

# **Revolving Door Lobbyists and the Affordable Care Act**

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## **Abstract**

Students of democratic institutions have long criticized the “revolving door” that moves government officials into lucrative positions as lobbyists, presumably giving the interest groups that hire them an advantage in the competition for access. The migration is especially common among congressional staff. Critics allege that revolvers gain access by exploiting personal relationships with former employers and co-workers. We argue that their advantage is more general than that. Positioned at the intersection of two policy-relevant networks, revolvers enjoy a comparative advantage in generating political information, but the value of that information to the member, we hypothesize, will be conditional on partisan alignment between member and group. Employer-based relationships and policy knowledge vary too little to explain much of the revolver’s advantage. Analyzing data on access from interviews with lobbyists on the Affordable Care Act, we provide the first direct evidence of a revolver-access relationship.

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Students of democratic institutions consider the “revolving door” one of the most disturbing patterns in contemporary American politics, and this pattern is nowhere more evident than the United States Congress. Former members and their staff, upon leaving Capitol Hill, accept lucrative salaries to go back and lobby on it, presumably giving the interest groups that hire them an advantage in the competition for legislative influence.

There is growing evidence that revolving door lobbyists improve the fortunes of their employers, but the means by which they do so remain opaque. Most assume that the key variable is access and that revolving door lobbyists are better at gaining it. Access enables interest groups to make their case for or against a bill or make requests for specific provisions, increasing the probability that their preferences will be reflected in policy. To date, there have been no direct tests of the revolver-access mechanism, however. Nor do we fully understand the reasons that revolvers would enjoy a comparative advantage in this regard, though the critics allege that revolving door lobbyists exploit their personal relationships with former employers and co-workers to open doors on Capitol Hill.

We hypothesize that the revolver’s advantage is more general than that. Legislators grant access to acquire information, and revolvers are better able to acquire one type of it. Positioned at the intersection of two policy-relevant networks, revolvers can more easily generate political intelligence about the preferences and strategies of key actors. The value of that information to the member, we hypothesize, is conditional on the partisan alignment of the member and group. We also argue that personal ties to former employers and co-workers will account for little of the revolving door advantage in access. Others have shown that those relationships sometimes have a high payoff, but over ninety percent of all revolvers are former staffers, and rarely will a staffer have employer-based relationships with more than a very small fraction of the current members of Congress. Neither is it common for revolving door lobbyists to have greater policy expertise than their non-revolving peers. Only former committee counsel might add value in policy expertise, and that advantage will be restricted to issues arising from their former committee’s jurisdiction. When it is present, however, the policy expertise of the lobbyist should be valuable to the member.

We investigate these hypotheses using highly granular data, collected from face-to-face surveys of interest group representatives who lobbied House committees on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA). Our results provide the first direct evidence that revolving door lobbyists enjoy an advantage in gaining access to members of Congress, and we find that the advantage is conditional in the ways that we hypothesize. We also find that campaign contributions are related to access, but inferences about the causal nature of that relationship remain elusive.

### **Congressional Staff and the Revolving Door**

The “revolving door” is a metaphor for a specific labor market pattern. Individuals who work in a policymaking capacity in government leave for positions as lobbyists outside it, working on some of the same issues and with some of the same people that they did as public servants. Institutional critics have long alleged that this pattern is commonplace, but until the

study by Heinz et al., *The Hollow Core* (1995), the only data on the practice were unsystematically generated or otherwise anecdotal and thin (1995, 106). Heinz et al. reconstructed the career paths of 1700 Washington lobbyists, finding that forty-five percent had federal government experience.

Ethics reforms adopted since the time of that study have not slowed the migration. LaPira and Thomas (2014) find that the percentage of lobbyists with government experience is higher now than it was at the time of the Heinz et al. survey. Career moves from Capitol Hill positions to advocacy jobs are especially common, but by far most of those moves involve congressional staff. In 2011, former congressional staff out-numbered former members of Congress as registered lobbyists by more than 10 to 1.

If the migration to K-Street occurs frequently, only recently have we begun to understand what difference it makes. Blanes i Vidal et al. (2012) demonstrate that revolvers suffer an abrupt drop in revenue when their former bosses leave Capitol Hill, with those losses greater when the departing member held major committee assignments and enjoyed high seniority. LaPira and Thomas (2015) find that interest groups assign revolvers to more important legislation. We thus can conclude that interest groups believe that revolvers do better by their clients. Luechinger and Moser (2012) find that investors share this belief. Richter et al. (2009) show that these beliefs are well-founded; organizations employing revolving door lobbyists on tax policy generate higher returns on investment (Richter et al. 2009). Lazarus and McKay (2012) find that universities employing revolving door lobbyists receive more government funding than those that do not. In the most comprehensive study of lobbying to date, Baumgartner et al. (2009) find that interest group coalitions that employ revolvers exhibit a higher probability of policy success (2009, 208).

The micro-level mechanisms by which revolvers do better for their clients are not well understood, but the presumption is that access is critical. Access is a precondition for influence, and revolvers are thought better able to gain it. The most common assumption is that they exploit their personal ties to former employers and office co-workers to gain access that other lobbyists cannot. This claim remains untested, however. Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA) reports tell us who is lobbying and on which issues. They also provide data on lobbying expenditures and revenue. But they provide no data on the access to individual offices for which the interest group money is spent. Of the studies that measure lobbyist-legislator interactions directly (Wright 1990; Austen-Smith and Wright 1992, 1994; Caldeira and Wright 1998; Hojnacki and Kimball 1999, 2001; Kalla and Broockman forthcoming; Langbein 1986), none examine the relationship between access and past government employment. If revolvers are better able to give their clients entry into the process, scholars have been unable to test hypotheses about whether, how much, and under what conditions they do so.

### **The Comparative Advantage of Revolving Door Lobbyists**

Access to an office is a product of two decisions, not one: the lobbyist's decision to seek access and the legislator's decision to grant it. The former, the decision of whom to lobby, has received greater emphasis in the literature (e.g., Austen-Smith and Wright 1994; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998; 1999), but to understand revolving door access, greater emphasis belongs on the

latter. We assume, over-simply, that lobbyists invariably want access, but that legislators selectively grant it.<sup>1</sup> The reason for the legislator's selectivity is that her supply of access is scarce. The typical legislator spends remarkably little time on legislative affairs (e.g., Weissert 1989), her issue-attention is limited (e.g., Sulkin 2005), her staff is spread thin (e.g., Zeller 2015), and she often has long lists of supplicants, so it seems unlikely that she would grant access uneconomically. The problem for the legislator is allocating how much access to whom. What is it about revolvers that would lead a legislator to favor them as a class of lobbyists in the competition for her time and attention?

In theorizing about these decisions, we begin from the premise that lobbying is an exercise in information transmission. Legislators look to lobbyists for information, both for determining their preferences over alternative policies (e.g., Ainsworth; Austen-Smith 1993; Wright 1996) and supporting work on their legislative priorities (e.g., Baumgartner and Leech; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Hall and Deardorff 2006). The question thus becomes: What information can revolvers better collect and convey that makes them more valuable to legislators than lobbyists without government experience?

