conception of the state. Such a view, sometimes associated with Miliband (1969), claims, roughly, that “the state, and state power, may be controlled or influenced by external agents or social forces and used to realize their interests or purposes, as against rival or conflicting interests” (Wetherly, 2007: 110). However, a key distinction between the two lies in the focus on class interests in elite power structure accounts (Wetherly, 2007).

Subsequently, an important issue in power structure research is whether corporate elites have a capacity to formulate general class interests and to act in pursuit of those interests (that is, as a “class-for-itself”). Such debates extend to lobbying, as some studies assert a particularistic view—depicting individual corporations as lobbying for their own parochial interests (Drutman, 2015; Waterhouse, 2013)—while others point to the role of organized corporate interests in lobbying, including via multisector business councils and chambers of commerce (Cronin, 2017; Waterhouse, 2021).

What Is the Purpose of Lobbying?

A related debate in the literature concerns the purpose of lobbying and the relationship that lobbyists have with state officials. In approaches drawing from pluralism, there is often a benign or overtly positive view of lobbying, which is understood to be based upon a transfer or exchange of information that facilitates policy development (Boucher and Cooper, 2019; Nownes and Newmark, 2016). Lobbyists are considered essential to the functioning of government because they “supply important information and subject-matter expertise to government so that it can do its

job” (LaPira and Thomas, 2014: 5). It is further argued that a main purpose of lobbying is to “subsidize” the policy work of allied legislators, by sharing expertise of a specific sector or issue (Hall and Dearthoff, 2006).

By contrast, in approaches drawing from the elite power structure tradition, the lobby industry is understood to work not so much as a system of knowledge transmission but a political strategy to influence policy toward some interests rather than others. By extension, a common understanding of what lobbying aims to accomplish is persuasion (Austen-Smith and Wright, 1994; Potters and van Winden, 1992). Business lobbying, in turn, is found to be primarily motivated by persuading against unwanted legislation (Drutman, 2015), while Austen-Smith and Wright (1994) add that lobbying, including of legislative “allies,” is most often counteractive—it exists to neutralize the advocacy efforts of opponents. Similarly, Drutman (2015) and Brulle (2018) argue that lobbyists endeavour to overwhelm policy makers with information and argumentation on one side of an issue, while “framing out” competing conceptions.

While we position our work within long-standing debates between pluralist and elite power structure theories, our concern is not to prove or disprove models of political power but to analyze the adequacy of representation in lobbying and its implications. In doing so, we draw from both elite power structure and neo-pluralist approaches.

The lobbying industry in Canada

Most work in Canada focuses on the state target component of lobbying, or the question of who gets lobbied. Thus, a sizable body of literature examines access to state officials and institutions, analyzing the nature of Canada’s governmental and legislative systems and how this informs lobbying strategy (Bridgman, 2020; Eagles, 2013; Hopkins, 2020). Boucher (2015) examines the relationship between lobbyists and members of the Canadian Parliament and provides a profile showing the extent to which both the executive and the legislative are targets of lobbying strategies.

Boucher (2018) also examines how different types of organizations access the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), where executive power is concentrated. He finds that organizations that lobby extensively (and mainly reach lower-level legislative branches) are more likely to reach the PMO, pointing to lobbying being a “dynamic process of socialization between organizations and the government” (Boucher, 2018: 333). Looking at 2008–2013, Boucher finds that business interests account for 64 per cent of total lobbying contacts and nearly 70 per cent of contacts with the PMO.

Boucher (2018) reports that just under a quarter of total lobbying contacts over this period are made by consultant lobbyists—lobbyists employed by a third-party agency or firm, hired by the company or organization to lobby on its behalf—and that 61 per cent of contacts performed by consultants represent business interests, an imbalance he attributes to the inability of NGO and public interest organizations to afford consultant lobbyists. This line of research is advanced by Boucher and Cooper (2019), who examine the role and activity of consultant lobbyists and revolving-door relations in Canada’s lobby industry. This speaks to debates on the purpose of lobbying by observing that there are different types of lobbyists that may carry different relationships with government personnel. Findings suggest

that consultant lobbyists act in ways that are more consistent with policy expertise and information sharing than peddling access to government personnel, but Boucher and Cooper suggest a “hybrid” understanding.

Echoing concerns about elite power structures (regarding the backgrounds of state elites), Yates and Cardin-Trudeau (2021) meanwhile examine “lobbying from within”—the way that new public officers hailing from the private sector bring perspectives and allegiances from their former industry into the state.

Empirical research focusing on the organizational composition of lobbying (that is, who lobbies) is more limited. A few studies provide sectoral analyses, with Cayley-Daoust and Girard (2012) and later Graham *et al.* (2019, 2020) analyzing fossil fuel lobbying. Other studies have examined lobbying by food and beverage and agriculture actors in response to select policy proposals (Gaucher-Holm *et al.*, 2022; Mulligan *et al.*, 2021).

Boucher (2015, 2018) provides one of the only large-scale multiyear overviews of lobbying by field at the federal level in Canada. Considering five years of lobbying during the Harper administration, he finds that corporations and trade associations accounted for 64 per cent of lobbying contacts. His analysis extends to sectoral access to the PMO, finding that, compared to banking and finance, the communication and information sector has a strong positive effect on contacts with the PMO, while energy and nature resources firms had less access.

