



# Influence Match: Can Corporate Lobbying Equalise Political Influence?

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## Abstract

Some corporations use their disproportionate lobbying power to obstruct policy. This obstructive lobbying violates most people's claims to equal political influence. Occasionally, however, other corporations respond by using their disproportionate power to lobby in support of policy. Does this supportive lobbying violate claims to equal influence too? This paper argues that it does, using climate policy as an example. Supportive lobbying does not, in many cases, work to cancel out the influence from obstructive corporate lobbying. Moreover, supportive lobbying violates claims to equal influence even in cases where this lobbying helps equalise the distribution of influence, helps equalise the likelihood of congruence between policy and people's policy preferences, and helps enforce claims to equal influence held by people in the supportive corporation.

**Keywords** Equal influence · Lobbying · Corporations · Policy obstruction · Climate change

## 1 Introduction

Some business corporations are very politically influential. One way in which these corporations influence policy is through lobbying. Corporations often lobby to prevent policies from being enacted or implemented. This obstructive corporate lobbying has been rightly questioned for violating most people's claim to equal political influence: most people have much less policy influence than obstructive corporations.<sup>1</sup> These violations are a serious matter: the claim to equal political influence is plausibly the core of the democratic ideal.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Alzola (2013); Christiano (2012); Moriarty (2021: 212–214); Weber (1997).

<sup>2</sup> The list of authors who claim that equal political influence is the (or a) core of the democratic ideal includes Brighouse (1996); Christiano (2018); Dahl (1989); Kolodny (2023); and Sunstein (1994).

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Some corporations, however, lobby in support of policy proposals that other corporations obstruct. Supportive corporate lobbying (supportive lobbying, for short) is sometimes welcome for its results. If obstructive lobbying was holding back just or good policy, supportive lobbying can help just or good policy be enacted and implemented.

A prominent example of this corporate obstruction/support dynamic is climate policy. Business corporations around the world have often lobbied to obstruct or dilute ambitious climate policy (InfluenceMap 2021a). However, the last two decades have seen a steady increase in corporate lobbying in support of ambitious climate policies (Böhler et al., 2022; InfluenceMap 2021b; Vormedal and Meckling 2023; Woellert 2021). A lot of this support is sincere, as many corporations see a business opportunity in climate policy, and some corporations realise that climate change poses serious material risks to their profits in the medium and long term (Barzuza, Curtis, and Webber 2023; Condon 2020; Schroder Investment Management 2018).

Welcome for its effects as it may well be, supportive corporate lobbying violates most people's claims to equal influence. Or so I will argue in this paper. Indeed, most individuals have much less opportunity to influence policy than the people who control corporate lobbying, both obstructive and supportive. If obstructive lobbying violates claims to equal influence, supportive lobbying violates these claims when they lobby in support too.

This paper begins in Sect. 1 by describing what claims to equal influence are, and how corporate lobbying can violate them. The rest of the paper then discusses four arguments for the view that in a context where there is ongoing obstructive corporate lobbying, supportive lobbying does not violate anyone's claims to equal influence. Section 2 discusses the strongest, and most intuitive argument. The argument is that, rather than merely exercising unequal influence, supportive corporate lobbying levels the playing field by cancelling out the unequal influence from obstructive corporate lobbying. I argue that this argument works for some cases, but supportive lobbying is often not really—or just—a reaction to obstructive lobbying; rather than cancelling obstructive lobbying, supportive lobbying is often simply an independent source of (very unequal) influence. Section 3 discusses the argument that supportive lobbying helps distribute influence among all individuals more equally. This argument, however, relies on a controversial view about the grounds and content of claims to equal political influence. Section 4 discusses the argument that supportive lobbying equalises people's likelihood of seeing their policy preferences reflected in policy, by increasing the chances that those who agree with the policy that is being obstructed see their policy enacted. The argument fails because equalising the likelihood of policy matching people's preferences is not the same as equalising political influence, which is what the argument was supposed to be about. Section 5 discusses the argument that when people who control corporate lobbying engage in supportive lobbying they are simply enforcing their claim to their own equal influence, which is being violated by obstructive lobbying. This argument can perhaps show that supportive lobbying is justified, but it fails to show that supportive lobbying does not transgress other people's claims to equal influence.

