By Invitation Only: Controlling Interest Group Access to the Oval Office

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Does the exchange model used to explain interest group influence with Congress and the bureaucracy hold leverage over patterns of lobbyist contact with the president? In this paper I argue that there is good reason to believe that it does not. Rather, I argue that the president and his immediate staff often keep interest groups at arm's length. Instead of being able to acquire face time with senior administration staff to press their own cases, lobbyists are largely granted access only when they are needed to build support for the president's policy agenda in Congress or with the public. Using data drawn in part from the 1996 filings of interest groups under the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, I analyze lobbyists' contact with the White House to learn what types of circumstances appear to drive contact between interest groups and the president. The evidence suggests that the president–interest group connection is largely determined by the White House based on ideological congruence rather than a two-way flow of communication and influence.

When is it a sensible strategy for an organized interest to approach the president and his senior staff? When the administration becomes actively involved in an issue of concern to an interest group, how does this affect the normal dynamics of lobbying, particularly in terms of conflict among these groups? Holding the single most prominent and powerful position in the Washington establishment, it is nearly impossible to imagine a better ally for an interest group to have in its corner than the president. Through their command of the national spotlight presidents have a unique ability to shape issue definitions thereby changing mundane issues into matters of national urgency. As the leader of his party, presidents shape the congressional agenda, deciding which issues survive to become laws and which languish in the backwater of a legislative committee. And of course the president is the final hurdle of the lawmaking process, his veto sending hard won legislation back to square one.

With over ten thousand organized interests and for-hire lobbyists competing in the nation's capital not everyone can find the golden path into the West Wing of the White House. For those who do, is this the fruit of good lobbyist strategizing and influential connections, or is it the president who has decided to cultivate the lobbyist to serve the ends of the administration? Do lobbyists wait for invitations from the Oval Office or are they able to invite themselves in? In this paper I draw on data provided by lobbyists under the Lobbying Disclosure Act for 1996, as well as data coded from

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The American Review of Politics, Vol. 25, Fall, 2004: 221-240

stories appearing in the *New York Times*, to address these questions and thereby to probe the connection between the Washington, D.C., interest group community and the White House.

The Exchange Theory of Lobbying

The best point to start exploring how lobbyists gain access to the president is to understand how they gain access to other elected officials, such as members of Congress, and look for similarities that may exist. So the question to start with is: how and why are representatives of interest groups able to gain access to legislators, thereby placing themselves in positions to influence the policymaking process? Rather than focus exclusively on contributions and arm twisting, the answer that has been developed, grounded in the work of Lester Milbrath (1963), is based on notions of supply and demand. With severe demands placed on their time and resources by the need to keep key constituencies satisfied and cast informed votes on hundreds of bills each year, elected officials and their staff are stretched thin and must develop a means of structuring channels of reliable information (Kingdon 1973). Milbrath saw interest groups as meeting this demand by providing constituency support services, but scholars following in his wake have identified a much wider range of services groups appear to be providing legislators in exchange for access to the policymaking process. Kingdon (1984), for example, argued that interest groups are frequently turned to as sources of information regarding solutions to policy problems arising on issue agendas, or even as sources of new problems in need of policy solutions.

This supply and demand theory of access, at least as applied to legislative institutions, received a fuller treatment by Hansen (1991) and Austen-Smith (1993) who portrayed it as *information exchange*. Lobbyists, they argued, are granted access if they can consistently provide information required by legislators regarding constituent preferences on existing issues or issues constituents would like to see addressed. Though legislators are able to exercise some quality control (Ainsworth 1993; Austen-Smith and Wright 1994), the balance of power in the relationship depends on a legislator's level of need for information and the type and availability of resources lobbyists can offer in exchange for access. Though campaign contributions likely play a role in getting a lobbyist in a legislator's door (Sorauf 1992), it is this model of sustained access, where both lobbyists and legislators earn the right to call on each other, that has emerged as a major explanatory model of the legislator–lobbyist relationship (Wright 1996).

The theory is robust in that some variation on its central theme of information provision and exchange has been applied successfully to political actors in other policymaking institutions. Certainly lobbyists are known to develop close relationships with appointed and career officials in the bureaucracy (Downs 1967; Heclo 1977). Epstein and O'Halloran (1999) argue that lobbyists do this by making themselves useful to agency officials as purveyors of information regarding the impact of implementation decisions on constituencies considered important by that agency's legislative overseers. In exchange lobbyists get to have input on decisions, both through direct meetings with regulators and by holding seats on advisory committees (see Balla and Wright 2001). Caldeira and Wright (1988) show that even the Supreme Court looks to amicus briefs filed by interest groups for information of the breadth of public interest in a case and may take this information into account when deciding whether to grant certiorari. Although this does not constitute an exchange relationship *per se*, it nonetheless reflects an important role for organized interests as purveyors of information in judicial politics.

