The Political Mobilization of Firms and Industries

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Abstract

Corporate political activity is both a long-standing preoccupation and an area of innovation for sociologists. We examine the limitations of investigating business unity without focusing directly on processes and outcomes and then review studies of five types of business political action that offer lenses into corporate power in the United States: engagement in electoral politics, direct corporate lobbying, collective action through associations and coalitions, business campaigns in civil society, and political aspects of corporate responsibility. Through these avenues, we highlight four shifts since the 1970s: (*a*) increasing fragmentation of capitalist interests, (*b*) closer attention to links between business lobbying and firms' social embeddedness, (*c*) a turn away from the assumption that money buys political victories, and (*d*) new avenues of covert corporate influence. This body of research has reinvigorated the classic elitist/pluralist debate while also raising novel questions about how business actors are adapting to (and generating changes within) their sociopolitical environments.

INTRODUCTION

The question of how the economic power and social position of business translate into political influence has a long history in sociology, rooted in debates about elite power and control (Mills 1956, Domhoff 1967), Marxian theories about the political influence of the capitalist class (Zeitlin 1974), and more general research on business influence in the structures of power in contemporary societies (Block 1977, Useem 1984, Mintz & Schwartz 1985, Schwartz 1987, Mizruchi 1992, Mizruchi & Schwartz 1992, Peoples 2009). Business political action also draws in economic sociologists interested in how the social embeddedness of firms shapes their political behavior (e.g., Mizruchi 1989, Burris 2005). More recently, scholars of social movements have become interested in (*a*) how business groups mobilize social movements on their behalf (see Walker 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014; Martin 2010, 2013) and (*b*) how contentious collective actors provoke firms into political action (Ingram & Rao 2004, Schneiberg et al. 2008). These sociological literatures complement expansive bodies of work in management studies, political science, and economics (see, respectively, reviews by Hillman et al. 2004, Hart 2004, Bó 2006).

Most often, sociological research conceptualizes business political action as attempts by incumbent capitalists to fend off challenges to their accumulation of profits, which follow strategies that are specific to the historical moment and social context (Roy 1981a,b; 1997; Prechel 1990, 2000; Perrow 2002). Firms and industry groups also understand that their ability to generate profits requires the sociopolitical legitimacy conferred by consumers, certifiers, regulatory agencies, professional associations, and other key audiences, thus making these relations potentially political in many respects (Zald 1978, Suchman 1995, Himmelstein 1997). The characteristics of the state also shape organizational structures, strategies, and indeed the very definition of business interests (Carroll et al. 1988, Dobbin 1997, Kaufman 2008, Martin & Swank 2012). Finally, sociologists are well aware that firms and industries are also situated in legal environments that are endogenous to their organizational processes (Edelman et al. 1999, Dobbin & Kelly 2007), further shaping their political positions.[1]

In recent years, however, cognate disciplines—especially management scholars, in research on nonmarket strategy (Baron 1999, Bonardi & Keim 2005, Bonardi et al. 2006, Oliver & Holzinger 2008)—have become significantly more active in researching corporate political action than have sociologists. We hope, then, that this review will help to reinvigorate sociological interest in corporate power and influence (for similar calls to arms, see Perrow 2002, Mizruchi 2004). In so doing, we amplify and extend the call by recent researchers for organizational theorists to return to investigations of how organizations shape environments (Perrow 1972, 2002; Clegg et al. 2006; Barley 2007, 2010; Zald & Lounsbury 2010; Walker 2009, 2012, 2014), harkening back to resource dependence approaches (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978, Oliver 1991, Oliver & Holzinger 2008). By focusing on business mobilization in politics, researchers can capture the ways that firms and industry groups engage in political struggle, manage uncertainty (e.g., Gargiulo 1993), co-opt opponents, and reconfigure their institutional terrain to suit their own interests (Chorev 2005). Indeed, business actors face political opportunities and constraints in a fashion similar to those of social movement organizations (Davis & Thompson 1994, Jenkins & Eckert 2000). At stake in investigating these dynamics is an understanding of the state's degree of receptivity to business interests, a topic of long-standing investigation by sociological theorists and researchers, rooted in Marxian and Weberian theories of the state (Block 1977; Skocpol 1980; Roy 1981a,b; Prechel 1990).

[1] Interestingly, sociologists have expressed greater interest in subtle pressures by which organizations reshape the law rather than more overt efforts such as corporate political lobbying (e.g., Edelman et al. 2011).

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT AND FOCUS

The politics of business are being reconfigured. The rise of shareholder capitalism and its destabilizing effects on management (Fligstein 2001), the globalization of markets (Mann 2013), and the rise of financialization (Davis 2009, Krippner 2011) have created dramatic contextual changes that firms and industries must respond to. The transforming civic environment also affects corporate political engagement, with an increased focus on political and reputational management (Walker 2009, 2014), the use of mobilized stakeholders as procorporate citizen lobbyists (Hillman & Hitt 1999, Lord 2000, Walker 2014), and new political opportunities, such as the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), which has unlocked new avenues of covert corporate influence in elections. And, of course, all these changes are taking place during a period of nearly unprecedented income inequality and political partisanship in the United States (Hacker & Pierson 2010).

In light of these changes, this review emphasizes evolution in both the theory and practice of business political mobilization. We focus on the United States since the tumultuous 1970s and emphasize primarily firm- and industry-level political efforts, putting aside important studies of political action by particular capitalists (but see Burris 2001, 2005). We pay greater attention to the largest firms and underemphasize small- and medium-sized enterprises and also focus more on the federal level and less on the important role of business in state policy regimes (see Jenkins et al. 2006) or local urban growth machine politics (a recent case is Pacewicz 2012). Space considerations mean we must also sideline research on domestic firms' interventions in foreign politics (but see Woll 2008). Additionally, although we recognize that the internal governance of firms and industries is often quite political in nature (see, e.g., Mizruchi 2004, Roscigno 2011), we emphasize mainly efforts to influence the policies of the state. And, lastly, although we do review research on the immediate outcomes of business political mobilization, we pay only scant attention to important second-order outcomes, such as the rise in economic inequality (Hacker & Pierson 2010, Tomaskovic-Devey & Lin 2011), firms' economic performance (Lux et al. 2011), and how political engagement might pave the way for corporate malfeasance (Prechel & Morris 2010).