This paper's main intended audience are people who ponder whether to encourage or discourage supportive corporate lobbying. Many people do encourage it, typically for policies these people deem to be just or good. In the realm of climate policy, the list includes politicians, such as Australian MP Zali Steggall who recently said that even though positive corporate lobbying is 'not the best way to shape policy', 'you need some counter to the lobbying that does go on from the fossil fuel industries' (Evans and Cumming 2021). Similarly, US Senator Sheldon Whitehouse said that many of his Republican colleagues are actually in favour of climate legislation, but they need corporate lobbyists' political support 'to counter the fossil fuel industry's relentless onslaught. [...] I am a sponsor of a Senate carbon fee bill, so I know this firsthand. I see their destructive handiwork all around me—and they have no corporate opposition' (Whitehouse 2016). Several publications in philosophy, political science, and by governmental and nongovernmental organisations, have also called for corporations to lobby in support of ambitious climate policy.<sup>3</sup> This paper suggests that people who encourage corporations in similar ways should be mindful of the fact that supportive lobbying violates most people's claims to equal influence.

Claims to equal influence are not all that matters, though. Policy can have such a significant impact on people's lives that transgressing claims to equal influence may well be justified for the sake of helping just or good policy be enacted and implemented. One plausible example is precisely climate policy. Ambitious climate mitigation and adaptation policy can prevent millions of deaths from climate-related causes (Burkart et al. 2020; He et al. 2022; Raimi 2021; Watkins and Hales 2014). This can be a strong reason not to discourage corporations from lobbying in favour of ambitious climate policy, and to actually encourage them to do so. However, I leave discussion of when supportive lobbying can justifiably transgress claims to equal influence for further research.

Note that this paper addresses an implication of just one of the many democratic objections to corporate lobbying. The objection that corporate lobbying can violate claims to equal political influence is likely the 'strongest one and the most widespread' (Néron 2010: 720; Alzola 2013; Christiano 2012; Moriarty 2021: 212–214; Weber 1997) There are others that I do not discuss here, such as the objection that corporate lobbying can involve political corruption (Nyberg 2021; Oberman 2004; Ron and Singer 2020; Stark 2009; Goldberg 2021) or violate the deliberative democratic ideal (Hussain and Moriarty 2018; Jayaram and Sridharan 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Calls for corporations to lobby in support of ambitious climate policy by philosophers and social scientists include Shue (2017: 595); Böhler, Hanegraaff, and Schulze (2022), 11; Winston (2014: chap. 11). Calls by governmental and nongovernmental organisations include Metzger et al. 2013; Mills and Reagan 2019; AAA Framework 2020; Ramani and Saltman 2020; Responsible Climate Lobbying, The global standard 2022. In the corporate world many people believe that corporate lobbying is unobjectionable, as long as it supports social good or just policy such as ambitious climate policy (e.g. Sullivan, Black, and Richards 2021: 10).

## 2 Claims to Equal Influence

The most developed and detailed account of claims to equal political influence is Niko Kolodny's (Kolodny 2014b, 2023). According to Kolodny, individuals have a claim to equal formal and informal opportunity for influencing political decisions (Kolodny 2014a: 197–198). An individual has equal formal opportunity for influence when legally sanctioned rules do not introduce explicit differences between that individual and other individual's opportunities to influence political decisions. An example of a decision where there is formally unequal opportunity for influence is an election of legislators where the law only enfranchises adult men.

Informal (or substantive) opportunity for influence is determined by the resources an individual has, such as money and time, when exercising formal opportunity for influence. For example, even when an individual has fully equal formal opportunity she may still have strongly unequal informal opportunity if she has much less free time for exercising political influence than others. The focus in what follows is going to be on informal influence, so 'influence' will refer to informal influence unless specified.