Given the breadth of the application of information exchange theory to most institutions of the United States Government, it is surprising that no attempt has been made to test its leverage over presidential–interest group relations.[1] Since the theory starts with assumptions regarding legislative rather than executive behavior, scholars may have simply assumed that it *cannot* be applied, that doing so would be comparing apples to oranges. Though this may be true, there is a case to be made that it could be true and therefore an empirical test should be made. If information exchange theory fails to explain patterns of White House advocacy by interest groups, then why it fails will tell us more about the nature of the presidency as a unique institution as well as help us better understand the limits of an otherwise robust lobbying model.

One reason the model might apply has to do with changes in the nature of the presidency as an institution. Many scholars (e.g., Greenstein 1977; Neustadt 1990) have noted the profound metamorphosis the presidency has undergone during the 20th Century from a largely passive office implementing congressional decisions to that of a national agenda setter. By virtue of their unique role as the sole nationally elected leader, presidents have learned how to command media attention and set national agendas, and therefore the parameters of debate, by proposing budgets and delivering major speeches such as the State of the Union address. Presidents have greater incentives to use such powers, Moe (1985) argues, because the growing number of national concerns government is called upon to deal with has placed presidents under greater pressure to provide leadership, or face the wrath of the electorate if they do not. Consequently, the White House has become the center of a vast political enterprise, shaping, and being shaped by, politics as much as Constitutional responsibilities. The Clinton Administration exemplified this by changing policy and strategy in response to shifts in public opinion. Political concerns also appear to be giving operatives, such as Karl Rove, senior policymaking roles in the administration of George W. Bush. In other words, the presidency may be different from Congress as laid out in the Constitution, but the president the politician may be motivated by many of the same concerns as members of Congress, and responds to political incentives and threats just as legislators do. If so, then there is reason to believe that the information and resources offered by interest group lobbyists may be the key to presidential access and presidents may even signal groups that information is desired.

There is also an empirical matter. Though it may be that lobbyists are not interacting as frequently with the president and his senior advisors as they do with members of Congress, or even as frequently as they do with the larger Executive Office of the President, interaction is nonetheless taking place. Mark Peterson (1992a), for example, describes how the Carter and Reagan White Houses learned to develop tight connections to key elements of the interest group community. More recently, the accusation that Vice President Dick Cheney's national energy policy taskforce is made up of too many industry lobbyists serves as another prominent example. More generally, data on registered lobbyists gathered by Baumgartner and Leech (2000) show that approximately 8% of lobbyists reported some form of contact with the White House. What type of contact this is, who initiates it, and whose interests it serves are largely unanswered questions. In the absence of rivals, the information exchange model deserves a chance to see if it can explain this contact behavior.

The White House: Different Needs and Incentives

There is, however, a case to be made that the information exchange theory may *not* be useful for explaining patterns of lobbyist contact with the Oval Office because the theory assumes a demand for information on the part of elected officials that simply does not exist (or, at best, exists minimally) in the case of the president. Specifically, the theory may have little explanatory power because of a high level of asymmetry in the proposed relationship, namely that the informational needs of presidents are small relative to the information that the Washington lobbyist community has to offer. Quite simply, lobbyists need the president more than the president needs them. Though the president is unquestionably a political animal faced with many of the same incentives and constraints as members of Congress, they do not have the same constant need for the information interest groups have to barter for access and are less likely to ever signal a need for information. This is not to say that presidents have no need for interest groups, merely that the currency lobbyists have to trade is somewhat different (thus rendering information exchange theory less useful) and not always in demand.

