The U.S Chamber of Commerce

**What is The U.S Chamber of Commerce? (Representation, Structure and Members)**

The U.S Chamber of Commerce is one of the largest interest groups that is a highly respected and prestigious body in D.C. as well as throughout the country. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is a pro-business interest group, which is the largest interest group that deals with the concerns of business first and foremost. On their website they write that, “The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is the world’s largest business organization representing the interests of more than 3 million businesses of all sizes, sectors, and regions.”[[1]](#footnote-1) To add to this statement, according to the guidebook on their website that describes how towns or districts can set up their own Chamber, it states that “ Today, there are more than 7,000 chambers, boards of trade, and designated nonprofits advancing the interests of their communities.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Among this massive sector, their members “range from mom-and-pop shops and local chambers to leading industry associations and large corporations.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Given that the U.S Chamber represents millions of businesses varying in size, they represent small, medium and large sized businesses and corporations differing in what they sell and produce. With their overarching representation of businesses of all sizes, sectors and demographics, they are responsible for ensuring the best interests of all businesses they represent. This is an important note to make given that this can come as an advantage to the U.S. Chamber when they are looking to become a member of a coalition with other interest groups, or with other interest groups looking to invite the U.S. Chamber to join themselves in a coalition. With the well-known fact that the U.S. Chamber is pro-business, it is thus obvious in stating that, although endorsing candidates of both stripes, they are “historically seen as Republican-leaning”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As discussed in class, interest groups offer incentives in terms of membership, whether it be material, solidarity, or purposive. Most interest groups have a combination of all three or two out of the three. In terms of the U.S. Chamber, their incentives include all three. However before analyzing them, it is important to note that there are three different types of membership for the U..S. Chamber of Commerce. They include a membership for small businesses, membership for chambers and membership for associations. Within the chamber and associations membership there are different levels of membership with the lowest being signature, the middle being advantage and the highest being elite. The small business membership includes both solidary and purposive incentives because it connects small businesses to the immense networking that is part of the U.S. Chamber. Additionally, with their membership fee, they are able to have their voices heard in Washington in terms of fighting for pro-business policy as well as other areas that they feel need to be a part of legislation in order to protect and enhance businesses.[[5]](#footnote-5) For the Chamber and Associations membership, it is a combination of all three incentives for the same reasons, however, they include material incentives unlike the small business membership because they are given special discounts, invitations to special access of members of the U.S. Chamber and monthly letters from the U.S. Chamber’s board of directors.[[6]](#footnote-6)

With the U.S. Chamber being composed of business men and women, to say they are organized, efficient and direct would be an understatement. They are one of the largest and most successful interest groups in the U.S. for the reason that as businessmen and businesswomen, they know how to accomplish their agenda efficiently as well as successfully. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is unique to other interest groups covered in class because of their situated primary office, or offices in this case. More specifically, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is based in Washington D.C. directly across the street from the White House. However, they also have state offices, local/district locations and international offices too. This structuring of having offices and chambers in all areas of the country to represent all business, allows them to know first hand all the information they need to know to ensure that what they are supporting is well researched and supported in order to make as effective of an argument to legislatures as possible.

Given this comprehensive network of research and representation, it is thus important to understand the structures and relationships between the different Chamber offices given their size and influence. For the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, their structure is in the form of an executive team along with a board of directors.[[7]](#footnote-7) This organizational structure of the U.S. Chamber has a more executive and major corporation feel as opposed to a local/district Chamber. Another important fact to state in regard to the U.S. Chamber is that there are only 15 lobbyists in the U.S. Chamber according to Allison Dembeck, an employee at the U.S. Chamber. Unlike the U.S. Chamber’s structure which is much more rigid and limiting, local Chambers allow anyone and everyone to join. However there is a board for local Chambers that is made up of the members of the local Chamber who decide who will be on the local board of directors. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s website has a section entitled “Who Leads a Chamber?” describing the local chamber’s structure as stating, “A chamber of commerce is run by its members. They elect a board of directors who determines policies and sets goals. The chief elected officer presides over all board meetings. A chamber’s day-to-day operations are handled by a professional manager. This person is generally a paid employee.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This definition from their website makes it clear that members of a Chamber are able to have a crucial direct influence and impact on businesses in their town, district and/or country. Accordingly, they are able to have a hand in shaping the agenda as well as addressing issues that need to be handled and further acting as supportive innovators to the business sector in a positive and continuously successful and impactful manner.