The literature identifies at least three types of information that lobbyists provide (see, e.g., Wright 1996). The theoretically most prominent of these stems from their interest in reelection. Lobbyists regularly collect district-specific, issue-relevant information that they might use to influence legislators.<sup>2</sup> As Hansen puts it, lobbyists are effective insofar as they “determine the kinds of information about constituents that are available and the kinds of information that are not” (1991, 3; see also, e.g., Kingdon 1981; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998).

The question here is whether revolvers as a subclass of lobbyists will be better informed in this respect. As former insiders, they will have learned something about other members' constituencies, but non-revolving lobbyists will surely do the same, often with support staff who conduct district-level research and maintain files on individual legislators.

The most plausible exception is the revolver with respect to the one or few offices where he formerly worked. Such ties have received the most attention and harshest condemnation from congressional observers, and there is strong evidence that they have important consequences for lobbyists, affecting the issues on which they work (Bertrand, Bombardini, and Trebbi 2011) and the revenue they generate (Blanes I Vidal, Draca, and Fons-Rosen 2012). But if these ties do matter, it is not clear why they matter. Indeed, the personal nature of the relationship may have little to do with it. Their ability to provide information that is at once constituency-relevant and policy-specific provides one reason they might have a comparative advantage, with respect to other lobbyists generally and other revolvers specifically. The theoretical problem with this reasoning is that little of that information will be the private information of the lobbyist with respect to the office, that is, better or different than that of the member and her current staff. Members, after all, constantly monitor the district in myriad ways, including regular trips home,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, we use the term legislator to refer to what Shepsle and Salisbury call the “legislator’s enterprise (fill in).”

<sup>2</sup> Organizations use outside as well as inside lobbying to transmit information about constituents’ preferences (e.g., Kollman 1998). We assume that the use of outside lobbying is orthogonal to the use of revolving door lobbyists, recognizing that the realism of that assumption needs to be investigated.

meetings with constituency groups, allocating staff to district offices, conducting polls, and tracking issue-specific constituency mail. Thus, on somewhat different grounds than the critics, we hypothesize the relationship that many have criticized: *H.3. Revolvers will have greater access to the office(s) where they formerly worked.*

A second type of information in which lobbyists presumably traffic is policy expertise. Legislators are uncertain about the connections between policies and outcomes. They deal with a wide range of issues almost daily and must rely on a limited staff, very few of whom are themselves policy specialists. In contrast, lobbyists tend to focus on one policy at a time, learning the policy-relevant arguments and evidence as thoroughly as possible. They may not be experts themselves, but as Heclo (1978) observes, they “are experts at using experts.” The relevant point here is that there is no general reason to expect that revolvers will have more policy expertise than non-revolving lobbyists. If anything, the generalist role most of them played as staffers would suggest otherwise.

There is a narrow exception to this. Congressional committee staff often go deep into the policy evidence and analysis related to the issues they cover, so they should be better able to convey specialized policy knowledge. The exception is narrow because their comparative advantage will be conditional on the match between their former committee’s jurisdiction and the issue at hand. With respect to the dozens of issues that may be relevant to their organization’s mission, as individual lobbyists they will have no special advantage. *H.2. Former committee staff will have greater access on issues arising out of their former committee’s jurisdiction.* This advantage need not be institution-specific, however. Expertise on Medicare policy, for instance, might be acquired as a committee staffer for House Ways and Means or Senate Finance.

To this point, then, it is not clear that revolving door lobbyists should get better access except under fairly narrow conditions. If they have a more general comparative advantage it should derive from a different type of information that revolvers as a class are better able to collect and convey, what we will refer to as “legislative intelligence,” meant in two senses. Having played staff roles themselves, revolving door lobbyists will better understand the internal workings of the legislative process, knowledge that the non-revolving lobbyist only acquires at greater cost and through less direct means (see esp. Wright 1996, 93).

More importantly, revolvers should be better able to gather contemporaneous intelligence. In making informed choices, legislators need to know not only what policies are preferable but which ones are viable, which depends on what the key actors are “thinking or planning” (Wright 1996, 92, 93). The key actors are mainly situated in two different networks. Like other lobbyists, the revolver is connected to interest group networks that generate information relevant to policy viability (Ainsworth 1997; Carpenter et. al. 1998; Heaney 2014; Heaney and Lorenz 2013; DeGregorio 1997). But unlike other lobbyists, the revolver begins with a set of well-developed connections to a congressional network and emeritus status within it. He thus has sources of information about both interest groups’ and legislators’ preferences and objectives, a combination that no other legislative informant enjoys. In Blanes I Vidal, Draca, and Fons-Rosen’s terminology (2012), he draws on a form of “relational capital” more

extensive and less personal than his connections to former employers. *H.3. Former staffers will have greater access to the offices of current members.*

If H.3 tends to be true, however, it is not likely that for the individual lobbyist it will forever be true. His distinctive connectedness to internal political networks should decay over time. Former staff members may have better lines of communication to current staff members, but staff turnover in Congress is high. After a decade or so, the revolver will know almost no one he worked with at the staff level. Even if there is a self-sustaining element to the connections that a lobbyist begins with, over time the revolver and non-revolver should become difficult to distinguish. as a lobbyist should improve one's access on Capitol Hill, *H.4: The advantage of congressional background will be decreasing over time.*

### **The Conditional Value of Information**

Theoretical work on lobbying as information transmission takes it as axiomatic that the value of information to the legislator will depend on her perception of its credibility (see e.g., Austen-Smith 1995; Wright 1998). Lobbyists can reveal their information selectively, perhaps deceptively. Legislators know this and thus look to sources they believe they can trust.

Those beliefs can depend on a number of factors, including lobbying costs and interest group competition (Grossman and Helpman 1994, 2001), but a recurring theme in the literature is that legislators look first to those with similar policy beliefs. In his study of legislators' voting decisions, for instance, Kingdon finds this pattern in both member-to-member (1981, 72-82) and interest group lobbying: "[Congressmen] know which organizations are generally in agreement with them and which ones are generally opposed and they use this bit of past history to help determine which side to be on in the current instance" (1981, 187). Similarly, Hall and Deardorff (2006) argue that legislators' priors about interest group agreement will affect their priority-setting decisions. Austen-Smith (1995) states the general point: "[T]he amount of information an informed agent (lobbyist) can credibly transmit to an uninformed decision maker (legislator) is increasing in the extent to which these individuals' preferences over final consequences are coincident. That is, the more like the legislator the lobbyist is, the more valuable that lobbyist will be to the legislator on informational grounds" (566).