Specifically, existing research on the presidency suggests three reasons why information exchange relationships are unlikely to develop between lobbyists and the White House. First, with the resources of the executive branch at their disposal, presidents and their senior staff have access to more information, both political and policy-relevant, than anyone else in Washington, D.C. As Moe (1985) argues, though agencies are endowed with their own policy goals and cultures that may be resistant to presidential directives (Downs 1967), presidents have often shaped the institutional structures of their office, usually through the Office of Management and Budget, to create reliable pathways for information to reach the Oval Office from the agencies. Indeed, presidents have even attempted to create institutionalized points of access for interest groups. Unfortunately for lobbyists, presidents often use these structures to avoid interest groups as much as to provide opportunities for lobbyist input. President Ford's creation of the Office of the Public Liaison, for example, largely resulted in a cul-de-sac rather than a passage to the Oval Office for interest groups (M. Peterson 1992b).[2]

Secondly, presidents, whose lives are subject to a high degree of public scrutiny, have a powerful incentive not to become closely identified with organized interests. Presidents are under pressure to be seen as serving the national interest, not a few privileged special interests (Lowi 1985; P. Peterson 1990; Uslaner 1998). The black-eye the Vice President's energy task force appears to have given the Bush Administration serves as an example. Finally, even if presidents signal a need for information, lobbyists may face a disincentive to provide it. Because the White House staff is relatively small and experiences high turnover, lobbyists find it difficult and ultimately unrewarding to start building relationships with particular presidential advisors (Berry 1989; Uslaner 1998). The fundamental dynamic of the information exchange model is of a mutually beneficial relationship built over time. But why invest resources today in building relationships with people who may well be gone next year? Members of Congress, agency staff, and staff in the Executive Office of the President are more likely to make for permanent allies and are therefore better long term investments.

The point is not that interest groups never lobby the White House or that presidents have no need of lobbyists. The incentives structuring contact with the White House are simply different than those that hold for Congress, and the coin lobbyists have to offer is something other than policy and constituent information. Presidents must govern, and this often requires pushing a policy agenda through a fractious Congress and recalcitrant bureaucracy. The rapid growth and decentralization of American government over the last few decades has made it considerably more difficult for presidents to control the agenda and enact their policies (Gais et al. 1984; M. Peterson 1992a). Instead, presidents bargain with Congress (Neustadt 1990) or "go public" by using their ability to capture the national spotlight and bring public pressure on elected officials to pass their initiatives (Tulis 1987; Kernell 1993; M. Peterson 1990). Both of these tactics provide potential openings for organized interests to connect with the Chief Executive. Bargaining with Congress means building legislative coalitions to support a policy agenda. Organized interests that already possess relationships with key legislators might be powerful allies in forming legislative coalitions, particularly when the president and congressional leaders are of opposite parties. Furthermore, Kernell (1993) points out that presidents who whip up public opinion to force through their agendas risk alienating Congress. As a result, Canes-Wrone (2001) argues, this dangerous tactic is worthwhile only when public opinion is already on the president's side, or when the president's credibility is exceptionally high on an issue central to his agenda.[3] Assembling a coalition of interest groups may be a subtler means of building public support for the president's agenda than taking to the airwaves.

Regardless of the tactic chosen, what comes across in these scenarios is that it may be the president who is reaching out to interest groups, not vice versa, seeing them as, in the words of Patterson (2000, 201), "possible extensions of his own salesmanship. They can multiply his influence—to their membership, and through their membership to the Congress." This suggests a model of one-sided control in the building and maintenance of relationships. It is the president who decides who will be trusted to take his message to the public, or who will act as a go-between with Congress. With little to offer the Chief Executive beyond courier services, lobbyists have few tools to entice or compel an invitation to the Oval Office; they simply must wait until called upon. It is presidents and the demands of their agendas that shape who in the interest group community gains access to the White House, thus setting the institution of the presidency outside of the exchange relationship framework.

Reaching Out to the Interest Group Community

Intuitively, the most straightforward means of testing the applicability of the information exchange model and the alternative notion of presidential control would be to ask a sample of lobbyists working with the White House who it was that initiated contact. Though direct, this approach suffers from potential response bias as lobbyists may be inclined to exaggerate their ability to gain entry to the Oval Office. Instead, I make use of an independent data set on lobbyist contact with the president and his senior staff (see below) and examine the patterns of contact to see if they are consistent with hypotheses grounded in my argument that presidents control who gains access to the White House. For instance, in order to build an electoral majority, presidential candidates take positions through major policy pronouncements, such as State of the Union Addresses, designed to appeal to the greatest number of voters (Downs 1957). These are positions, in other words, targeted at large social groups or broad segments of the electorate (Seligman and Covington 1989). As Paul Peterson (1990) notes, lobbyists, for the most part, represent much narrower interests that are often not as critical to a president's electoral coalition. If so, then interest groups are not essential for maintaining broad electoral coalitions. What presidents do need, as Mark Peterson's example of Anne Wexler and the Carter Administration demonstrates, are lobbyists to help build congressional support for legislation on the presidential agenda. In other words, rather than wield influence over the president's policy agenda, interest groups instead become tools for helping to implement it. Therefore the lobbyists whom presidents will invite into the Oval Office are those the latter believe are already ideologically supportive and will be willing to help presidents move their agendas on Capitol Hill. In contrast, the information exchange model suggests that the smaller size of congressional districts allows certain interest groups to be highly influential with key portions of the electorate. This provides more grounds for using information regarding this constituency's desires to persuade or threaten a congressman into forming his or her policy agenda around the group's preferences. In terms of observable contact patterns, this suggests the following testable hypothesis:

