**“If someone donates $1000, they support you. If they donate $100,000, they’ve bought you.” Mixed methods study of tobacco, alcohol and gambling industry donations to Australian political parties**

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# Abstract

**Background and Aims:** Business corporations’ use of political donations to garner political influence is especially troubling in relation to products that damage human health. We sought to investigate patterns of donations to Australian political parties from tobacco, alcohol, and gambling industry actors, and the experiences of key informants.

**Design and Methods:** We analysed public data on federal and state donations for 10 years to June 2015. We conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with current and former politicians, ex-political staffers, and other key informants, concerning the role played by political donations of tobacco, alcohol and gambling companies in Australian politics. We examined temporal associations in donations data, and thematically analysed interviews.

**Results:** Australian political parties declared donations of A$14 Million (US$11M) from tobacco ($1.9M), alcohol ($7.7M), gambling ($2.9M), and supermarket ($1.7M) entities, excluding donations below the $12,800 reporting threshold. Donations to the governing party increased substantially during debates about an alcohol tax and gambling law reform. Alcohol industry donations to major parties spiked ahead of elections. Interviewees identified the function of donations in terms of (1) buying immediate influence; (2) building long-term relationships; (3) exploiting a flawed political system; and (4) the need to look beyond donations, e.g., to favour exchange; and the public’s right to know about corporate influence on policy-makers.

**Discussion:** Thealcohol and gambling industries make substantial donations to influence particular decisions in the short term and build relationships over the long term. Banning corporate donations and publicly funding political parties warrant consideration to safeguard the integrity of public policy making.

**Key words:** donations; politics; government; alcohol; tobacco; gambling; industry; vested interests

# Introduction

The practice of business corporations making political donations to garner influence over political parties, to advance their interests [1], is especially troubling in relation to products that damage human health. Academic research on corporate political donations mainly occurs within the disciplines of business ethics and political science [2-5]; though there is some public health literature in relation to tobacco [6, 7]. Donations are often used to prevent the adoption or implementation of policies that are contrary to corporate interests. For health harming industries these include regulation, taxation, and other evidence-based interventions; and they seek instead to promote ineffective programs [8, 9]. Tobacco industry internal documents show that where the policy decision looks unwinnable, the goal may be to obfuscate and delay, protecting profits until regulation is implemented [10].

A recent Australian analysis showed that delays by government in implementing alcohol warning labels were probably due in large part to lobbying by the alcohol industry [11]. This is in keeping with systematic review evidence that a range of methods are used to influence alcohol policies, among which donations may serve to support long-term relationship building with key political actors, and can be integrated with other methods of influence [12].

Australia is generally regarded as a stable democracy with relatively low levels of corruption, being ranked 13th out of the 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index in 2017 (<https://www.transparency.org/country/AUS>). But its ranking is falling, and the undue influence on politicians of corporate actors has been cited as a cause for concern [13]. According to one public enquiry, Australia’s current political donation regime is weak compared to other high income countries [14]. Federal political donation laws are such that any person, corporation, trade union, third-party donor or associated entity can donate to a political party or candidate [15], and there is no limit on the size of donations [5]. Disclosure is subject to a minimum threshold ($12,800 in 2015, adjusted annually by the consumer price index) per donation, per year, to any single candidate, and the identities of the donor and recipient for amounts below the minimum threshold do not have to be revealed [16]. Disclosure is required only annually, meaning that up-to-date information is usually unavailable to voters at the time of elections.

We sought to (1) examine patterns in political donations that Australian political parties declared receiving from tobacco, alcohol, and gambling industry actors, and (2) investigate the views of people with experience of donations and their effects on political parties and public policy-making.

# Methods

*Design*

We employed a mixed methods design to estimate the extent of donations from tobacco, alcohol, and gambling industries, and their function in Australian politics.

*Policy events*

We identified policy events occurring at federal level during the reference period of the study (2006-2015), including parliamentary debates on tobacco plain packaging, pre-mixed spirits, and gambling reforms.

### Donations data

We selected for study a list of tobacco, alcohol and gambling companies operating in Australia, including the supermarket chains Woolworths and Coles, who between them sell over half of the tobacco and alcohol in Australia and also have large holdings in the poker machine gambling sector (see Appendix A). In 2016, we obtained publicly available data on donations made by them from 1 July 2005 to 30 June 2015, in the annual donor returns submitted by the selected industries and recorded by the Australian Electoral Commission [17].

