



**Reinvent
Albany.**

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Buying Influence Works

Science Shows Gifts Change Decisions
Made by Politicians and Doctors

OPEN, ACCOUNTABLE, EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT

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Introduction

Here's a story you've probably heard: A CEO donates \$50,000 to a state governor's political campaign. Not long after, the CEO's company gets a \$50,000,000 contract from the state. A reporter asks the politician if it was pay-to-play, and the governor's office says: "No donation of any size has any influence on the governor's decisions – period."

The politician may truly believe this, but a substantial body of research suggests the opposite: When people receive a gift, they want to return the favor. Reinvent Albany found at least 13 studies showing that corporate gifts for politicians are usually followed by political gifts for corporations.

While there is plenty of evidence that gifts influence politicians, there is even more showing that drug companies influence doctors. Researchers have spent three decades thoroughly documenting the pharmaceutical industry's efforts to influence physicians. Thanks to their research, it is now well known that gifts and payments from drug companies cause doctors to prescribe more of those companies' drugs and use more of their equipment. Studies funded by drug companies also tend to produce findings those companies like.

This has unsettling implications for New York. The 2022 gubernatorial election was **one of the most expensive in state history**, and many of the largest donors **had business before the state**. Elected officials claim that large contributions have no bearing on state decisions, but even if that's true, the appearance of corruption – not to mention the state's countless pay-to-play scandals – continues to **undermine the public's faith** that the government is working for the people, not wealthy donors.

Despite the public's deep distrust, New York still has not passed a single pay-to-play law. As of 2023, CEOs seeking contracts from the state are free to donate up to \$18,000 to Governor Kathy Hochul.

The studies on the following pages examine the influence of gift-giving on politicians, doctors, researchers, and everyday people.

Campaign finance

Donating to a campaign gets you contracts, meetings, and more

The vast majority of studies Reinvent Albany has found on public corruption confirmed what campaign contributors, journalists, and the public think is obvious: When companies donate to politicians, politicians return the favor.

Contributions get not only **contracts**, but also **meetings, legislation, political stances**, and, perhaps most importantly, **judicial decisions**.

The studies below are ordered from most to least recent (click on the text for links):

Contractors that donate to federal campaigns are more likely to win contracts.

Fazekas et al. found that donations of \$1,000 to \$5,000,000 to US federal campaigns increased the risk of favoritism in public procurement by one-third of a standard deviation (2022). This study also replicates **Witko's 2011 research** below.

Donations from the sugar industry buy votes for the sugar industry.

US representatives are more likely to vote to support the sugar industry after receiving campaign contributions from the sugar industry (Grier et al., 2022).

Looser campaign contribution limits mean bigger contracts for donors.

Gulzar, Rueda, and Ruiz found that localities in Colombia with looser campaign contribution limits tend to give bigger contracts to the election winner's donors (2021). The contracts are also of lower quality and are more likely to have cost overruns. A second study by Ruiz **reached a similar conclusion**.

Banning corporate contributions means less contracts for corporations.

Audinga Baltrunaite found that when corporate contributions are banned in Lithuania, corporate donors' probability of getting a contract declines (2019).

Larger donations get corporations bigger contracts.

In the Czech Republic, donating 10% more to a political party gaining power correlates with a 0.5%-0.6% increase in the value of corporations' government contracts (Titl and Geys, 2018).

Lawmakers are more likely to introduce legislation for their fundraisers.

Amy Melissa McKay showed in 2018 that when a lobby group holds a fundraiser for a lawmaker, the lawmaker is more likely to introduce legislation proposed by the group.

Lawmakers' ideologies align most closely with their donors.

US Senators' ideologies align more closely with donors than they do supporters, fellow party members, or even their own constituents, according to a 2016 analysis by Michael Barber. The author also noted that the donors tend to be more extreme than other groups of voters. Out of all the incumbent Senators reviewed, only two (both in swing states) were found to be closer to their voters ideologically.

Lawmakers are more likely to meet with donors than with nondonors.