In the contemporary Congress, similarity and difference in preferences are divided sharply by party. Interest groups often try to broker partisan conflicts (Heaney 2006), but Koger, Masket, and Noll show that interest groups separate into two distinct party networks, concluding that "these actors are best understood as networks of co-operating allies" (2009, 634). Partisan alignment of groups and members should thus appear in the patterns of interaction among them, the latter looking to the former for information they can trust. Such patterns should hold for all lobbyists, but it should be particularly true for legislative revolvers. As former legislative staffers, their intelligence-gathering capacity will come from their better connections to partisan networks, whose participants they interacted most while on Capitol Hill and on whom they can still depend for information. *H.4. The revolver's advantage in gaining access will be greater when there is partisan alignment between member and group.*

Finally, we expand our focus from the individual lobbyist attributes to the staff capacity of the interest group. Organizations vary widely in the number of lobbyists they employ and hence their ability to strategically assign lobbyists to individual offices. They vary more specifically in the extent to which they populate their staff with revolving door lobbyists. However, the advantage of large staffs will depend on the number of issues across which their lobbyists are spread. We thus expect that the access of an organization will be increasing in the number of lobbyists per issue, but hypothesize more specifically that: *H.5. Access will be increasing in the proportion of those lobbyists that have congressional backgrounds.*

### **Lobbying House Committees on the Affordable Care Act**

The principal data for our exploration come from face-to-face interviews with individuals who lobbied in the House of Representatives on health care reform in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, one of the most important domestic initiatives in a generation. That the political environment of the Affordable Care Act was densely populated by interest groups thus surprised no one. A century of health policy history foreshadowed it. Social scientists seeking to explain the repeated failures of major reform proposals often placed responsibility at the feet of private sector interests. By the time of the 2008 elections, the stakes were especially high. The legislation under consideration would regulate a sector of the economy that accounted for one sixth of GDP, about \$8,000 per person, and employed one in every ten Americans in the private sector. The Medicare provisions alone would immediately affect the program's 46 million beneficiaries and thousands of health services providers. The number of low-income individuals eligible for Medicaid would expand dramatically. The insurance regulations, the revenue provisions, and the individual and business mandates would affect almost everyone else directly or indirectly. Every group in America, it seemed, had something at stake in this debate. Over a thousand organizations filed Lobbying Disclosure Reports in 2009 that specifically mentioned the Affordable Care Act, and many other advocates – especially foundations and other 501(c)(3) organizations – seldom file disclosure reports.

**Table 1. Lobbying on the Affordable Care Act: Sample of Organizations**

Type of Organization	Snowball	(%)	Sample	(%)	Cases	(%)
Health professionals	23	15%	9	18%	5	17%
Pharmaceuticals/health products	21	14%	9	18%	4	14%
Hospitals/nursing homes	10	7%	4	8%	4	14%
Health insurance	18	12%	6	12%	4	14%
Public interest groups/think tanks - health	36	24%	8	16%	6	21%
Public interest groups/think tanks - general	24	16%	9	18%	4	14%
General business and labor organizations	21	14%	5	10%	2	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>		<b>50</b>		<b>29</b>	

For substantive and practical reasons, we focused the data collection on the House and, within the House, on the three committees of jurisdiction. In the Senate, the main legislative negotiations occurred not in committee but in the ad hoc “Gang of Six,” an informal working group of three Democrats and three Republicans organized by Finance Committee Chair Max Baucus (D-MT).<sup>3</sup> That so much of the legislative attention was focused on six senators made the process unusual and suggested that the variance on lobbying would be highly truncated. The legislative process in the House was relatively conventional in that the deliberations were committee-centered and, because all bills in committee are marked up under the equivalent of an open rule, the participation of individual members was procedurally inclusive. The same House bill was marked up in the three committees that shared jurisdiction, 145 members in all,<sup>4</sup> with scores of amendments offered by members of both parties. The bill considered on the House floor, in turn, was largely the product of the committee process, for like most major bills in the House, it came to the floor under a highly restrictive rule.<sup>5</sup>

The sample of organizations is not random with respect to the population of groups that filed LDA reports on this issue. That list is not only unwieldy; most groups who listed the ACA in their issue reports were scarcely visible on Capitol Hill, their lobbying activity across members on this bill difficult to measure.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, the LDA does not require think tanks and other 501(c)(3) organizations to file reports, even though advocates from these groups

<sup>3</sup> The Senate bill was eventually adopted by the House, though a number of House-initiated changes were adopted through a second, budget reconciliation bill negotiated prior to enactment. See Jacobs and Skocpol 2012.

<sup>4</sup> The three committees were Ways and Means, Energy and Commerce, and Education and Labor.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the final bill, even after the reconciliation amendments, was much more the product of the Senate than the House, but that fact was not known or anticipated until the very end of the process.

<sup>6</sup> We recognize that groups select into that category. Why some groups and not others, on some issues and not others, engage in significant lobbying activity is an important matter that political scientists have not yet been able to model. Our analysis exhibits the same limitation.

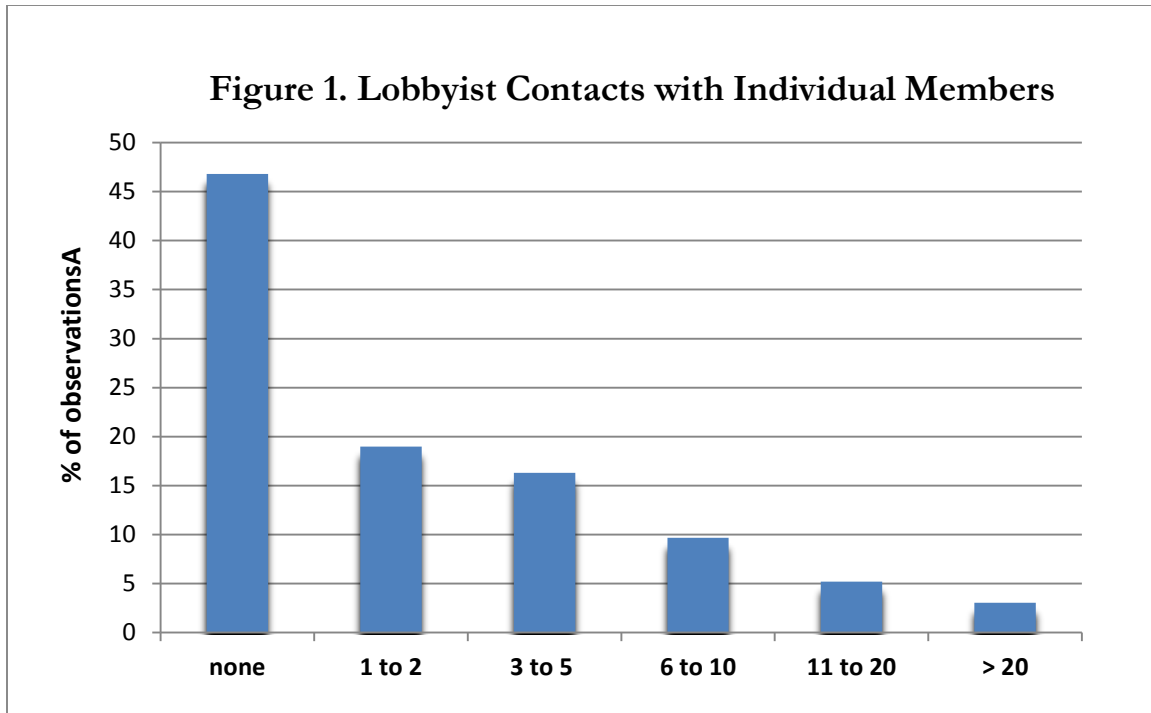


play a significant role in most major policy issues, including this one. We thus generated the set of groups using a snowball process, beginning with a list of organizations culled from newspaper, magazine, and online reports. We then conducted interviews with House committee staff from both parties during which we showed them the working list of organizations and asked them to suggest others that lobbied on healthcare reform. We did the same as we interviewed lobbyists. This cumulative process generated a list of 153 organizations, which, as Table 2 summarizes, included insurance companies, pharmaceuticals, hospital associations, healthcare professionals, general labor and business organizations, and think tanks and other nonprofits. From this list we sampled 50 and completed interviews with 29. As the table indicates, the final dataset includes a mix of groups, roughly representative of the ones that actively lobbied House members regarding the bill.

