

# 7

## Interest groups and corporate power

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Like other Anglosphere liberal democracies, Australia has very little formal regulation of the interest group process, although by the time of writing a few practices (such as lobby donations to parties and politicians) were closely regulated. A great deal of democratic practice in this area still relies on unwritten political norms and conventions, and on politicians and officials acting in public-interested ways because they believe in democratic norms. The latter may be subverted if business corporations or wealthy individuals can coerce or influence governments into favouring their interests over others – the problem of ‘corporate power’.

### **How should the interest group process operate in a liberal democracy?**

- ◆ Politicians should recognise a need to supplement electoral and public opinion influences via continuously being open to dialogue with different sectional interests among citizens and firms about detailed policy design and who bears the costs of policy changes. Decision-makers should recognise the legitimacy of autonomous collective actions and mobilisations by different groups of citizens, and value the transparent consideration of diverse points of view.
- ◆ All stakeholders should have an ability to freely form interest groups and to lobby elected representatives and government officials on decisions affecting them, operating within the law and common ethical norms.
- ◆ In a democratic society the resources for organising collective ‘voice’ and political action in pressure groups, trade unions, trade associations, NGOs, charities, community groups and other forms should be readily available, along with opportunities for securing media coverage and explaining their case to citizens at large.
- ◆ The costs of organising effectively should be low and within reach of any social group or interest. Ideally, resources for different interests should be reasonably equitably distributed. Where a balanced representation of all affected interests is conspicuously hard to achieve, then philanthropic or even state assistance should be available to ensure that the policy process does not systematically disadvantage particular groups. This imperative is especially strong where historically the civil rights and legitimate needs of a given group or set of communities has been disregarded.

How to cite this chapter:

Dunleavy, Patrick (2024) ‘Interest groups and corporate power’, in: Evans, Mark; Dunleavy, Patrick and Phillimore, John (eds) *Australia’s Evolving Democracy: A New Democratic Audit*, London: LSE Press, pp.143–165. <https://doi.org/10.31389/lsepress.ada.g> Licence: CC-BY-NC 4.0

- ◆ Because of inequalities in resources across interest groups, decision-makers should discount the input they receive to take into account which lobbies are easier or more difficult to organise.
- ◆ Policy-makers should also re-weight the inputs they receive so as to distinguish between shallow or even 'fake' harms being claimed by well-organised groups and deeper harms potentially being suffered by hard-to-organise groups.
- ◆ Where a policy change means that new costs or risks must be imposed on some groups in a policy area, decision-makers should seek to allocate the costs involved to those groups best able to insure against them.
- ◆ Because of the 'privileged position of business' in terms of controlling discretionary resources critical for overall social welfare and shaping political debate, liberal democracies confront particular difficulties in ensuring that the power of major corporations, private business more generally and wealthy individuals is controlled and regulated so as to maintain a relatively equitable interest group process. This is likely to involve controlling business's capacity to shape public opinion, dominate policy analysis and relevant information, and withhold resources vital for state policy.

The chapter begins by briefly reviewing the recent empirical experience of group politics in Australia, set against the background expectations of the pluralist theory central to modern democracies. A strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis then summarises key points of debate around interest group politics and corporate power. After the SWOT analysis, three sections consider further group inequalities, donations and corporate power.

## Recent developments

Modern pluralist theories of the democratic process do not claim that interest groups have 'equal' power in any sense. Instead they argue that multiple different centres of power in society should be acknowledged and welcomed as legitimate in the political process. And there should be no guaranteed ability for the electoral wishes of an 'apathetic' majority to over-ride the legitimate intense preferences of minorities relating to their own welfare and concerns within civil society. Easy mobilisation by interest groups and their ability to access politicians and officials are also key safeguards against abuses of civil rights and essential human liberties (see [Chapter 3](#)). The following subsections review key expectations in pluralist theory and then consider how far Australian group politics matches that model.

### Group pluralism

Any group in Australian society with shared interests should be able to easily put together an organisation and engage in the political process, confident that its legitimacy will be recognised both by elected politicians and by public service officials, so long as it acts in legal and ethically appropriate ways. Consultation processes should be equitably organised and take account of the full diversity of public views about policy options. This does not mean that politicians can or should 'equally accommodate' every interest (even if that were feasible, which

it is not). Nor does it mean letting every group have a veto power to block any policy changes adversely affecting them – for this would be a recipe for complete social gridlock (see [Chapter 15](#)). Resolving policy issues where there are sharp conflicts of interest between different social and economic groups often entails making a choice where someone must incur a loss – because any option will carry costs for some group. However, in democratic theory, politicians and public administration officials are obligated:

- ◆ to always register different groups' costs from alternative policy proposals accurately and appreciate them in detail
- ◆ to modify policy designs as far as possible so as to minimise the overall social costs (which is often feasible)
- ◆ to mitigate the burden falling on any one group as far as possible
- ◆ perhaps to compensate a group for a change that affects them adversely
- ◆ to allocate costs, where they have to be incurred, efficiently across social interests to those groups that can most cheaply and easily insure or protect themselves against such costs ([Horn, 1995, Ch. 2](#)).

For instance, on the last point, collecting income taxes from workers in firms inevitably creates transaction costs for someone. Getting employers to bear most costs by collecting pay-as-you-go taxes for their employees is the cheapest way to do it, and firms can employ dedicated staff to handle tax business and offset these costs against their profits.

How are politicians and officials made accessible in liberal democracies? A 'ladder' of freely available participation opportunities should exist. Low-cost options on the ladder include writing emails, letters and social media messages to MPs or departments; sending back public feedback forms; signing online petitions; or people showing up at MPs' local offices or 'surgeries' to explain in detail how policy problems have affected them. Medium-cost activities include people joining and paying membership subscriptions to fund a pressure or other collective group to represent their case to politicians and the media; supporting lobbying activities with funding or time; making formal complaints through public administration channels; and taking part in official consultation exercises, like public meetings.