Drawing especially on sociological theories of social movements, politics, organizations, and management, we focus on corporate mobilization processes, drawing attention to firms' and industries' roles as political actors that, while linked to their interests in the marketplace, are rooted in social, organizational, and cultural processes. We favor the language of mobilization to highlight the move by contemporary scholarship to extend concepts from the study of social movements, revealing continuities between the political actions of business and those made by other actors seeking to maintain or destabilize institutionalized practices within fields of strategic action (see Fligstein & McAdam 2012).

We begin by situating this review in classical theoretical debates about the role of business influence in the societal power structure, which is continued today in theory and research focused on business unity. Then, in light of the many recent studies that question whether corporate unity is necessary for firms and industry groups to have political power, the review continues by highlighting work that investigates how firms attempt to influence the political process through business engagement in electoral politics, direct corporate lobbying, trade association activity, efforts to win political support through engagement in civil society, and an emerging cluster of studies on the politics of corporate responsibility. The discrete empirical focus of each of these five strands of business political mobilization, however, betrays what we see as a set of overarching theoretical insights: that business power may not be contingent on a unity of business interests; that the mobilization of business, as much as it is economic, is also ideological, cultural, and institutional; and that however it is manifested, business political power is great and growing. We conclude by highlighting the many promising avenues available to future researchers interested in investigating business mobilization and its relationships with the political process.

CONCEPTUALIZING BUSINESS POLITICAL ACTION: BEYOND THE QUESTION OF UNITY

Much research on corporate political action continues to be animated by the classic elitist/pluralist debate, although the terms of the debate have shifted somewhat since foundational statements in the early post–World War II era. In the debate's original form, a group largely dominated by political scientists such as Truman (1951), Dahl (1961), and Lowi (1969) argued for variations on a pluralist position in which power was relatively dispersed in society across diverse interests; business groups were believed to hold political influence, but their power was held in check by myriad other contending organized interests in civil society. On the other side, sociologists such as Mills (1956) and Domhoff (1967) argued for more elitist positions, finding evidence that those in command of key societal institutions such as the state, corporations, and military were able to exercise outsized influence, leaving members of the mass public with comparatively little influence. Although business influence is only one aspect of sociological elite theories, the interests of capitalist firms were seen as primary in the American power structure. Over time, both sides seemed to concede key points of their opponents, with elitists showing that elites at times lose in major political battles and pluralists acknowledging that certain privileged interests have significant political advantages over those representing disadvantaged causes (Schattschneider 1960, Lindblom 1977). This modified elitist view (focused on the mobilization of bias and the social organization of political interests) has become well accepted in much contemporary political science (e.g., Schlozman et al. 2012) and, with different areas of emphasis, in sociological work concerned, either explicitly or implicitly, with how powerful actors mobilize, manipulate, and depend on the political and economic resources at their disposal (McCarthy & Zald 1977, Pfeffer & Salancik 1978).

Still, debates over the nature of business power in the United States remain somewhat, if only implicitly, unsettled. All agree that corporations—especially large and increasingly global firms—command resources at levels that dwarf the resources of nearly all citizen groups. But social scientists remain unsure that the wealth generated by business alone is sufficient to win political battles, as corporations' basic orientation to their peers is often one of competition rather than coordination, not only in the marketplace but also in policy disputes. Even so, there are clearly moments when businesses come together on particular policy issues, such as periods when foundational business interests are directly challenged (Vogel 1989, 1996; Phillips-Fein 2009). Unifying threats to broad-based business interests appear to drive this more than political opportunities do (see Akard 1992, Smith 2000).

Building from these observations of corporate power, scholars generally assume that business unity engenders greater influence and, as a result, have focused much more on business unity than on ultimate political outcomes—that is, how business mobilizes and what it gets when it does.[2] Dreiling (2000, p. 21), for example, argues that, "when unified, the resources of corporations. . .nullify or crowd-out the resources of other societal interests." To demonstrate such unity, scholars working within this framework often emphasize the role of corporate board interlocks as a mechanism for facilitating capitalist class cohesion, following pioneering scholarship by Mills (1956), Domhoff (1967), Zeitlin (1974), Mintz & Schwartz

[2] In fact, it is telling that the previous reviews of corporate political engagement in these pages have been focused largely around intercorporate networks rather than political activity as such (Scott 1991, Mizruchi 1996).

(1981, 1985), Useem (1984), and Mizruchi (1989, 1992). Evidence of unity includes, for instance, making contributions to the same candidates or their political action committees (PACs) (Mizruchi 1989, 1992; Burris 2001), appearing together at legislative hearings (Dreiling & Darves 2011), or jointly holding leadership positions in policy coalitions (Mintz 1995, Dreiling 2000, Dreiling & Darves 2011).

Nonetheless, the assumption that unified business is necessarily more politically powerful has been questioned, justifiably in our view, by a number of analysts. In particular, although studies of directorate networks and corporate political activity (discussed below) suggest some coherence around broadly similar class interests, theories of unity only minimally emphasize the ways that corporate political action is conditioned by historically specific relationships with the state and institutionally and culturally contingent logics of collective action (Roy & Parker-Gwin 1999). What is more, beyond general class interests, the American system of business political power has long been one characterized by fragmentation, and many find that this is increasingly so (Vogel 1996, Martin 1999, Drutman 2010, Mizruchi 2013). Indeed, observations of corporate influence on broadly probusiness political platforms and in agenda setting seem fully compatible with observations that specific business interests are opposed in most policy debates (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Thus, as Mizruchi (2013) argues, following Simmel (1955), when economic or class interests do not face unifying threats, individual businesses and industries may have the freedom to act in disunited, autonomous ways and to pursue specific policy goals, often with great success. In this way, the many political victories of business in the 1970s led to a decline in unity in the 1980s and thereafter (Mizruchi 2013; see also Vogel 1996). Thus, it may be true that even if not united, "when it comes to getting what they want for themselves, [individual] American corporations have rarely, if ever, been more powerful" than they are today (Mizruchi 2013, p. 271). Or, as Bond & Harrigan (2011, p. 198) put it, "the freedom of firms to be disunited could be interpreted as evidence of American business dominance."