The central purpose of the interviews was to gather data on access at the level of the lobbyist-legislator dyad. Early in each meeting we administered a survey instrument designed to capture the number of “phone or face-to-face conversations” between the organization’s lead lobbyist(s) on this issue and each legislative office. The instrument closely follows the one developed by Wright (1986) and used in most individual-level studies of lobbying to date (e.g., Austen-Smith and Wright 1994; Caldiera and Wright 1998; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998; Wright 1990), with the exception that we employed categories that required the respondent to estimate the actual number of contacts with each legislator or their staff.<sup>7</sup> The specific ranges were: “none (0),” “once or twice (1-2),” “a few (3-5),” “several (5-10),” “many (10-20),” and “repeated contacts (>20).” When respondents checked off “repeated contacts,” we asked them to estimate the actual number of contacts with that office on that issue. We thus have a measure of the issue-specific conversations between lobbyist and legislator, which can be analyzed either as an ordinal or a count variable. As Figure 1 shows, the values are skewed toward zero, a pattern that is consistent with our assumption that legislators grant access selectively.

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<sup>7</sup> The question wording was: “Please estimate the number of phone or face-to-face conversations you had with the following members or their staff regarding the healthcare reform bill in 2009 through its adoption in 2010.”



To test the first three hypotheses, we require accurate data on the attributes of lobbyists, which we gathered from career information reported on two online databases, the Center for Responsive Politics at [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org) and CQ's proprietary database, *First Street*. We then checked that information against the lobbyists' online biographies. The variables include: (1) whether the lobbyist had previous congressional experience and (2) whether he had House experience specifically;<sup>8</sup> (3) whether he had staffed a health policy committee; (4) whether he had worked for a specific member in the sample; and (5) the number of years he had worked as a registered lobbyist. We also gathered data on the number of lobbyists employed by each group, to capture the lobbying capacity of the organization, and the proportion of lobbyists that were revolvers.

To test hypotheses H.4 and H.5, we collected data on the contributions of the organization's employees to the respective parties' campaign committees and candidates, as reported to Federal Election Commission. Our measure of the group-member partisan alignment is simply the percentage of employee contributions going to the same party as the member.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> None of the revolving door lobbyists in our sample were former members of Congress.

<sup>9</sup> Bonica (2010) has used employee contribution data to estimate the ideal points of similar interest groups on the same scale as legislators, but doing that at the group level was not possible for all organizations in our sample.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: The Affordable Care Act in House Committees**

Variable	Mean / % nonzero	S.D
<b>DV = # of contacts of MC <math>i</math> with lobbyist <math>j</math></b>	4.39	11.44
<b>Organizational Resources (<math>j</math>)</b>		
# of lobbyists (per issue report)	0.48	0.28
% revolving door lobbyists	35.6	25.64
<b>Group-Member Covariates (<math>ij</math>)</b>		
# of group $_j$ sites in district of MC $_i$	0.28	0.83
PAC \$ from group $_j$ to MC $_i$ (in \$1000s)	0.61	1.65
% alignment of $j$ with party of MC $_i$	55.69	35.48
<b>Lobbyist Attributes (<math>j</math> and <math>ij</math>)</b>		
Years as registered lobbyist	8.71	6.5
Lobbyist or colleague worked for MC $_i$	0.03%	-
Former staffer - Congress	57.57%	-
Former staffer - House	18.68%	-
Former Health Committee Staffer - Congress	5.83%	-
Former Health Committee Staffer - House	3.00%	-

N = 4101. lobbyist-legislator dyads. Note: For dichotomous variables, the first column is the percent of the sample that are nonzero. Member/district controls not shown: majority party, committee, institutional position index, % Medicare recipients in district, % uninsured in district, and % with private insurance in district.

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics on the main variables of interest, showing the means and standard deviations for the interval level variables and the percentage of nonzero values for the lobbyists' revolving door attributes. Three things are worth noting. First, the number of former congressional staffers in our sample of lobbyists is approximately 58%, a number consistent with what others have found of lobbyists as a whole. But at the same time, of the set of lobbyists who lobbied the House on health care reform, only 19% had connections to that chamber. Second, the number of individuals lobbying on health care reform that had experience as a health committee staffer in either chamber is only 6%, while only 3% had worked for one of the House committees under study here.

Third, despite all the scorn heaped on them, the occasions where a particular lobbyist has ties to a former employer are remarkably rare. In our data, the number of nonzero values on the lobbyist-employer match was less than one-tenth of one percent in our data (3 of 4011 dyads).

We thus expanded the variable definition to capture whether the lobbyist or any of the other lobbyists for his organization had worked for a particular member in the sample, the premise being that the head lobbyist on an issue could rely on a colleague to open doors in specific instances, if not accompany him to the office. As Table 2 shows, even this condition held for only .03% of the observations. Nor should this finding be peculiar to our sample. Even if a revolver worked for three or four different offices while on Capitol Hill, he will have close ties to only those three or four out of 535 members. If he worked in the Senate, he will have zero employer-based ties in the House, with the same holding for former House employees in the Senate. And the more time that has passed since the revolver left Capitol Hill, the more likely his former bosses will themselves have left Congress. Because most lobbying occurs at the staff level, moreover, high staff turnover means that ties to former co-workers will decay even more rapidly. As Table 2 shows, the mean number of years our respondents had been gone from Capitol Hill is about nine; for the revolvers the mean is 10.5. By that point in his lobbying career, almost every staffer the revolver worked with will have moved on, many of them to lobbying positions of their own.

### **A Multilevel Model of Access**

Recall that the unit of the dependent variable in our analysis is the legislator-lobbyist dyad: the number of conversations between legislator  $i$  and the lobbyist for group  $j$  about healthcare reform.<sup>10</sup> The model we estimate thus includes member-level covariates (subscript  $i$ ), lobbyist/group-level covariates (subscript  $j$ ), and cross-level covariates (subscript  $ij$ ). Other than the revolving door and partisan alignment variables of primary interest, we control for two important cross-level covariates. One is a measure of the number of sites (e.g., offices, chapters, plants) each group had in each member's district at the time that healthcare reform was being considered. Insofar as we can measure this variable accurately, we can capture the extent to which the lobbyist's constituency-relevant, private information is general to his group, not a consequence of his revolving door experience. We thus took some care to construct this measure. We used both interest group websites and a national telephone directory database to identify every distinct address for each organization in the sample, then geocoded those addresses into congressional districts, giving us the number of organizational sites in the district of each member. The other cross-level variable worth highlighting is the dollar amount of campaign contributions going from the specific group's PAC to each individual member during the prior election cycle. There are several mechanisms that could generate a positive relationship between the money a group gives and the access its lobbyist enjoys with the recipient, which we cannot disentangle here and take up in a separate paper, but for present purposes it is important that we control for it.