High-cost activities might include people taking part in public protests, demonstrations, strikes or peaceful civil disobedience – activities that more forcefully communicate to policy-makers how strongly they feel about an issue. If people are willing to incur such high costs, they demonstrate to politicians that persisting with contested proposals will likely cause voters to change allegiance or back opposition parties, and create possible reputational damage for particular unpopular politicians. Well-organised groups pursue many low- and medium-cost options simultaneously, reserving high-cost options more for 'last ditch' mobilisations if previous lobbying activities have not succeeded.

The group process is important for government and opposition, because how far a given group climbs up the 'ladder' of organising and mobilising costs provides politicians with high-quality and reliable information about its members' preference intensities. While an email or letter campaign to MPs might be ignored or assigned little salience, and a professionally run media advertising campaign discounted, evidence of people incurring real costs to get their point across will count far more. What then determines differences in the influence or power of different groups? Pluralist theory recognises that a diverse set of nine main factors will determine a group's relative influence in a relatively complex overall way. These factors are summarised in [Figure 7.1](#).

**Figure 7.1: Factors that make interest groups more or less politically influential**

Factor	Expected to be influential, and why	Expected not to be influential, and why
1. Potential size of group (if everyone supported it)	Large groups may shape more voters' views and influence election outcomes.	Small minority groups are trivial for election outcomes.
2. Actual membership size		
3. Group's mobilisation rate (i.e. actual members/potential members)	Well-mobilised, active groups can better sway their members' actions and bear organising/campaign costs.	Passive and poorly mobilised groups.
4. Can groups easily organise private benefits (selective incentives) for their members?	Usually, smaller groups can do this best, because non-joining is visible and affects outcomes. A few larger groups may just be 'lucky' in this aspect.	Usually, larger groups cannot do this, because individual non-joiners are invisible. And in large groups any one person not joining will not worsen the group's outcomes in a noticeable way.
5. Access to resources	Wealthy groups can fund campaigns and use skilled professionals for lobbying.	Groups with weak funding rely on amateur lobbying and philanthropy to get heard ( <b>Madden, Scaife and McGregor-Lowndes, 2005</b> ).
6. Pivotality within major social or partisan cleavages or conflicts	Non-aligned or 'swing' groups are able to swing their support behind different political or societal coalitions and extract a price for it from political leaders.	Groups already firmly aligned in social or political conflicts (e.g. trade unions supporting Labor, or business backing Liberals); their support may be taken for granted by political leaders, since they are committed already.
7. Legitimacy	Well-established, 'respectable' and moderate groups that play by the rules of parliamentary politics and represent non-controversial causes.	'Extreme' groups, those that reject parliamentary politics or have relied on 'direct action', and new groups, especially those representing controversial viewpoints.
8. Reputation for success	Groups that have previously fought and won fiercely contested issues and demonstrated political and campaign skills, strong membership backing and access to big resources.	New groups and those who have previously lost out in contested issues or whose campaigns visibly failed.
9. 'Coalitionality', i.e. ease of joining coalitions with other interests	Non-ideological groups, those most controlled by their leaderships, and groups able to build 'coalitions of minorities' with different and non-clashing interests. For example, libertarian groups opposing 'nanny state' restrictions might ally with interests seeking to stop vaccines, curb anti-smoking measures or ease firearm controls on guns.	Groups that are ideologically 'locked-in', especially if group policy is controlled by grassroots members.

Source: Derived from ([Dunleavy, 1991, Ch. 4](#)).

So, overall, the pluralist prediction is that:

<b>Group influence</b>	<i>is some weighted function of</i>	<b>P</b>	<b>+ A</b>	<b>+ M</b>	<b>+ S</b>
		(its potential size)	(its actual size)	(its mobilisation rate)	(access to selective Incentives)
	<b>+ T</b>	<b>+ V</b>	<b>+ L</b>	<b>+ R</b>	<b>+ C</b>
	(its total resources)	(its pivotality)	(its legitimacy)	(its reputation)	(its coalitionality)

## Australia: empirics

Political scientists have not been able to determine how these different factors are weighted, but the majority pluralist view among them insists that within liberal democracies no group ranks high on all these factors at once. For instance, Australian trade unions have 1.5 million members and some occupations and industries are well mobilised (especially the public services). Unions are able to mass together annual union membership fees and so run effective organisations. They can also offer selective incentives, for example by providing legal protection to members. These bases sustain unions' ability to undertake collective industrial bargaining with employers and to periodically mount costly effective strikes or other actions when needed. Yet unions have also faced sharply declining memberships in many industries (see [Figure 7.6](#) later in this chapter) and must constantly battle with powerful business corporations, and often environmental lobbies. Unions have also been thoroughly aligned with the Labor Party (and so rarely pivotal). Indeed, unions regularly confront threats to their bargaining capabilities and effectiveness for members from restrictive government policies, especially under Liberal-National governments (who may believe they have few union voters to lose).

Many groups may also be well situated on most of the factors in [Figure 7.1](#) in one narrow area of policy-making, but still be relatively uninfluential in others. So pluralists argue that there is no overall, fixed power structure, but instead a multiplicity of different and shifting power centres. Previously long-established patterns of influence can also be changed if public and political opinion shifts against them. For instance, rural and shooting interests were long seen as powerful in maintaining relatively lax gun laws in Australia's states, and strongly linked to the Coalition parties on the right. But after a mass shooter killed 20 people in 1996, Howard's Liberal-National government and all the states pushed through a National Firearms Agreement that imposed stricter gun controls nationwide ([Guardian, 2016](#)). No other mass shootings have recurred (up to late 2023), a very different picture from the complete stalemate on gun controls in the USA.

Looking more systematically at how many interest groups operate in Australia, and how they are endowed with the resources listed above, is tricky, because recent data is lacking. Many major business, professional and well-established civil society associations are organised primarily in branches at the state/territory level (and sometimes in larger cities too). Additionally, they come together at federal level via annual conferences and meetings and operate national executive committees. However, some trade associations and trade unions are strongly organised at both levels, but may focus most intensively on federal lobbying. Long-established issue advocacy groups, plus organisations like unions strongly linked to major political parties, also permanently operate branch networks spanning across both levels. Their balance of activity reflects who does what in the overall allocation of Australian governance functions across tiers (see [Chapter 16](#)).