There is also little research analyzing lobbying patterns following the transition from Harper to Trudeau. One exception is Cooper and Boucher (2019), who examine rates of lobbying in Canada in relation to periods of “uncertainty,” covering 2008–2018. They distinguish “policy objective uncertainty” (where organizations and lobbyists are uncertain about the policy intentions of decision makers) from “issue information uncertainty” (where policy makers may be uncertain about the technical details of issues). They find that the change of government from Harper to Trudeau, which brought policy uncertainty, led to a statistically significant immediate decrease in the number of lobbying contacts that government departments receive. The decrease was, however, temporary, and they report a growth in lobbying in the months following the transition in government.

We build from these works, providing an up-to-date and systematic analysis, including a detailed sectoral examination (both business and non-business civil society) of the organizational composition of lobbying in Canada. By examining federal lobbying in Canada over the past decade, we also consider changes in dynamics of the lobbying landscape, with a specific focus on the transition from the Harper to Trudeau administrations. While we focus on broad patterns of representation, we also consider key campaigns among the most prominent corporate sectors.

Data and Methods

We construct a database using information from the lobby registry of Canada, available via the Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada. From this we find (a) organization name and (b) (number of) lobbying contacts. After organizing the data, a field and sector code was manually assigned to each organization ($n = 4,294$). Each organization was classified into one of three broader fields: (1) corporations and businesses, (2) industry associations and business councils and

(3) non-business civil society organizations. We further categorized each organization by sector. For corporations, businesses, and industry associations, we classified each into one of 15 sector categories. Similarly, we classified civil society organizations based on their primary focus or social functions, with a total of 13 categories. Data on lobbying topics or “subject matter details” (which are self-reported and offer only generic topical descriptions) were collected for the top two sectors.

These classifications follow from concerns of neo-pluralist and elite power structure literature outlined above. Namely, a fine delineation of non-business civil society organizations follows a concern that certain voices and perspectives predominate in lobbying, even within citizen action groups (Schlozman et al., 2015). We also separate business councils from industry associations, as the former are of particular interest to power elite studies, as expressions of class-wide interests. While our choices differ slightly from other Canadian research (for example, Boucher [2015, 2018]), they do not preclude consideration of broad patterns of continuity and change in the field.

The time range of our study—from May 2, 2011, to May 1, 2022—allows us to conduct an 11-consecutive-year longitudinal analysis. We divided the data into 11 time intervals: each interval starts from May 2 and ends on May 1 the next year, for a total of 11 full years. Beginning in 2011 allows us to study the full period of Harper’s second term and consider shifts that may have occurred following the change in government in 2015.

Our study asks four questions:

1. To what extent do business interests dominate lobbying in Canada?
2. Which business sectors are the most active, and what issues are focal, among leading industries?
3. Which civil society and public interest organizations are most represented?
4. Are there significant changes in lobbying activity over time, including across Harper and Trudeau administrations, and what explains salient changes?

In addressing these questions, our study does not examine lobbying targets (that is, which officials and state bodies get lobbied). While we point to broad policy areas and issue campaigns among leading sectors, we also do not aim to determine the precise nature of specific lobbying events or meetings, nor do we endeavour to assess the direct effects or impacts of lobbying. Instead, we examine the organizational ecology of lobbying access, which concerns the opportunity for influence.

Findings

Assessing the lobbying field

Over the 11-year period of the study, 4,294 organizations recorded lobbying efforts. Of these, 58 per cent (2,479) are businesses and corporations, 16 per cent (694) are industry associations or multisector business councils and 26 per cent (1,121) are various other civil society organizations and public interest organizations.

Table 1 displays total lobbying contacts recorded by these organizations, providing a comprehensive picture of federal lobbying by organization type and sector across time.¹ The table is organized by field, grouping organizations that, on the one hand, clearly represent business interests (corporations, industry associations

and business councils), and on the other, various non-business civil society organizations.

As displayed in [Table 1](#), there were 308,900 lobbying contacts from May 2011 to May 2022. Corporations and business organizations dominate, accounting for nearly 70 per cent of the contacts. Temporally, there is a sharp growth in overall federal lobbying contacts over the past decade, and especially beginning in 2016 following the transition to Trudeau (discussed further below).

Consistent with Boucher's (2018) findings, consultant lobbyists account for 27 per cent of lobbying contacts over the period of the study. We observe a modest increase in their role, which mainly follows from the transition to Trudeau; from 2016 to 2022, consultants account for 31 per cent of contacts.

By business sector (combining corporations and industry associations), the agriculture and fisheries industry, which includes agricultural input businesses (for example, fertilizers) and food manufacturing firms, top the list (31,471 contacts). This is followed closely by the fossil fuel industry (25,941 contacts). This amounts to over 11 contacts per working day between government officials and the agriculture sector and over 9 contacts per working day between the fossil fuel industry and federal office holders. Meanwhile, manufacturing and industrial conglomerates have over 20,000 lobbying contacts. When we look at these results together, we therefore find a tilt in the lobbying arm of business toward export-oriented industries with generally high environmental and climatic impacts. This finding is consistent with wider lobbying literature that finds that among corporations, firms that face higher government regulations (Hill *et al.*, 2013), as well as those with poor environmental performance (Cho *et al.*, 2006), are more likely to lobby.