Both sides in the debates over the power and unity of business, then, often talk past one another by focusing on different units of analysis and, more often than not, reinforcing what we see as overly restrictive empirical and theoretical silos. Most sociological research looks for evidence of business unity by searching for patterns among (an often limited subset of) corporate dyads that share policy preferences (Mizruchi 2013 is an exception). There is also significant attention to lobbying by particular peak associations such as the Business Roundtable (discussed below) and policy planning committees that congeal interfirm interests (Akard 1992, Jenkins & Eckert 2000, Burris 2008). Sociologists also continue to highlight the power of the capitalist class beyond firms or industries as such (e.g., Burris 2001). In political science, in contrast, the focus tends to be less on the firm-dyadic level and, naturally, more at the level of particular policies, congressional votes, or agency decisions. This research often suggests that although firms and industries are by far the most well-represented interests (Baumgartner & Leech 2001), representatives' votes on salient issues are still moderated heavily by popular opinions (Smith 1999, 2000), although the opinions of the most affluent voters, a fraction of whom are business leaders, do seem to matter more than those of the middle and working classes (Bartels 2008, Gilens 2012, Gilens & Page 2014). Similarly, the potential for industry capture of regulatory agencies is, in part, constrained by the strong reputational concerns of agencies qua organizations (Carpenter 2010).

This disjuncture calls out for further integrative work to bridge these perspectives and units of analysis, while focusing directly on identifying causal influences of corporate mobilization on political outcomes. Doing so could help develop a broader theoretical synthesis by focusing on the concrete ways that a remarkably probusiness political context has evolved over the last three decades, but without losing sight of the ways that business still operates within a system of fragmentation and policy competition. The concern expressed by Roy (1981b) unfortunately still rings true today: "[T]he issue of the organizational characteristics that differentiate politically powerful groups from powerless ones has been overshadowed by the debate over the distribution of power, [i.e.,] the pluralist-elitist debate" (p. 1288). We hope that our focus on business political mobilization and its outcomes can help further transcend these theoretical and disciplinary boundaries.

BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

Perhaps one of the most well-investigated modes of business political mobilization is engagement in electoral politics. For reasons related to the availability of data, researchers in the United States often focus on corporate contributions to PACs, the legal entities that collect and disburse election-related funds on behalf of candidates and political causes. There is no doubt that PACs, and now Super PACs (discussed below),[3] play a prominent role in modern elections: Federal Election Commission data indicate that over $3.87 billion was disbursed by PACs in the 2008 election cycle. Nonetheless, it is not entirely clear how much influence this money buys for business interests. The largest share of PAC money comes from individuals ($2.7 billion, or 70%, in 2008), suggesting that the politics of business may play out in important ways vis-à-vis corporate leaders rather than corporations themselves (see Burris 2001). Furthermore, corporate PAC spending is only a fraction of what firms tend to spend on lobbying or philanthropy (Milyo et al. 2000), and PAC spending did not increase significantly as a share of GDP between 1976 and 2000 (Ansolabehere et al. 2001).

In general, sociological research drawing on PAC data suggests that corporate politics is predictably conservative (Burris 1987, Clawson & Neustadtl 1989, Brunell 2005, McKay 2010) but that contributions to candidates are strongly moderated by strategic decisions to ensure access to important political players on either side of the proverbial aisle (Ansolabehere et al. 2002, Hart 2004). It remains unclear to what extent this political action varies by industry and region. Burris (1987) used contributions from corporate PACs in the 1982 congressional election to show that Northeastern and Midwestern "yankees"—bankers and manufacturers, respectively—were more moderate than the "ultraconservative" sunbelt "cowboys" from the agribusiness, defense, oil, textile, and construction industries. Studying the watershed 1980 presidential election, Clawson & Neustadtl (1989) provided similar empirical support for claims about relatively consistent corporate conservatism but did not find regional differences. More recent evidence—from congressional elections between 1997 and 2006—suggests that business PACs tend to give significantly more to Republican candidates (McKay 2010). This finding seems to be consistent regardless of whether Republicans controlled the House of Representatives; evidence from the 12 election cycles between 1979 and 2002 indicates a clear corporate preference for conservative candidates (Brunell 2005).

Still, the conservative influence of PAC contributions should not be overstated. Large corporations especially seem to hedge their bets with bipartisan contributions so as to maintain connections and influence with incumbents (Hansen & Mitchell 2000, Ansolabehere et al. 2002, Hart 2004; but see Mizruchi 1989). Partisanship aside, it is clear that electoral strategies vary by industry characteristics. More heavily regulated industries and those with the closest connections to the state (e.g., banking, utilities, defense) typically have the largest

[3] Super PACs are a variant of PACs that promote political causes or candidates independent of the candidate's own election campaign. Super PACs came into existence after the US Supreme Court ruled in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* in 2010 that limits to independent expenditures in elections violated First Amendment rights to free speech and after the Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit ruled that independent PACs could accept unlimited donations. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Super PACs spent over $567 million in the 2012 election cycle. See **http://projects.wsj.com/super-pacs**.

and most active PACs (Neustadtl & Clawson 1988, Boies 1989, Grier et al. 1994, Hansen & Mitchell 2000, Burris 2001). Furthermore, many researchers find that concentrated industries tend to exhibit more unified interests than diffuse industries (Mizruchi 1989, Grier et al. 1994). This observation suggests opportunities for more careful research on the ways that industry and organizational structure, relations of production, and the embeddedness of firms and their employees all shape the political engagement of business in electoral politics.