Figure 7.2 shows a selection of some of the interest groups that were reputedly amongst the largest in modern Australia in 2023. The trade union movement was still perhaps the largest overall in terms of the total union members, brought together within the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). However, many of the component unions have different policy lines on key issues and controversies, for example over climate change mitigation measures needed. Two large business associations and the farmers' federation also feature in the list, and two health professional bodies (for nurses and doctors). The largest civil society and non-economic groups are the Red Cross, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) and the pressure group for older citizens.

**Figure 7.2: Australian interest groups reputedly with the largest number of members or supporters, 2023**

Group	Type	Members or 'supporters'	Type	Political alignment
Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) – representing 1,500,000 union members	Peak association	46 unions	Trade union	ACTU itself is neutral, but many unions are Labor aligned
Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF)	Environmental/ interest group	700,000	Interested citizens	Neutral
Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI)	Peak association	300,000	Business owners	Neutral
Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF)	Peak body for profession	300,000	Nurses/midwives	Neutral
National Seniors Australia	Social interest group	200,000	Interested citizens	Neutral
Australian Red Cross (with 700,000 supporters)	Philanthropic group	90,000	Interested citizens	Neutral
Australian Medical Association (AMA)	Peak body for profession	90,000	Doctors	Neutral
National Farmers' Federation	Peak association	80,000	Farmers	Liberal/National
Australian Industry Group (Ai Group)	Peak association	60,000	Business owners	Liberal/National

Source: Compiled by author using data from the 2023 Wikipedia pages, checked against the organisation home pages for each of these groups.

Environmental groups and those representing the interests of women, LGBTIQ+ communities, ethnic/language identities, First Nations peoples and other demographic groupings tend to be more locally or community based. They mostly have less well developed or more episodic/ fluctuating levels of state or federal organisational 'pyramiding', depending on the issues being

addressed at different times or in particular campaigns. With the expansion of social media and the ready availability of apps and other aids for lowering organisations' communication and administration costs, many smaller cause groups and special interest associations (for example, resident associations) are essentially federations of home-based organisers who may now be able to match many of the activities previously requiring office-based staff financed from membership dues. Internet-based funding and means of engaging supporters who are not members are also increasingly critical and to some extent can substitute for obtaining large donations and contracting a media/PR agency to run campaigns.

The other side of the coin involves considering the most disadvantaged groups in Australian society and their capacity to organise and secure political attention to their needs and concerns. [Figure 7.3](#) shows the five groups that in the still-recent past (around the turn of the century) suffered from what most observers would regard as serious, policy-induced disadvantages, and compares that with more recent experience in terms of policy attention and patterns of group mobilisation. In all these cases, previously very bad situations for these groups have greatly improved in recent decades. However, among a minority of Australians, there are still some continuing strong mobilisations around contemporary issues that sustain prejudicial or discriminatory public attitudes that are hard to eradicate completely.

**Figure 7.3: Five disadvantaged social groups and their interest group mobilisation, 2023**

Social group	Situation at the start of the 21st century	Public policy situation, 2023	Pattern of group mobilisation, 2023
Women	Despite equal pay legislation, women were still discriminated against in pay levels and woefully under-represented at the top of corporations and within the political system. Levels of both reported and unreported abuse and violence against women were high.	Gender-based pay gaps have reduced (see <a href="#">Chapter 10</a> ) and women's representation in politics has improved towards parity with men. Company boards and top private sector positions show less equal progress. The 'Me Too' movement and scandals in Parliament, plus the political success of Teal Independents, have broadened the range of discriminatory sexism being criticised and acted against.	Highly decentralised, multiple-state and big-city groups, with vocal political and public campaigning on 'Me Too' issues, pay and promotion, and reproductive issues.
People with disabilities	Welfare provision for disabled people was partial and under-funded.	The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has improved access to services and benefits ( <a href="#">DSS, 2017</a> ), but discrimination in public transport access remains considerable. Public attitudes have improved, but people with disabilities still suffer labour market exclusion and ageism in their senior years.	Seven main disability organisations (some individual associations, a consortium of associations and others in company form) receive government funding ( <a href="#">DSS, 2017</a> ) and must be consulted by public policy-makers on relevant changes.

Social group	Situation at the start of the 21st century	Public policy situation, 2023	Pattern of group mobilisation, 2023
LGBTIQ+ communities	Prejudice against homosexuals and lesbians was substantial and people could routinely expect some public hostility, reflecting quite recent decriminalisation. Legal discrimination continued.	Transgender groups continue to experience public hostility from a substantial minority of peoples. Gay people have greater but not yet complete public acceptance and can still be targeted by homophobes. Gay marriages have finally been accepted and legal disadvantages have gone.	Well-developed state and conurbation groups, with a focus on annual city Pride marches, vocal political and public campaigning.
Refugees and asylum seekers	Some 900,000 refugees have been re-settled in Australia since 1945. But since 2010 only people with valid visas have been allowed, and those without (often 'boat people') have been housed offshore under poor conditions (e.g. on access to healthcare).	Visa-less refugees and asylum seekers face long periods of detention and limited access to public services. Pathways to resettlement are restrictive. Public hostility to refugees and asylum seekers' interests on the political right and as a component in public opinion remains prominent.	A range of small philanthropic cause groups campaign on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers, who are unable to organise themselves politically.
First Nations Australians	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have faced long-run historical mistreatment by government, gaining full civil rights only in 1967.	Indigenous Australian communities in 'bush' areas of the Northern Territory and Queensland still face intractable social problems of joblessness, substance abuse and household violence. Elsewhere, First Nations people confront less acute but still serious disadvantages.	A slow-burn civil and political rights and cultural movement most recently focused at national level on the First Nations Voice to Parliament referendum. But this was lost decisively in October 2023 (see <a href="#">Chapter 4</a> ). Future progress is hard to foresee.