We use the count measure of the dependent variable and a negative binomial estimator with two-level random effects, though we return to the choice of estimator in the appendix. Table 3 reports three sets of estimates. Model 1 defines revolvers as lobbyists with any congressional experience, Senate or House, either as personal staffers or health committee

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<sup>10</sup> Because we present the respondent with ranges in the number of contacts, this is a lumpy count variable, but reducing it to an ordinal variable loses information. We thus use the count variable but report in Appendix A the identical analysis using a mixed ordered logit estimator.

**Table 3. A Multilevel Model of Access to House Committee Members: Revolving Door Lobbyists and the Affordable Care Act**

DV = # of contacts of MC <i>i</i> with lobbyist <i>j</i>	[1]	[2]	[3]
<b>Organizational Resources (j)</b>			
# of lobbyists (per issue report)	0.04 [.10]	0.01 [.10]	-0.02 [.10]
% revolving door lobbyists	1.56*	1.50*	1.48*
<b>Group-Member Covariates (ij)</b>			
# of group <sub><i>j</i></sub> sites in district of MC <sub><i>i</i></sub>	.38* [.04]	.33* [.04]	.36* [.04]
PAC \$ from group <sub><i>j</i></sub> to MC <sub><i>i</i></sub>	.22* [.02]	.23* [.02]	.23* [.02]
% alignment of <i>j</i> with party of MC <sub><i>i</i></sub>	1.32* [.09]	1.25* [.09]	1.02* [.10]
<b>Lobbyist Attributes (j and ij)</b>			
Years as registered lobbyist	.01* [.00]	.02* [.00]	.02* [.00]
Lobbyist or colleague worked for MC <sub><i>i</i></sub>	.74 [.43]	.61 [.43]	.47 [.43]
Former staffer - Congress	.31* [.06]		
Former staffer - House		.51* [.07]	0.28 [.18]
Former Health Committee Staffer - Congress	-.15 [.12]		
Former Health Committee Staffer - House		.08 [.16]	.03 [.16]
<b>Revolver Interactions (i and ij)</b>			
House staffer X years as lobbyist			-.04* 0.01
House staffer X % alignment <i>j</i> with party of MC <sub><i>i</i></sub>			.01* [.00]
Constant	-1.94 [.90]	-1.81 [.90]	-1.72 [.91]
Wald $\chi^2$	950.59	998.42	1029.10
Pr > $\chi^2$	[.00]	[.00]	[.00]

Note: Entries are three-level negative binomial random effects coefficients. Member/district covariates not shown. See appendix for robustness checks. N=4101. \* p < 0.05.

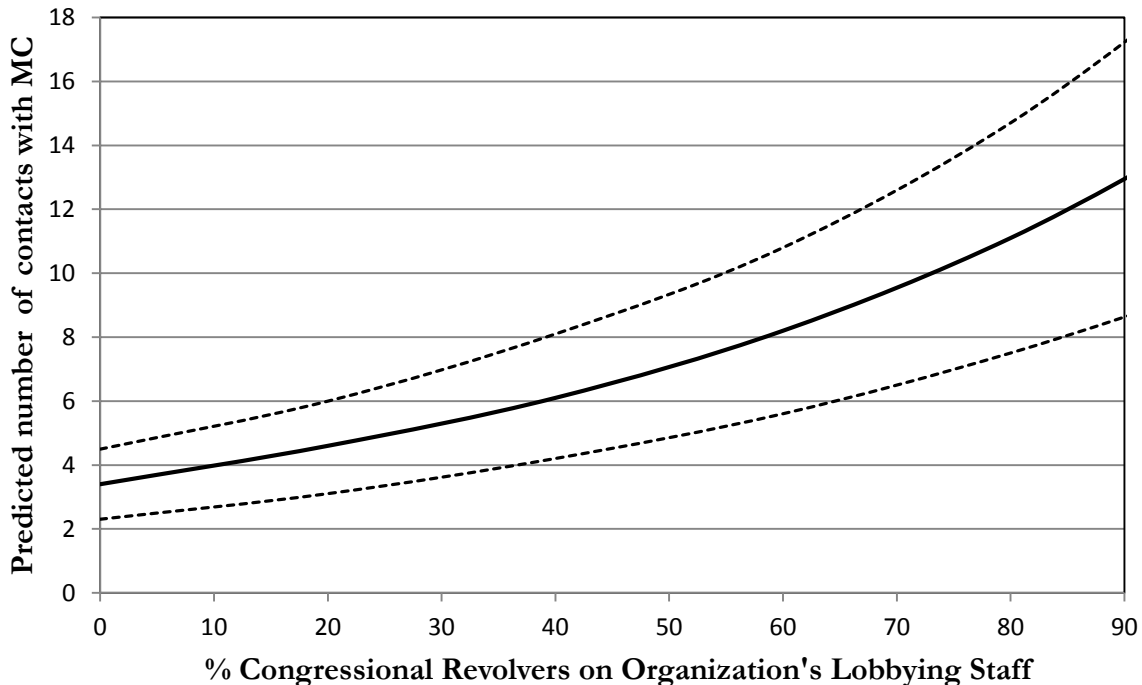
staffers. In the second model, the revolver variables are coded in terms of the revolver's House experience, the House being the focus of this study. The third model includes the conditional effects that are important to our theory.

### **The Revolving Door Advantage: A First Look**

The first two sets of results in Table 3 are offered in part for juxtaposition to the third, but they are reasonably robust with respect to several important factors related to access. We focus in this section on the findings relevant to the revolving door hypotheses evident in the first two models, which are theoretically "naïve" in the sense that they do not imagine that the effect of congressional background should be conditional.

The two models are robust with respect to specification regarding the human capital of the group's government relations operation. In no case can we say that the organization's level of resources, measured as the size of their advocacy staff per issue, is related to access, a finding consistent with previous work by Hojnacki and Kimball (1998) and, less directly, Baumgartner et al. (2009). At the same time, the percentage of revolving door advocates that comprise the staff does matter. Figure 2 shows that the relationship is strongly positive and substantively meaningful. As reported in Table 2, the mean of this variable is 36%, the standard deviation 26%. A change from one standard deviation below the mean to one above it approximately doubles the number of lobbyist-legislator contacts, from just under four to about eight. We cannot speak to the exact mechanism that gives rise to this relationship, but one possibility, consistent with a general informational story, is that the lead lobbyist on an issue can draw on information provided by his revolving door colleagues, who are connected to legislative networks somewhat different than his own. Legislators that value that information are more likely to grant the access needed to acquire it.