The legal context surrounding business engagement in electoral politics has changed rather dramatically in recent years. The Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) appears to have unleashed vast new amounts of corporate spending to influence elections through the use of Super PACs.[4] The *Citizens United* decision also paved the way for groups incorporated under sections 501(c)4 and 501(c)6 of the US Internal Revenue Code (respectively, "social welfare organizations" and "business leagues") to make considerable expenditures in campaigns, as long as they do not coordinate directly with the campaign itself. Such associations are not legally compelled to disclose their funding sources. These developments are recent enough that we lack systematic studies of their effects (but see Dowling & Wichowsky 2013). Still, commentators worry about the lack of disclosure and transparency in such spending to influence elections. Studying covert avenues of corporate political influence is, of course, inherently challenging, but clearly worthy of further investigation.

Political Impacts of Electoral Engagement

Research on the ability of corporate donations to influence elections has found mixed and contradictory results, with many now questioning whether one can assume that campaign spending—whether by corporations or other interests—has substantial effects on elections after other factors are controlled and models are purged of endogeneity (Ansolabehere et al. 2002, 2003; Hart 2004). Among studies that have found evidence of influence, there is considerable heterogeneity in effectiveness across policy domains (Neustadtl 1990). Incumbents are usually seen as less risky investments and draw more funding from business PACs, but Gerber (1998) finds that an incumbent's spending advantage cannot explain their higher reelection rates.

Several studies have investigated whether firms' contributions to electoral campaigns lead beyond electoral outcomes to downstream rewards such as through favorable legislation or looser regulatory oversight. The evidence on legislation is mixed (Roscoe & Jenkins 2005), with some systematic studies finding very limited or no support for such an expectation (Aggarwal et al. 2012), and certain studies finding that firms are, in fact, rewarded for contributions (Clawson et al. 1998). Contributions are less likely to affect highly visible votes, probably because of the mediating effect of public scrutiny (Smith 2000). Studies of donations influencing regulatory outcomes are also mixed but more likely to find evidence of influence. Witko (2013) finds that corporate PAC spending was associated with fewer workplace safety violations being issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration when Republicans controlled either Congress or the presidency. And Gordon & Hafer (2005) find that firms that make large political donations tend to be less compliant in following regulations, perhaps in the expectation that their indiscretions will not be challenged (see also Prechel & Morris 2010). Clearly, then, corporate donations to political campaigns buy something, although we leave open the possibility that norms of political engagement and even rationalized myths (Meyer & Rowan 1977) about the efficacy of donations may play nontrivial roles in explaining

[4]Corporate investors and traders, however, did not seem to think *Citizens United* would have a large effect on politically active firms. Important developments during the case had little discernable effect on the stock prices of *Fortune* 500 firms (Werner 2011).

corporate campaign contributions. In any case, patterns of corporate engagement in electoral politics seem to confirm our general arguments about the nature of the political mobilization of business: Business electoral contributions in the United States may be efficacious in certain respects and for certain firms or industries, but yield mixed or even negligible effects for business interests broadly defined.

CORPORATE LOBBYING AND POLITICAL POWER

Despite the sociological relevance of understanding which firms engage in lobbying at all (and the volume of such activity), most research on corporate lobbying has been dominated by management scholars, political scientists, and economists who have investigated how lobbying is shaped by such matters as organizations' interfirm ties, ownership structures, stakeholder relations, size, and financial characteristics (see Hillman et al. 2004, Hart 2004). Classic perspectives in political science argued that lobbying is routine and primarily informational, encouraging legislators to prioritize action on some issues over others (Bauer et al. 1963, Milbrath 1963); these ideas have been elaborated in more recent work on agenda setting (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones 1993, Jones & Baumgartner 2005). Sociologists, in contrast, have generally been more interested in forms of influence that operate outside institutionalized channels and have done little to investigate the relationships, exchanges, and politics of lobbying in depth [see, however, Fligstein & McAdam's (2012) new work on strategic action fields, which opens up new avenues for sociologists to investigate the maneuvering of insiders]. Still, lobbying is a social process through and through, involving reciprocity and symbolic exchange between lobbyists and policy makers (Scott 2008) in which policy makers benefit in unanticipated ways. Hall & Deardorff's (2006) widely influential paper on lobbying understands it as a subsidy to legislators, highlighting how efforts to gain political influence are not akin to vote buying but are better understood as efforts to facilitate the work of legislators with agendas consonant with business interests or other advocacy groups (see also Austen-Smith & Wright 1994).

Federal lobbying is dominated by the very largest firms in the United States. According to estimates by Kerr and colleagues (2013), only 10% of publicly traded firms in the United States engaged in sufficient federal lobbying activity to warrant lobbying disclosure in any year between 1998 and 2006 (i.e., the firm spent more than $10,000 on lobbying activity in any six-month period). Lobbying expenditures are substantial, however: Spending by registered lobbyists grew from $1.44 billion in 1998 to almost $2.5 billion in 2009 (Richter et al. 2009). Comparing firms that lobby with those that do not, Kerr et al. (2013) find that politically active firms tend to have annual sales nearly four times higher, employee sizes over three times larger, and assets nearly twice as substantial. It should come as no surprise, then, that firms with a heavy lobbying presence nearly always have an in-house lobbying operation or government affairs office (Meznar & Nigh 1995), usually controlled by senior management rather than, for example, a human resources office or other boundary-spanning offices within a firm. The set of firms that lobby each year is thus remarkably stable; the probability that a firm lobbies in a current year, given that it lobbied in the previous year, is 92% (Kerr et al. 2013). This finding gives some credence to older "iron triangle" theories of subgovernment in which a small group of key players dominate in particular issue domains over time and lends implicit support to theories of unity among similar industries, or what Zeitlin and colleagues (1976) referred to as class segments. Even so, lobbying work is nearly always policy specific, making it difficult to understand how it would consistently generate business unity. Furthermore, it remains unclear to what extent small firms free ride on the legislative work done by larger firms, how this relationship is understood in the business world, and whether small firms' interests align or conflict with those of their larger competitors.