Congressmembers or their staff were 3 to 4 times as likely to respond to a request for a meeting if informed that a donor would be attending, Kalla and Broockman found in 2015.

Firms that donated in Brazil got at least \$8.50 on the dollar.

When public works firms donated to a candidate for Brazil's ruling Workers' Party, they got a boost in government contracts for at least 8.5 times the value of their contributions (Boas et al., 2014).

Companies that donated more to federal candidates received more contracts.

Companies that donated more to federal candidates received more contracts (Witko, 2011). The sample covered firms that were "politically active" from 1979 to 2006.

Judges are more likely to rule in favor of their corporate donors.

Judges who receive a high volume of contributions from businesses are more likely to rule in favor of businesses, according to Kang and Shepherd (2010). Donations of a million dollars could make a judge as much as 30% more likely to rule in favor of a

business. It's possible that the effect is even stronger, as the analysis left out independent spending by businesses on campaign ads. When the dataset was disaggregated by partisan and nonpartisan elections, however, the authors found that campaign contributions did *not* have an effect in nonpartisan elections. The authors recommend making all judicial elections nonpartisan in order to mitigate the effect of campaign contributions on judicial decisions.

Pharmaceuticals

More company gifts to doctors = more prescriptions of company drugs

When drug companies give to doctors, they're not doing it just to be nice. According to one study, **just a single meal** from a drug company makes doctors more likely to prescribe that company's drug.

Drug manufacturers market their products to doctors through a process known as "detailing." Here's how it works: Drug company representatives go to the doctor's office and bring some sandwiches for the doctor and her entire staff. As the doctor eats her sandwich, the representative explains the medication (or artificial knee, hearing aid, etc.) to the doctor and addresses any concerns. Now the doctor is more familiar with the product, and she has a full stomach to boot. (Though the practice is not as common as before, detailers also sometimes give away branded swag – **pens, totes, baseball hats, coffee cups** – to keep their product fresh in the doctor's mind.)

Does detailing work? Without a doubt. One study found that **even a single meal** from a drug company made doctors more likely to prescribe that company's drug, and another that doctors receiving meals from drug companies prescribed that company's drugs at rates **up to 5.4 times higher** than before. Reviewing the literature, Reinvent Albany could not find a single study showing no correlation between free meals for doctors and an increase in prescriptions (though still prevalent, detailing is **less pervasive** than it used to be).

More gifts tend to lead to more prescriptions, and **the more lavish the gift, the higher the prescription rate**. This affects not only what meds patients take, but how much they pay: In **a study published in PLoS One**, doctors who received gifts from companies prescribed their drugs at an average cost of \$135, but doctors who received gifts above \$500 prescribed drugs at an average cost of \$189. Another study showed that detailing led to the prescription of **lower-quality drugs**.

Like politicians, many doctors and researchers deny that they're influenced by gifts. One survey had **only 8 percent of doctors** saying small branded gifts could affect their habits. When a pharmaceutical company paid for physicians' trip to a symposium at a luxury resort, nine out of ten doctors said the trip would have no effect on their prescription habits (the study, of course, **found otherwise**). And like politicians, physicians will acknowledge the problem of pay-to-play while claiming they themselves are immune: One survey had only 39 percent of medical residents acknowledging that

gifts could influence their prescriptions, while **84 percent believed other physicians are susceptible.**

Here's what the studies say:

Physicians that received payments from the insulin industry prescribed more insulin and at a higher cost.

Inoue et al. (2021) found that payments from insulin producers to doctors led, unsurprisingly, to more prescriptions for insulin.

Payments from pharmaceutical companies likely cause physicians to prescribe more of that company's medicine.

This was a major meta-analysis of 36 studies examining the relationship between payments and prescriptions (Mitchell et al., 2020). It showed that payments from pharmaceutical companies likely cause physicians to prescribe more of that company's medicine. The authors noted that the finding was "consistent across all studies" that examined the association.

Patients are much more likely to receive devices from the manufacturers that pay physicians the most.