> ***H1:*** *Interest groups that report working on issues highlighted by the president in a major speech are more likely to report contact with the White House than those advocating issues not high on the presidential agenda.*

A negative finding, or a negative sign for the operationalizing variable's coefficient, would suggest that differences in the issues addressed are important, that groups are persuading the president to take on additional issues. Such a finding would imply support for the information exchange model.

Similar to Hypothesis 1, if the president is looking for faithful agents to sell his agenda to Congress and the public, those least likely to shirk this responsibility are interest groups with ideological positions similar to the president's. Consistent with this idea, most of the organizations contacted by President Bush and Vice President Cheney to serve on the latter's energy task force were those with positions on energy policy sympathetic to the White House. Under the information exchange model, there is no prerequisite of ideological congruence for contact. Indeed, one implication of the model is that legislators' need for interest groups resources, such as PAC contributions, may compel them to compromise their ideological principles. Therefore:

> ***H2:*** *The greater the similarity of ideological positions between an interest group and the president, the greater the likelihood that the group's lobbyist will report contact with the White House.*

Although the focus of the present analysis is on these two hypotheses, other factors potentially influencing contact with the White House must be controlled for. For instance, labor unions and consumer interests may see a Democratic president as a natural ally because of their historical relationship with the Democratic Party. Consequently, they may attempt to contact the White House without an invitation even if their actual ideological positions on issues are dissimilar to the president's. Similarly, business or other conservative interests may feel entitled to drop in on a Republican to push their issues regardless of whether the president is interested in them or not.

Also, following Schattschneider's (1960) argument that interest groups unable to make headway in one institutional venue may expand the conflict by bringing in new players capable of changing the balance of power, lobbyists on the losing side of a congressional policy battle may attempt to solicit the assistance of the White House. Opposition from competing interest groups can pressure lobbyists to attempt advocacy in another venue (Holyoke 2003). Therefore, it is possible that lobbyists who find their efforts opposed by competing interest groups are more likely to attempt to gain access to the president than those who are unopposed.

A second consequence of Schattschneider's argument is that lobbyists may desire to expand conflict not only when opposing interests confront them, but also when lawmakers prove hostile. Scholars have long held that certain types of policies, such as those distributing public goods, are characterized more by reciprocity and accommodation than conflict among lobbyists and lawmakers (Lowi 1964; Ripley and Franklin 1980). But conflict is found in policy domains dealing with the redistribution of these goods or the regulation of economic sectors where lawmakers must choose among competing interests. Lobbyists working in these latter types of domains are more likely to attempt conflict expansion and try enlisting the president.

The resources available to an interest group may also affect the likelihood of an attempt to contact the White House. The more lobbyists a group has, for instance, the greater the likelihood of contact may be, simply because the group can spare a lobbyist to work exclusively on gaining access to the West Wing. Also, lobbyists who already enjoy access to agency staff may find these allies to be stepping stones to the Oval Office; senior bureaucrats with whom a lobbyist has developed exchange relationships may be able to arrange a meeting with the president. Though counting as neither an invitation from the president nor the result of an exchange relationship, both of these factors may still influence contact patterns and need to be taken into account.

As mentioned above, presidents may find less need for interest groups as go-betweens with Congress when they have legislative allies already, most likely from their own party. Therefore, the strength of support the president already enjoys in Congress needs to be considered. Finally, regular patterns of contact and interaction among political participants are disrupted when highly salient or problematic events occur (Kingdon 1984), so it is also necessary to control for surges in the importance of any particular issue that interest groups are working on.