Despite such disproportionate representation of large businesses, many sociologically oriented accounts suggest that corporate lobbying is not easily reducible to firm size and market interests. Such interests exist, of course, but are seen only through the prism of cultural contexts and organizational decision-making processes involving imperfect information, structural constraints, time pressures, and internal politics within firms. Martin's (1995) study of lobbying over health reform in 1993–1994 showed that organizational features are critical for understanding political mobilization, highlighting that a firm's lobbying was shaped most strongly by its internal capacity for evaluating policy issues, participation in business policy networks, and legacies of previous engagement in the health domain. Scott's (2008) study of political networks suggests that lobbying behaviors are highly relational and nurtured by institutional contexts that revolve around informal trust, reciprocity, and exclusion of outsiders (such as social movement activists).[5] And, as described above, research on business political unity highlights that firms' engagement in political action often has as much to do with interfirm elite networks as with its economic position. These approaches are valuable in that they complicate simpler economic models of lobbying, which typically reduce such activity to a basic exchange between business and policy makers (e.g., Tullock 1989) or describe it as entry into political markets (e.g., Bonardi et al. 2005) where relational networks of actors and institutions are generally ignored or reduced to secondary importance.

Of course, this is not to deny that firms' lobbying interests are also rather closely aligned with the economic circumstances they face. Sociologically minded scholars, however, add that economic motivations for lobbying, as in all areas of social life, are embedded within a particular social and institutional environment. Quadagno (2005, ch. 6) describes large firms' and industry groups' attempts to push back against rising employee health costs in the 1980s, which were naturally linked to the size of companies' employee health expenditures. Along the same lines, Mintz (1995) and Mintz & Palmer (2000) both highlight firms' economic interests in containing health costs. Glasberg & Skidmore's (1997) account of corporate welfare policy finds that lobbying by both large banks and savings and loans institutions helped to shape bank deregulation policy debates in the 1980s, with the diverging economic interests of those two sectors leading, at times, to opposing lobbying.

Furthermore, a firm's degree of engagement with the state is a clear antecedent of lobbying. As with contributions to PACs, studies consistently find greater lobbying activity among interests representing more heavily regulated industries and those dependent on government contracts (Clawson & Neustadtl 1989, Grier et al. 1994, Hansen & Mitchell 2000, Burris 2001, Walker 2014), especially in defense industries (see Boies 1989, Clawson & Neustadtl 1989, Mizruchi 1990, Schuler et al. 2002). Similarly, firms that exchange staff with government are often much more politically active, although the direction of causality is less clear. Etzion & Davis (2008) find that both the Clinton and G.W. Bush administrations recruited from the corporate elite (especially when staffing ambassadorships), while service in the executive branch was also leveraged for later corporate board positions, and all but one of the former joint chiefs of staff as of 2000 eventually worked for a defense contractor after their appointment. Such revolving doors between firms and government suggest deeper links that, many expect, make later lobbying likely to be more influential (e.g., Salisbury et al. 1989). We note that although economic motives may be at play, the exploitation of these personal ties and insider knowledge highlight the importance of a sociological approach to understanding lobbying. It is precisely their familiarity with procedure and organizational

[5]Vidal et al. (2012), who are economists, demonstrate just how valuable these relationships may be; the authors find that lobbyists with experience working for a US senator suffer an immediate and long-lasting 24% drop in revenue when the senator leaves office.

structure and their networks of interpersonal relationships that make former political appointees and staff appealing for lobbying work.

Political Impacts of Corporate Lobbying

Beyond investigating business unity and the downstream effects of electoral contributions on policy outcomes, scholars often find that direct business efforts to influence government have had varying influence when examined overall (Hansen et al. 2005) but great influence within certain policy domains. Jacobs (1988) suggests that corporate influence is effective in reshaping corporate tax rates, and Richter et al. (2009) find that increases in subsequent lobbying expenditures reduced firms' effective tax rates in the subsequent year. On the other hand, Pavalko (1989), studying an earlier period, finds that business groups had relatively little influence on the spread of workers' compensation legislation. Tomaskovic-Devey & Lin (2011) suggest that financial deregulation policies were shaped by corporate lobbying, which is consistent with the conclusions of other recent studies (e.g., Hacker & Pierson 2010; for an alternative view, see Krippner 2011).

In the labor domain in particular, there is considerable evidence from sociological studies that employer lobbying has significantly influenced political restrictions against unionization, with some arguing that employer resistance is a primary explanation for union decline (Clawson & Clawson 1999). Some suggest economic explanations for understanding the degree of employer resistance to unionization, finding that periods of low unemployment weaken the political position of firms, and periods of high unemployment tend to fragment the power of unions (Jacobs & Dixon 2010). Furthermore, business lobbying in favor of right-to-work laws was most effective when the political context was favorable and unions were weak (Dixon 2010). However, the structure of industries may affect the ability of firms to resist unionization. Industries driven by scarce skilled labor and in geographic areas where strikers are difficult to replace, for example, had the highest unionization rates in the early labor movement (Kimeldorf 2013). As with the organizational antecedents to engagement with lobbying described above, the social organization of firms and industries seems to shape its efficacy when mobilizing against organized labor.

TRADE ASSOCIATIONS AND BUSINESS COLLECTIVE ACTION

Although more political activism on behalf of business interests takes place through the efforts of individual firms rather than industry groups (Baumgartner & Leech 2001), major sources of political support for companies nonetheless remain trade associations, coalitions, policy planning associations, think tanks, foundations, and other nonprofits. Sociologists have emphasized trade associations in particular as cultural producers and generators of moral orders that shape economic activity (Spillman 2012), as vehicles for solidifying and institutionalizing new organizational forms and industries (Esparza et al. 2014), or as covert mechanisms for dominant players to extend their market influence (Barnett 2013, Yue et al. 2013). Still, as Fligstein (2001) argues, trade associations are predominantly political creatures. And, as Clawson and colleagues (1992) contend, industry associations bridge the gap between company-wide and class-wide rationality.