Our analysis only includes entries listed as ‘donations’; which encompasses ‘gifts’ as per the Commonwealth Electoral Act (1918) [18]. At the federal level, donors are only required by law to declare monies defined as ‘donations’ in their annual returns, including cash and non-cash (in-kind) contributions [18]. The data provided to us by the Australian Electoral Commission were donations to political parties, not individuals.

## *Key informant interview data*

We identified participants through a stakeholder analysis and snowball sampling, on the basis of their experience and knowledge of political donations. We conducted interviews from June–December 2016, as part of the Corporate Political Activity of Tobacco, Alcohol and Gambling Companies in Australia project (<http://www.industryinsight.info/>). The interview protocol we used is shown in Box 1.

<Box 1>

Researchers NR, FM, and PM conducted 21 semi-structured key informant interviews by telephone and seven in person where the participant preferred a face-to-face format and it was feasible to meet. We used Skype for Business to record telephone interviews and a digital recorder for the face-to-face interviews. Interviewers elicited information about the role played by political donations of tobacco, alcohol and gambling companies in Australian politics, and lasted approximately 45 minutes.

We developed a structured interview protocol (see Box 1) informed by the framework devised by Savell and colleagues [19], and research on wider corporate political activities. Interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically using NVivo. We refined the coding iteratively, starting with Savell and colleagues’ framework, developing new codes as content arose in the data [20].

*Ethical approval*

The Human Ethics Advisory Group of the Faculty of Health at Deakin University approved our study protocol (HEAG-H 101-2016).

# Results

## *Corporate political donations*

In the 10 years to June 2015, Australian political parties received $14,113,040 (Australian dollars; approximately US$11 Million) in donations from tobacco ($1,926,679), alcohol ($7,650,858) and gambling ($2,871,609) industry bodies, and the major supermarket chains ($1,663,895). The Liberal Party (centre-right) received $7,317,367 (52%), the Labor Party (centre-left) $4,830,252 (34%), the National Party (longstanding coalition partner of the Liberal Party, with a conservative, rural support base) $1,673,481 (12%); while the Country Liberal Party, Liberal National Party, and “Associated entities” received the balance ($291,941; 2%).

In 2009, the Labor Government passed a law to increase the excise tax on pre-mixed spirits drinks (‘alcopops’), aligning it with the tax on spirits [21]. Alcopops are spirit-based drinks that appeal to children and young people because their high sugar content masks the bitterness of alcohol. Figure 1 shows that alcohol industry donations increased in 2008 and 2009, when the alcopops bill was being debated. Alcohol industry donations also increased ahead of the 2010 and 2013 elections. Gambling industry donations to Labor peaked in 2008 and 2009 during a major enquiry into gambling [22]. Throughout the period of study, Labor had a policy of not accepting donations from tobacco companies.

<Figure 1>

Figure 2 shows that alcohol industry donations to the Liberal Party increased sharply before the 2010 and 2013 federal elections, and were substantially greater than donations to Labor, despite the latter having been in government from 2007–13. The pattern of donations to the National Party was similar except that it continued to permit tobacco industry donations.

<Figure 2>

Federal elections occurred on 24 November 2007, 21 August 2010, and 7 September 2013, as indicated in Figures 1 and 2. Labor were the party of government from 2007–2013, with the Liberal-National Coalition governing before and after these years. It should be noted that the patterns of donations illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 reflect declarations of the amounts received in the 12 months up to 30 June of each year. Without knowing the dates of each donation, we situated data points at the end of the reporting period, such that they lag by up to 12 months.

## *Key informant interviews*

The key informants were current politicians (n=6), ex-politicians (n=7), ex-political staffers (n=3), journalists (n=6), public health advocates (n=3), a senior civil servant (n=1), a lobbyist (n=1), and a senior police officer (n=1). Informants consistently observed that donations secured access to politicians. They noted that political parties had a growing appetite for alcohol and gambling money after the ban by the major parties on accepting tobacco donations.

### Theme 1: Money buys access

According to one informant, the size of the donation matters greatly:

If someone donates $1000, they support you. If they donate $100,000, they’ve bought you (politician, #1).

Another suggested that if donations were not effective in securing benefit, they would cease:

There’s no doubt that if someone makes a significant donation to your campaign or to your political party, then you tend to look fondly towards them (ex-politician, #5).

He explained why and how donations matter:

The real politics of it is that if there’s someone who can cause you pain and maybe even cause you to lose an election, you keep them close (ex-politician, #5).

If you know that they are a regular donor then you’ll obviously meet with them (ex-politician, #5)

Others attested to the importance of personal contacts, e.g.:

…the CEO [Chief Executive Officer] of the AHA [Australian Hotels Association] or the CEO of Crown Casino is capable of picking up the phone and ringing individual members of parliament or ministers…I’ve got their mobile numbers as well. You bump into them at functions; not just political functions but corporate functions, charity functions of all kinds...Everyone knows everyone…But I don’t know if that’s a corruption of the system or it’s just simply the reality of the corporate sector (politician, #4).

