

‘Try to see it my way’. Frame congruence between lobbyists and European Commission officials

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(summary of article forthcoming in *Journal of European Public Policy* 2015)

Every lobbyist wants policy-makers to see things their way. If, for example, a policy program subsidizing tobacco farmers is perceived mainly as a question of rural development, farmers’ organizations are more likely to gain a favourable outcome compared to if the program is discussed as a health issue, or as an issue of (obstacles against) global trade. Although policy-makers should be able to see things from more than one perspective, they are likely to be more influenced by some frames than by others, with significant potential consequences for the success of different lobbyists.

The study reported here examines how *frame congruence* – the degree to which key policy-makers’ frames correspond to the frames of lobbyists – is distributed between different types of interest groups. We argue that two contextual factors are particularly important for whether the frames of business interests dominate those of civil society interests in the minds of European Commission officials.

First, the broader the scope of the conflict, i.e. the more affected interests that are active in the process, the more difficult it will be to promote narrow self-regarding frames. This benefits civil society interests, who more often attempt to frame issues in terms of other-regarding or ideal-regarding interests and principles. The mechanism is the following: In a more competitive pluralist setting actors need to build support for their case in order to gain leverage in the political process. For that purpose, self-regarding frames that relate only to the actor itself and its specific constituency are less likely to be useful as tools for winning support. When a conflict expands to include more actors there will be an increasing demand for more general public interest perspectives. Self-regarding

frames that are difficult to justify publically in a legitimate way are therefore more likely to fail, as the competition among frames for domination in public policy debates increases. To speak with Jon Elster, pluralism and conflict expansion has a “civilising effect” in that sense. This is to the advantage of civil society interests, and increases their frame congruence with Commission officials, as the latter need to be sensitive to the frames that dominate the debate.

Secondly, the media coverage different lobbyists receive affect their ability to influence the way issues are defined in policy debates, and subsequently the way policy-makers think about these issues. In the EU, business has both the resources and reasons to engage in media strategies. Much EU legislation in the last decade has focussed on regulating the European market against the will of status quo defending business interests (see the contribution by Dür, Bernhagen and Marshall to this conference). To the media, therefore, business often provides the conflict story that it seeks, which tends to give more cover. In another study coming from the INTEREURO project, De Bruycker and Beyers also find that business actors clearly dominated the media attention that different interest groups had in the proposals included in the project. Consequently, we argue that the more media coverage that EU legislation receives, the better the frame congruence of business lobbyists and Commission officials.

Research strategy

The empirical research is based on INTEREURO data. We analyse 141 face-to-face interviews with Commission officials and lobbyists in relation to 55 legislative proposals that were put forward by the Commission during 2008-2010. The interviews capture what the respondents perceived to be “at stake” in the proposals, i.e. what their primary frame was.

Frame congruence is operationalized as the dyadic relationship between two respondents – a Commission official and an interest group representative – indicating whether their responses to the question of what was at stake in the proposal is within the same frame. In case a respondent gave several answers we

used the one he or she had ranked as the most important. The coding of the answers proceeded as follows: If the Commission official and the interest group representative gave two completely different responses, this was coded as 1 (no congruence). If it was clear that the Commission official and the interest group respondent shared the same frame, this was coded as 3 (full congruence). Instances where the answers were similar, but not identical were coded as 2 (partial congruence). Examples of frames mentioned include both more general (“public health”, “safety”, “environmental protection”, “(avoid) over-regulating companies”) and more policy specific (“stability of the banking system”, “improving the living conditions of musical performers”) frames.

Findings

To categorize the frames we found in the interviews we use a distinction between self-regarding, other-regarding and ideal-regarding references. Our argument that the effect of conflict expansion is beneficial for the frame congruence of civil society groups assumes that these groups are more likely than business groups to promote other- and ideal-regarding frames. Table 1 shows that this is indeed the case. The dominant frame type for civil society groups is ideal-regarding; in half of the cases, civil society group representatives think that some ideal or principle is at stake (such as “the environment”, “legal coherence” or “the common market”). The second largest category consists of other-regarding frames (such as referring to the well-being of “children”, “asylum-seekers” or “EU citizens”), whereas self-regarding frames are used in only three cases. Business interests, on the other hand, rely heavily on self-regarding frames. In more than 50 per cent of the cases policy issues are understood in terms of potential losses or gains for companies or industries.

Table 1. Types of frames promoted by business and civil society groups

	Self-regarding	Other-regarding	Ideal-regarding	Total % (n)
Civil society	12 (3)	38 (10)	50 (13)	100 (26)
Business	53 (31)	17 (10)	30 (18)	100 (59)

Note: Per cent, n in parenthesis. Chi2 = 13.02, p=0.00

Two examples may illustrate the pattern described in Table 1. One of the proposals in the data set concerned regulation of the rights of passengers in bus and coach transportation (COM (2008) 817). According to an NGO promoting passengers' rights, the proposal was (unsurprisingly) about passengers' rights. A business representative for the transport sector, on the other hand, framed the question as one of increasing the number of consumers (and hence the profit for the industry). Another example concerns the proposal to improve and extend the EUs greenhouse gas emission allowance trading system (COM (2008) 16). The interviewed respondent representing the steel industry claimed that what was at stake here was no less than the very existence of a (European) steel industry. To the representative of an environmental NGO, on the other hand, the question was about the role of Europe in international climate policy.