Individuals have a claim against others *exercising* their unequal opportunity for influence (Kolodny 2023: 101–102). This implies, first, that individuals do not violate another individual's claim merely by exercising more influence than the influence that another individual in fact exercises. If an individual has an equal opportunity for influence but she chooses not to exercise it, her claims are not violated. Secondly, an individual does not violate another individual's claim merely by having more opportunity for influence than another does. The claim is violated only when the unequal opportunity is exercised. (In what follows, when I talk of claims to equal influence, I mean the claim to equal opportunity for influence.)

Another important feature of Kolodny's account is that claims to equal influence are held against individuals, i.e. natural persons (Kolodny 2023: 90). Corporations are not natural persons, and in many senses they are not persons at all (Hess 2013: sec. 3). In corporate lobbying the individuals who can violate claims to equal influence are the individuals who have control over whether lobbying is performed in a corporation's name or for a corporation's sake. In some cases, these individuals are more internal to the corporation—such as owners, managers, in-house-lobbyists—, and in some cases they are more external—such as shareholders, and people working for lobbying firms that are hired by the corporation. These individuals can, through their control over a corporation's lobbying, disproportionately influence policy. Whenever I speak of 'corporate lobbying', I mean the acts of these individuals that control if and how lobbying is conducted in a corporation's name or for its sake.<sup>4</sup>

Opportunities for political influence are almost always unequal between individuals. For example, no one has exactly the same amount of free time and other resources to allocate to political influence. This seems to imply that almost all exercises of influence violate claims to equal influence. This counterintuitive implication

<sup>4</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for asking me to revise this point.

can be tempered. One thing is to violate a claim (i.e. unjustifiably transgress the claim), another thing is to infringe it (i.e. justifiably transgress it). Transgressions are more serious when opportunities for influence are more unequal. When an inequality is small, transgressions are often justified for their benefits, and the cost of enforcing or even paying attention to the transgression is often so high that it is justified to just tolerate it. When influence is too disproportionate, however, transgressions are often unjustified, and enforcement is often justified.

## 2.1 How Does Corporate Lobbying Violate Claims to Equal Influence?

Lobbying can take many forms. ‘Inside’ lobbying means trying to influence policymakers by engaging in dialogue with them, for example in a meeting, conference, or formal consultation process. ‘Outside’ lobbying means trying to influence a policymaker in less direct ways, such as by persuading voters through media advertising or newspapers op-eds (Kollman 1998).

Corporate lobbying’s influence is often proportional to the corporation’s wealth. Consider for example inside lobbying. When engaging in dialogue with policymakers, corporations employ two influential strategies. Corporations provide policy research to policymakers (Hall and Deardorff 2006; Gullberg 2013), and corporations threaten policymakers with disinvesting capital from their jurisdictions (Christiano 2012: 250; Jayaram and Sridharan 2023; Lindblom 1977).<sup>5</sup> Wealthier corporations can threaten larger capital withdrawals. Wealthier corporations can also pay for more and better policy research. Additionally, wealth can facilitate inside lobbying by providing better access to policymakers.<sup>6</sup>

Many corporations have much more wealth than most individuals. These corporations can therefore spend much more money than most individuals on, for example, producing policy research. Corporate disinvestment threats are much more compelling than similar threats by less wealthy individuals. For these reasons, the

<sup>5</sup> It may be obvious how policy can be influenced by threats of capital withdrawal, but it is not so obvious how policy can be influenced by providing policy research. Policymakers typically need expensive and time-consuming policy research, and need to gather political intelligence such as information about other legislators’ stance and concerns about a policy proposal. Legislators are often very resource-constrained, so lobbyists can help them pursue their policy aims by supplying the required research and intelligence. Lobbyists provide information selectively, only for the policies they favour. Information-based lobbying, then, typically influences legislators not so much by persuading them to change their policy preferences, as by helping them pursue one of their preferred policies more effectively instead of the others (Hall and Deardorff 2006). Policy research is so valuable to policymakers that often it is the policymakers who seek out the lobbyists to ask for it (Nownes 1999: 117).