High rates of lobbying by the fossil fuel sector over the last decade and a moderate increase since 2016 have been reported in existing literature (Cayley-Daoust and Girard, 2012; Graham *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, the leading role of agriculture in lobbying is somewhat surprising. While variation in lobby reporting procedures inhibit one-to-one comparisons, US lobbying expenditure data shows that agribusiness ranked 10th out of 14 sector categories in lobbying spending from 1998 to 2022.²

Most sectors have seen a growth in lobbying over time. However, lobbying by finance, banking and insurance, as well as by mining, forestry and other extractive industries, displays a bell shape, peaking in 2016–2017 and slowly declining thereafter. In relation to profitability, finance sector firms lobby at a relatively modest level. It is possible that the relative absence of lobbying in this case is connected to the more minimal regulatory threats facing the industry, as compared to industrial capital. The same can be said of real estate, which is among Canada's most profitable sectors but hardly lobbies federally (indeed, it is counted among "other businesses" in [Table 1](#), with just 2,137 contacts).³

Within the civil society field, universities and colleges are the most active, with nearly 20,000 lobbying contacts. The second largest are environmental and climate organizations, which have witnessed a five-fold increase in lobbying contacts, from 431 in 2011 to 2,093 in 2021 and now lobby at rates comparable to universities and colleges. Charitable foundations (such as World Vision Canada) and social services firms (such as Community Living Toronto) are the third and fourth most prominent civil society organizations and lobby slightly more than unions. The presence

Table 1. Federal Lobbying Contacts by Organization Type and Sector (May 2, 2011–May 1, 2022)

Organization Type	Sector	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Corporations / Industry Associations / Business Councils	Agriculture and Fisheries	1923	2122	1725	1987	2058	3134	4245	3530	3119	3919	3709	31471
	Fossil Fuel	2107	2546	1827	2064	1629	2143	2491	3292	2496	3035	2311	25941
	Manufacturing and Industrials	1236	1594	1669	1844	1233	2378	2937	2546	1439	2252	2049	21177
	Transportation	912	1053	1018	1093	1202	2142	1909	1899	1486	2427	2181	17322
	Finance and Insurance	1020	1027	1278	1201	991	1778	1812	1746	1487	1397	1359	15096
	Health	1403	817	911	888	807	1235	1494	1288	1116	2458	1888	14305
	Other Business	606	872	855	765	856	1595	1622	1625	1126	2214	1840	13976
	Retail and Wholesale	503	696	677	845	812	1550	1754	1741	1069	1778	1640	13065
	Media and Culture	579	467	362	451	617	1193	1059	910	1129	2133	1536	10436
	Mining and Forestry	689	824	829	813	732	1180	1087	983	672	934	928	9671
	Technology	273	357	533	425	521	1096	1086	1175	757	1401	1487	9111
	Telecommunications	692	583	777	599	608	781	960	852	896	1157	864	8769
	Utilities and Electrification	320	267	146	134	182	572	450	638	586	765	855	4915
	Tourism and Recreation	186	163	194	134	157	268	373	287	217	924	651	3554
	Renewable and Clean Energy	95	85	84	90	90	335	488	292	447	694	574	3274
	Multi-Sector Business Councils	730	790	951	930	791	1261	1240	1392	1102	2018	1776	12981
	Sum		13274	14263	13836	14263	13286	22641	25007	24196	19144	29506	25648
Percentage		75.56%	73.94%	73.42%	68.68%	68.73%	67.37%	69.68%	69.85%	69.29%	67.15%	68.58%	69.62%
Civil Society and Public Interest	Universities and Colleges	1065	1069	1094	1353	1418	2695	2441	2018	1956	2545	2167	19821
	Environment and Climate	431	918	595	595	613	1514	1771	1321	1182	2162	2093	13195
	Charitable Foundation	333	387	546	798	515	806	925	1032	827	1669	1153	8991
	Social Services	212	204	388	573	319	1015	793	714	587	1657	1290	7752
	Professional Association	361	392	506	661	563	878	913	908	591	1030	765	7568
	Trade Unions	359	415	195	237	575	755	826	1130	699	1051	792	7034
	Religion and Nationality	413	451	366	371	388	646	829	727	744	799	768	6502
Other Civil Society Groups	395	302	345	547	451	553	639	715	396	1139	869	6351	

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued.)

Organization Type	Sector	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
	Civil Liberties, Rights, and Justice	201	295	309	505	352	766	515	609	441	666	643	5302
	Municipal Associations	115	221	334	275	349	409	393	550	455	710	444	4255
	NPO Research Institutes	304	249	234	523	328	479	359	408	227	577	353	4041
	Indigenous and First Nations	105	124	97	65	173	449	479	311	378	427	416	3024
	Sum	4294	5027	5009	6503	6044	10965	10883	10443	8483	14432	11753	93836
	Percentage	24.44%	26.06%	26.58%	31.32%	31.27%	32.63%	30.32%	30.15%	30.71%	32.85%	31.42%	30.38%
	Total	17568	19290	18845	20766	19330	33606	35890	34639	27627	43938	37401	308900

of these organizations speaks to the role of NGOs and the voluntary sector in welfare and social service provision, which is a feature of neoliberal governance (Ilcan and Basok, 2004). The role is accompanied by opportunities to be consulted in the policy process. On the other hand, civil liberties, rights, and justice organizations recorded just over 5,000 contacts, and Indigenous organizations only 3,000.

Industry associations and collective business lobbying

Figure 1 displays a stacked bar chart, combining totals in Table 1 to visualize the composition of lobbying contacts and show the role (or ratio) of industry associations within each private sector category.

In addition to efforts to influence public opinion and debate, industry associations play an important role in political agenda-setting (Stritch, 2007), including, as we find, via lobbying. They account for nearly one-third (89,030) of all lobbying contacts. Organizations such as the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) or the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) provide space for different firms within a given business sector to define issues of common importance and to organize strategies for advancing sectoral interests. They can mediate potential conflicts among competing firms, effectively allowing corporations to act collectively and speak with a single voice on issues of common concern.