In terms of who the members of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce as well as their own local Chamber’s are, as mentioned above, members consist of business owners, businessmen and women from any and all sectors as well as anyone who supports businesses no matter what size or from what sector. Their individual goals are the same: to see businesses succeed as well as make progressive and positive change to the business world. The local Chambers consist of members who are business owners of all sizes, individuals from the town who are “concerned with the socioeconomic climate of a community.”[[9]](#footnote-9) With the U.S. Chamber of Commerce being a pro-business interest group, their members are pro-business and support businesses and any piece of legislation that will help promote business. Alternatively, they strongly oppose legislation that is looking to limit or hinder business in any way.

The U.S. Chamber’s current Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is Thomas Donohue.[[10]](#footnote-10) The narrative around business is that it is predominantly controlled by men who occupy most business leadership roles. However, as current times have shown us, the rise of women in power as well as being involved in different career sectors is dramatically increasing everyday. With this said, on their executive leadership team, the U.S. Chamber has five females appointed to respective roles while 11 males occupy the remaining positions.[[11]](#footnote-11) Although there is still a distinct difference between the number of men and women, it is increasingly apparent that at the top level of the Chamber in D.C. and in local communities, businesswomen and women business owners are becoming more involved, looking to have their voice heard, valued and placed in an acknowledged role. This concept of female and male membership and involvement will be discussed later when talking about policy issues such as the Equality Act. Additionally, in comparing the U.S. Chamber’s structure to a corporate type structure, the U.S. Chamber has “committees, subcommittees, task forces, and councils involving more than 2,000 representatives of member corporations, organizations, and the academic community who serve voluntarily. In almost every instance, significant policy and public issue positions originate with one of these Chamber components.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This structuring allows them each to focus on different issues important to the U.S Chamber such as health care, energy, legal reform to name a few.[[13]](#footnote-13) This structure in its organization allows for the U.S Chamber to be efficient and successful, as well as diverse in its scope and areas of influence.

**Funding (Money, Money, Money!)**

With the Chamber being a pro-business interest group, money is very important, crucial and heavily focused on its impact on business. A common phrase is “money makes the world go ‘round” and businesses know how to raise money in big numbers. Thus with the Chamber of Commerce being made up of businessmen and women, they are efficient in terms of funding. Their predominant funding for their interest group objectives is through their membership. As mentioned above, there are three types of membership. The small business membership on the Chamber’s website acknowledges an annual membership fee of $250.[[14]](#footnote-14) Another way the U.S. Chamber is funded, is through donations.[[15]](#footnote-15) In terms of local Chambers, their funds come also from membership fees. Membership fees serve as a constant funding for themselves as well as an incentive to the members who get a professional network of public interest and other benefits from their membership.

**Activities/Tactics to Influence Policy**

As discussed with significant emphasis, tactics are a crucial element of how interest groups are able to influence policy. The variety of tactics a group can use is endless; what matters is how they use these tactics and how successful they are. For the Chamber of Commerce, one of the tactics they use most effectively is advocacy. Since the Chamber of Commerce is a pro-business interest group, they are always advocating for pro-business policy as well as other policies that will have a positive impact on businesses in the United States as well as for businessmen and women and other workers in the business community. In terms of what their advocacy looks like, those that work at the Chamber of Commerce in D.C. will regularly, like other lobbyists, meet with politicians and staffers on Capitol Hill in seeking to influence them in how to vote for particular legislation that has a direct positive effect or impact on them as a group as well as their members. Additionally, as discussed in class, they will also help write bills and have particular language included in the bill which will help it get passed as well as portray the importance of the bill for businessmen and owners, to those politicians.

Two common tactics used by many interest groups including the Chamber of Commerce, are direct and indirect lobbying. Direct lobbying can be observed when individuals who work for the Chamber will go to the Capitol and meet with Senators or Representatives and tell them directly how they want them to vote for a specific bill or piece of legislation. Additionally direct lobbying can be evidenced when they include language they want to be included in the bills or pieces of legislation going up for a vote. Direct lobbying can also be portrayed by the Chamber when it meets with Congressmen and women to educate them on a certain policy issue and the significance it will have for workers in the United States, no matter what sector they are in. In this way, they are directly educating lawmakers and informing them of the implications of if they vote for a particular policy or against that policy. These efforts are the daily workings of the U.S. Chamber on Capitol Hill.