Annapureddy et al. (2020) found patients were "substantially more likely" to receive devices from the manufacturers that provided the highest payments to physicians.

Doctors who receive larger gifts from companies prescribe more expensive drugs.

Doctors in DC who received larger gifts from pharmaceutical companies prescribed more drugs at higher quantities and cost, according to Wood et al. (2017). The study found that gift recipients, on top of prescribing at 2.3 times the rate of non-recipients, also prescribed drugs at an average cost of \$135, compared to \$85 for non-recipients. Doctors receiving the largest gifts prescribed at an average of \$189, more than twice that of non-recipients. Gift recipients were also more likely to prescribe brands over generics.

Medical centers that restricted pharmaceutical detailing prescribed less drugs.

When medical centers restricted pharmaceutical detailing, market shares of the drugs they prescribed dropped immediately (Larkin et al., 2017). After the restrictions were implemented, detailed drugs saw an immediate market share drop of 1.67 percent, and

nondetailed drugs had a market share rise of only .84 percent. The number may seem small, but one author noted that in the pharmaceutical industry, it means **literally billions of dollars**.

Doctors in states that ban gifts from drug companies are far less likely to prescribe drugs.

Doctors in states that banned pharmaceutical gifts were as much as 83% less likely to prescribe psychotropic drugs (King et al., 2015). The results were less dramatic in states that only mandated disclosure of gifts. The authors note that pharmaceutical companies spend about \$15 billion a year on drug detailing.

Physicians prescribe more drugs after receiving payments from the manufacturer.

Physicians' prescriptions of certain drugs increased after receiving payments from the drug company, despite no difference between paid and unpaid physician prescriptions prior to payment (Carey et al., 2015). The study also found that payments were associated with the prescription of lower-quality drugs.

Doctors are more likely to prescribe a drug after receiving just one meal from the manufacturer.

Even a single meal from a drug company was associated with higher prescription rates for doctors in a 2016 study by DeJong et al. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America's voluntary guidelines allow gifts of up to \$100 in value, but this study found increased prescription rates even after the receipt of gifts valued at less than \$20. One drug came to be prescribed at 4.5 times the rate of a group that didn't receive gifts. Even one of the most expensive drugs on the market came to be prescribed nearly twice as often. The authors noted that it only found association, not cause-and-effect, but also that similar correlations had been noted in other studies.

Doctors are more likely to prescribe drugs after receiving all-expense-paid trips from the manufacturer.

This was a pathbreaking study on pharmaceutical gifts by Orłowski and Wateska (1992). Doctors who received all-expenses-paid trips to luxury resorts from pharmaceutical companies prescribed the target drugs as much as 4.5 times as before the trip. The majority of physicians were skeptical when asked if the trips could have affected their prescription patterns, and not a single physician said that a prescription would ever serve as a "thank you" for the symposiums.

Research

Industry-funded studies claim cigarettes and soft drinks are healthy, independent studies don't

Big Tobacco produced mountains of pro-smoking studies after concerns about the health impact of cigarettes emerged in the 1950s. Unsurprisingly, **94% of reviews by researchers affiliated with Big Tobacco produced positive findings for the industry**, compared with 13% of independent reviews. When controlling for factors such as article quality or peer review status, the odds that an industry-affiliated author's study would favor Big Tobacco were *88 times higher* than for non-affiliated authors.

Soft drink producers and **gas companies** must have been taking notes – as with Big Tobacco, studies funded by Big Oil are more likely to find that **natural gas is good for the environment**, and studies funded by Big Soda are more likely to find that **soft drinks are great for your health**.

Here's what the studies (on studies) say:

Studies funded by fossil fuel companies are more likely to favor fossil fuels.

Studies at universities that receive funding from fossil fuel companies are more likely to favor natural gas over renewable energy (Almond et al., 2022).

Studies funded by drug companies are more likely to favor drug companies.

Lundh et al. (2018) found that studies funded by drug and device manufacturers are more likely than non-industry-funded studies to reach conclusions favorable to manufacturers.