At a yet higher level of business interest aggregation, multisector business councils and chambers of commerce (such as the Business Council of Canada and Canadian Chamber of Commerce) represent diverse capital fractions, functioning to organize and represent corporate or capitalist class interests in general (Langille, 1987). As seen in Figure 2, such organizations are prominent in the lobbying field, recording 12,981 contacts.

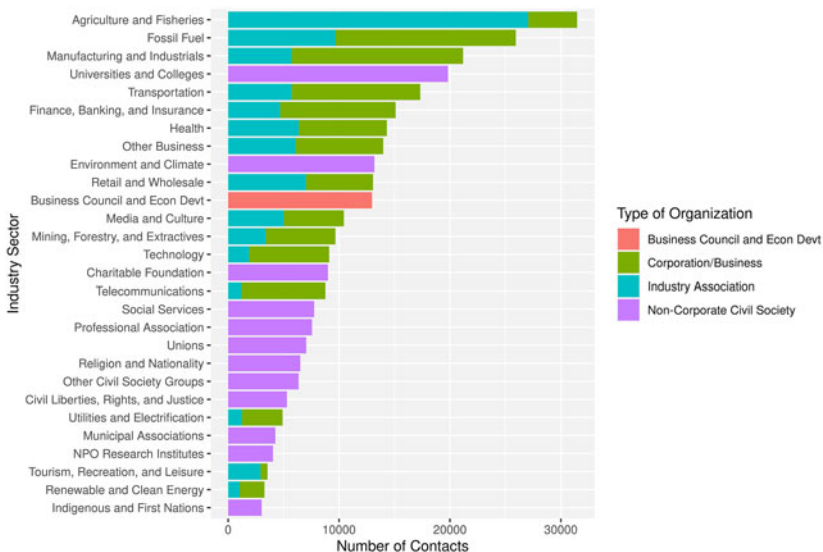


Figure 1. Federal lobbying contacts by industry sector

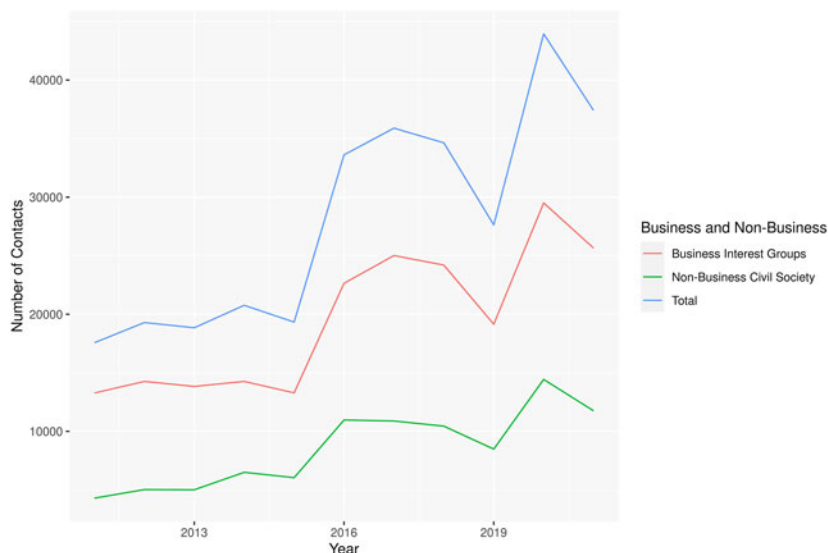


Figure 2. Federal lobbying from Harper to Trudeau, business versus non-business

However, collective advocacy varies by sector. Lobbying within the agriculture sector is dominated by industry associations. This follows from the composition of the industry, which is composed of many relatively smaller producers. On the other hand, in the telecommunications, technology and utilities sectors, lobbying is primarily conducted by individual companies, suggesting a stronger focus on firm-level interests.

Lobbying concentration

While the lobbying industry includes thousands of organizations, lobbying activity is highly concentrated. Indeed, just 184 organizations account for over half of all lobbying, while 94 corporations account for over half of the total lobbying contacts by all companies and businesses (56,732 out of 113,053).

Likewise, a handful of organizations dominate each sector. The top 14 agriculture organizations (most of them industry associations) account for half of lobbying in that sector. Fossil capital representation is yet more concentrated, as 10 organizations account for half of all lobbying. In addition to a leading role played by CAPP and the Mining Association of Canada, this includes three of Canada's top five oil producers (Suncor Energy, Cenovus and Imperial), coal giant Teck Resources, and the two largest oil and gas transporters (Enbridge and TransCanada) (on fossil capital concentration, see Hussey *et al.* [2021]). Likewise, the top 10 manufacturing and industrial conglomerates account for just over half of all lobbying contacts in that sector, with just three car manufacturing organizations—General Motors, Ford, and the Canadian Vehicle Manufacturers' Association—accounting for 20 per cent of the total.

In terms of multisectoral business representation, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce is the most prominent collective business organization (1,839 contacts),

followed by the Business Council of Canada (828 contacts). Together, 47 industry associations and business councils provide half of all lobbying contacts.