They also indirectly lobby. This is where their members are more involved. Under multiple locations on their website whether it be under the membership page or under policy pages, they always describe that being a member of the U.S. Chamber opens you up to their expansive network. But they also promote members and supporters of the U.S. Chamber to write, call or meet with their lawmakers to help promote pro-business legislation. This type of grassroots advocacy/indirect lobbying allows for members to be individually involved and feel as though they are having a significant impact on the issues at hand. The U.S. Chamber does not get involved in local politics or local chambers, so this gives local chamber members an opportunity through their membership to be able to “play in the big leagues” in terms of contacting lawmakers and trying to influence Washington in terms of pro-business reform and legislation. Again, this indirect lobbying is a constant and continual work for the overall U.S. Chamber.

**Pieces of Legislation/Issues**

Since the U.S. Chamber is such a giant of an interest group, they are involved or have been involved in numerous policy issues and or pieces of legislation that they have faced with struggles and more often with great success. Three issues/pieces of legislation will be analyzed in terms of how the U.S. Chamber tried to influence them and whether they were successful with their efforts and any challenges they faced. These issues/pieces of legislation are the issue of Immigration, the Equality Act, and Covid-19, which are current issues that have long been debated and discussed.

For a long time The U.S. Chamber has been associated and aligned closely with the GOP. However, during the Trump administration, their relationship with the GOP, or rather what has emerged to be the Trump Party, is severely strained. This strained relationship has to do with the fact that the U.S. Chamber has been very outspoken in opposing Trump in terms of immigration. As is widely known, Trump has been very clear in that he wants to reject immigrants and dismisses their value to our country. The U.S. Chamber, however, sees the positive impact and influence immigrants have on business and industries in the U.S.; they make up a significant part of the workforce. Their website has its own link to a page dedicated to the U.S. Chamber’s action, information and statements on DACA. On the page, visitors can find Dreamer testimonials, public responses to the U.S. Supreme Court’s decisions and actions on immigration, their own public statements to Capitol Hill, public speeches one of their executive team member’s made at an event or meeting. Additionally, they have a virtual map that when your cursor hovers over a state, it explains and shows on their site under this link, “how reducing legal immigration by 25% would affect the economy and legal immigration in that state.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

These efforts to try and influence immigration policy, can exhibit the different strategies they employ as well as the different governmental branches they try to influence. Their public testimonials from Dreamers as well as from the U.S. Chamber’s members are aimed at the executive and legislative branches because they are trying to impact the ultimate lawmakers’ thoughts and minds on the issues. These resources on their immigration website educate members, supporters of the Chamber, as well as members of the public in general in an effort to show all citizens and lawmakers that they are invested, experts, and concerned with this issue that impacts every area of the country. Given the immense presence of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, it gives them name recognition as well as easier access in meeting with politicians and other professionals dealing with immigration policy. This allows them to have immense influence by being a well-known group who is recognized and respected in the country. It also allows for their words and actions to have deep meaning and consequences on the policy as a whole.

However, in recent times the challenges they have faced have been significant. As set forth above, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has long been aligned and associated with the GOP. Yet, in this unprecedented time in which the Republican party has now seen internal transformation with respect to policy, the U.S. Chamber has faced backlash from the GOP that they are not accustomed to. Since starting his campaign for President and continuing up until today, Trump has been very vocal in his opposition to immigrants and their status in our country. He has constantly been opposed to their legality and their rights to participate in common acts in our country, which includes their inclusion and contribution to our country’s workforce. With their outspokenness in response to Trump’s constant attacks towards immigrants the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has stayed constant in their stance on the issue and policy of immigration. As a result of the opposition they have faced from their once strong allies, the GOP, they have had to shift their strategies in terms of their efficiency and impact so as to continue to be the successful and respected interest group they have almost always been. Overall, they have had to walk a policy tightrope in order to have the voice of American business and its alliances with the immigrant labor, heard in Washington.

Another piece of legislation they have tried to influence is the Equality Act. According to the Human Rights Campaign, “The Equality Act would provide consistent and explicit non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ people across key areas of life, including employment, housing, credit, education, public spaces and services, federally funded programs, and jury service.”[[17]](#footnote-17) As a pro-business interest group, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has a focus of making certain that there is no discrimination in the work place based on race, gender, sexuality, and beliefs. Thus, it is important for them to be involved with regard to the Equality Act, which focuses on these protections.