**Figure 2. The Relationship Between Access and Revolvers on Staff: The ACA in House Committees**

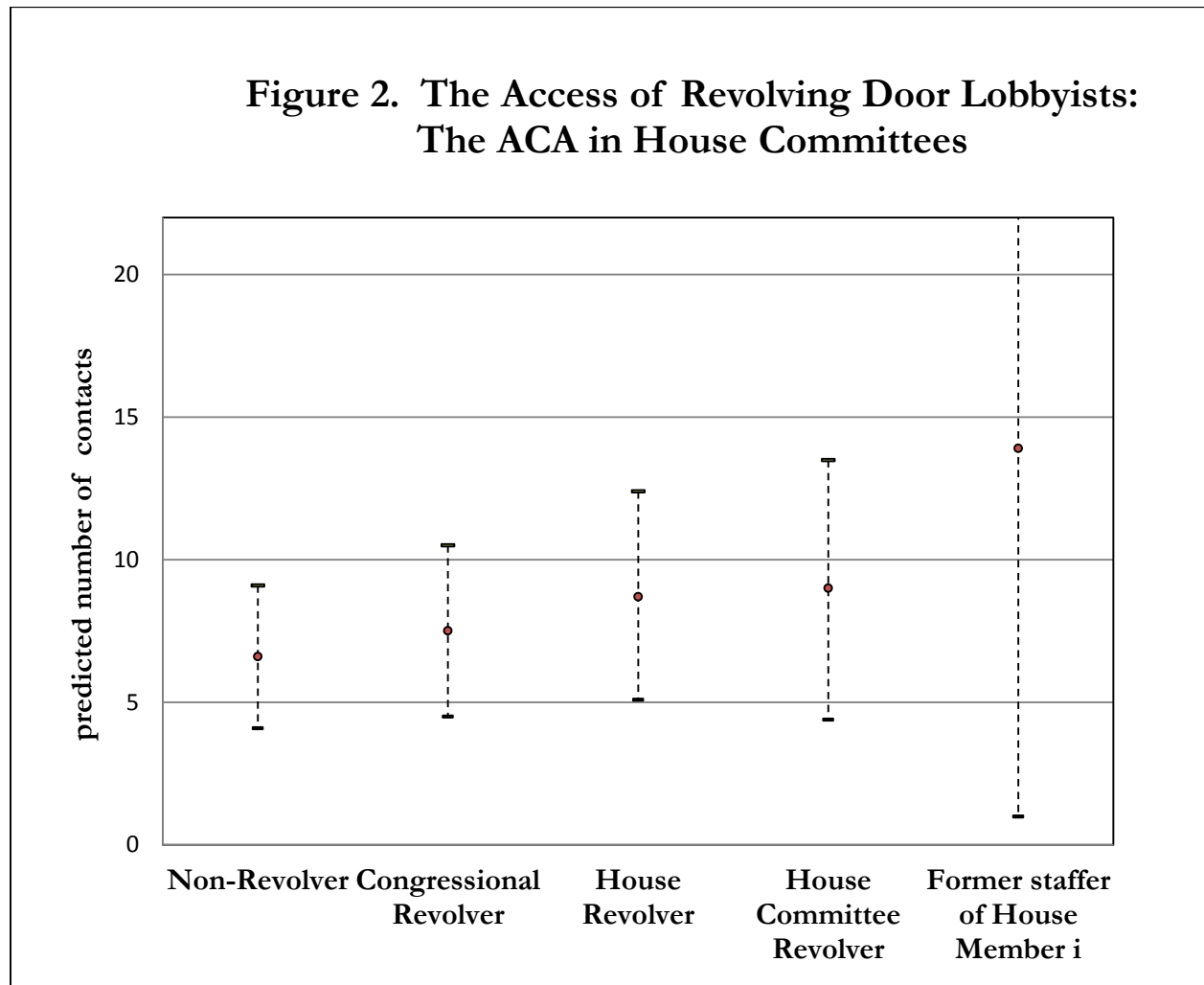


The results for the first two models show that the individual lobbyist's revolving door background is associated with greater access on Capitol Hill. The first model tests the hypothesis with respect to revolvers from either chamber. The second tests it for House revolvers, that is, former staffers from the chamber under study here. Both estimates show that congressional staffers have more opportunities to make the case for their clients' interests than do their non-revolving colleagues. But the results of Model 2 indicate that the advantage in access during House consideration of the ACA accrues more specifically to former House staffers. The fit of the second model is better, the coefficient on the House revolver variable is larger, and, the substantive effect is somewhat greater. Figure 3 reports the predicted count of contacts for different categories of lobbyist, holding the other variables at their medians for ordinal variables and means for interval-level variables. Congressional revolvers averaged one more contact per member than non-revolvers; House revolvers averaged two more contacts, 30% more than non-revolvers.<sup>11</sup>

We also hypothesized (H.2) that one, albeit uncommon source of advantage in gaining access arises from the greater expertise that a former health committee staffer would bring to health reform deliberations that, in the main, other lobbyists would not. Indeed, if policy specialization underpins the revolver's informational advantage, it should not matter much

<sup>11</sup> In separate analyses, we find that when added separately, experience as a House member has a positive relationship to access, Senate background has a slightly negative effect on access.

whether the expertise had been developed in the House or Senate committee of jurisdiction. The results of Model 1 provide no compelling evidence that that is true. In fact, the association of health committee background to access is negative rather than positive. In the second model we test for the House-specific committee hypothesis, finding a positive relationship, but we cannot reject the null for any of the three estimates, and the relationship is substantively weak. As Figure 3 indicates, there is a trivial difference between the predicted count of contacts for a House revolver and a House revolver who also served on a health committee staff.



The evidence thus far appears consistent with the view that one of the advantages of revolving door lobbyists derives from their connectedness to internal political networks. Both Senate and House staffers can claim a congressional pedigree, and both may have greater general knowledge of the legislative process than their non-revolving colleagues. But Senate revolvers will be better connected to internal Senate networks, House revolvers to House networks. Given that our data come from health reform lobbying on the House side, the latter's connections should be better, and that is what we find.



We also hypothesized, however, that when revolvers have specialized in a particular policy area by serving as committee staff, their value to the member on a related issue should be high and their access thereby improved. We do not find support for this hypothesis. Nor can we confidently say that the revolver's chamber- and committee-specific intelligence-gathering capacity improves his access. The main distinction here is that the former House committee staffers can provide two kinds of information rather than one. In addition to information they and their Senate counterparts might provide about the connections between alternative policies and outcomes, House committee staffers more than Senate committee staffers should be better connected to those who worked in and around the committees under study in this case, enabling them to learn more about what the major players at that stage want and what they are willing to accept. While the relationship shifts to the correct sign in the model that includes House committee background (Model 2), the coefficient is small and the standard errors large.

The results reported in Table 3 provide at once weak and strong support for the hypothesis that revolving door lobbyists gain greater access to their former offices, though inferences from our data are necessarily tentative. The best test we could manage with the data available is at the staff level: Is access greater when any of the lobbyists for group  $j$  had worked for House committee member  $i$ ? The estimates vary by specification, but in all three the coefficient is positive, and as Figure 2 shows, the substantive relationship (estimated from Model 2) is large. The House revolver averaged about nine contacts with members who marked up the ACA in House committees, but the predicted count increases by more than half when the organization had a lobbyist on staff that had previously worked for the individual member  $i$ .