*Source: Compiled by author using information from the 2023 home pages for each organisation and also any relevant Wikipedia pages.*

In terms of securing access to political power centres and attention from public service officials, some civil society groups and mobilisations were largely excluded from direct influence during the COVID-19 pandemic – notably a wide range of anti-lockdown and anti-quarantine protestors and later on the many vocal anti-vaccination groups, plus groups promoting health disinformation and a wide range of often bizarre conspiracy theories. In many cases, legal compulsion was used to coerce dissenters from many of these groups into meeting public health regulations, and major party politicians often united to condemn especially 'extreme' demonstrations or propaganda, which was also generally excluded from broadcast news and discussions. Did this dismissive treatment infringe democratic norms? Pluralists would argue that it does not, since the COVID-19 sceptics and anti-vaxxers were allowed to demonstrate, mobilise and communicate their messages online and via print, lobby public authorities and dispute their policies, and probe the public health evidence. In addition, there were two strong



and over-riding reasons why these movements were handled by government in a generally unresponsive way. Decision-makers wanted to maximise the welfare of the vast majority of citizens in the face of a very serious threat to health. And most politicians were concerned to combat any degradation of the public realm by giving credence to completely unevidenced and irrational disinformation. Yet politicians' and public service concerns to minimise any 'extreme' reactions and public resistance (however badly founded) did also clearly influence lockdown policy in most states, which ended restrictions as soon as possible (see [Chapters 17 to 22](#)).

## Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
<p>The importance of interest group politics has been fully acknowledged by politicians and officials at federal, state and local levels and recognised in the country's 'civic culture'. The resources needed to form effective interest groups are widely available, and internet mobilisation tools have even further lowered the information and organisation cost barriers to forming associations.</p>	<p>Critics have pointed out that in the recent past many minority groups in Australia suffered from legal oppressions and policy-induced harms because majority-seeking politicians were unable or unwilling to take unpopular actions needed to defend their civil liberties and human rights. Some minorities, like asylum seekers and refugees not using official routes, and transgender people, still suffer from similar mistreatment or prejudices from some other citizens.</p>
<p>Group influence depends on multiple different factors (see earlier in this chapter), and pluralist authors argue that no interest groups score well on all factors at once. In general, large groups can potentially shape substantial votes on their own, while minority groups with small memberships have to rely on joining a 'coalition of minorities' – that is, pooling their influence to promote their interests shared with other favourable minority groups (ones whose interests do not clash with theirs).</p>	<p>In recent years, many Australian voluntary institutions (like churches, charities and some NGOs) have been indicted for their past treatment of disadvantaged people in their care, with adverse impacts on social trust. A recent analysis estimated the percentages of Australians in four groups (<a href="#">Kamp et al., 2023</a>) – the very distrusting (15 per cent), those that are largely unsure about how much they can trust various groups and institutions (17 per cent), those that are somewhat trusting (42 per cent) and those that are largely trusting (26 per cent). Not all associations have acted in socially positive ways, as some social movement mobilisations around bizarre conspiracy theories continue to demonstrate.</p>
<p>Some previously large and apparently dominant groups, notably the trade unions and established Christian churches, have declined in size and salience so that they operate as more 'normal' interests than in the past. Overall, the pluralism of interest group politics has greatly increased in recent decades.</p>	<p>Trade union decline has been accompanied by an increasing imbalance of economic power in the workplace between employers and workers, and the growth of major social inequalities. Before 2022, Liberal-National governments' restrictions on unions' ability to organise effectively often made this worse, for ideological reasons.</p>

<p>Corporations and wealthy individuals can influence politics via party donations, which are strictly controlled, but they control few votes directly. Major corporations tend not to make spectacularly large or one-sided donations or political interventions, which are far more the behaviour of somewhat ‘rogue’ business executives, like Clive Palmer. Most major Australian companies ‘hedge’ against political risks by making only medium-sized donations relatively equally across the top two parties.</p>	<p>Business has become more concentrated in Australia over time (Sims, 2016). It now occupies a clearly privileged position within the interest group universe, and by expanding its ideological, informational and media power it has more than compensated for having only a minority of votes that are directly controlled. Business interests have increasingly set a dominant neo-liberal framework for all policy debates. Australian voters worry more about the power of big business than about trade union power, and this effect was most marked under Coalition governments (Cameron and Wynter, 2018).</p>
<p>The development of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and big firms’ action on environmental and social governance (ESG) both demonstrate that business interests themselves must pay close attention to their public reputations, the views of their increasingly active and articulate customers, their workforce, and political and policy measures. Old-fashioned, ‘hard threat’ measures (like the Google and Facebook showdowns with the federal government in 2021 on the mandatory media code, see Chapter 9) are no longer sustainable for business.</p>	<p>Corporations have repeatedly and systematically intervened in the political process to mobilise resources in defence of their sectional economic interests. Strikingly successful media and ideational campaigns have frustrated any action on corporate taxation, drastically slowed efforts to mitigate climate change, and biased economic policy-making consistently to major corporation interests (see below in this chapter).</p>
<p><b>Future opportunities</b></p>	<p><b>Future threats</b></p>
<p>The expansion of social media has increased the scope, immediacy and appeal of citizen activism in ways that now fundamentally constrain large or institutionally dominant groups’ ability to get away with scandals or inaction on inequalities – witness the change in corporate behaviours about bringing women onto boards and acting against sex discrimination within their firms.</p>	<p>The development of artificial intelligence (AI) will almost certainly expand the ability of corporations and wealthy interests to flood social media with disinformation campaigns and materials designed to demotivate opponents. Australian regulators are poorly placed to take any effective countervailing measures.</p>
	<p>Only constant vigilance by unions, anti-corporate interest groups and citizens, plus some centre-left politicians can prevent the further continuous accretion of corporate power at the expense of all other social interests.</p>

The remainder of the chapter considers how the interest group funding of political parties shapes unequal group influence; to what extent trends in group mobilisation have been adverse for the largest civil society groups, especially the trade unions; and if business and corporate power has become dominant in Australian politics.

