

Very Large Majorities of Americans Believe Big Companies, PACs, Political Lobbyists and the News Media Have Too Much Power and Influence in D.C.

But nine in ten Americans believe small business has too little power and influence

ROCHESTER, N.Y. – March 12, 2009 – When one thinks of Washington D.C. and the power corridors, smoke filled rooms and shady deals with lobbyists may come to mind. There are certain groups which are singled out by large majorities of the American public as having too much power in influencing the government. Influencers leading the list are big companies and Political Action Committees (PACs), which give money to political candidates. Eighty-five percent of Americans see them both as having too much influence.

Large majorities also believe that political lobbyists (81%) and the news media (75%) have too much power. Rounding out the top five are entertainment and sports celebrities, as over two-thirds (70%) of Americans believe they have too much power and influence in D.C.

Fully 90% of Americans believe that small business has too little power and influence. Large majorities also believe public opinion (76%) and nonprofit organizations (7%) have too little power and influence.

These are some of the results of *The Harris Poll*® of 1,010 adults surveyed by telephone between February 10 and 15, 2009 by Harris Interactive.

Who Else Has Power and Influence?

In addition to PACs, big companies, lobbyists, the media and celebrities, there are three other institutions which majorities of the public believe have too much power – TV and radio talk shows (59%), trade associations (55%) and labor unions (54%). Looking at the other side of the issue, just over half of the public believes racial minorities (53%) and churches and religious groups (57%) all have too little power and influence. Also a 51% to 38% majority believe opinion polls have too little influence.

Changes over Time

Since The Harris Poll began asking these questions 15 years ago, the rank order of interests, in terms of their perceived power and influence, has not changed very much. Big companies, PACs and political lobbyists have always topped the list of the too powerful; small business, public opinion and (since we began asking them) non-profit organizations have always headed the list of those having “too little power and influence.”

The biggest changes since 1994 is an eight-point increase, from 51% to 59% in those seeing TV and radio talk shows having too much power and influence.

Differences between the Views of Republicans, Democrats and Independents

Republicans, Democrats and Independents tend to agree on some groups related to their power and influence in Washington and disagree about others. Over 80% of all three believe that big business and PACs have too much power and influence. Furthermore, similar numbers of Republicans and Democrats believe TV and radio talk shows (60% and 64% respectively) have too much power and influence. Only four or five percent of all three party groups think small business has too much power and influence in D.C.

However, there are also some large differences. Republicans are much more likely than Democrats to believe that labor unions have too much power (77% vs. 36%). They are also more likely to think that racial minorities (50% vs. 18%), opinion polls (48% vs. 24%), and the news media (88% vs. 66%) have too much power.

Democrats, on the other hand, are more likely than Republicans to think that churches and religious organization (41% vs. 18%) have too much power and influence

So What?

Politicians know how to use this kind of information. It helps to identify oneself as being on the side of small business and public opinion. If you are looking for groups to criticize, big business, PACs, lobbyists and the news media are good targets.

One finding is particularly striking, the different between big business (bad) and small business (good), with one at the top of “too powerful” list and the other topping the “too little power” list. The foundation of America may be business but the distrust of big business is pervasive. However, it may be worth noting, hostility to big business is no higher than it was over the last three years. The economic crisis has had a big impact on how people see banks ([The Harris Poll, Dec 3, 2008](#)) but not, it seems, what they think of business in general.

TABLE 1

GROUPS SEEN AS HAVING TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE POWER AND INFLUENCE IN WASHINGTON

“And now a question about the power of different groups in influencing government policy, politicians, and policy makers in Washington. Do you think (READ EACH ITEM) have/has too much or too little power and influence in Washington?”

Base: All Adults

	Too Much	Too Little	About Right	Not Sure/Refused
	%	%	%	%
Big companies	85	10	2	3
Political action committees which give money to political candidates	85	9	2	5
Political lobbyists	81	14	1	4
The news media	75	18	3	5
Entertainment and Sports celebrities	70	20	4	6
TV and radio talk shows	59	29	5	7
Trade Associations	55	30	2	12
Labor unions	54	40	3	4
Opinion polls	38	51	5	6
Churches & religious groups	34	57	4	5
Racial minorities	33	53	6	8
Nonprofit organizations	19	71	3	7
Public opinion	18	76	3	2
Small business	5	90	3	3

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100 percent due to rounding.