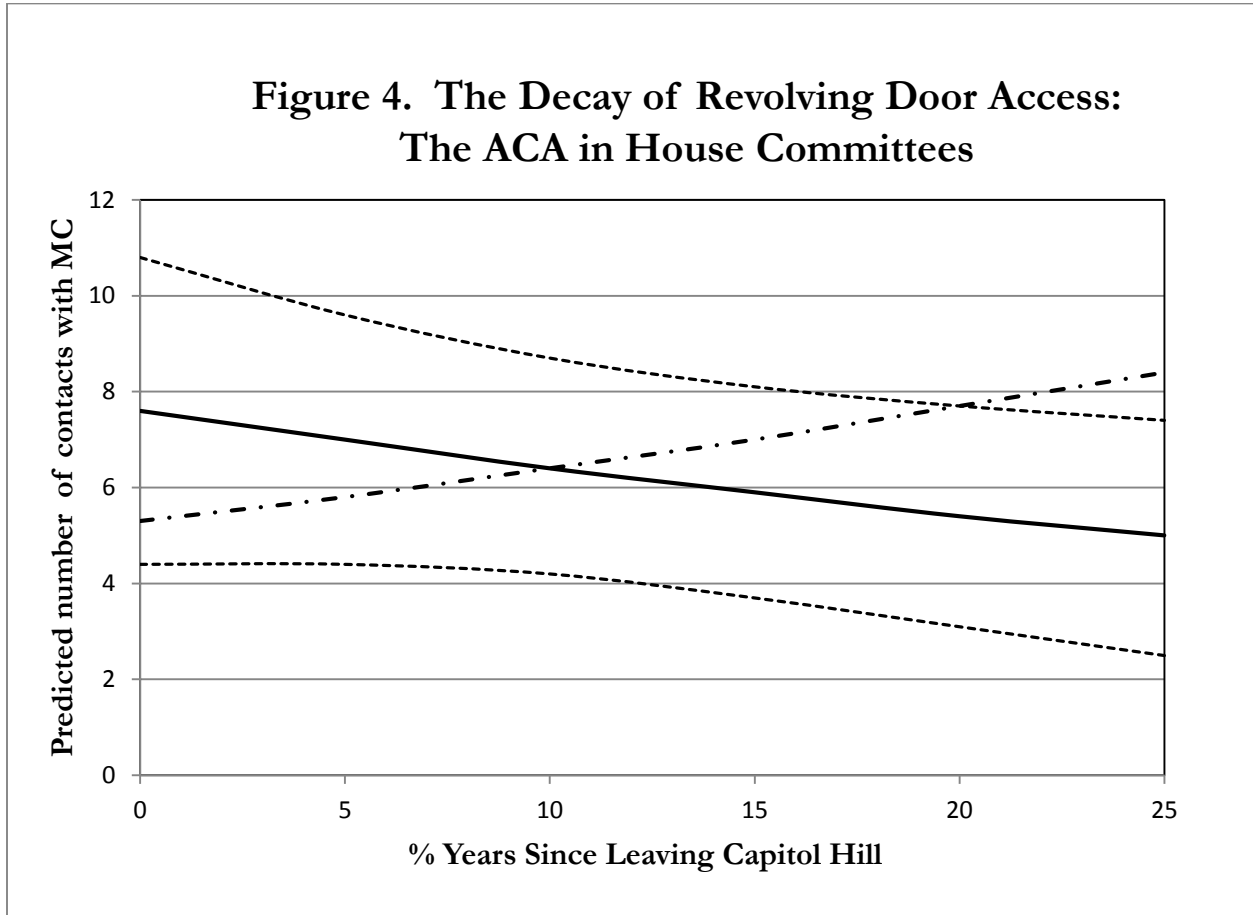
In every model, however, the coefficients for this variable are statistically insignificant, and in any case, this variable cannot explain much of the variance in the access that lobbyists get to legislators. Nor can we tell from the data the mechanism that underpins whatever relationship exists. As we have suggested, it need not rest on close, interpersonal relationships. Former employees know more about the district and constituencies that they once helped to represent, information that is deeply important to members of Congress, especially on a highly salient issue such as the ACA. Those lobbyists might also warrant greater trust in the information that they provide to the office, a point to which we turn in the next section.

### **The Conditional Nature of Revolving Door Access**

Our story of revolving door access emphasizes the connectedness of revolvers to current participants in the legislative process, but we have also suggested that the relationship should be conditional in two respects.

First, the distinctiveness of revolvers as a class of lobbyists should decay over time. That is what we find. The dashed line in Figure 4 shows that experience as a lobbyist, measured in years, does help him better represent his clients, learning the process and developing connections in and around the House. But the boldface line (bounded by 95% confidence intervals) shows that the distinctive advantage of the revolver diminishes as his Capitol Hill experience becomes more distant. If the revolver has an advantage, in other words, it does not appear to be self-sustaining. Good connections to members and staffers early in the lobbyist's career do not

necessarily carry over to congressional replacements, and the revolver starts to look more like other lobbyists, perhaps less effective than them.