Although most business associations do not focus on political lobbying (Spillman 2012), dominant peak associations such as the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the Business Roundtable are widely recognized as influential actors (Burris 1987; Peschek 1987; Akard 1992; Himmelstein 1997; Smith 1999, 2000; Jenkins & Eckert 2000; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Spillman 2012; Mizruchi 2013). These peak associations were a powerful force in the wake of the economic turmoil and new regulations of the 1970s, which, combined with popular challenges to business, encouraged a more class-based and unified approach to business political mobilization (Vogel 1989, Akard

1992, Mizruchi 2013). Peak associations tend to be more supportive of Republican candidates than of Democratic ones and often take part in conservative policy coalitions (Himmelstein 1992). Groups like the Business Roundtable, an association of CEOs founded in 1972, explicitly lobbied against regulation, pushed back against labor unions, sought business-friendly tax reforms, and resisted requirements for public disclosures related to hostile takeovers (Vogel 1989, Palmer et al. 1995, Mizruchi 2013). Such efforts were quite a contrast to the more civically oriented and public interest–focused efforts of postwar peak associations such as the Committee for Economic Development (Mizruchi 2013, Schifeling 2013; but see Phillips-Fein 2009).

Business collective action today reflects a more fragmented set of actors and interests. In part, this may be because firms' in-house government affairs offices have reduced the relative importance of industry associations (Vogel 1996). Political victories of business over labor in the 1970s and early 1980s likely helped to remove labor's role in facilitating business solidarity and moderation, and business's successes in antitrust policy supported the vast corporate takeover wave of the 1980s (Mizruchi 2013). This, in turn, further fragmented business by making executives increasingly insecure, short-tenured, and focused on a firm's share price instead of its broader stakeholder commitments. Banks also served less of a role as an intermediary in intercorporate communities, thus removing another source of cross-firm solidarity (Mizruchi 2013, pp. 191–97; Davis & Mizruchi 1999). As a consequence, the largest firms today may be less likely to lobby through trade associations or peak associations and favor instead individual firm-level lobbying over narrow issues (Mizruchi 2013, pp. 270–71), even though there is evidence that certain key peak associations have served as major players in policy battles over, for instance, health reform (Skocpol 1997) and trade policy (Dreiling 2000).

Still, in all of these forms, efforts to unite individual firms tend to run up against Olsonian collective action problems stemming from divergent interests of competitors and varying proclivities toward political action by constituent firms. Business collective action requires prior agreement by member firms about the appropriate political solution to a problem (Clawson et al. 1992), and such concerns make certain trade associations take on a much wider range of issues than others. Absent common threats from organized labor or populist, progressive politics generally, certain firms will tend to prefer to go it alone rather than coordinate strategy with industry rivals.

Political Impacts of Trade Association Mobilization

Research on the ability of industry associations to shape policy harkens back to Hirsch's (1975) classic study of industries' capacities for altering their external environments, which found that the pharmaceutical industry had much greater influence on pricing and distribution matters, the legal environment, and external opinion leaders than did the recording or broadcast industries, in part because of the power of pharmaceutical trade associations. Akard (1992) argued that the Business Roundtable provided a key organizational base in supporting the political influence of business in the post-1975 period, and Jacobs (1988) finds that peak associations like the National Federation of Independent Business and US Chamber were key players in fighting the passage of both health reform and family-friendly work policies. Lifting spending limits and donor contribution disclosure requirements by *Citizens United* may make such 501(c)6 organizations even more influential. There is also evidence that business-dominated policy planning organizations have been effective in recent years in reshaping the political environment surrounding the issue of climate change (Dunlap & Jacques 2013). This is not to say that all such interventions have positive effects. Yue et al. (2013) find that elite-led co-optation of a quasi-regulatory trade association led to the restructuring of markets in a fundamentally unstable, self-destructive fashion. These findings provide a stark reminder that pursuit of narrow political and economic interests poses fundamental difficulties for business unity and implicitly highlight the ways that political cohesion of business elites, to the extent that it exists, depends on more than common economic interest.

MOBILIZING CIVIL SOCIETY AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

Generally, corporations prefer less visible forms of influence, given the often technical nature of corporate policy disputes and because, in most circumstances, companies would not benefit (and would often be harmed) by involving members of the public. Culpepper's (2011) study of the "quiet politics" of markets for corporate control fits this model quite well. However, sociologists have recognized that under circumstances in which a firm or industry is facing serious popular controversy (Useem & Zald 1982, Elsbach 1994, Walker 2014) or incumbent firms are threatened by the rise of new actors or organizational forms that jeopardize their interests (Ingram & Rao 2004, Schneiberg et al. 2008), business actors become more likely to take such action. Salient issues are a particular draw (Bonardi & Keim 2005).

Corporate mobilization of the public can take place through advocacy advertisements (Sethi 1977) or public relations campaigns (Ewen 1996), by funding advocacy groups or think tanks (Rich 2005), by joining consumer groups in boycotts of other firms (McDonnell 2012), by seeking to discredit or smear opponents through lawsuits (Pring & Canan 1996), or by engaging in a grassroots mobilization effort (Vogel 1989; Walker 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014). These strategies often complement firms' insider lobbying efforts,[6] reflecting the fact that the public affairs function of most leading firms has expanded considerably since the 1970s (Griffin & Dunn 2004).

Sociological research on corporate mobilization of civil society has creatively merged interests with social movement theory and research. Public campaigns for corporate causes such as the National Chain Store Association opposing anti–chain store legislation (Ingram & Rao 2004), the Grocery Manufacturers' Association advocating the use of biotechnology in agriculture (Schurman & Munro 2009), health industry firms mobilizing against healthcare reform in the mid-1990s (Skocpol 1997; see also Giaimo & Manow 1999), business associations and wealthy elite organizing campaigns against taxation (Martin 2010, 2013; see also Phillips-Fein 2009), and employer efforts to mobilize against unions (Haydu 1999, Dixon 2010, Jacobs & Dixon 2010) are all cases of corporate political mobilization that sociologists have shown to be similar to traditional grassroots activism in many respects (although clearly divergent in terms of resources and structural sources of power). Scholars have also called attention to the strategic value of corporate constituency building and how firms seek to benefit from facilitating activism by consumers (Lord 2000), employees and management (Keim 2005), and local community members (Walker 2014). In all cases, the emphasis is on the ways that firms themselves engage in political activity both within and outside formalized political channels in order to achieve their political ends.