The U.S. Chamber has been active in their response in supporting LGBTQ issues in the workplace. This is interesting considering that, “After decades of silence on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, it’s become a staunch supporter of the proposed federal Equality Act, which makes explicit civil rights protections for LGBT citizens.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Nonetheless, their action is a long time coming and important in this historic piece of legislation. Although they have long been associated with the GOP which is a conservative party, not as open to the LGBTQ community as is the Democratic party, the U.S. Chamber has realized the importance of this position given their stance of representing all businesses and businesspersons, which can then be believed to be read as having no variance based on those people’s sexual and gender identifications.

To influence this historic and very important piece of legislation, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce released many public statements and letters to Congress and individual Congressman to say that they support the Equality Act and why they think the act should be passed and the importance of it not only in the business world but also in society as a whole.[[19]](#footnote-19) The Equality Act was such a historic piece of legislation over an issue that was long contested, interest groups, especially the Chamber of Commerce, had to be persistent and consistent in their advocacy, having written position letters to Congress, meeting on Capitol Hill, having members write to Capitol Hill whether it be on their own, or going on their website, finding the issue (the Equality Act, for the purpose of this example) and then filling out the template that the U.S. Chamber has provided for members as well as non-members who are supporters of the U.S. Chamber. This can also be seen in how other business groups were publically requesting Congress to support this bill, bringing a successful grassroots advocacy to the U.S. Chamber as well as other groups efforts to have Congress pass this act.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Another way they are effective in helping this particular piece of legislation as well as with the immigration policy mentioned earlier is through their Congressional Scorecard. They have current as well as past scorecards posted on their website so that they themselves as well as members and or supporters of the U.S. Chamber can go to it and see if their own Congressman/woman voted for pro-business policy that those members/supporters might be highly in favor of and see the significance of in policy making.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Scorecards play an important role in whether the U.S. Chamber as well as other interest groups can have an influence on particular legislation or face challenges in their influence. The scorecard lists all members of Congress and shows how they have voted on past business policies.[[22]](#footnote-22) Additionally, the Chamber organizes scorecards under different bills on different matters that the Chamber would have a significant or minimal interest in. This page includes hyperlinks which visitors to the website can click and see letters of support on the issue from a member of the executive team, speaking on behalf of the entire U.S. Chamber.[[23]](#footnote-23) In 2019, the U.S. Chamber updated their scorecards to emphasize bipartisanship.[[24]](#footnote-24) Again, this supports the objective of having an informed and active membership.

As the U.S. Chamber states, they “will continue to create an individual report card for every U.S. Senator and Congressional Representative that compares them to the rest of Congress as well as their party and their delegation.”[[25]](#footnote-25) This new scorecard is set up with 80% of it counting for “*The Legislative Vote Score”*, 10% counting for the *“Legislative Leadership Score”*, and the last 10% counting for the U.S. Chambers *“Bipartisan Engagement Score”*.[[26]](#footnote-26) Scorecards are a very important factor to explain and analyze in this section, because along with other interest groups, they help the U.S. Chamber in knowing who to meet with on certain policies on which they are trying to have an influence on. More specifically, if there is a Congress person who has always voted in-line with what the U.S. Chamber believes, they do not have to lobby them. However, members who are not as consistent with the U.S. Chamber’s policy objectives, and only partially, the U.S. Chamber’s lobbyists will meet with them to try and educate them and convince them to vote for or against the bill they are in support or in opposition of. This is a constant monitoring, to take the temperature of Congress to see how it affects the Chamber’s particular objectives.

This provides the U.S. Chamber with being able to tell which members they need to lobby, whose votes are not guaranteed and who they have a chance of swaying, and members who they do not need to lobby since they are aligned and in agreement. This is both a successful and challenging influential tactic since if they do not need to lobby that many people, it might mean the piece of legislation or policy is aligned with how the U.S. Chamber views it. However, if there are many Congress members who are not in-line with the U.S. Chamber, they have to lobby more members and work around the clock to educate and convince members to vote and see the policy or piece of legislation from their perspective and argue why their perspective is more important and the better one to look at the issue through than the opposers. Again, constant monitoring of Congress is a necessity to ensure their (the U.S. Chamber’s) positions are well-heard and advocated on the Hill.