## Interest groups and party funding

One of the most direct and controversial linkages between interest groups and policy-making concerns the existence of large donations by groups or companies and individuals linked to major groups (like business or the unions). Of course, donations are closely regulated and any gift to political parties over a threshold of A\$16,900 must be declared to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), which publishes an annual list of donations. However, there has been no upper limit on how large gifts can be. Critics argue that business influence in particular can be disguised by corporate executives making large individual gifts that are well understood to be for a specific interest. Sceptics argue about the legitimacy of large donations, querying whether they might lead to creating dependency or expectations about policy stances from the recipient parties. On a pessimistic view:

*Even with reform of the system of funding political parties, the wealthy will find a way to buy political power – whether through the direct sponsorship of politicians and parties, or through the acquisition of media businesses, or through the financing of think tanks. To put it another way, the voices of the super-wealthy are heard by politicians well above the babble of the crowd ... It means that we are more vulnerable than perhaps we have been since the 19th century to the advent of rule by an unelected oligarchy. (Peston, 2008, p.346)*

By contrast, pluralist defenders of the status quo argue that in fact donations are quite diverse, and that no flow-back of benefits for publicised donations can be organised without running foul of strong anti-corruption laws at state level and legislation, recently strengthened at federal level.

Figure 7.4 shows what types of donors gave the largest gifts of A\$50,000 or more in 2017–18 – an off-year for elections except in Queensland and Western Australia. These large gifts to parties totalled just under A\$9.3 million then. Over a third were company donations to the Liberals, followed by individual donations, again to the Liberals, and then trade union donations to Labor (mainly in the two election states). Trade associations also gave extensively to Labor and less so to the Liberals, and a few companies supported the Nationals. Overall, nearly half of the big donations (48 per cent) went to the Liberals and 36 per cent to Labor. However, in 2017–18 the single largest donation made was of A\$600,000 to the Greens, from a retired professor in her will. Elsewhere in the listing it was apparent that companies and unions preferred to fragment their donations across state and federal parties, perhaps to avoid attracting attention. Some large companies also followed ‘balanced’ funding strategies, giving approximately the same funding to the top two parties. Trade associations also often split their funding in this way. Trade unions divided their funding across state and local units, making gifts chiefly to their relevant part of the Australia Labor Party (ALP). Labor attracted few large individual donors in this year, but did somewhat better with smaller donations. The Greens relied almost wholly on individual donors, some of whom gave medium-sized sums, reflecting the party’s appeal based on its espousing a ‘cause’ and not merely being a standard election-fighting organisation.

**Figure 7.4: Who gave and who received major sums (of A\$50,000 or more) as political donations in 2017–18***Thousands of Australian dollars (A\$)*

Party	Type of donor				Total received
	Companies	Individuals	Trade associations	Unions	
Liberal	3,032	1,500	270		4,802
Labor	1,009	92	637	1,580	3,318
Greens		750			750
National	264				264
Australian Conservatives	100				100
Katter	50				50
<i>Total given</i>	<i>4,455</i>	<i>2,342</i>	<i>907</i>	<i>1,580</i>	<i>9,284</i>

Source: Compiled by author using data from the AEC (2020).

Note: There were 85 donations above A\$50,000 in this year.

However, just looking at donations by size, or focusing attention (as most critics do) on large companies alone, may not capture the ability of interest groups to make multiple small donations in ways that cumulatively have a great effect, especially in the case of companies or trade associations transacting with the government for contracts, or where business fortunes are closely bound up with government regulation or subsidy schemes. A case in point involves community pharmacists whose peak national professional body is the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, which makes no donations and remains resolutely non-political. In addition, however, an association called the Pharmacy Guild of Australia has represented the specific interests of 5,700 community pharmacists, including large chains and small businesses. They are heavily dependent on regulations about what Medicare's Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) pays for drugs – expected to total A\$4 billion a year in 2020 to 2025 (Russell, 2019). These firms have also wanted to prevent too much competition arising in many community settings and in the use of online prescribing. The guild has been extremely active politically, both in federal politics and at state level. Figure 7.5 shows that in 2017–18 they made nearly a hundred donations, split into many small amounts, across the top two parties, with more going to Labor (historically a staunch defender of community pharmacies' role and of Medicare generally).

**Figure 7.5: Donations to parties by the Pharmacy Guild of Australia in 2017–2018**

Party	Total (A\$)	Number of donations	Average donation amount (A\$)
Labor (ALP and four state parties)	139,540	29	4,810
Liberal (two state parties)	43,280	23	1,880
National	37,620	41	920
<b>Total</b>	<b>220,440</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>2,370</b>

Source: Computed by the author using data from the AEC, reproduced at ABC News (2019).

Note: Numbers in columns 1 and 3 are rounded to the nearest 10.

The end result has been an intensely active and vigilant group exercising a lot of influence, and apparently getting a lot of direct return for its members in terms of beneficial changes strongly affecting these firms, who typically get 40 to 46 per cent of their annual incomes from public funds:

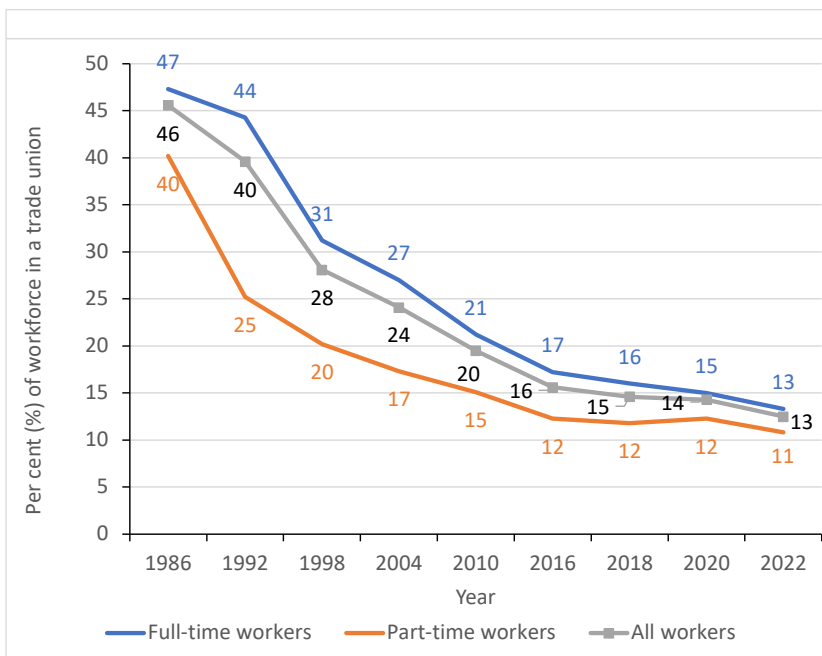
*The lobbying capabilities of the Pharmacy Guild executive and its members, the reach into every community, and the substantial political donations they make, mean politicians are always nervous about treading on community pharmacies' toes.*