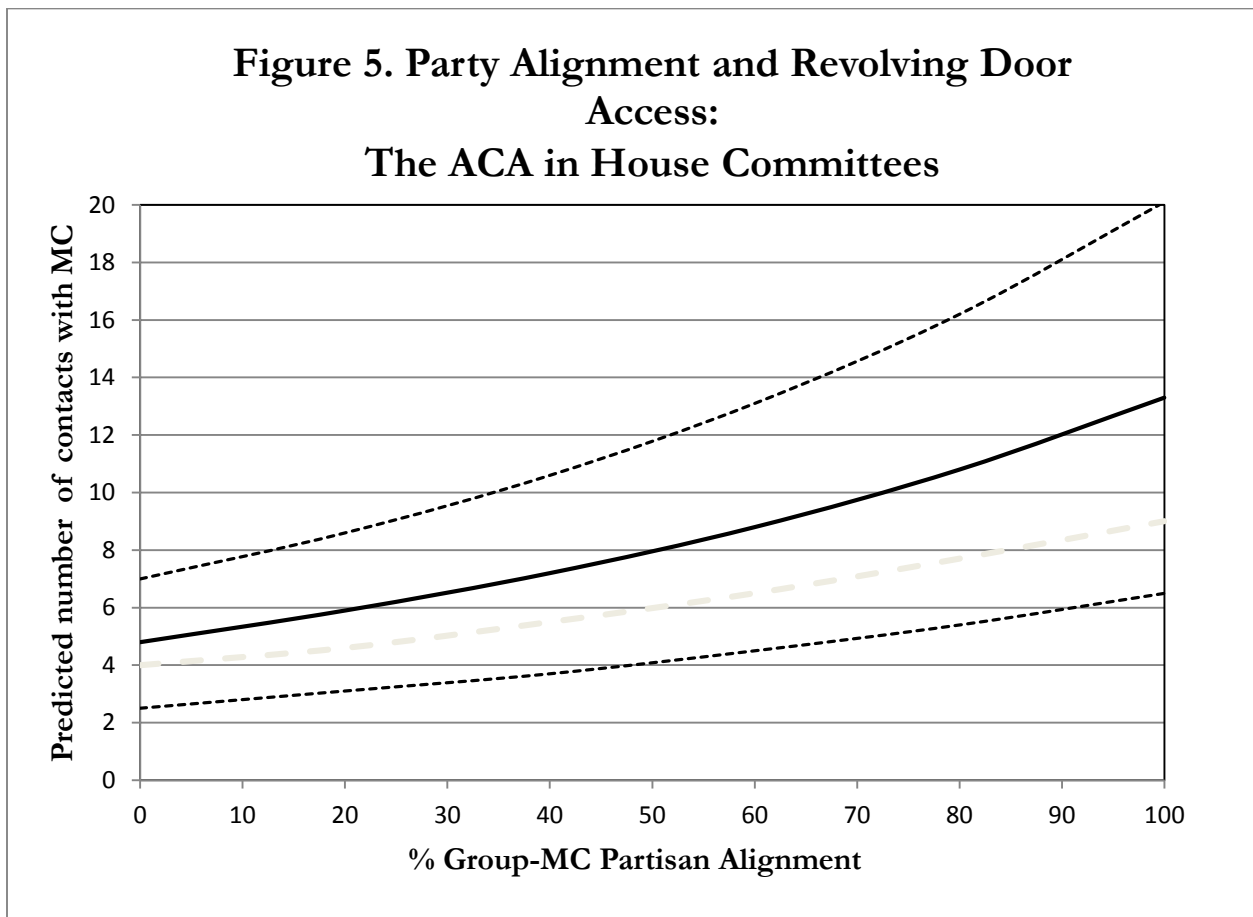


The importance of congressional experience is conditional in another important way that we hypothesized. One of the longstanding regularities in the empirical research on interest group advocacy is that lobbyists tend to lobby their allies. Early work on the subject found this pattern puzzling (Bauer, Pool, and Dexter 1963; Milbraith 1963), but subsequent scholars have argued that it is theoretically predictable (e.g., Austen Smith and Wright 1994; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Hall and Deardorff 2006), although different scholars subscribe to this view for different reasons.

The relationship between group-legislator partisan alignment is large and robust in our data, but our primary concern here is the extent to which alignment affects the value of the revolver's information to the member, hence the access the latter will give to the former. This hypothesis is tested with the specification in Model 3, which includes an interaction between partisan alignment and revolving door background.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The value of policy expertise should also depend on the degree to which the member's priors about the preferences of the group align with her own, implying a committee background-partisan alignment interaction. The variance on committee background was too slight to estimate this effect

The pattern in the data is consistent with this hypothesis. The main effect of revolving door status, indicated by the lobbyist’s staff background in the House, remains fairly large but becomes statistically insignificant in Mode 3. But the interaction term in Model 3 is positive and precisely estimated. Figure 5 illustrates the relationship. The dashed gray line shows that access increases with partisan agreement for non-revolvers, but the solid boldfaced line (bounded by 95% confidence intervals) shows that the revolving door relationship is magnified by partisan agreement. When agreement is low, say, at 20% (one standard deviation below the mean), the predicted number of contacts between lobbyist *i* and member *j* is approximately six. When partisan agreement is at 90% (one standard deviation above the mean), the predicted count is doubled to about 12. It is a third larger than when agreement is high and the lobbyist a non-revolver. To use Eggers’ phrase (2010), the “partisan revolving door” works remarkably well.



Finally, the results reported here also show that other cross-level covariates indicating that an organization’s interests align with the member’s have strong, positive associations with access. At least as far back as Kingdon (1973), scholars have shown that legislators are much more likely to favor interest groups that have a presence in their districts. Hojnacki and Kimball (1998) find that this factor affects access specifically. So do we.

To many, the more noteworthy relationship suggested in Table 3 is the relationship we uncover between campaign contributions from the group and access to the member. The correlation is strong positive, robust, and estimated with considerable precision. To some this will not be surprising. In the critics' view of interest group money – even the Supreme Court shares this view – access is what campaign contributions buy. But this paper is one of the few observational studies to generate this result at the individual level (see Langbein 1986).<sup>13</sup>

The reasons why this pattern should appear are inherently difficult to disentangle with observational data, however – a difficulty that has confounded scholars interested in money and politics for three decades. Access-buying is certainly one possibility. A second possibility is that money does not so much “buy” access as it signals to the legislator the group's agreement with her policy preferences on matters the group cares about (Hall, Van Houweling, and Beckmann 2012). But a third possibility is that such a correlation implies little causal connection at all. Among other reasons, interest groups might anticipate the major players likely to meet with interested parties and give them money hoping that it will win them policy concessions. At this point, we would simply say that one cannot conclude from our analysis that campaign contributions buy access, however popular that allegation may be, nor that they signal the agreement on which access is based. But the results here do provide new circumstantial evidence for a contributions-access connection, and a recent field experimental study conducted by Kalla and Broockman (2015 forthcoming) provides the best evidence so far that, at least in some form, the connection between money and access causal.

## Conclusion

The frequency with which members and staff leave Capitol Hill for lucrative jobs on K Street has many detractors, and two waves of Congressional ethics reforms have been enacted to stem the migration. Those reforms have been largely unsuccessful, however, and the criticism has only grown louder. Most of it has focused on the close, personal relationships that revolvers have with their former employers and co-workers. These revolvers presumably “cash in” on their public service and introduce a form of legislative cronyism that stains the practice of representation.

Claims about revolving door access are largely evidence-free, however. This paper represents the first attempt to test them directly. Using individual-level data on access during the House debate over the Affordable Care Act, we find that revolvers have a comparative advantage, but that advantage is not reducible to the widely criticized ties of lobbyists to their former employers. The more striking pattern in our data, and we suspect more generally, is how little variance there is on this particular revolving door variable. Instead our results suggest that revolvers as a class gain greater access because of information they provide that legislators find valuable. Revolvers' connectedness to intra-chamber political networks enable them to collect and convey political intelligence to key players in the process. That advantage is conditional, however. The value of information to the legislator depends on its credibility, and credibility depends at least in part on how much the interest group's partisan alignment with the member. With time and turnover, the informational advantage of revolvers decays, though interest groups that have substantial revolving door staffs can mitigate that problem. We find little evidence

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<sup>13</sup> For evidence of aggregate-level patterns, see Ansolabehere et al. 2002, 2003; Gray et. al. 2013)

that former committee staff gain greater access, raising doubt that policy expertise is an important reason why legislators look to revolving door lobbyists.

Both the findings and their interpretation require several caveats, however. First and most obviously, our evidence that political intelligence is the source of the revolver's advantage is only indirect. Although our results cast doubt on an expertise-based explanation, we have no direct measure of lobbyists' intelligence-gathering networks, much less their relative levels of policy or political information relevant to the case. Second, while we think it reasonable to assume that the revolving door attributes of the lobbyist are exogenous with respect to the access-granting decision of individual members, the assumption is not without problems. In particular, interest groups with multiple lobbyists might non-randomly assign revolvers to the main legislative players for whom access would otherwise be high. Lobbyist assignment is a matter that students of lobbying have yet to consider, and we are not able to model it here.

Finally, we have examined revolving door access in the context of a legislative fight for which the stakes were enormous and lobbying activity intense. The nature of the health reform case thus makes it substantively important, but it also makes it difficult to generalize from our results to a broad range of cases. In the study of access, the difficulties of data collection recommend research strategies that trade breadth for depth, a limitation that only the accumulation of studies or teams of researchers can overcome.

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