TABLE 2

GROUPS SEEN AS HAVING TOO MUCH POWER - TRENDS 1994-2008

“And now a question about the power of different groups in influencing government policy, politicians, and policy makers in Washington. Do you think (READ EACH ITEM) have/has too much or too little power and influence in Washington?”

Percent saying “too much”

Base: All Adults

	1994	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2007	2008	2009	Change Since 1994
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Big companies	86	82	84	86	87	80	83	90	84	86	85	-1
Political action committees which give money to political candidates	88	83	83	83	83	78	81	85	85	83	85	-3
Political lobbyists	79	75	74	71	70	69	72	74	79	80	81	+2
The news media	79	81	77	77	72	72	71	68	71	74	75	-4
Entertainment and sports celebrities	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	69	70	n/a
TV and radio talk shows	51	54	54	57	47	54	54	51	54	57	59	+8
Trade Associations	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	61	52	57	55	n/a
Labor unions	46	42	39	44	46	45	48	43	47	51	54	+8
Opinion polls	37	36	35	38	33	33	36	33	38	44	38	+1
Churches & religious groups	n/a	n/a	27	28	31	27	32	35	38	40	34	n/a
Racial minorities	38	31	32	30	27	20	31	28	32	33	33	-5
Nonprofit organizations	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	23	18	23	19	n/a
Public opinion	14	21	15	14	15	19	18	16	17	20	18	+4
Small business	4	3	5	5	5	4	5	4	6	4	5	+1

TABLE 3

GROUPS SEEN AS HAVING TOO LITTLE POWER - TRENDS 1994-2008

“And now a question about the power of different groups in influencing government policy, politicians, and policy makers in Washington. Do you think (READ EACH ITEM) have/has too much or too little power and influence in Washington?”

Percent saying “too little”

Base: All Adults

	1994	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2007	2008	2009	Change Since 1994
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Big companies	9	8	6	6	5	10	9	5	11	8	10	+1
Political action committees which give money to political candidates	8	8	7	6	7	12	11	10	11	9	9	+1
Political lobbyists	13	12	12	13	11	15	16	17	14	13	14	+1
The news media	13	9	8	10	14	17	18	23	20	17	18	+5
Entertainment and sports celebrities	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	20	20	n/a
TV and radio talk shows	37	29	24	23	29	29	28	34	31	32	29	-8
Trade Associations	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	22	28	24	30	n/a
Labor unions	43	41	40	37	35	37	37	46	42	39	40	-3
Opinion polls	52	49	44	41	49	48	47	53	49	46	51	-1
Churches & religious groups	n/a	n/a	52	56	51	53	53	55	51	52	57	n/a
Racial minorities	51	52	50	51	51	59	54	58	54	51	53	+2
Nonprofit organizations	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	67	68	65	71	n/a
Public opinion	82	74	74	73	75	69	72	78	74	74	76	-6
Small business	92	85	85	88	87	88	88	92	90	90	90	-2

TABLE 4

GROUPS SEEN AS HAVING TOO MUCH POWER – BY PARTY ID

“And now a question about the power of different groups in influencing government policy, politicians, and policy makers in Washington. Do you think... have/has too much or too little power and influence in Washington?”

Percent saying “too much”

Base: All Adults

	Total	Party ID			Difference between Republicans and Democrats
		Rep.	Dem.	Ind.	
	%	%	%	%	%
Big companies	85	84	88	86	-4
Political action committees which give money to political candidates	85	82	85	89	-3
Political lobbyists	81	86	75	85	+11
The news media	75	88	66	73	+22
Entertainment and Sports celebrities	70	82	61	73	+21
TV and radio talk shows	59	60	64	57	-4
Trade Associations	55	59	51	55	+8
Labor unions	54	77	36	57	+41
Opinion polls	38	48	24	43	+24
Churches & religious groups	34	18	41	45	-23
Racial minorities	33	50	18	34	+32
Nonprofit organizations	19	23	12	23	+11
Public opinion	18	21	16	17	+5
Small business	5	4	5	4	-1

Methodology

The Harris Poll was conducted by telephone within the United States between February 10 and 15, 2009 among a nationwide cross section of 1,010 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region, number of adults in the household, size of place (urbanicity), and number of phone lines voice/telephone lines in the household were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words “margin of error” as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different

probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100 percent response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.

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