

## **Representational bias and changes in the Brussels-based interest group population**

*Joost Berkhout, University of Amsterdam*

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The numbers and types of interest organizations in any political system matters. First, the interests represented through the system of interest groups never precisely matches the universe of preferences and interests of citizens or society more broadly. There is always ‘bias’ and that bias favors some interests over others. The most commonly cited, but not exclusive concern, is about an ‘upperclass’ or ‘business’ bias. Second, some scholars, most notably Mancur Olson, point out that, once organized, interest groups exist perpetually and tend to successfully defend their narrow interests in specific existing policies, at the cost of public interests. Such defenders of status-quo policies make it very difficult to adapt policies to changing circumstances, and in that way lead to, according to Olson, economic decline. The European Union (EU) is not immune to these concerns: recurring protests against the EU ‘lobby community’ testify of concern about bias or lack of representativeness, and complaints on the part of policy makers about lack of leadership point to concern about policy deadlock or inefficiency.

We cannot provide conclusive resolutions to these concerns but our research questions aim to specify and, when applicable, nuance them. First, speaking to the latter concern, is there an explosion of lobbyism in the EU? And, second, relating to the concern about bias, what are the main differences between ‘the whole’ population of organized interests and those that are potentially heard by policy makers?

### **No explosion, but lobby tourism**

The number of interest organizations accredited to the European Parliament (EP) has been constant at about 1500 organizations over the past decade or so. The administrators of the EP provided us with an anonymous list of pass holders for the time period 2005 to 2010 and we additionally copied the more recent versions from the EP website. We do not find a substantial increase in the aggregate number of organizations on the list. Other data sources, most notably those that include an even longer time period, such as the European Public Affairs Directory, also do not indicate a change in the aggregate number of organizations from the mid-Nineties onwards. Please note that this pertains to organizations rather than number of persons working in Public Affairs in Brussels. This

finding nuances the argument about an 'indeterminate growth' of self-serving interest representation potentially deadlocking the policy process.

There is an important caveat here: the Brussels lobbying community consists of about 30 per cent 'residents' and about 70 per cent 'tourists'. That is, 30 per cent of the organizations in the EP register maintain a pass for longer than 40 weeks (in the time period studied). The other 70 per cent of the organizations are either primarily concerned with non-EP or non-policy related work, or 'return' to their national political environments. This implies, first, that measured over a longer period, the number of groups accredited to the EP is far bigger (around 4000 for the five year mentioned). This potentially raises efficiency concerns. Second, we think that it plausibly affect the dynamics within the lobby community: there are likely to be substantial differences in lobby experience and networks between 'residents' or 'old bulls' on the one hand, and 'tourists' or 'mayflies' on the other. We are not sure whether this phenomenon, and its magnitude, is unique to the EU or common to all interest group populations.

### **A tale of two cities**

As policy issues move from being 'on the agenda' towards being decided upon, institutional mechanisms make sure that the scope of the political conflict narrows and the range of participants involved becomes smaller. This implies that there is likely to be a difference between 'the whole' population of organized interests and those that are actually being heard by policy makers.

The 'population' part of the INTEREURO study has two components: a general part where we rely on the register of the EP and an issue or legislative proposal part where we study groups active on a selected group of legislative proposals. We collected basic data such as membership, socio-economic base and organizational structure for all organizations.

The comparison of the general population ('bottom-up') and issue-active population ('top-down') produce two interesting findings: first, while, as expected, different in size (1960 organizations against 588), these populations are surprisingly similar. They are both numerically dominated by business interest representation (around 60 per cent), have a similar distribution of organizations with a national/European/supra-national scoped (about a third each) and have similar proportions of collective, associational versus individual firm or institutional representatives (a third each, with citizens' groups taking another third). This suggests that in aggregate terms we may nuance the concern that out of a diverse range interests only certain types of interests are actively engaged with policy makers. Of course, one may still be concerned about biases prior to coming to Brussels, later in the policy process or on other dimensions than those observed in our study such as

‘upperclass-ness’). Second, we find that only 12 per cent (347) of the organizations studied is part of both populations, ie is registered in the EP and is mentioned in issue-specific documents and interviews. These sub-populations consist of individually different organizations. This puzzles us and suggests ‘a tale of two cities’: this partially is a Commission-oriented Brussels versus an EP-oriented Brussels. But there may also be some prior distinction driving the observed differentiation.

### **Lobby practice and registration**

As regards lobby practice, our findings suggest that Brussels lobbyists are impatient and selective in their attention to public policy. Impatient in terms of the time invested in tracking policies (which seems relatively short compared to the policy process) and selective in terms of their institutional focus (which seems to be either EP or European Commission (EC)). This may be perfectly rational but may also require reconsideration as longer policy presence at multiple institutions may, but this is outside our part of the study, lead to better networks, higher quality policy information and more favorable policy outcomes.

As regards lobby registration, our findings indicate some of the possibilities for the research use of lobby registers, including the joint EC-EP Transparency register (which we did not use because it was not in place for the full time period studied). From a research perspective registers are especially useful when managed by administrators or policy makers rather than ‘self-managed’ by interest representative themselves, as is currently the case for the Transparency register. More to the point, the EP register is useful because it is reliable in at least one aspect: a person has requested and the EP secretariat has provided a doorpass. For the Transparency Register we do not have any indicator that involves both ‘sides’ and providing cross-validated data about any act or attempt of interest representation. A true transparency register would have policy makers publicly record the agendas and participants of actual meetings in the EC, Council and EP buildings. This is, for instance, common practice for national parliamentary agendas of committee hearing or round table meetings.

In general, our findings nuance the concerns associated with interest representation about representational bias and policy inefficiency. We note, however, that the Brussels lobby community is more sizable than its ‘residents’ and also includes ‘lobby tourists’ – potentially broadening the scope of the community to such an extent that one may become concerned about policy inefficiency. We also note that the community is ‘split’ along, among others, institutional lines. This adds complexity to the concerns about biases in the group system.