*Community pharmacies have a unique ability to garner public support for their causes from loyal customers. This can be a potent deterrent for any politician proposing changes the Pharmacy Guild views as adverse (Russell, 2019).*

## The decline of large groups?

The dominant large-membership interest group for much of Australia's history has been the trade union movement, which in the mid-1980s accounted for almost half the working population. However, a series of trends, plus the vigorous anti-union laws of the Howard government in the 1990s, helped to produce a big decline in membership, and by 2022 the trade union movement stood at just one in eight workers (Figure 7.6). The development of part-time working and later the gig economy, plus the deindustrialisation of large manufacturing plants with many (mostly male) workers and the globalisation of production functions to China and elsewhere, explain much of the early spectacular declines in this chart. For instance, in 1993 the unionisation rate for part-time workers was fully 19 percentage points less than for full-time workers. Improvements in union appeals to women and part-time workers began to stabilise the situation from 2016 onwards, but the COVID-19 pandemic and working from home did not help there.

**Figure 7.6: The decline of unionisation in Australia, 1986 to 2022**



Source: Compiled by the author using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023).

Note: Numbers rounded to nearest digit.

Given the decline of manufacturing, much of modern trade unions' membership is concentrated in professional occupations, chiefly inside the public services (and mostly at state level). Thus, [Figure 7.7](#) shows that public administration, healthcare and education are among the most unionised industrial sectors, with over a fifth of workers being members in 2022. Two other top five areas (shaded in [Figure 7.7](#)) are infrastructure and transport. The order of sectors in [Figure 7.7](#) is set by the extent of declines in membership from 2016 to 2022 (in the rightmost column). Here the top sectors were public administration, mining and financial services – the first and third possibly reflecting the effects of working from home. Elsewhere decline was less steep, but still apparently hard for the unions to stem. Only one small sector – arts services – saw any unionisation increase.

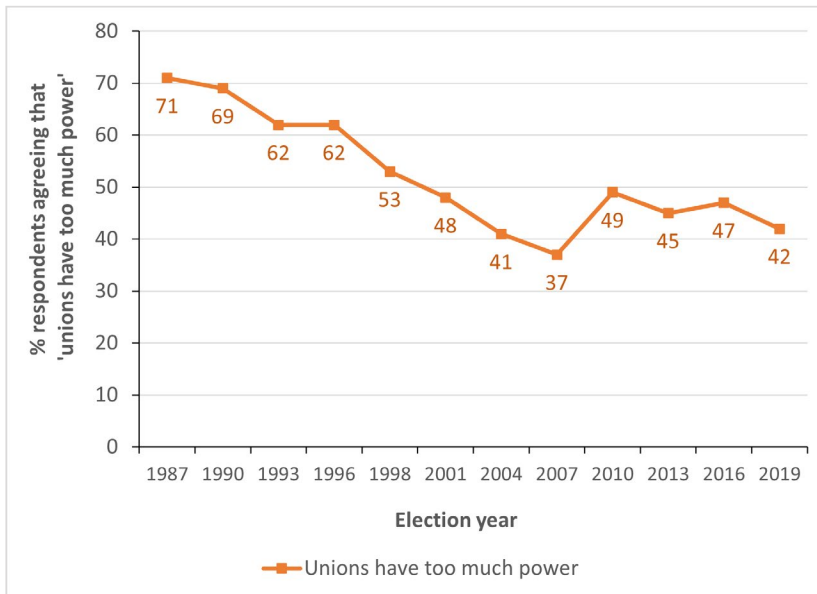
**Figure 7.7: Changes in unionisation rates by industrial sector, 2016 to 2022**

<i>Industrial sector</i>	Unionisation rate (%) 2022	Decline (% points) since 2016
Public administration and safety	22.5	-8.3
Mining	10.2	-6.3
Financial and insurance services	6	-5.0
Electricity, gas, water and waste services	21.6	-4.4
Manufacturing	9.9	-4.2
Construction	9.7	-3.9
Retail trade	8.1	-3.8
Transport, postal and warehousing	19.8	-3.7
Healthcare and social assistance	20.2	-3.3
Wholesale trade	2.4	-3.3
Education and training	30.1	-3.0
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	1.3	-2.4
Other services	3.7	-2.4
Administrative support services	3.4	-2.3
Information, media and telecommunications	7.2	-1.0
Accommodation and food services	1.6	-0.7
Professional, scientific and technical services	2.1	-0.6
Rental, hiring and real estate services	2.4	-0.2
Arts and recreation services	9.5	0.3

Source: Compiled by author using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023).

Falling union memberships have also been very visible for the Australian public. [Figure 7.8](#) shows that the share of respondents to the Australian Election Study endorsing the view that unions are too powerful fell considerably in recent decades, stabilising above 40 per cent since 2010.

**Figure 7.8: Percentage (%) of respondents in election surveys agreeing that ‘unions have too much power’, 1987 to 2019**



Source: Adapted from Cameron and McAllister (2019, p.108).

The outcomes of industrial disputes themselves have also showed some declining union efficacy over time. A third shaper of trade unions' legitimacy were the interactions with Liberal-National Coalition and Labor federal governments over industrial relations policies in three main periods, namely:

- ◆ from 1996 to 2007, when the Howard Coalition government systematically attacked unions' legitimacy, seeking to reduce their policy influence
- ◆ from 2007 to 2013, when unions once again became 'insider' groups under the Rudd–Gillard Labor governments (albeit with policy differences among them)
- ◆ from 2013 to 2022, when the unions again moved to being 'outsider' groups under the Coalition governments (**Wright and McLaughlin, 2021**).

Some manual worker unions recovered some bargaining power thanks to labour shortages during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the labour movement as a whole returned to insider group status with ministers after the narrow Labor victory in the 2022 federal election.