<sup>6</sup> There are at least three ways in which wealth can provide better access to policymakers. First, money can help corporations hire lobbyists who have better connections with policymakers. For example, money makes it easier for corporations to hire former policymakers or members of their staff as lobbyists, whom policymakers often trust more than outsiders (Vidal et al., 2012; McCrain 2018). Secondly, money can also help hire more capable lobbyists, or hire them for a longer period, potentially covering all stages in the policymaking process up to the crucial implementation stage (Gullberg 2008). Thirdly, in some countries, campaign contributions and other kinds of political spending may facilitate lobbying, either because contributions buy access or because they signal ideological affinity, both of which facilitate lobbying (Hall and Deardorff 2006: 80).

individuals who control corporate lobbying can have much more opportunity for influencing policy through lobbying than most other individuals (Christiano 2012: 247–250).

Corporate obstructive lobbying seriously violates claims to equal influence. Most individuals are much less wealthy than the corporations. These individuals therefore have much less opportunity for influence than the people who control corporate obstructive lobbying.

Corporate lobbying violates claims to equal influence not because it is an attempt to take unfair advantage, or exploit, an unfair regulatory system (Alzola 2013: 409; Singer 2019: 244–245). Even if corporate lobbying has completely altruistic and non-exploitative intentions, the simple fact that the people who control that lobbying are more influential than most people is enough to violate claims to equal influence.

In this respect, obstructive lobbying and supportive lobbying are the same. When corporations are wealthy, supportive corporate lobbying is an exercise in very unequal opportunity for influence. Even when the policy is good or just. The idea that ‘corporate lobbying is already disproportionately influential, so that influence may just as well be used for good’ is wrong in an important sense. It makes a difference if the individuals who control corporate lobbying abstain from lobbying—they would respect claims to equal influence.

Yet there are some strong arguments for the claim that, in contexts where corporate lobbying obstructs policy, supportive lobbying actually respects—does not violate or even transgress—claims to equal influence.<sup>7</sup>

### 3 Cancelling out Unequal Influence

Supportive lobbying does not violate claims to equal influence if all this lobbying does is cancelling out obstructive lobbying influence. This line of reasoning can best be understood by analogy to the following kind of case.

*Tug of war:* twenty equally strong children are playing tug of war. Ten children pull for the Red team, and ten pull for the Blue team. The game is evenly matched for a few seconds, but then Adult A enters the game, and joins the Red team. Adult A is as strong as ten children combined, so the Red team is now quickly dragging the Blue team towards them. Children in the Blue team start complaining: ‘adults are not allowed in the game, they are too strong!’ Noticing that Adult A has created an imbalance, Adult B enters the game and starts pulling with the Blue team. Adult B is as strong as adult A, so the game is now even again.

It is clear that Adult B exercises much more influence over the game than any of the children. Yet there is a sense in which, rather than introducing even more

<sup>7</sup> This paper does not address lobbying reform, i.e., how and why to reform legal norms in order to restrict undemocratic corporate lobbying (Lessig 2020; Thompson 2018). The paper instead discusses claims against corporate lobbying in the all-too-common contexts where adequate lobbying reform has not yet occurred.

unequal influence into the game, Adult B seems to be equalising influence. The reason is that Adult B cancels out Adult A's influence.

Analogously, supportive lobbying could perhaps cancel out the unequal influence that obstructive lobbying introduces. Instead of violating claims to equal influence, supportive lobbying in fact helps prevent their violation by obstructive lobbying.

This way of thinking about supportive lobbying has some truth in it, but it has important limitations. In a nutshell, the problem is that an attempt at influencing an outcome really counts as cancelling out someone else's influence when the attempt is a reaction to this influence, and when it is confined to this influence only. As I will show, supportive corporate lobbying is often not exclusively reactive and confined.

Let us discuss reactivity first. Influence is reactive to a person's influence when it is exercised because, and just because, this person exercises influence. To see why there is no cancelling out if there is no reactivity, consider a slightly different tug of war case:

*Tug of war 2*: everything is the same as in *Tug of war*, except that Adult B joins the game for a different reason. She is walking nearby, and sees people playing tug of war, her favourite game. She wants to join as soon as possible. She happens to be closer to the Blue team, so she joins it. In fact, Adult B does not even notice Adult A mixed among the other children in the Red team. Frustrated with not winning, Adult A leaves the game. Adult B does not leave, however, and keeps pulling with the Blue team, which now begins to drag the Red team towards them.