As one strategy for understanding how business groups have become more engaged in mobilizing the mass public in recent decades, in a series of studies, Walker (2009, 2010, 2012, 2014) has investigated the expanding market for grassroots lobbying services provided to businesses through specialized lobbying firms (called grassroots lobbyists or public affairs consultants). For a fee, these consultants offer their clients the ability to engage the mass public as an ally in policy debates or even to create pro-corporate social movement organizations (such as Working Families for Wal-Mart). Estimates

[6] Grassroots (or "outside") lobbying is set in distinction to "inside" lobbying. The latter typically refers to one-on-one communications between the expert representative of an organized interest and a policy maker. Insider strategies often include marshaling evidence from academic and think tank studies (through, e.g., white papers), testifying in legislative or administrative hearings, and facilitating campaign contributions. For a summary, see Walker (2013a).

indicate that nearly 40% of the *Fortune* 500 companies appear on the client lists of at least one such firm, suggesting that the use of these strategies is relatively widespread among major firms. These consulting firms were founded in response to increasing business mobilization, a generally expanding public interest group field, and widening political partisanship (Walker 2009, 2014). Firms and industry groups represent a plurality of these consultants' clients (other clients include advocacy groups, unions, parties, and candidate campaigns), and they use them to indirectly lobby legislatures, pressure regulatory agencies, battle ballot initiatives and referenda, and influence public opinion and competitor firms. Health insurers, for example, have used consultants' services at various times to support or fight proposed health reforms, pharmaceutical firms have used them to mobilize patient groups, and hospitals have done the same to push back against insurers (Walker 2010). In general, and as with other forms of business lobbying, the use of grassroots lobbying is associated with firm size, level of government regulation, and efforts to minimize reputational costs related to public controversies or protest. The critical insight of these findings, however, is that the politics of business need not be confined to explicit attempts to elect sympathetic candidates or facilitate the work of friendly legislators (Hall & Deardorff 2006). Business may also act as an activist and an issue entrepreneur, with clear economic interests but, to that end, with a clear focus on developing political and ideological support of its policy positions.

Political Impacts of Mobilizing Through Civil Society

Business-backed activism runs the inherent risk of being discredited as inauthentic or outside the public interest and poses some risks as well as a potential buffer for legislators. The risks are that legislators may unwittingly fall prey to covert lobbying, but the buffer is that they typically retain plausible deniability about knowing its sponsorship. To mitigate these risks, business campaigns in civil society often deploy the rhetoric of general interests (Phillips-Fein 2009). Even so, business-backed grassroots campaigns are often referred to as astroturf (i.e., fake grassroots), especially when they involve participation that is heavily incentivized, include fraudulent misrepresentations of citizens' viewpoints, and/or fail to disclose corporate sponsorship (Lyon & Maxwell 2004, McNutt & Boland 2007, Walker 2014). The term astroturf, however, is something of a political Rorschach test, which is used very loosely by contending groups that distrust their opponents' claims and sources of support (Walker 2010); complicating matters further, many of the most effective consultant-backed campaigns for companies are those that look like traditional grassroots citizen campaigns (McNutt & Boland 2007, Walker 2014).

Studies have found that corporate mobilization of public support may be an effective strategy. Walker (2014) shows that the relative success of a corporate-backed grassroots campaign is closely linked to the sponsor's transparency and the campaign's ability to make partnerships with civil society groups that have an independent interest in the policy issue of the company; campaigns that employ the most egregious astroturf strategies often fail. Hiatt & Park (2013) find that US Department of Agriculture (USDA) approval of genetically modified organisms depends heavily on the mobilization of third-party actors such as farmers' associations, which are partially supported by agribusiness firms (such as through Monsanto's America's Farmers campaign); support from third parties provides political cover and a buffer to the legitimacy of USDA in its regulatory decisions. Oreskes & Conway (2010) illustrate the diverse ways that tobacco, chemical, and energy industry interests reshaped public perceptions and policy decisions about health risks and global warming through public campaigns (see also Brown & Cordner 2011). Lord's (2000) interviews with legislative staffers suggest that constituency-based lobbying is more effective than other kinds of business lobbying, but this evidence is somewhat limited by being based upon staffers' perceptions. Castellblanch (2003) finds that pharmaceutical companies have mobilized support through grassroots coalitions, but such efforts were less effective in states where pharmacists joined coalitions with consumer groups to oppose the industry. In short, where it appears authentic, covert political mobilization by firms is an increasingly important and often effective form of business influence. The challenge for sociologists lies in doing more to identify and elaborate its various incarnations, conceptualize its organization and development, and further evaluate its efficacy.

POLITICAL COVER AND PREEMPTION: CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY AND PRIVATE REGULATION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is broadly defined as a set of principles that hold firms accountable for "actions far beyond their boundaries" (Davis et al. 2008, p. 32) and that generate goodwill with firms' stakeholders. We argue that CSR can, in many respects, be understood as yet another form of political mobilization deployed by business. In recent years, a key element of CSR regimes has developed in the form of private transnational regulatory programs, such as product certification systems in the apparel and forestry industries (Bartley 2007). Although less often understood as forms of corporate political action (Vogel 2005; but see Scherer & Palazzo 2011), both CSR and private regulation are nonetheless deeply rooted in the politics of the corporation.

One set of studies investigates how corporate philanthropy is used to compensate for evidence of wrongdoing on the part of the firm, following Burt's (1983) understanding of corporate philanthropy as co-optation. Wal-Mart, for example, gives significantly more to charity in communities where new stores opened despite protests (Ingram et al. 2010), and tobacco interests increased their donations to medical research to counter negative publicity (Tesler & Malone 2008). Similarly, product-related controversies lead health firms to give significantly more through their corporate foundations in the following year (Walker 2013b), and boycotts have been shown to increase corporate prosocial claims that resonate with consumers, citizens, and policy makers (McDonnell & King 2013). Corporate giving to educational institutions also showed heightened donation levels following negative media coverage of a firm (Werbel & Wortman 2000). And, as with PAC contributions and lobbying, firms that are more politically active in general are significantly more likely to engage in forms of CSR (Werner 2012).