Political donations are thus implicated in the building of relationships with politicians, and the initiation of favour exchange. What is noteworthy is the way in which such close relationships between corporate actors with vested interests and political representatives are seen as a routine feature of contemporary politics, even while acknowledging that this may risk corruption. Indeed, politicians have relied on senior corporate actors as a key resource in policy-making and as a source of advice: The Labor Government’sproposal to introduce electronic pre-commitment (setting spending limits in advance)for the use of poker machines, and$1 bet limits, was defeated by a concerted industry effort, involving public messaging aimed at damaging the proponents’ electoral prospects [23]. According to one informant:

## …both parties, or leaders, contacted [casino owner] Jamie Packer for his opinion on it [$1 bet limits] and Packer made it absolutely clear to them that $1 maximum bets was completely and utterly unacceptable. It could not be allowed, and…Tony Abbott [Leader of the Opposition] and Julia Gillard [Prime Minister], both refused the one-dollar maximum bet proposition.…these people are held in such high regard by politicians that politicians would go to them and to Packer, for example, at a time like that for his advice (politician, #1).

This situation implies obvious potential for influence to be exercised in various ways.

*Theme 2: Long term strategy*

Industry actors identify different types of target for donations to build relationships, including politicians early in their career:

[Industry actors] have a habit of finding either politicians who have power, or who look like they might have power [in future], and they give them a fairly small amount of money, you know, to try and curry favour, and when they do it seems to work, unfortunately (ex-political staffer, #2).

This respondent explained how particular roles were designated regardless of status in government at a particular time:

So what they’ll do is they’ll find guys who have a voice in caucus and they buy…we call it mouthpiece money…there’s two or three guys or women in caucus who will argue on behalf of the club (in regards to gambling policy), right. They’ll also then go and find the next up-and-coming heroes who might become the next Premier; he might be a guy on the rise, and they’ll start giving him money too (ex-political staffer, #2)*.*

From the rising politician’s point of view donations enhance their career prospects. In the long-term relationship building strategy outlined here, donations thus appear pivotal. Being seen as an unremarkable part of the political environment reinforces the maintenance of such relationships with corporate actors:

I see them at regular functions so they always maintain a presence at party forums where corporates are invited; always maintain a presence in terms of general communications around Twitter and things like that. Just to make sure that they’re part of the political discussion of the day. Not necessarily pushing an agenda but just maintaining a relationship. So that when they do have an issue which is front-and-centre they have existing contacts and existing relationships that they can then simply advocate for a particular issue (politician, #4).

In this way relationships are built gradually and provide opportunities for influence over the longer term. Informants emphasised that ongoing personal contact is critical and that having the resources to maintain a presence in the political sphere helps to maintain avenues of influence:

Keeping channels of communication open and maintaining relationships…is the large part of what we would advise our clients to engage in, and we’re the system to do that (politician #4, speaking of when he was a lobbyist).

### Theme 3: A flawed system

Some political actors expressed their desire for a system free of commercial influence, e.g.,

…on balance I would prefer to see no industry of any kind funding election campaigns in a way, because I think it has the potential …to distort… (ex-politician, #3).

But they also noted that politics is expensive, and becoming more so, thus increasing the appetite for money to fund election campaigns, and thereby the reliance on corporate donations, e.g.:

It’s very difficult, because the way it’s structured at the moment, MPs have got to fund campaigns and you’ve got to find your donations wherever you think you can legitimately and decently do that (ex-politician, #4).

One further factor that compounds the dilemmas facing individual politicians and parties is the lack of transparency around who buys access, and why, which is perhaps a fundamental flaw in the current system:

So, the political donations issue, and it’s not just the well-known suspects, or the usual suspects. It’s widely spread. There's all sorts of devices used to cover it up (ex-politician, #3).

This means that donations can be accepted, for example, below the stipulated threshold, and kept secret.

*Theme 4: Beyond political donations*

Informants identified other manifestations of gifting in relationships established between industry and political actors, e.g.:

We have wine-tasting at Parliament House so they have access to all different levels of government and non-government members of parliament. They participate in personal and private wine-tasting in the Valley and Margaret River. And policy issues are [raised during] those events and discussed (ex-politician, #2).