# The problems of corporate power and wealth distortions

As the case of the community pharmacies illustrates, businesses very often have a direct interest in shaping public policies, and attention has focused especially on the political power of big corporations. Lenin famously claimed that the democratic states were ‘tied by a thousand threads’ to the interests of capitalists, a position that liberal authors have always rejected. Yet a range of pluralist theorists have argued that we should be concerned about ‘the privileged position of business’, which makes corporations’ influence completely non-comparable to that of normal interest groups (Dryzek and Dunleavy, 2009, pp.132–34; **Head, 1993**):

*The system works that way not because business people conspire or plan to punish us, but simply because many kinds of institutional changes are of a character they do not like and consequently reduce the inducements we count on to motivate them to provide jobs and perform their other functions [within their discretion]. (Lindblom, 1982, p.327)*

And ‘even in the democracies, masses are persuaded to ask from elites only what elites wish to give them’ (Lindblom, 1977, p.136).

In Australia, around two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents in major election surveys have consistently endorsed the claim that ‘business has too much power’ across the last two decades, up around 10 per cent on previous eras (**Cameron and McAllister, 2019, p.108**). Lindy Edwards has argued that:

*Australia’s 10 largest and most powerful corporates ... all operated in industry sectors dominated by one to four businesses. Each of these companies tower over long production and supply chains, and a significant element of their corporate strategy centres on scraping the wealth out of those chains and concentrating it in their own hands ... Australia is teetering on the edge of a ‘Medici Cycle’ where economic and political power has become mutually reinforcing, and the largest companies use their political power to secure laws to further entrench their economic dominance. (2022, pp.95 and 97)*

Figure 7.9 shows the industrial sectors that are most cited by critics as showing evidence of overwhelming corporate power (**Denniss and Richardson, 2013; Edwards, 2018, 2020**).

**Figure 7.9: The main sectors where critics argue that domestic big business is dominant**

Sector	Main evidence cited	Additional sources
<i>Mining giants</i>	Strong industry campaign to defeat mining levies and carbon taxes under the Rudd–Gillard governments; subsequent climate change denialism over coal and oil mining; heavy government subsidies given to fossil fuel projects. State and federal government dependency on mining tax revenues has been high, while mining provides scarce, well-paid jobs in sparsely populated regional areas. In more populated areas local residents’ resistance to exploitative mining has sometimes been greater ( <b>Christie, 2019</b> ).	<b>Maier, 2022; Gilding, Merlot and Leitch, 2016; Mikler, Elbra and Murphy-Gregory, 2019; Grudnoff, 2013; Marsh, Lewis and Chesters, 2014; Buckley, 2019; Eccleston, and Hortle, 2016; Bell and Hindmoor, 2013.</b>



<i>Fossil fuel industries more generally</i>	Climate change denialism was also sponsored by oil and gas interests and powerful media interests.	<a href="#">Lucas, 2021</a> ; <a href="#">Goods, 2022</a> ; <a href="#">Wilson, 2016</a>
<i>Big four banks</i>	Very strong oligopoly. Widespread banking malpractices before the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry (2019) and its reform proposals were subsequently greatly watered down.	<a href="#">Richardson, 2012</a> ; <a href="#">Johnson, 2013</a>
<i>Superannuation funds</i>	Government mandates all employees to invest 12 per cent of salary in funds and regulations which restricts levels of market competition and consumer access to funds.	<a href="#">Denniss and Richardson, 2013</a>
<i>Retail giants, Coles and Woolworths, and food manufacturing peak associations</i>	Top two firms dominate the industry and act to maintain minimal regulation of obesogenic marketing and food/ alcohol threats to public health.	<a href="#">Needham et al., 2019</a> ; <a href="#">O’Keeffe, 2019</a>
<i>Gambling industry</i>	Widespread evidence of adverse effects especially in poor neighbourhoods; weak regulation of debt-inducing behaviours, especially in terms of ‘pokies’ (slot machines) operated also by many social clubs.	<a href="#">Ting et al., 2021</a>
<i>Telstra</i>	Privatised former state telecoms operator that has retained a market-dominant position in broadband and mobiles sector, inhibiting competition. Strong political connections.	
<i>Management consultants</i>	A handful of large (international) firms have received very large government contracts over decades as public services staffing thinned out, plus a ‘revolving door’ of senior staff acting as political advisors to politicians. In 2022 to 2023 a scandal broke over PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC) apparently using inside government information to advise its private industry clients.	<a href="#">Josserand, 2023</a> ; <a href="#">Podger, 2023</a> ; <a href="#">Anaf and Baum, 2023</a>
<i>Media (press and private sector TV giants)</i>	High level of media oligopoly nationally and regional dominance at state level. Politicians directly depend on proprietors and journalists for coverage, especially in the highly partisan press. See <a href="#">Chapter 8</a> .	<a href="#">Boulus and Dowding, 2014</a>
<i>Australian branches of internet platform companies</i>	Google, Facebook, Apple, X (formerly Twitter) and other global firms have increasingly dominated political news dissemination within Australia. Government intervention on behalf of media companies to mandate GAFAM (Google (Alphabet); Apple; Facebook (Meta); Amazon; and Microsoft) firms paying for news content showed Liberal-National ministers acting at the behest of media corporations. However, the global platform companies still internally regulate most aspects of internet safety, competition and innovation (as with AI), while government regulation lags years behind. See <a href="#">Chapters 8 and 9</a> .	See <a href="#">Chapter 8</a>

Source: Author-created table from sources listed in the table.

The case most commented on in the corporate power literature concerns the mining industry and especially its highly effective campaign against the Labor government's 2010 resources super-tax (see references in [Figure 7.9](#)). The big two firms rounded up many smaller companies to seriously threaten an investment strike, and spent A\$25 million on an advertising campaign targeting government changes. The firms successfully built a broader coalition with the Business Council of Australia and with some trade unions. In Queensland and West Australia, the two states most affected, the industry increased political funding support of the Liberals by a factor of 10. A subsequent disastrous drop in Labor support in the polls led to intra-party dissent and the withdrawal of the policy.