I would not be fully encapsulating the power and presence of the U.S. Chamber if I did not mention how they presently play a major role in federal bailouts for businesses. This can be seen in the work they are doing during the covid-19 pandemic. With their presence as a large interest group, they are very vocal publically in the media and in statements they put out as well as lobbying behind closed doors on Capitol Hill. This vocalness can be seen with regard to the issue of opening up businesses (which they support) versus the health risk of opening them up.[[27]](#footnote-27) This difficult decision places the U.S. Chamber, a pro-business interest group, in a precarious position in the national political scene. Do they put businesses and their profits before workers and their health?

As mentioned earlier, they are lobbying aggressively for Federal Bailout monies to help small businesses survive this financially destructive global health pandemic. With an economic crisis headed our way, the U.S. Chamber is doing anything they can do to try and protect small business owners.

All in all, the work of the U.S. Chamber continues. At present, and perhaps at no other time in American history, the impact of the current pandemic has significant, if not, catastrophic implications to American businesses. Daily headlines underscore how stores and businesses are on the precipice of failure- not merely doing poorly, but failing existentially. Again, daily news is discussing federal bailouts for small businesses and workers. Accordingly, at no other time in American history has the Chamber’s power and influence been more needed by American businesses and workers. Although being done in a remote as well as socially distanced way, the U.S. Chamber is at the forefront of seeking effective and impactful Federal legislation for businesses.[[28]](#footnote-28)

**Opponents and Coalitions**

Like all interest groups, the U.S. Chamber has both opponents and also groups that they are aligned with, through coalitions.

In terms of immigraiton policy, as stated earlier, as one of their influential tactics, the U.S. Chamber, along with a coalition of other groups, wrote a letter to the Senate Judiciary Committee’s leaders with regard to increasing the number of green cards for students having received degrees from American universities to thus allow them to use their skills and knowledge in the United States, specifically in terms of STEM careers. This letter was written and signed by “[a] multi-industry coalition”[[29]](#footnote-29) consisting of American Council on International Personnel, Association of American Universities, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, Business Roundtable, Compete America, Information Technology Industry Council, IEEE-USA, National Association of Manufacturers, Partnership for a New American Economy, Semiconductor Industry Association, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Another coalition is one in which “the Chamber's Employment Policy division is a leader in a broad coalition of supporters that spans industries and includes labor, law enforcement, the faith-based community, and ethnic organizations.”[[31]](#footnote-31) This coalition is out of the National Immigration Forum which has a coalition called, “Natural Allies for Immigration Reform” where “a network of conservative faith, law enforcement, business leadership, and veterans have come together to establish a new consensus on immigrants and America.”[[32]](#footnote-32) This broad coalition allows the U.S. Chamber as well as other groups which are a part of this coalition to have broad outreach and resources to bring in a variety of people from all over the county. A particular interest group who could be seen as an opponent of the U.S. Chamber is the Federation for American Immigration Reform.[[33]](#footnote-33) Their goal is “to severely limit immigration into the United States.”[[34]](#footnote-34) This group is very conservative, and unlike the U.S. Chamber, does not see the value in immigrants at all, no matter what industry.

Turning to the Equality Act, the U.S. Chamber endorsed this act but was not a member of a coalition. However, they did face opponents on this act such as The Heritage Foundation, which is a highly conservative group against LGBTQ and very religiously, socially and politically conservative in every way possible.[[35]](#footnote-35) In this regard, the U.S. Chamber’s position on the Equality Act was a significant and courageous stance in the public forum.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the U.S. Chamber is a diverse group who is involved in a variety of different issues and pieces of legislation and works with many people while being opposed to many as well. The Trump administration has found the U.S. Chamber working to try and reinvent as well as reform how they operate as well as who they work with. Historically, the U.S. Chamber has been aligned with the GOP, however since the U.S. Chamber and Trump have starkly contrasted in terms of immigration and tariffs, the U.S. Chamber has not had the support of the GOP and has had to pivot and realize they need to work across the aisle more. That is why, in the last few years and even now, the U.S. Chamber has started to talk with democrats and endorse them in races so as to be able to work and rely on them more often.[[36]](#footnote-36) The U.S. Chamber is the perfect example of an interest group who is stereotyped because of their affiliation and close relations to the GOP, but who are constantly evolving with the times and finding areas to improve on, so as to continue to be successful but also broaden and diversify their base of supporters and members.

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