Concentration is also evident among civil society organizations, as 57 organizations supply half of total lobbying efforts (47,243 out of 93,836), with some key universities and colleges, municipal associations, and environmental NGOs (ENGOS) topping the list. Taking a closer look at ENGOS, we find that just eight account for 54 per cent of the total. These are well established and professionalized organizations, including Environmental Defence Canada (1,233 contacts), Nature Canada (1,210 contacts), David Suzuki Foundation (1,099 contacts), Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (914 contacts), Ecojustice (840 contacts), Ducks Unlimited Canada (625 contacts), West Coast Environmental Law (626 contacts) and World Wildlife Fund Canada (574 contacts). Given the costs of lobbying, civil society representation, including by ENGOS, is oriented toward large organizations to the marginalization of smaller grassroots groups.

Changes in lobbying rates and composition from Harper to Trudeau

Figure 2 visualizes the changing dynamics of federal lobbying from the last term of Stephen Harper to Justin Trudeau. The graph visualizes the sharp growth of lobbying with the transition, demonstrating greater consultation between various interest groups and state officials under the Trudeau government. For 2011–2015 (May), the average number of contacts is 19,117, while for 2016–2022, it jumps to 35,516. While the civil society groups have made recent gains, the dominance of business interests is still plainly observed.

The standard deviation for the former period is 1,142, while for latter it is 4,852, signalling greater variance in contacts by year under Trudeau. This follows from a drop in 2019 (corresponding with the election) and an uptick in 2020 (at the onset of COVID-19). Yet the deviations are not large, and there is fair amount of consistency within each period.

Power ratios: Business versus public interest advocacy and unions

As the civil society field is highly heterogeneous, in this section we home in on a comparison of lobbying between business interests and public interest advocacy organizations and unions. The latter, borrowing from Galbraith (2017), represent “countervailing forces”—civil society forces that may check massive powers afforded to large corporations. We consider power or access ratios between the two groupings in the lobbying field.

Drawing on Kohler-Koch and Buth (2009), we classify public interest organizations expansively, to include environment and climate, various civil liberties, rights, and justice and Indigenous groups, as well as religion and nationality organizations. While many are more oriented to service provision than advocacy, we also include charitable foundations and social service groups, given that they often give voice to weak interests. In examining power ratios, we group public interest organizations together with unions, which may focus on policy related to labour and work conditions and to issues that transcend workplaces, such as living costs and a healthy environment (Ross, 2008).

The notion of a “power ratio” is borrowed from Drutman (2015), who likewise examines the ratio of business versus public interest groups and unions in the United States. Like Drutman, we do not measure power (in the sense of influencing behaviour and outcomes) directly, but rather access, which concerns the opportunity for influence.

Table 2 displays the resulting ratios and changes for the lobby industry in Canada over time. Comparing business interests versus public interests and unions over the course of the study, we find that the former account for 81 per cent of lobbying, or a power ratio of 4 to 1. Considering 2011–2015 (May), which are all years of the Harper administration, business interests account for 84 per cent of lobbying, or a ratio of 6 to 1. On the other hand, from 2016 to 2022, all years of Trudeau, business interests account for 79 per cent of lobbying, or a ratio of 4 to 1. Public interest representation reached a high point in 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, as 22 per cent of contacts represented public interests.

The analysis that follows seeks to explain growing rates of lobbying following the change in government. Compared to the outgoing Harper Conservatives, the Liberals ran on a platform entailing a more ambitious role for the federal state in managing economic and social development. Key features of the subsequent policy agenda include greater emphasis on human capital investment and improved access to postsecondary education (as an effort to grow the middle class), fostering clean tech innovation and green technology, and enhanced social policy measures (especially, addressing gender inequality) (Jansen and Robbins, 2022). The government has also introduced new climate measures (including federal carbon pricing) and legislation aimed at strengthening federal environmental review processes (Graham *et al.*, 2020). We argue that this turn to more intensive policy intervention incentivized interest by business and civil society actors to engage with the federal government to provide input on and advocate for or against various interventions.

In addition, the newly elected government was explicitly interested in public engagement. Beginning in 2015, the PMO made public mandate letters for each cabinet minister (Ie, [forthcoming](#)), which stated that the minister would be held “accountable for our commitment to bring a different style of leadership to government” including “constructive dialogue with Canadians, civil society, and stakeholders, including business, organized labour, the broader public sector, and the not-for-profit and charitable sectors” (Government of Canada, [n.d.](#)). Laura Wesley, former executive director, Consultations and Public Engagement at the Privy Council Office, wrote in 2018 that “the federal government has dramatically increased the scope and scale of its consultations and engagement in the past two years” (Wesley, 2018: 14). In addition, the Treasury Board directed that federal departments and agencies “are responsible for identifying stakeholders impacted by regulations, including Indigenous peoples, and meaningfully consulting and engaging with them throughout the development, management, and review of regulations” (Treasury Board of Canada, [n.d.](#)).

Public interest advocacy and state relations

Various public interest groups, ranging from environmental NGOs to charitable foundations and social service organizations, alongside trade unions, have seen

Table 2. Federal Lobbying Contacts: Business versus Public Interest and Unions (May 2, 2011–May 1, 2022)

Organization Type	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
Corporations/Industry Associations/Business Councils	13274	14263	13836	14263	13286	22641	25007	24196	19144	29506	25648	215064
Public Interest Groups and Unions	2054	2794	2496	3144	2935	5951	6138	5844	4858	8431	7155	51800
Total	15328	17057	16332	17407	16221	28592	31145	30040	24002	37937	32803	266864
Percentage Shared by Business Interests	87	84	85	82	82	79	80	81	80	78	78	81
Ratios (Rounded) Business Interests Vs Public Interest and Unions	7 to 1	6 to 1	6 to 1	5 to 1	5 to 1	4 to 1	4 to 1	4 to 1	4 to 1	4 to 1	4 to 1	4 to 1

significant increases in lobbying contacts under Trudeau. Enhanced access reflects a conscious shift in governance practice noted above.