Subsequently, the mining firms and oil and gas industry substantially exploited their victory to campaign vociferously against the regulation of carbon emissions, supporting climate denialism and making effective donations. One indicator of this recent influence was given by the extent of state and federal government subsidies for mining projects:

*A 2013 estimate by the Australian Institute found that the federal government provided the mining industry with over \$4.5 billion per year in subsidies (Grudnoff, 2013). A more recent IMF report, which estimated global fossil fuel subsidies, found that in 2015 the Australian government provided US \$29 billion in post-tax subsidies, a figure amounting to 2.3 per cent of GDP (Coady et al., 2019, p.35). In addition to direct subsidies, the federal government has also heavily funded rail and port infrastructure required by the mining industry. For example, the controversial Adani Coal mine in Southern Queensland will receive \$4.4 billion in subsidies over the next 30 years, without which it would not be commercially viable. (Maher, 2022, p.70) [URL links here are our additions]*

Observers have drawn an acute contrast between how Australia and Norway regulate the whole resources sector (Cleary, 2016).

Of course, big business companies directly control few votes – although their employee numbers can be significant overall (as with the retail giants) or be concentrated in states where they can have a lot of regional and local influence (as with the mining giants, headquartered in Western Australia). So how does business influence operate so much more effectively than the kinds of campaigning that other groups can do? David Beetham (2011, pp.7–8) and many other writers point out that business imposes seven systemic constraints on government capacity:

- ◆ *Economic globalisation* has been a potent disincentive to governments trying to regulate key industries, as the fear of domestic industries being undercut by overseas competitors worsened. Many more sectors of the economy have become 'financialised' via privatisation and deregulation of state enterprises and via the growth of para-state contracting by big corporations taking over more services and controlling key assets. These changes have greatly speeded up the government's weakening grip on domestic capital. Occasionally the Australian government has shown itself able to face down investment strike threats, as with the collapse of the resistance by Google and Facebook/Meta to the 2022 media code (see [Chapter 9](#)). However, ministers here only acted on behalf of domestic Australian capital (the news media) with significant political clout.
- ◆ *Corporate fiscal strategies* have greatly undermined Australian government revenues through the tax avoidance industry – depriving government of corporation taxes especially, which almost no major Australian companies are still paying. For fear that firms would exit the country, the Canberra government has performed had to wait for an OECD initiative to standardise a minimum corporation tax of 15 per cent across industrial nations, but this has been hung up for years.

- ◆ *Complex corporate architectures* of inter-firm transfers and holdings of assets have accelerated this problem. International companies can transfer-price assets and shift their tax domiciles in ways that are hard to control. Privatised utilities and public service suppliers can create large debt burdens and remortgage assets so as to extract ‘shareholder value’ at taxpayers’ expense, often selling on debt-laden companies to hedge funds and less scrupulous or influenceable companies overseas.
- ◆ *Top pay levels* for corporate executives and other wealthy individuals have boosted their combined income pay and share options and other benefits to unprecedented levels, with a huge range of justifications being used (Pepper, 2022). ‘Tax efficient’ structures have been created that the Australian Tax Office has struggled to keep up with, and there has also been extensive evidence of tax avoidance.
- ◆ *Operational issues* inside the public sector have accelerated a steep decline in government expertise and organisational capacity. In every sector, public authorities must compete for expert professional staff with a private sector that can cream off their best public service staff with higher salaries and more innovative (less regulatory or procurement-only) work. The result has been the extensive inter-penetration of regulators and industry bodies. The supposedly independent chairs of regulators can often only come from the industry that they will regulate and to which they will return after a relatively brief time in government. Mainstream economic theory suggests that they will rationally act in ways that maximise their future job prospects when they return to the industry, pursuing only minimal interventions that safeguard corporate interests. Major companies maintain governmental relations units that also forecast and seek to mitigate adverse political developments via direct contacts with officials, special advisors and politicians (Bell, 2023). They particularly offer public service officials access to key relevant private information to aid policy-making, but in return for influence over legislative and regulatory drafting. Similarly, in public administration, the hollowing out of the public service (especially at federal level) leads to a high reliance on management consultants and other industry executives by major firms straddling the public/private sector divide. The 2022–23 controversy over PwC giving information from secret Treasury briefings to private industry clients demonstrated the many problems in maintaining essential barriers (‘Chinese walls’) between corporate dealings and public clients’ information (Anaf and Baum, 2023; Jossierand, 2023; Podger, 2023).
- ◆ *Ideological influence via think tanks and media operations* has been a massive area where corporations, trade associations and business professional groups have expanded their influence, often using anonymous donations to pro-business or sector-defense ‘think tanks’ (or even more beholden ‘junk tanks’ and ‘front organisations’). These maintain a steady flow of informational and influence pressures for the adoption of neo-liberal policies.
- ◆ *Post-service compensation for political leaders* has increasingly opened up a path that has led retired top politicians to move into very lucrative occupations advising major corporations, who alone can afford their spiralling consultation or even dinner-speaking fees.

*Compensation for politicians should be seen as income over a lifetime. In many developed democracies, politicians in retirement can make huge incomes. With an eye to post service retirement, politicians may adopt positions on policies that are not in the public interest – in effect selling public policy. (Peters and Burns, 2023, p.590)*

Just as former UK premiers and USA politicians quickly became multi-millionaires in their own right as a result of their corporate power linkages after leaving office, so Scott Morrison (for instance) will likely soon join their ranks.

# Conclusion

Systematic academic studies of Australia's interest group processes at federal and state levels have been strikingly lacking in recent decades. Perhaps this reflects a professional consensus among most political scientists that pluralist accounts of diverse power centres, multiple key factors that no group monopolises, and easy mobilisation into politics are somehow 'obviously' or manifestly accurate? However, the sub-literature on corporate power takes a different line, one based more on structural analyses and case studies, while the recent history of many minorities leaves little room for complacency that the hidden injustices of past eras have no or few modern parallels. Beyond any room for doubt, Australian civic culture now supports a very vigorous and strongly contested group process. It also seems that philanthropic support and cause groups, plus perhaps the impact of social media in lowering the costs of organising politically (see [Chapter 9](#)), have meant that the scope of involvement with governments by many previously excluded and disadvantaged minorities has become greater than in earlier decades.

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