I believe that in *Tug of war 2* we cannot say that Adult B cancels out Adult A's pull (at any point in the game). Adult A does not cancel out anyone's pull in particular. Adult B's influence in the game is not a *reaction* to anyone's pull in particular. She entered the game and pulled from the rope out of a desire to play. In *Tug of war*, on the other hand, Adult B enters the game in reaction to seeing Adult A enter the game.

In order to determine if influence is reactive we often need to engage in counterfactual reasoning. We need to know if Adult B would not have entered the game if Adult A had not been playing. And we need to know if Adult B would have left the game if Adult A had left the game.

Similarly, supportive lobbying does not cancel obstructive lobbying unless supportive lobbying is reactive. Lobbying is reactive when it happens because, and just because, someone else is engaging in lobbying. Lobbying is reactive when it would not have happened if someone else had not engaged in lobbying, or if lobbying would stop if those others stopped lobbying.

Sometimes supportive lobbying is reactive. In August 2022, the US Congress passed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which includes substantial incentives for renewable energy, grid energy storage, and electric vehicles, among other emissions-reduction policies. The IRA can reduce global emissions by around 1 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> by 2030 (Jenkins et al. 2022). A few months before being enacted, the bill's fate depended on just one vote. Joe Manchin, a West Virginia Democrat Senator, was apparently the target of intense lobbying by obstructive corporations (Schwartz 2022). In July 2022 Manchin announced he would not vote for the bill.



Breakthrough Energy, a company where Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and George Soros are major investors, reacted to Manchin's announcement and started to intensely lobby his office. The company and its investors used a diverse lobbying repertoire that included sharing expensive information, promising investment in Manchin's jurisdiction, and engaging in outside lobbying such as publishing op-eds in the most widely read newspapers (Colman, Siegel, and Tamborrino 2022; Schoffstall 2022). In the end, Manchin decided to vote for the bill.

However, supportive lobbying is often not reactive. Obviously, supportive lobbying is not reactive when there is no ongoing or threatened obstructive lobbying. Now, even when supportive lobbying takes place in a truly adversarial context where there is ongoing obstructive lobbying, supportive lobbying is likely to be not exclusively a reaction to obstructive lobbying. A significant portion of supportive lobbying typically takes the initiative. To understand why this is typical, we need to briefly discuss why and how corporations support policy.

Corporations often support policy because it is aligned with their underlying business interests. This is called sincere policy support, and it is the opposite of strategic support—just to avoid reputational or political costs (Vormedal and Meckling 2023). When corporations lobby sincerely, they often allocate more substantial resources in support of the policy, and support the policy through most of its stages: from before the policy proposal is even drafted, to its passing, implementation, and even expansion (Vormedal and Meckling 2023). When support is merely strategic, corporations typically support it with broad, generic public statements, and allocate little or no resources to lobby in other ways for the policy. Strategic support is therefore much less likely to actually influence policy.

When corporations support policy sincerely, they often take the initiative, and try to actively shape legislation in ways that benefit them. Sure enough, in these cases supportive lobbying often reacts to obstructive lobbying when it shows up at any stage. Yet when supportive lobbying is sincere, at least part of that lobbying is very likely to be a pure initiative and not a reaction. Whenever supportive lobbying is a pure initiative, it is just plain, non-reactive influence that violates most individuals' claims to equal influence.

Consider the IRA case again. Breakthrough Energy (and several other corporations) had been lobbying Congress and the Senate for two years on the bill that would become the IRA (OpenSecrets 2023). The last-minute, frantic, lobbying of Manchin was just one brief stage of a very long effort to influence that piece of legislation. This long effort probably involved attempts to convince policymakers to introduce particular provisions that would benefit the corporations—several of the IRA's subsidies and tax credits benefit the kind of enterprise that Breakthrough Energy invests in. Most likely, at least some of Breakthrough Energy's lobbying engagements were genuine initiatives, and not reactions to obstructive lobbying (Olano 2023).