Studies funded by artificial sweetener companies are more likely to favor artificial sweeteners.

Studies by artificial sweetener companies were 17 times more likely than non-industry studies to show that their product was associated with weight loss (Mandrioli et al., 2016). Many studies (42%) were by researchers with undisclosed conflicts of interest, and no studies by researchers without conflicts reached conclusions favorable to the industry.

Studies funded by a drug company were less likely to find that the drug made cancer worse.

Researchers with funding from the pharmaceutical industry were far less likely than non-funded researchers to find that an anemia-treatment drug's receptors had adverse effects (Bennett et al., 2010). The researchers reviewed studies that had looked into associations between ESAs (erythropoiesis stimulating agents) and tumors, and found that in many cases, as few as 0% of studies from researchers funded by ESA manufacturers found that the drug strengthened the malignancy, while as many as 94% of non-funded researchers would find the opposite. Studies have found that ESAs are associated with increased mortality in cancer patients.

Studies by the soft drink industry are more likely to find that soft drinks are healthy.

Studies funded by the milk, soda, or juice industries are four to eight times more likely to find that the products are beneficial to consumers' health, Lesser et al. found (2007). In studies done as a public health intervention, 0% of industry-funded research would reach unfavorable conclusions about the products, compared to 37% of research with no industry-funding.

Studies by tobacco companies are 88 times more likely to find that tobacco is harmless.

Researchers affiliated with the tobacco industry were up to 88 times more likely than non-affiliated researchers to find outcomes favorable to the industry (Barnes and Bero, 1998). They found that while 13% of studies by non-industry-affiliated researchers found passive smoking to be harmless, compared with 94% of studies by those affiliated with the industry. When controlling for factors such as article quality or peer review status, the odds that an industry-affiliated author would reach the same conclusion were *88 times higher* than for non-affiliated authors.

Pay-to-play in everyday life

Other studies on the science of gift-giving

Patients receive better treatment when they give gifts to doctors.

Chinese doctors provide more timely responses and greater emotional support to gift-giving patients than to non-gift-giving patients (Zhao et al., 2021). In China, online medical consultation platforms allow for patients to give small monetary gifts to patients. The gifts are of “negligible monetary value.” **Another study in March 2020** had a similar finding.

People like your joke more if you bribe them.

When presented with two jokes, judges prefer the joke of the individual who gives them a larger bribe, Gneezy et al. found in a 2018 experiment. When the judge could only keep one bribe, they preferred the joke on the contestant who had provided a larger bribe 90% of the time, selecting the better joke 60% of the time. When judges could keep both bribes, judges chose the preferred joke of an independent panel 84% of the time.

Sales reps sell more when they give gifts to customers.

Sales reps generate twice as much revenue when they provide a small gift at the start of business negotiations with customers (Maréchal and Thöni, 2018).

The friends of patients who give gifts to doctors get better medical treatment.

In urban Chinese hospital outpatient clinics, when patients give a small gift, doctors provide better service and fewer unnecessary prescriptions (Currie et al., 2013). Doctors are also likely to treat known friends of the gift-giver better, and non-friends of the gift-giver worse.

“Decision-makers” are more likely to choose the product of the creator who bribed them.

A 2012 experiment by Malmendier and Schmidt finds that “decision makers,” when given two products to choose for a client, are twice as likely to choose the product whose creator gave them a small gift such as a pen, coffee mug, or invitation to dinner. When gifts were intentionally withheld by creators, decision-makers would get “revenge” by deliberately not choosing the creator’s product.

When they get a raise, tree-planters plant more trees.

When a tree-planting firm told its workers they would receive a pay raise for one day, the workers planted more trees than on normal workdays (Bellemare and Shearer, 2009).

Customers tip more when the waitress gives them candy.

Servers receive bigger tips if they leave a piece of chocolate with the receipt, Strohmets et al. found in a 2006 study. A second piece of chocolate leads to even bigger tips.

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This report was written by Tom Speaker, Policy Analyst at Reinvent Albany, and edited by John Kaehny.

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