Yet such political opportunities must also be perceived. Corrigan-Brown and Ho (2015) observe that successive Liberal governments have been more inclined than Conservative administrations toward NGO participation in service delivery. Moreover, ambivalence and antipathy toward NGO advocacy was acute and plainly observed under the Harper Conservatives, especially in the environmental field (Corrigan-Brown and Ho, 2015; Lakanen, 2018). The low levels of lobbying by ENGOs under Harper followed from restrictive opportunities for policy input. By contrast, the Liberals presented their victory in the 2015 federal election as a restoration, declaring “Canada is back!” (Nimijean, 2018), with an emphasis on climate action. Trudeau campaigned on rolling back contentious changes made to the federal environmental review process by the Conservative Party in 2012, and this culminated in bills C-69 and C-48. The latter banned large oil tankers from docking in much of British Columbia’s North Coast, while the former encouraged stronger environmental assessments, including impacts on climate and Indigenous communities. Enhanced opportunities have spurred the mobilization of public interests, including ENGO resources toward lobbying.

Alongside ENGOs, social service NGOs and charities gained a greater hearing at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this has been maintained in 2021–2022. However, as we see in Table 2, changes in the balance of lobbying forces are modest. Moreover, within the field of public interest advocacy, a relatively narrow set of issues and perspectives are represented.

The Liberal government’s turn to more intensive policy intervention also incentivizes business actors to engage with the federal government. In the following section, we outline some of this engagement by examining key policy areas and issue campaigns among the top two corporate sectors—agriculture and fossil fuels—which together account for over a quarter of all business lobbying.

Lobbying by top business sectors: Key issues and campaigns

The high rate of lobbying by the fossil fuel sector over the last decade and the moderate increase since 2016 has been analyzed in existing literature. Cayley-Daoust and Girard (2012) examine fossil capital lobbying from 2008 to 2012 and report a sharp rise by the industry beginning in 2010 and 2011, which they cite as an important turning point in public debate over energy development, Indigenous rights, and climate change. Graham *et al.* (2019) further track fossil fuel lobbying from 2011 to 2018 and report an increase in 2011–2012 (also reflected in Table 1). They link the upsurge to a parliamentary review of major amendments made to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (CEAA-2012), which, upon passing, eliminated much of the core of federal-level environmental assessment in Canada. They also track a second rise in lobbying rates in 2016 that corresponds with Trudeau’s announcement of a review of Canada’s environmental laws as part of a plan to revise and overhaul changes that were introduced under CEAA-2012. At the tail end of their study, this lobbying effort had evolved into advocacy surrounding bills C-69 and C-48, which were introduced in the House of Commons in late 2017 and 2018 and subsequently underwent senatorial reviews.

CAPP and other major fossil players positioned the bills as a threat to investment, jobs and economic growth and as the Senate began an official review of them, Graham et al. report that “its Senate lobbying went into overdrive” (2019: 47).

We see an additional rise in fossil sector lobbying in 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent reporting links some of this growth to the formation of the Market Crisis Joint Working Group, initiated at the behest of the CAPP, who wished to discuss suspending and reducing climate regulations, strengthening “investor confidence” and creating postpandemic opportunities for the industry (Lukacs, 2021).

Compared to the work done on the fossil fuel industry, little research has analyzed agricultural lobbying. In addition to it being the leading sector, we see a sharp increase in lobbying contacts by the industry beginning in 2016–2017 (see Table 1). In terms of policy matter, part of this increase is explained by lobbying efforts surrounding nutrition-related policies articulated in Health Canada’s *Healthy Eating Strategy* policies (see Gaucher-Holm et al., 2022; Mulligan et al., 2021). The strategy, launched in 2016, included revisions to Canada’s Food Guide, such as changes to the nutritional quality of the food supply, nutrition labelling, and restrictions on food marketing to children. Consultations surrounding the changes took place from 2016 to 2021, and Gaucher-Holm et al. (2022) link 5,197 federal lobbying contacts to initiatives within the *Healthy Eating Strategy*, with business organizations in various agriculture domains and food and beverage manufacturing accounting for the vast majority. Mulligan et al. (2021) provide a closer focus on restrictions on food marketing to children contained in Bill S-228, and they likewise find that 84 per cent of communications came from business actors.

Beyond these campaigns, key lobbying issues are revealed through an analysis of the subjects recorded in the lobby registry, in concert with the website communications of leading agriculture lobby organizations. Aside from the generic subject “agriculture,” trade, transport and international relations top the list of lobbying subjects (listed 6,311 times) reported by the top 10 agriculture lobbying organizations. This focus follows from major trade policy formulation and negotiation during the period of study, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (2012–present) and the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA), which replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and was signed in fall 2018.

The Canadian Cattle Association (CCA) names “foreign trade” as a key lobbying campaign on its website, including “efforts to remove tariff barriers and nonscientifically justified technical barriers for Canadian cattle and beef” (Canadian Cattle Association, n.d.). Specifically, the CCA seeks to address current trade-limiting factors between Canada and the United Kingdom and encourages trade expansion in the Asia-Pacific. The CFA, which is the largest general farm organization in Canada, likewise names trade negotiations as among “the key topics addressed in CFA’s advocacy meetings with parliamentarians and government officials” and seeks to provide “market access opportunities for our export-oriented sectors, such as red meats, grains and oil seeds without compromising supply management” (Canadian Federation of Agriculture, n.d.).