Research Design

To test these hypotheses, I used data coded from the filings of interest groups registering with Congress in 1996 pursuant to the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995. As a result, the analyses presented here focus on lobbying of the White House by organized interests during the last year of President Clinton's first term. The data set, created by Baumgartner and Leech (2000, 2001), contains observations for some 19,300 interest groups, and indicates whether each organization reported lobbying the White House.[4] As the law requires any interest group spending more than $20,000 over a six-month period to lobby Congress, the president and/or vice president, and executive branch agency senior officials, to register this data set captures a substantial portion of the known national lobbying community and is therefore appropriate for testing my hypotheses of lobbyist contact patterns with the White House.[5]

The dependent variable is whether a group reported contacting the White House in 1996, coded 1 if it did or 0 if it did not. Because some independent variables needed for present purposes are not contained in the Baumgartner and Leech data set, several indicators had to be developed from other sources. It was not feasible to code the thousands of groups in the data set, so I drew a random sample of 400 organizations. In the master data set for the population of interest groups, lobbyists reported contact with the White House in 8% of cases; the sample contact was 9% with a standard deviation of 28% producing a 95% confidence interval of ±3%. Because information forming the independent variables described below could not be obtained for all of these groups the actual number used in the analysis fell to 384.

The variable indicating whether the president had highlighted an issue as part of his agenda (H1) comes from Ragsdale's (1996) list of issues emphasized in Clinton's major speeches, including State of the Union addresses, from 1993 to 1996. For each group entered in the Baumgartner and Leech data, the issue, or issues, they were lobbying is also listed. If their issue is on Ragsdale's list, I coded the variable 1, or 0 if it is not. In cases where an interest group reported lobbying on two (or more) issues, the group is entered twice (or more) in the data matrix, once for each issue. To test H2, a binary variable indicating whether the reporting group took an ideological position similar to the White House (1) or not (0) was constructed from a content analysis of stories in the *New York Times* for 1996 relating to the issue each group reported lobbying. The threshold for deciding whether the president's position was similar to the interest group's was set high: the positions of both the president and the interest group had to be clearly spelled out, or else the variable was coded as 0.6.

To indicate whether an interest group was of a type historically supporting the Democratic Party, I turned to Schlozman and Tierney's (1986, 76) typology of organized interests. Because a few of their distinctions among types are irrelevant here, I collapsed several categories to create six general types: corporations, trade associations, professional associations, labor unions, consumer and public interest groups, and organizations representing other government subdivisions such as states and localities. Labor unions and consumer / public interest groups (excluding conservative citizens groups such as the Christian Coalition) are those most traditionally associated with the Democratic Party, so I coded organizations that fell into one of these categories as 1, and others as 0.

To indicate conflict among interest groups on an issue, I again turned to the *New York Times*. If any story clearly stated that the views of two or more organized interests stood in contrast to each other, I coded the observation 1, otherwise 0. To indicate whether the issue being lobbied was distributive, I relied on the 76 issue codes Baumgartner and Leech (2000) assigned to the specific legislation the groups reported lobbying. I assigned each policy area primarily concerned with the distribution of government funds to specific sectors of the public a code of 1.

The number of lobbyists each interest group had working on the issue was taken from the disclosure reports. These reports also indicated whether the organization was contacting the bureaucracy, for which another binary variable was coded. The variable demonstrating support from the president's own party in Congress comes from the number of times congressional Democrats voted for President Clinton's proposals from 1993 to 1996 (Ragsdale 1996). Finally, whether the public viewed an issue as a major problem came from Gallup Poll results for 1993 to 1996 (Ragsdale 1996).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Dependent and Independent Variables

Variable Name	Mean (Mode for Binary Variables)	Standard Deviation	Minimum Value	Maximum Value
Dependent Variable: Interest Group Reported Contact with the White House	0.09 (0)	0.28	0	1
Hypothesis 1: President Highlighted Issue in a Major Speech	0.32 (0)	0.47	0	1
Hypothesis 2: Interest Group and President have Similar Ideological Positions	0.11 (0)	0.31	0	1
Organization is a Labor Union	0.09 (0)	0.29	0	1
Organization is a Consumer / Public Interest Group	0.14 (0)	0.35	0	1
The Group's Position is Opposed by Other Interest Groups	0.51 (1)	0.50	0	1
Issue Lobbied by the Group is Distributive	0.28 (0)	0.45	0	1
Number of Lobbyists Registered by the Organization	2.48	2.89	1	37
The Organization Lobbied an Executive Agency on the Issue	0.46 (0)	0.50	1	0
Support from Congressional Democrats on Key Votes, 1993-1996	0.78	0.09	0	0.84
Gallup Poll of Major Public Issues, 1993-1996	0.25	0.43	0	1

If the issue was considered a major problem, a variable was coded as 1, otherwise 0. Summary statistics for these variables are presented in Table 1.