Reflecting on the politician’s responsibility to voters, one informant argued for a public right to know about potential influence:

It comes down to these issues of integrity. You have to conduct yourself with integrity and if there is too much of a direct relationship between, say, the hospitality you receive, certainly the donation that your party received, and the actual outcomes…People have a right to ask if that influence has been undue (politician, #4).

Such sentiment suggests the possibility that some politicians would welcome reforms that free them from their dependence on corporate entities to generate funds and the conflicts of interest this engenders.

# Discussion

## There were high levels of donations from tobacco, alcohol, and gambling industries declared by Australian political parties in the period 2006-2015. The largest sums went to the Liberal Party (52%), followed by the Labor Party (34%), and the National Party (12%). Donations increased to the party in government (Labor from 2007-2013) in the lead-up to critical policy decisions on alcohol and gambling, and to all parties before federal elections. Interestingly, there are differences between industries in this regard, with alcohol industry actors donating more before elections than gambling industry actors. This suggests differences in strategy, with alcohol companies investing more in donations to influence electoral outcomes and in building long-term relationships. Themes in interview data identified the function of donations as (1) buying immediate influence; (2) the part they play in building long-term relationships; (3) exploiting a flawed political system; and (4) the need to look beyond donations, e.g., to gifting relationships that provide mutual benefit, and the public’s right to know about corporate influence on policy-makers.

Given that reporting donations under $12,800 was not compulsory, the total amounts given to parties, and the identity of many donors, were indeterminable. It is also important to note that our study did not encompass donations from organisations closely associated with–and often themselves receiving funding from–tobacco, alcohol, and gambling bodies, e.g., think tanks and trade associations, which may be seen as indirect contributions. Our estimates are therefore conservative.

For our interviews we did not seek to recruit industry representatives, expecting them to provide carefully crafted accounts on donations that offered little insight without complex methodological investigations. We instead endeavoured to recruit a heterogeneous sample of informants with varying perspectives. The consistency in the views they expressed is therefore noteworthy. We do not know how the industries we studied compare to others because similar study of other corporate sectors is lacking, and also due to the array of channels available to corporate actors to introduce money into politics outside of the regulations.

Informant accounts such as that of a Prime Minister consulting a casino owner about poker machine reforms illustrate the dependence of national political leaders on the goodwill of key corporate actors. The donations data reveal large payments at critical points in political debate, while key informants also brought to light the importance of ongoing favour exchange effected through lobbying. This approach was pioneered long ago by the tobacco companies [24-27], and our findings show that alcohol and gambling industry actors employ similar methods.

The case of the alcopops tax suggests that evidence-based policy initiatives inimical to industry interests, can sometimes succeed despite donations and other lobbying efforts. It should be noted, however, that the proposed legislation was opposed with unusual vigour in both houses, creating the rare possibility of a double dissolution of the parliament [28].

The potential for influence on policy decision-making seems likely to grow as the cost of competing for office increases. It has been estimated, for example, that the Liberals spent $46M and Labor $34M in the 2014-15 financial year on broadcast advertising alone [29]. This suggests that the donations identified here should probably be seen in the context of a larger dependence of political parties on corporate money. Having to secure funding diverts parties from developing policy, communicating with constituents, and governing or providing effective opposition. Such dependence facilitates the exercise of donor financial power at the expense of democracy [30].

## While it was suggested by one informant that bigger donations buy more influence, our analysis also points toward small donations being implicated in long-term relationship building. Research revealing how drug reps regularly visit doctors, giving them pens and notepads to influence their prescribing practices, attest to the effectiveness of such tactics [31].

## Skilful cultivation of relationships and corporate gifting (e.g., concert tickets, bottles of wine) and shared activities (e.g., sporting events in which politicians and lobbyists attend together [32]) create a subtle but sustained pressure, like ‘water dripping on stone’ [33]. The impacts on government policy may take years to materialise [34] and be untraceable to their origins [12].

## Our informants, who included current and former politicians, journalists, and political staffers, were unanimous in the view that donations are effective in gaining access and thereby helping secure policy outcomes for donors, though provided little direct evidence of the latter. While we did ask some key informants about these links, the answers they gave were general, outlined a milieu of influence. Specific prompts for such information may be worth including in future research, however, it is likely that informants who witness such practices would be reluctant to report potentially illegal activity without the protection of anonymity.

By eluding a regulatory system focused on donations, such ‘below the radar’ strategies highlight the need for other safeguards against commercial influence on public policy. Unfortunately, recent research on political lobbying in Australia showed that even the basic statutory functions of recording and making available the identities of those with whom politicians and senior bureaucrats meet, for public scrutiny, are performed poorly [35].

