



Why Targeting Corporations and Government Institutions Can be More Effective than Lobbying Politicians

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Scholars and activists often presume that the way to change government policies is to pressure elected politicians or elect new ones. But movements have another potentially more effective tactic at their disposal: they can directly target corporations and agencies that stand in the way of reforms and new policies. Large corporations and key government agencies are often central to policymaking and implementation, so pressuring these entities directly can make it hard for them to carry on as usual or mount anti-reform efforts. Persuading corporations and agencies to stop opposing reforms – or even to support change – is also a good way to get the message to politicians about the need to enact new policies. Telling examples from recent and earlier U.S. reform movements illustrate why pressuring powerful institutional interests can be effective.

The Failure of Environmental Lobbying in the First Obama Administration

As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama vowed to address climate change, even as strong majorities of the American public expressed support for stronger environmental regulations and cleaner energy. From 2009 on, the executive branch had formidable legal authority to restrict carbon emissions. Yet the environmental policies of the first Obama administration from 2009 to 2012 were only slightly less polluter-friendly than those of its Republican predecessor. The first-term Obama White House blocked or weakened new rules proposed by the Environmental Protection Agency at nearly the same rate as the previous GOP administration of President George W. Bush. The Obama administration bowed to market forces and polluters rather than confronting them. What is more, even when Democrats held substantial majorities in Congress during Obama's first term, legislative efforts fell short. Cap and trade legislation designed to win support from business interests as well as environmentalists passed the House of Representatives in the spring of 2009, but made no headway in the Senate.

Why did progressive environmental reforms – including efforts to address global warming – fail during the apparently friendly first Obama presidential term? First, polluters used their longstanding ties and leverage within government to block or stunt proposed reforms, repeating a longstanding pattern in U.S. politics: even when elected politicians seem to have the authority and public mandate to bring about progressive changes, substantial shifts become impossible without the support or acquiescence of the corporations affected or, at least, divisions among corporate interests. Some reform proposals gained modest support from a few corporations, but they still faced fierce and effective resistance from most corporate players with strong ties to executive agencies and Congressional leaders of both parties.

Another, equally important shortfall lay with the insider lobbying approach used by environmentalists. Major environmental advocacy organizations targeted politicians, not polluters, and they placed priority on insider bargaining rather than mobilizing a disruptive mass movement. To win corporate support for Congressional action on cap and trade legislation, for example, leading environmental organizations politely courted a few corporate chieftains rather than threatening business interests. At best, the polite, insider bargaining approach won nominal and temporary endorsements from a few business leaders, but still faced concerted opposition from most businesses. The results might have been different had U.S. environmental groups built a mass-based social movement that targeted polluters through boycotts, calls for stockholder divestment, and other confrontational tactics – the kinds of tactics some groups have deployed more recently in fights against coal plant construction and in opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline.

Winning Reforms by Targeting Corporations

Studies of anti-corporate protests have focused on movements that demand and sometimes win direct shifts in business practices, but they have neglected the fact that mass action targeting economic institutions can facilitate policy change at the governmental level as well. Two major reforms achieved during the last century

illustrate this process:

- In the fight for union recognition through the 1935 Wagner Act and its contested implementation in the late 1930s and 1940s, mass U.S. worker movements directly targeted resisting corporations with disruption. Eventually, large manufacturers came to prefer progressive legislative and regulatory changes to uncontrollable labor strikes and boycotts.
- Again in the 1960s, Civil Rights activists used tactics such as lunch-counter sit-ins, business boycotts, and “freedom rides” on interstate bus lines to persuade businesses that it would be better to support an end to legal racial segregation.

In both eras, obstreperous movement activities pushed business leaders not only to make direct changes but also to support policy changes. Once sufficiently threatened, many businesses either relaxed their opposition to legal change or actively promoted it, which in turn helped to shift the calculations of elected politicians. Whether Democrats or Republicans controlled the reins of government was much less important than the shifting posture of business leaders trying to avert disruptive mass pressures.

Prompting Change by Targeting Institutions

Like large corporations, major government institutions also exert influence over their respective domains, so threatening those institutions can open the way for policy changes. This dynamic is illustrated in the U.S. withdrawals from protracted wars in Vietnam and Iraq. Mounting pressures on U.S. military institutions were crucial ingredients of withdrawal in both cases. Of course, fierce and continuing armed resistance within Vietnam and Iraq was a fundamental drain on military resources and resolve. But within the United States, declining military enlistments, growing economic problems and discontents, and growing resistance among rank-and-file soldiers also converged to prompt many military officials to advocate withdrawal or acquiesce to it. Congressional and presidential officials were not in the lead. This has important implications for anti-war movements, showing that they may make greater headway by undermining military recruitment and fighting capacity rather than directly pressuring politicians.

Read more in Kevin Young and Michael Schwartz, “A Neglected Mechanism of Social Movement Political Influence: The Role of Anticorporate and Anti-Institutional Protest in Changing Government Policy.” *Mobilization* 19, no. 3 (2014): 239-260.