Perhaps the most immediately notable item in Table 1 is the lobbyists' rate of contact with the White House. In only 9% of the coded cases did interest groups report contact with the president and his senior staff. This figure may seem low, but it is not surprising if presidents truly control the frequency of their contact with interest group lobbyists. Like all politicians, presidents focus on only a few issues at a time. Consequently, there are relatively few issues on which the president would need to mobilize interest group support.

Analysis and Discussion

The results of the initial analysis are presented in Table 2. The Wald X^2 statistic indicates that the results of the model are significantly different than what I would expect to find due to random chance. Although the signs of these two variables are in the expected directions, positive and therefore inconsistent with the information exchange model, only the variable indicating a convergence of ideological positions exhibited a statistically significant effect. More interesting are their marginal effects, presented in column 2 of Table 2. The increase in the probability that an interest group would report contact with the White House as a function of ideological convergence was 20%. This result is as predicted. That is, with all the other independent variables in the model held constant at their respective mean or modal values, the probability of contact between a lobbyist and the White House would be only 0.02 if the two were ideologically divergent, but would rise all the way to 0.22 if their ideological perspectives converged. If the president is looking for allies to carry water for him, then the most trusted lobbyists would be those with outlooks similar to his, those already invested in seeing his agenda advanced, a finding also seen in Mark Peterson's (1992a) work. If, however, as the information exchange model predicts, interests with ideologies and issues different from those favored by the president were able to gain access to the West Wing, this is not a contact pattern I would expect to find. Nor should the variable for H1 on the commonality of issues be entirely dismissed because its marginal effect is only a 1 percentage point increase in the probability of contact. Although that effect is small, it has a more substantial joint influence with the similarity in ideological position variable. Specifically, when lobbyists are involved in the same issues as the president and they share ideological disposition (that is, when both independent variables are set at values of 1), the increase in the probability of a lobbyist reporting contact with the White House is 24%, a 4 percentage point increase over the marginal effect of ideological convergence alone. Given that the average probability of contact between a lobbyist and the president is only 9%, a 4 point increase in the probability of contact is non-trivial.7

One possible interpretation of the finding that labor unions were more likely to report contact with the White House is that unions invested heavily in the election of President Clinton in 1992 and (in a small win for the information exchange model) may have earned the right to approach the Clinton White House as a reward. Consumer groups were also supportive of Clinton in the election but could not contribute the same grassroots resources as

Table 2. Logistic Regression Estimates of Interest Group Contact with the White House

Variable Name	Coefficient Standard Error)	Change in Probability of Contact
Hypothesis 1: President Highlighted Issue in a Major Speech	0.20 (0.55)	+1%
Hypothesis 2: Interest Group and President have Similar Ideological Positions	2.56*** (0.48)	+20%
Organization is a Labor Union	1.44** (0.55)	+7%
Organization is a Consumer / Public Interest Group	–0.18 (0.76)	0%
The Group's Position is Opposed by Other Interest Groups	0.24 (0.52)	0%
Issue Lobbied by the Group is Distributive	–1.08 (0.59)	–1%
Number of Lobbyists Registered by the Organization	0.12* (0.06)	+1%
The Organization Lobbied an Executive Agency on the Issue	1.24** (0.48)	+5%
Support from Congressional Democrats on Key Votes, 1993 to 1996	–0.22 (2.20)	0%
Gallup Poll of Major Public Issues, 1993 to 1996	–0.06 (0.53)	0%
Constant	–4.17** (1.80)	—
Wald X^2	58.33***	—
Pseudo-R^2	0.33	—

*p < 0.05;**p < 0.01; ***p < 0.005
Percentage of cases correctly predicted = 94%
N = 384

organized labor, and that is presumably why this variable has no predictive power. Interest groups with more lobbying resources to spend on making contact with the White House did enjoy some return on this investment. Lobbying an executive agency also increased the likelihood of contact with the president by 5 percentage points. It is likely that relationships a lobbyist developed with permanent agency staff may help when it comes to getting a trip to the Oval Office. Senior agency officials might be able to bump the lobbyist's case up to the political appointee level and from there into the White House. Thus, while there is some solid empirical support for the idea that presidents control who in the lobbying community they have contact with, this is not the whole story.