After consumer and health issues, the next most listed subjects are environment, climate and energy (listed 1,316 times). An analysis of industry association websites

indicates that lobbying efforts in this domain often oppose climate action, especially direct regulations. The CFA, for example, opposes carbon pricing, citing competitiveness concerns as a pretext for CFAs “pushing for farmers to have exemption for various fuels and uses” (Canadian Federation of Agriculture, *n.d.*). Meanwhile, Fertilizer Canada, which represents fertilizer producers and distributors, has opposed the federal government’s plans to reduce emissions from artificial nitrogen fertilizers. According to Fawcett-Atkinson (2022), the organization has continued to lobby the government to focus on methods that use fertilizer more efficiently but do not necessarily limit use.

Alongside economic development, the next most listed subjects are labour, employment and immigration, named 953 times. The CFA names this as a key sector-wide campaign, with a focus on foreign worker relations, including in relation to COVID-19.

Discussion and Conclusion

The policy process within government, from agenda-setting to policy design, is often characterized as something of a black box that is opaque and inaccessible to all save for state policy functionaries and to those working outside of the state with the capacities necessary to gain a hearing for their policy preferences. It is here that the practice of lobbying, as a key component of policy advocacy, comes into play. Lobbying has been described as “the efforts of individuals, corporations and non-governmental organizations to influence the outcome of government policymaking. . . . It can shape laws and policies and affect who gets awarded grants and contracts” (Bulowski, 2022). Obviously, this characterization raises questions respecting the existing practice within the institutions of liberal democracy about which interests are heard by the state.

We provide a big picture exploratory analysis of lobbying in Canada, aimed at addressing this among other interrelated research questions. Our study reveals the broad dominance of business interests in lobbying federally. We find that business organizations and corporations account for nearly 70 per cent of lobbying contacts. Findings are consistent with the pattern observed by Boucher (2015, 2018) under earlier years of the Harper administration.

If we compare business interests and public interest organizations and unions, this dominance is yet more pronounced; over the last 11 years, business interests account for 81 per cent of lobbying. We also find a high level of lobbying concentration, with a small number of large corporations and collective business organizations dominating the field. The concentration of lobbying within the private sector mirrors the ongoing concentration of capital.

Our study also examines changes in lobbying over time, including across Harper and Trudeau administrations and reveals a significant growth in federal lobbying contacts following the election of the Trudeau-led Liberals. As the Liberals turned to more intensive policy intervention, both business and civil society actors found incentives to engage with the federal government to provide input and advocate for or against various interventions. This was combined with newly elected government’s explicit interest in public engagement. While some organizations adopted a wait-and-see approach and decreased lobbying contacts immediately following

the transition to Trudeau (Cooper and Boucher, 2019: 451), as the policy intentions of the government became clear, lobbying effort rose sharply.

We also found a spike in lobbying contacts at the onset of COVID-19, including a modest increase in the ratio of public interest advocacy. While more research is needed, this growth may be partly explained by what Cooper and Boucher (2019) call “issue information uncertainty.” Indeed, there was an immediate rise in rates of lobbying at the onset of the pandemic, and organizations were likely advocating for financial relief while also providing state officials with information and technical details concerning their respective industries in relation to health policies.

In addition to examining lobbying by field, we provided a comprehensive analysis by sector. Somewhat surprisingly, the agriculture industry accounts for the largest share of lobbying, followed closely by fossil fuels and manufacturing. The prominent and growing role of these sectors is partly explained by recently introduced climate policy measures and environmental regulations, which were often perceived as threats. Additional factors may have come from south of the border. The Republican Party under Donald Trump threatened changes to trade policy—including increased tariffs on metals and automobiles, alongside policies to put American cattle and dairy farmers “first” (Macdonald, 2020; Pittis, 2018). This likely spurred lobbying mobilization, particularly by manufacturing and agricultural sectors.

In the field of public interest lobbying, ENGOs and unions, as well as charities and service-based NGOs, have seen an increase in lobbying access. Environment organizations account for a sizable and growing share of contacts and offer a partial counterweight to industry lobby efforts on environmental policy matters. However, while the opportunity of subaltern forces to shape policy has grown under the Trudeau administration in comparison to the final term of Harper, the balance of lobbying forces still strongly favours corporate interests. Our findings underline the fact that greater openness does not guarantee equitable representation.

In this vein, our study draws from and contributes modestly to research in the power structure tradition, including the work of Miliband, who over 50 years ago showed that externally the state is not “subjected to a multitude of conflicting pressures from organized groups and interest” (1969: 4) but faces a concentration of power in society. This includes organizations representing prominent fractions of capital and multisector business councils, which function to organize and represent corporate or capitalist class interests in general. While some studies (Drutman, 2015; Waterhouse, 2013) assert a particularistic view of business lobbying, our findings confirm the importance of collective business interests in Canada’s lobbying industry.

Concentration is the converse of pluralism and dispersal, but these are relative terms. A strong power elite versus pluralist contrast is brought into question by recognizing that all state theory must be pluralistic to a degree (Wetherly, 2007) and by the recognition of the privileged position of business and professional groups in neo-pluralism. As predicted by theories of biased pluralism, a relatively narrow set of issues and perspectives are represented—there are few organizations dedicated to poverty or economic inequality issues, and representation of the interests of workers is overall minimal, as labour unions are heard from less than charitable foundations. Likewise, justice issues, whether focusing on gender or race, and civil liberties and rights and Indigenous issues gain relatively little hearing. Thus, our study echoes Schlozman et al.’s (2015) account of lobbying in the United States,

which observes an increasingly louder lobbying “chorus,” but one that continues to be sung in predominantly the same class “accent.”