We suggest that measures such as banning corporate donations and publicly funding political parties warrant consideration to safeguard the integrity of public policy-making. The importance of arresting tobacco, alcohol and gambling industry influence in order to implement effective public health strategies is clear. This study could be replicated in other countries where there are publicly available data on political donations. The key research implications of the present findings are the need for studies of the processes of making public policies and long-term relationship building among corporate and political actors.

We have found substantial levels of political donations that a broad array of key informants say are effective in gaining access to political actors, building relationships and ultimately influencing policy by various means. The current monitoring system makes it impossible to know how much corporations donate, while gifts and gratuities designed with the expectation of reciprocity go unrecorded. We need to better understand how tactics such as political donations function in the building of relationships between political actors and industry actors, and take preventive action to reduce commercial influence on public policy.

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**Figure 1. Alcohol and gambling industry donations disclosed by the Labor Party (year ending 30 June)**

Notes: (1) Labor Party policy disallowed acceptance of tobacco industry donations; (2) Donations from supermarkets are not included; (3) The patterns of donations reflect declarations of the amounts received in the 12 months up to 30 June of each year. Without knowing the dates of each donation, we situated data points at the end of the reporting period, such that they lag by up to 12 months.

**Figure 2. Tobacco, alcohol, and gambling industry donations disclosed by the Liberal Party (year ending 30 June)**

Notes: (1) Donations from supermarkets are not included; (2) the patterns of donations reflect declarations of the amounts received in the 12 months up to 30 June of each year. Without knowing the dates of each donation, we situated data points at the end of the reporting period, such that they lag by up to 12 months

**Box1. Structured interview protocol**

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| --- |
| Introductory remarks: “The purpose of these interviews is to consult with key informants about the alcohol and gambling industries engage with governments. We are interviewing a diverse range of people who have had experience of these activities in the course of their work.”   1. Could you tell me what kind of interactions you have had or have seen happening with the alcohol/ gambling industry and political actors, as part of your occupation? How does this process occur?   Probes: *Specifically, in what situations have you interacted/observed the alcohol/gambling industry representatives?*  *What opportunities, that you’ve observed, were there for industry people to mix directly with political actors or government officials?*   1. How would you characterise or describe their interactions with members of government or what you saw of their interactions with members of the government? 2. What do you think/was the purpose of the industry representative was? 3. In your opinion what are the consequences of the influence of the alcohol and gambling industries is on policy outcomes? 4. What sorts of specific approaches were used? *(See optional questions for additional prompts, below)*. *Were you satisfied that corporate involvement was warranted?* 5. Do you feel that there is a conflict of interest in relation tocorporate political activity and political actors? 6. What measures should be occurring to monitor and do you think these activities should be reduced, and if so how? 7. We would like to interview other people who can provide insight into this area. Who else do you suggest we interview about this? *e.g., ex-politicians, ex-alcohol/ gambling industry people, retired government officials, others who have extensive experience in this area* 8. Finally, is there anything else you would like to talk about?   *Additional prompts*   1. There is a strong body of evidence, in the literature, that some of the practices of the alcohol/gambling industry may influence public health policies, directly or indirectly. I have a list of such practices here.     *Present the strategies (separate document or just read out) one by one.*   * 1. Looking at that list, can you indicate whether you have experienced or observed these practices? I am really interested in **your own professional experience** here. Do you feel these practices may pose a risk to public health and why/why not?   2. Is there **any other practice** that you have observed, and that is not mentioned here?   3. Could you please indicate which of these practices you feel are **most influential** on public health? And which are **least influential**? |

## Appendix A. Companies included in the analysis, by industry

*Tobacco:* British American Tobacco Australia Ltd; Philip Morris Limited.

*Alcohol:* ALH Group Pty Ltd (Australian Leisure and Hospitality); Australian Hotels & Hospitality Association Inc.; Australian Hotels Association - Federal Office; Australian Hotels Association (NSW); Australian Hotels Association (SA Branch); Clubs Australia; ClubsNSW; Coopers Brewery Limited; DSICA; Lion Nathan Australia Pty Limited; Lion Pty Ltd.

*Gambling:* Burswood Entertainment Complex; Burswood Ltd; Burswood Nominees; Crown Resorts Limited; Lozune Pty Ltd; Mulawa Management Pty Ltd; Skycity Adelaide; Skycity Darwin NT Pty Ltd; Star City Pty Ltd; Star City Sydney; Tabcorp Holdings Limited; Tattersalls; Tattersalls Holdings Pty Ltd.

*Supermarkets:* Coles Group Limited; Independent Grocers Alliance; Metcash Trading Limited; Wesfarmers LTD; Woolworths Limited.