These and similar studies suggest that CSR can be understood as more than just a strategic maneuver by firms to avoid real and perceived financial or reputational costs due to changes in public opinion (Vogel 2005, Werner 2012). If such opinions link to credible threats of policy change, as embodied, for example, in explicit state pressure to adopt new regulatory standards for apparel manufacture (Bartley 2007) or heightened Securities and Exchange Commission scrutiny of executive compensation (Werner 2012), then related CSR campaigns would seem to serve not just as a response to activist demands but also as an explicit tactic to avoid regulation or legal action (see also Parker 2013). Indeed, given the high level of importance of public opinion in firms' achievement of public policy goals (Smith 2000, Werner 2012), CSR may be a critical tool for shaping downstream policy outcomes. This does not make CSR particularly democratic; as some sociologists point out, CSR is, in some respects, disenfranchising for citizens, who cannot have a vote in the programs that corporations enact (Esbenshade 2004, Seidman 2007). It does suggest, however, that social scientists should consider CSR as more than a purely private form of business politics.

Despite these potential links to broader public policy and institutionalized politics, private and nonstate systems of corporate regulation, like CSR, are nearly always explained in relation to larger observations about globalization and the reconfiguration of state power (Vogel 2005, Bartley 2007, Soule 2009). CSR, then, emerges as a product of "private politics" (Baron 2001; Soule 2009, pp. 33–34) or "contentious markets" (King & Pearce 2010), where, in the absence of strong state regulation, social movements challenge corporations directly (Walker et al. 2008). This, in turn, pushes researchers toward assessing relationships between the social and financial performance of firms but shifts analytical emphasis away from the ways that corporate actors may proactively wield CSR or private regulation as a political tactic, designed to minimize direct state interference in business or to stave off expensive lawsuits.

Political Impacts of Corporate Responsibility

There is important work that situates CSR practices in comparative political economy (Campbell 2007, Lim & Tsutsui 2012), but very few studies have examined the direct link between CSR efforts and political outcomes. Still, some have started to conceptualize this link and develop propositions about mechanisms. Navarro (1988) understands corporate giving as a key element of a firm's general lobbying strategy, offering social access to policy elites in informal settings. Hansen & Mitchell (2000) go so far as to argue that charitable contributions themselves are an indirect form of lobbying, although they find that many of the standard predictors of PAC and lobbying activity (defense contracts, government shipments, operating in a regulated industry) do not predict charitable giving. Hadani & Coombes (2014) argue that both corporate philanthropy and corporate political activity tend to increase in response to firms' degree of uncertainty in their nonmarket environment; further, in their view, philanthropy enhances a firm's reputation and strengthens a firm's relational capital in its dealings with policy makers. Lastly, Cho et al. (2006) find an inverse association between corporate environmental performance and political spending, providing some limited indication that firms lobby to counteract the reputational damage of poor CSR. As with covert mobilization, the theoretical point here is that managing and crafting reputation, legitimacy, and broad-based political and ideological support via corporate responsibility measures is a key element of the contemporary politics of business.

CONCLUSION: AN AGENDA FOR SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS

Several themes emerge from research on the five types of corporate political mobilization outlined above, each of which suggests aspects of an interrelated research agenda on how firms and industries affect their external environments. All five strands of research highlight the value of returning to many of the fundamental insights of resource-dependence views of firms, while recognizing that institutional pressures are interwoven with strategic efforts by capitalist firms to manipulate their external environments (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978; Oliver 1991; Clegg et al. 2006; Barley 2007, 2010; Oliver & Holzinger 2008; Wry et al. 2013).

First, business unity cannot be conflated with business power. Over the past 30 years, sociologists and political scientists have shown convincingly that business elites can be unified, especially by threats to general business interests, but also that unity is conditional, and that even unified interests may not translate into enhanced political power. We encourage scholars to focus more directly on outcomes of business mobilization to uncover more clearly the exercise of capitalist political power, and especially to examine how the modes of engagement identified here are interrelated. Opportunities are ripe, for example, for research on the ways corporate interlocks affect responses to protest, on how judicial decisions like *Citizens United* may have decoupled firm image and reputation from its actions to influence elections, on how lobbying and business collective action shape government, and on the dynamics of CSR and covert mobilization. By focusing on these concrete means of business political mobilization and their interaction, we can gain a much deeper understanding of the nature and extent of business power in society.

Second, and despite our push for more research on outcomes, we encourage sociological research to supplement its long-standing reliance on PAC data and associational memberships with new sources of evidence. The politics of business are nuanced, multifaceted, and focused on winning hearts and minds as much as on votes and pocketbooks (King & Walker 2014). Studies of grassroots mobilization by firms, corporate responsibility measures, and the sensitivity of companies to reputational costs all suggest business's keen awareness that legitimacy and public opinion matter and that insider forms of business engagement should not be seen as detached from the contentious politics of the corporation. This observation calls for a wide variety of research that is only beginning on the covert mobilization strategies of firms, the cultural and ideological (and thus fundamentally political) work firms do to garner support for their causes, and the ways firms themselves engage in activism not unlike social movement organizations. Indeed, beyond investigating the institutional and cultural contexts firms face, we encourage researchers to more carefully trace the ways that political, regulatory, and of course financial resource dependencies shape business political mobilization.

Finally, a central question that remains in the research we review here is how business, given its fragmented policy positions, conditional unity, and inability to simply buy votes, actually maintains such dominance in the highly unequal American political system. Observations of the prominence of markets and hegemony of capitalism can only take researchers so far; wide-ranging criticism of banking and health industries, public disillusionment with inequity of income and wealth, and continuous—even if unsuccessful—challenges by social movements to corporate causes remind us that alternative politics are available on both the right and the left.

No doubt the challenges of uncovering the nature and extent of business political power are substantial, both methodologically and theoretically. We think the importance of such investigations is commensurate with the challenge.

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