A perhaps more contentious debate in the field concerns the purpose of lobbying. In some accounts, lobbyists act as a “service bureau” or “adjuncts to [governmental] staff,” more so than a force of persuasion (Hall and Deardorff, 2006: 76). This perspective, which often carries a benign or positive view of lobbying, is partly affirmed in Canadian lobbying studies (Boucher and Cooper, 2019; Cooper and Boucher, 2019). Using indicators found in the literature, these studies find that lobbyists in Canada supply information on technical details of issues and policy expertise more so than partisan and electoral information (which is part of persuasion).

Other literature maintains that lobbying is focused on influencing legislators’ policy preferences or keeping them from being changed. If persuasion is central to lobbying, unequal voice is of heightened concern. Indeed, for Brulle (2018: 302), “control over the nature and flow of information to government decision-makers . . . creates a situation of systematically distorted communication,” with troubling implications for democracy. While our contribution to this general question is limited, our overview of lobbying campaigns from leading business sectors points to the importance of persuasion. Key campaigns opposed unwanted legislation, including via issue definition (for example, defining fertilizer emissions reduction as efficiency enhancement, rather than use reduction) and framing (for example, emphasizing the economic costs of legislation, including bills C-69 and C-48 and carbon taxes).

While we do not closely track impact, it is also evident that these efforts can be successful. For example, in 2019, following concerted lobbying opposition to restrictions on food marketing to children, Bill S-228 “died on the parliamentary table . . . despite seemingly strong support from parliamentarians and the public” (Mulligan *et al.*, 2021: E280). Similarly, industry lobbying efforts contributed to the weakening environment and climate bills C-48 and C-69. As Cox (2019) reports, the Canadian Senate approved more than 180 controversial amendments to Bill C-69, many of which directly mirror requests made by industry and, according to some analysts, have rendered them weaker than Harper-era legislation. The outcomes are consistent with literature finding that defence of the status quo is a key predictor of lobbying success (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2009; Drutman, 2015). Given the climate-related nature of key campaigns, our work dovetails with literature on climate obstructionism—the organized interests that are blocking and delaying action on climate change (Brulle, 2018; Graham *et al.*, 2020).

In examining lobbying representation and access, our study has numerous limitations. Key among them is our focus on the “supply side” of lobbying, as we did not map the institutions and bodies that are lobbied. By omitting the lobbying target, our analysis of the aim and purpose of lobbying is foreshortened and we do not account for the potential for different interests to be influential in different parts of the state system. While Boucher (2018) examines how different sectors and interests access different power centres, how these dynamics might have changed under Trudeau was beyond the scope of our study.

We also did not track the individuals who lobby or the public officials being lobbied. Following Boucher and Cooper (2019) and Yates and Cardin-Trudeau (2021), more work might focus on the backgrounds of consultants, whose role has grown in

recent years, and revolvers (individuals that move between private and public sectors), including examining how partisan connections may have shaped their rise or fall after the change of government.

We also focused on the opportunity to influence policy, rather than on lobbying impacts. Changes in policy begin with new ideas entering the policy advisory system. We have shown that this entry and advocacy is limited. However, the ideas advanced via lobbying must also be understood as legitimate. The relative privileging of business economic interests can be understood structurally as one where such interests are inherently legitimate because the “structural-economic relations rooted in the dynamics of capitalism and its power relations can be seen to set boundaries on what is understood as legitimate” (Bradford, 1999: 18). Policy proposals that cross the threshold of orthodox legitimacy move forward, while those that do not are filtered out. Therefore, a focus on interest representation does not fully account for structural affordances of corporations in the policy field.

Key recent contributions (Boucher, 2015, 2018; Boucher and Cooper, 2019; Cooper and Boucher, 2019; Graham et al., 2020; Yates and Cardin-Trudeau, 2021) have begun to address the paucity of research on Canada’s lobbying industry. Our wide-angle overview of lobbying representation and access builds on this work and provides context for more focused case studies. More research is needed to understand key lobbying campaigns within prominent business sectors (especially in agriculture and manufacturing), within public interest advocacy (more closely analyzing the nature of environmental and union advocacy, for example), and by leading business councils, among others. A comparative analysis of lobbying by field and sector at the provincial level, drawing from provincial registries, could be illuminating. More research is also needed to understand the nature of the lobbying profession, as well as the practice of lobbying, by moving beyond examining the lobbying “act” to consider the full scope of work lobbyists do, including the kinds of information that lobbyists provide and the research infrastructures and policy networks they draw from. Such accounts could simultaneously contribute to understanding the purpose of lobbying. Given major power imbalances in lobbying, it is also important to consider solutions to the problem of unequal voice, as a part of efforts to democratize the state.

Notes

1 Our count of contacts tallies the number of designated public office holders (DPOHs) contacted, rather than the number of meetings; therefore, a meeting with four state officials equals four contacts. This is common practice (see, for example, Boucher, 2018; Graham et al., 2019).

2 Expenditure data are compiled via the public website OpenSecrets.

3 These sectors may be more active at provincial and municipal levels. Real estate firms are likely more active in lobbying municipally, yet there are few municipal registries.

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