We can now turn to the second condition: reactive influence must be confined. This means that reactive influence must cancel out the influence it is reacting to, and cancel out that influence *only*. Reactive influence is not confined when it cancels out a target person's influence but, as a side effect, it exerts additional influence that pushes against other people's influence. Consider another case:



*Tug of war 3*: everything is the same as in *Tug of war*, except that this time Adult B is stronger than Adult A. Moreover, Adult B does not have very fine control over her might: she can either pull with all her might, or not at all. She pulls, and the Blue team starts to drag the Red team towards them.

In this case Adult B's influence is, let us assume, strictly reactive. She would not have started pulling had Adult A not joined the game. And Adult B is not trying to exert more influence than needed to cancel out Adult A's influence. The issue is that there is simply no way for Adult B to cancel out Adult A's influence without, as a side effect, exerting more influence than needed to cancel out Adult A's influence. Thus, Adult B's influence is reactive but not contained.

Supportive lobbying is often not contained. Consider again corporate supportive lobbying in response to Manchin holding out his vote. That lobbying push was a very narrow reaction to (partly successful) corporate obstructive efforts. Yet the influence that supportive lobbying exercised probably pushed against obstructive efforts by other individuals too. Corporations were not the only ones trying to influence Manchin. There were probably many individuals with no corporate ties who tried to get him to vote against the bill by writing letters to his office or publishing social media posts. Corporate supportive lobbying necessarily pushed, as a side effect, against the meagre influence from these individuals too. Since these individuals had much less opportunity for influence, their claims to equal influence were violated.

#### 4 Equalising the Distribution of Influence

Another argument—for the claim that supportive lobbying does not violate claims to equal influence—focuses on how supportive lobbying can equalise the distribution of influence within the whole group of relevant individuals. One advantage of this argument is that it applies both to cases where supportive lobbying is reactive and where it is not reactive.

Consider again the IRA case. As mentioned, some corporate supportive lobbying was not reactive, and tried merely to introduce provisions that would benefit corporations. This supportive lobbying cannot count as cancelling out obstructive lobbying. Nevertheless, it could be argued that this supportive lobbying helped equalise the distribution of influence.

To see why, compare two scenarios, S1 and S2. S1 is the actual IRA scenario, where there is both obstructive lobbying, and non-reactive supportive lobbying (pushing for provisions that benefit corporations). S2 is a counterfactual scenario where there is obstructive lobbying, but no supportive lobbying. There is no doubt that in S1 most Americans have much less opportunity for influence over the IRA than the influence exercised by supportive and obstructive corporate lobbying, so the distribution of influence is very unequal. However, the distribution of influence is less unequal in S1 than in S2. In S2 the only individuals with disproportionate influence are those who control obstructive corporate lobbying. In S1 there are more individuals with disproportionate influence: the same as in S2 plus the individuals

who control supportive corporate lobbying. Unequal influence is at least partly lower in S1.

One standard way to measure distributive equality in a group is the Gini coefficient. This coefficient was initially proposed to measure inequality of income (or wealth). The coefficient measures the dispersion of income in a group with a number between 0 and 1. A Gini coefficient of 1 means that a single individual has income and the rest have no income, and a Gini coefficient of 0 means that every individual has equal income.

When used to measure inequality of influence, a Gini coefficient of 1 means that only one individual in the group has influence whereas all other individuals have no influence, whereas a Gini coefficient of 0 means that all individuals have equal influence. In S2 the Gini coefficient is higher than in S1, meaning that inequality is lower in S1. It seems then that supportive lobbying does not violate claims to equal influence because it helps make the distribution of influence less unequal.

In order to assess this argument, we should first note that equality in the distribution of influence in a group differs from inter-individual equality. Inter-individual equality is measured by comparing one's influence with the influence of each other individual, taken separately. What matters in inter-individual inequality is the magnitude, and number, of relations of unequal influence between individuals.

Distributive and inter-individual equality of influence can come apart. In S1, for example, inter-individual equality of influence is actually lower than in S2. The number of relations of unequal influence is larger in S1. Indeed, in S2 each American (except those controlling obstructive corporations) is in a relation of unequal influence with those who control obstructive corporations. In S1, each American is in relations of unequal influence with those who control supportive corporations too. This significantly increases the number of such relations. It is true that in S1 the individuals who control supportive corporations are in a relation of equal influence with those who control obstructive corporations, so the number of relations of unequal influence is lower for these individuals in S1. But this slight reduction in the number of unequal relations is largely offset because in S1 most Americans are in unequal relations with the people who control both obstructive *and* supportive corporations—approximately doubling the number of such relations.