But might these results be skewed because President Clinton chose to take an active position on less than a third of the issues sampled? Though presidents may control contacts with lobbyists working on those issues included on his agenda, might contact patterns be systematically different on those issues not included? Perhaps ideological congruency matters most when the president has chosen to highlight an issue. After all, a president might not care what an interest group's position is if he has not publicly announced his interest in an issue. In other words, are the factors that explain contact with the White House systematically different depending on whether the president has highlighted an issue in a major speech?[8] To find out I break the data into two subsets, one where the president has highlighted the issue and the other where he has not. If the issues advocated by the president are influencing the effect of the other variables, then there should be systematic differences in the results for the two models. The results of the two estimations are presented in Table 3.

Though there are several differences in terms of statistical significance, as would be expected when the number of cases in a model is reduced, substantively there are only two major differences between the models. First is that the effect of ideological convergence is greater in the model where the issue has not been highlighted by the president. Rather than depend for its influence on whether the president has taken a public position on an issue, the variable clearly exhibits an independent effect. Presidents do not always make cases for their issues in public speeches, particularly if they do not wish to alienate Congress by going public, but in both cases it appears they do seek out ideological allies. In fact, what this finding implies is that on issues where the president has chosen a bargaining with Congress strategy, having interest group allies may be even more important. By tapping into the influence trusted lobbyists have in Congress, the president may hope to build coalitions to move pieces of his agenda. This interpretation, then, strengthens the empirical evidence in support of H2.

The second difference is the performance of the labor union variable. The effect of this variable depends on whether Clinton placed an issue on his agenda. If so, then organized labor is reacting to his choice of issues, not pushing issues of its own onto the presidential agenda. This result is more in line with my basic expectation of presidents deciding with whom in the lobbyist community they will initiate contact.

In sum, these results are not clear-cut, but the evidence does suggest that presidents exercise significant control over access to the Oval Office. By choosing to take a position on an issue, President Clinton significantly shaped the lobbying contact patterns of those interest groups concerned with the issue and organizations supportive of his position suddenly found an invitation to come and be supportive of the president and his agenda.

Table 3. Group Contact with President Highlighting or Not Highlighting an Issue

Variable Name	President Highlighting an Issue	President Not Highlighting an Issue
Hypothesis 2: Interest Group and President have Similar Ideological Positions	1.42* (0.79) +8%	5.12*** (1.26) +51%
Organization is a Labor Union	2.28** (0.74) +19%	–0.01 (1.07) 0%
The Group's Position is Opposed by Other Interest Groups	0.47 (0.94) –1%	0.05 (0.73) 0%
Issue Lobbied by the Group is Distributive	–0.29 (0.94) –1%	–0.37 (0.99) –1%
Number of Lobbyists Registered by the Organization	0.16* (0.08) +2%	0.30* (0.15) +1%
The Organization Lobbied an Executive Agency on the Issue	0.99 (0.75) +4%	2.46* (1.12) +7%
Support from Congressional Democrats on Key Votes, 1993 to 1996	–5.24 (8.01) –1%	6.14 (5.56) 0%
Gallup Poll of Major Public Issues, 1993 to 1996	–0.21 (1.27) 0%	1.44* (1.44) –1%
Constant	0.02 (7.23)	–10.54* (4.90)
Wald X^2	26.74***	32.19***
N	122	262

*p < 0.05;**p < 0.01; ***p < 0.005

Conclusion

Although ground-breaking work has been done by Mark Peterson (1992a) and others (e.g., Pika 1983; Wolman and Teitelbaum 1984; Lucco 1992), research on the relationship between organized interests and the presidency is still very much in its infancy. Part of the developmental process in a new area of research is to import models that have been used successfully in more developed areas into the new cases. Though research on interest groups and the presidency has heretofore not attempted to apply models from congressional–lobbyist relations to the presidency, existing research on the presidency itself casts doubt as to whether the information exchange models that have come to dominate research on interest group interactions with Congress and the bureaucracy apply to lobbying the president. Indeed, case study evidence suggests that instead of building relationships over time that allow for a two-way flow of information transmission and therefore influence as the information exchange theory argues, presidents are shielded from regular contact with organized interests. Though I have not made any comparison of the frequency of lobbying contact between the president and the Congress, I have attempted to examine the main claim of this theory in the context of lobbyists and the presidency. The evidence suggests that when presidents do choose to work with interest groups it is they who initiate the contact and decide with whom to work, usually favoring ideological allies. In other words, the results reported here support a more White House-driven view of lobbyist contact and should form a part of any larger model of president–lobbyist interactions that may emerge in the future.