Whether the argument from the distribution of influence succeeds depends ultimately on what kind of equal influence matters in claims to equal influence. Do people have a claim to influence being distributively equal? Or is it a claim to influence being inter-individually equal?

The answer to these questions hinges on whether we adopt a distributive or a relational account of equality (Arneson 2013: sec. 4; Gosepath 2021: sec. 4). According to distributive accounts, individuals have a fundamental interest in certain goods being distributed equally between individuals. Individuals' fundamental interest in political influence grounds claims to an equal distribution of such influence. According to relational accounts, individuals have a fundamental interest in standing in a relation of equality with each other, or in avoiding standing in a relation of inequality with each other (Anderson 2010; Kolodny 2014b: 335–336; Scheffler 2015; Viehoff 2014). An essential component of equality in such relations is power, and influence over decisions affecting an individual is a form of power. Individuals have

thus an interest in standing in a relation with another where influence is equal, and avoiding standing in a relation where influence is unequal. This interest grounds a claim to equal influence against each natural person.

The jury is still out on whether distributive accounts or relational accounts are most plausible (Arneson 2013: sect. 4). The important lesson is that showing that supportive lobbying makes the distribution of influence less unequal is not enough to show that it does not violate claims to equal influence. One must additionally show that these claims are claims to an equal distribution of influence. And in order to show this, one must explain why distributive accounts of equality should be preferred to relational accounts. A very tall order.

## 5 Equalising Likelihood of Congruence

Consider now a third argument. Individuals have policy preferences. The policy preferences of people who control corporations are sometimes shared by other individuals. Some individuals share the policy preferences of those individuals who control obstructive corporations, some share the preferences of those who control supportive corporations. Now compare scenarios S1 and S2 again. In the S1, the likelihood that policy will be congruent with, or match, each individual's preferences is more equally distributed than in S2. That is because in S2 obstructive lobbying increases the likelihood of congruence for just one set of people—those who do not prefer the IRA. In S1 supportive lobbying increases the likelihood of congruence for another set of people—those who prefer the IRA. If supportive lobbying helps in this way to reduce inequality, it seems it does not violate claims to equal influence.

Equalising likelihood of congruence matters especially in the climate policy realm. People who live in low-emissions countries that are highly vulnerable to sea-water level rise, for example, typically have no right to vote in high-emissions countries where their future is decided. These people also have very limited means to influence policy in high-emissions countries at all. The likelihood that these people's policy preferences will be reflected in the policy of high-emissions countries is low. Similarly, future generations are expected to suffer climate harms to a much larger extent than present generations, but they obviously have no ability to vote in present climate policy decisions. Supportive lobbying can help increase the likelihood of congruence for people in climate-vulnerable, low-emissions countries, and for future generations. Since these people's likelihood of congruence was much lower than for people who live in high-emissions countries, supportive lobbying equalises likelihood of congruence.

This argument is problematic. It confuses influence with congruence. As we just saw, a policy is congruent with an individual's preferences when the policy matches these. On the other hand, an individual has influence over a policy decision when the decision is positively sensitive to the individual's preferences (Kolodny 2014a: 199; Bartels 2023: 83–84). For a policy decision to count as positively sensitive to a preference, the preference must at least contribute to determining the policy decision. Supportive corporate lobbying may well contribute to determining policy

decisions in a way that is congruent with other people's policy preferences, but this does not mean that those preferences themselves have contributed to determining the policy decisions. Thus, supportive corporate lobbying still violates claims to equal influence.

One way to resist this conclusion is to point to how corporate lobbying may itself be influenced by people's preferences. Surely, people's policy preferences sometimes prompt corporations to support a policy. Corporations sometimes strategically support policies that are not aligned with their business interests as a means to retain workers, managers, customers or investors. For example, ClimateAction 100+, an investor association including giants like BlackRock, publishes a Net Zero Company Benchmark assessing large corporations' climate-related performance. The results of this assessment are used by institutional investors to make investment decisions. In 2023 the benchmark now assesses companies' policy engagement. Companies rank lower if they lobby to obstruct ambitious climate policy (ClimateAction100+ 2023).