More broadly this evidence supports a more general point made by scholars such as Ginsberg and Shefter (1990) who argue that Republicans have been engaging in a systematic effort to peal interest groups out of the New Deal Coalition that has supported the Democratic Party for decades. In such a scenario it is the president, in this case Ronald Reagan, who has been strategically targeting interest groups, dangling the carrot of access to the White House and a place on the Republican legislative agenda. Rather than merely evolve as a by-product of mutually beneficial two-way relationships arising in accordance with the information exchange model, this appears to be the result of careful targeting on the part of the Reagan White House, a one-sided decision regarding access, and one that appears to still be going on with the current Bush Administration.

This is not to say that exchange models have no place in explaining the relationship between organized interests and the White House. It may be that once an interest group is contacted by the president's staff, it continues to work on that issue for years to come, exchanging information and providing the group with a degree of influence. The main point I argue here is that the White House appears to be relatively impermeable to interest group influence unless it decides that it wants to be open to it. It is the president and his senior advisors who decide whom to see and that they often base this decision solely on their own needs, not those of the interest group.

Two possible interpretations follow from this, one gloomy for representative democracy and one hopeful. On the gloomy side, these results may reflect the president's ability to act as a puppet-master, pulling the string of influence when it suits him. If interest groups are vehicles for expression and representation of factions of the population, then the president's ability to flip access to the White House on and off means voices are being heard only when the president desires it—not the type of responsiveness one might envision for a democratic society. Alternatively, if one accepts the view that presidents should not be responsive to interests able to buy their way into the Oval Office, these findings paint a rosier picture. After all, if the president is reaching out to groups in order to push his own agenda, then the agenda he was elected on by a majority of the voters is the one being advocated, not necessarily that of a few special interests. Although there is no telling what may happen to the president's agenda once it is dissected by Congress and the myriad of interests enjoying access there, at least at the initiation stage agendas may reflect more of the popular will than that of a few small factions.

NOTES

[1]In this paper I use the term "presidential" or "presidency" to refer to both the president himself as well as the members of the White House Staff, arguably his senior advisors.

[2]The Kennedy Administration tried to create a means by which consumer groups could be assured that their positions on issues, theoretically reflecting more national constituencies, could reach the president, countering the more parochial interests holding sway in Congress. But as Lucco (1992) found, this institutionalization provided consumer groups with little real access to the president. Other administrations have tried to use more ad hoc mechanisms, such as Vice President Dan Quayle's Council on Competitiveness (see Berry and Portney 1995), to provide groups perceived to be supportive of the administration with a means of communication with the White House.

[3]Such as promoting a position substantially different, and perhaps contrary, to the president's established campaign and partisan rhetoric (Goodin 1983; Sigelman 1990). The decision to normalize relations with China by known red-baiter Richard Nixon is the classic example.

[4]Specifically, Baumgartner and Leech note that the variable was coded if a "White House official," such as the president, vice president, or policy liaison, was reported as a contact. This makes the dependent variable consistent with the usage of terms such as "Presidency" and "White House staff" used in this paper.

[5]As the Baumgartner and Leech codebook points out, the definition of lobbying used here is fairly narrow, largely encompassing more traditional forms of lobbying such as pushing new legislation on attempting to amend existing legislation.

[6]Groups for which no information could be found were deleted from the data set, though this proved necessary in only 16 cases.

[7]Another implication of this finding may extend to PAC influence. As Walcott et al. (2003) find presidents are not unmindful of the policy needs of donors. But what it suggests is that PAC donations to presidential campaigns may be more along ideological lines, which certainly seems to be the case in the 2000 and 2004 elections with the bulk of industry money (as opposed to trial lawyer money) flowed to the pro-business Bush campaign (see VandeHei 2005).

[8]This also suggests that the statistical model may be suffering from endogeneity bias because there is feedback between the dependent variable and the variable for H1. To see if this is the case I conduct a Durbin-Wu-Hausman test. The explanatory variable suspected of causing endogeneity bias, in this case the one indicating whether an issue was highlighted in a presidential speech, is estimated using the other independent variables and the residual entered in the full model along with the original explanatory variable. If the residual is statistically significant there may be endogeneity bias (see Davidson and MacKinnon 1993). I ran this test and found that the residual failed to achieve statistical significance.

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