When corporations support policy strategically, however, they are very unlikely to engage in well-resourced, enduring lobbying. When what is at stake for a corporation is not its (underlying) business interest, but its reputation, corporations typically just reduce or cut their obstructive lobbying spending. They do not ramp up their supportive lobbying spending. In many strategic support cases, in fact, corporations just keep up lobbying obstructively, but outsource the dirty work to a business association. This is a common practice in climate policy—and for that reason since 2023 the Net Zero Company Benchmark now gives a lower score to corporations whose industry associations lobby to obstruct climate policy (ClimateAction100+ 2023). In any case, supportive corporate lobbying is most likely to be enduring and well-resourced when it is aligned with the underlying business interest.

In sum, policy decisions are most likely to be influenced by supportive corporate lobbying when supportive lobbying is least likely to be influenced by other people's policy preferences. Thus, supportive lobby is very unlikely to help equalise influence, even when it helps equalise congruence.

## 6 An Agent-Relative Prerogative to Exercise Equal Influence

There is a fourth argument to make supportive lobbying compatible with claims to equal influence. Obstructive lobbying violates people's claims to equal influence. This includes claims held by people who control lobbying in other corporations. When these people whose claims are violated decide to use their disproportionate lobbying influence to support the obstructed policy, these people can be seen as vindicating their own claim to equal influence. After all, why should these people let their claim be trampled by obstructive corporate lobbying?

This argument relies on something like the claim that people have certain agent-relative prerogatives to harm others (Levine 1984; Quong 2016). These prerogatives are grounded in the idea that individuals can to some extent give more weight to their own interests than to the interests of others when both conflict (Scheffler 1994: chap. 3; Quong 2020: 70–71).

People's agent-relative prerogatives plausibly include prerogatives regarding claims to equal influence. When it comes to choosing between satisfying one's own claim to equal influence and other people's claims to equal influence, individuals are justified in prioritising their own. People who control corporate supportive lobbying sometimes have to choose between transgressing other people's claims, and letting their own claims be violated by obstructive corporate lobbying. The people who control supportive lobbying are justified in prioritising their own claims.

One problem with this argument is that agent-relative prerogatives do not cancel other people's claims. Agent-relative prerogatives provide a kind of justification for transgressing claims that leaves those claims fully in force. Indeed, people whose claims have been transgressed by acts that use an agent-relative prerogative can enforce those claims (Quong 2020: 71). Thus, people who control supportive corporate lobbying may be justified in lobbying supportively as a way to enforce their claim to equal influence, but this does not mean that these people are not trespassing other people's claims to equal influence.

There is a more basic problem with the argument. Claims to equal influence are satisfied whenever one has an *opportunity* to exert as much influence as another is in fact exercising. Exercising the opportunity is not necessary for one's claim to be respected. When we compare obstructive corporate lobbying and supportive corporate lobbying in terms of influence, what matters to determine if the claims of people who control supportive lobbying are violated is not whether these people exercise as much influence as people who lobby obstructive exercise. What matters is whether the people who control supportive lobbying have the opportunity to exercise that much influence. Thus, people who control supportive lobbying do not really face a dilemma between enforcing their own claim to equal influence and respecting other people's claim to equal influence. If people who control supportive lobbying choose not to exercise their disproportionate influence, both their claims and other people's claims are respected.

## 7 Conclusion

In a world where corporations very often lobby to obstruct just and good policies, it is tempting to think that there is no harm in other corporations lobbying in support of those policies. The playing field is so slanted in favour of obstructive corporations that the fact that other corporations sometimes support those policies does not seem to be a matter of concern, not even from the democratic point of view. I have argued that precisely from a democratic point of view—understood in terms of claims to equal political influence—supportive lobbying is often as objectionable as obstructive lobbying. Supportive lobbying may well level the playing field in some respects, but not in a way that avoids often seriously transgressing claims to equal influence.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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