Table 2 indicates that promoting more other- and ideal-regarding frames seems to pay off in terms of frame congruence with Commission officials. There is a clear difference between the two types of actors, as civil society groups are almost twice as likely to share frames with the Commission officials, compared to business actors. While 39 per cent of the civil society groups that were interviewed promoted the same or a similar frame as that held by the Commission official, only 21 per cent of the business lobbyists achieved partial or full congruence.

Table 2. Frame congruence with Commission officials of business and civil society groups.

	No congruence	Partial congruence	Full congruence	Total % (n)
Civil society	62 (16)	27 (7)	12 (3)	100 (26)
Business	79 (50)	16 (10)	5 (3)	100 (63)
Total	74 (66)	19 (17)	7 (6)	100 (89)

Note: Per cent, n in parenthesis. Chi2 = 3.22, p=0.20

The overall level of congruence – 26 per cent of the groups included have partial or full congruence – seems fairly low. The fact that we use an open question – rather than asking the respondents to grade or rate predefined frames – is likely to yield a fairly conservative measure of frame congruence. Furthermore, our measure of congruence only takes into account the most salient frame in the minds of the interviewees, not the secondary or third frames that were also acknowledged the respondents. Nevertheless, Table 2 shows that three out of four interest groups face policy-makers with a different perspective than theirs. This makes sense given the multitude of factors that influence Commission officials’ policy positions, but is also an indication of the up-hill battle that many lobbyists face in Brussels.

Figures 1 and 2 below support our argument that the challenge for business interests, in terms of getting the Commission to see things their way, increases even further as the scope of conflict increases, and as the level of media attention decreases. The figures are based on a logistic regression analysis including a binary dependent variable (*Frame Congruence*), which takes the value of 0 if there is no congruence, and 1 if there is partial or full congruence. The main independent variable of interest has the value of 1 for business actors, and 0 for civil society actors.

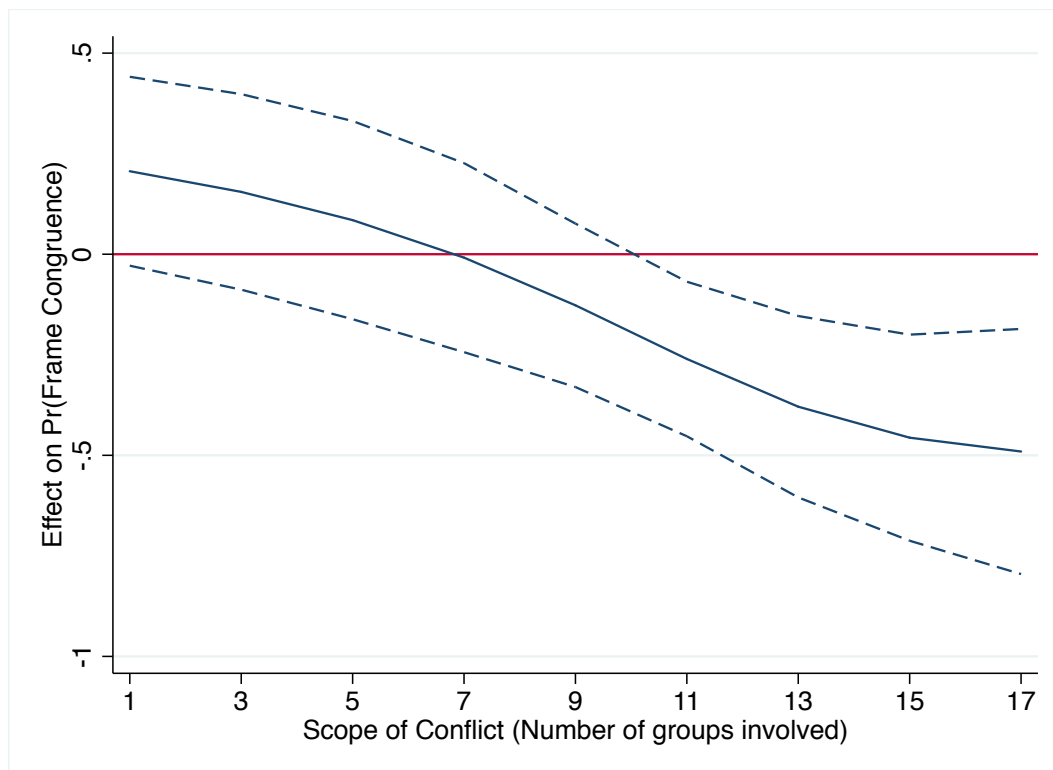
The contextual variables are operationalized as follows: *Scope of conflict* is based on the number of interest groups that were involved in each policy proposal. For our sample of proposals the number of groups involved range from 1 to 22.

Media publicity counts the number of articles referring to the particular legislative proposal in six media outlets covering European politics (European Voice, EurActiv, Agence Europe, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Le Monde and Financial Times).

The regression analysis indicates that civil society actors are considerably more likely than business actors to achieve frame congruence with the Commission when the scope of conflict is high. When fewer interest groups are involved, however, the advantage of civil society actors disappears. This is illustrated in

Figure 1, which compares the frame congruence of business and civil society actors, depending on the scope of conflict. Negative values on the Y-axis indicate that business has lower frame congruence with Commission officials than the civil society actors. The difference starts to become statistically significant around 10 active groups (where the upper dashed line crosses the zero-line).

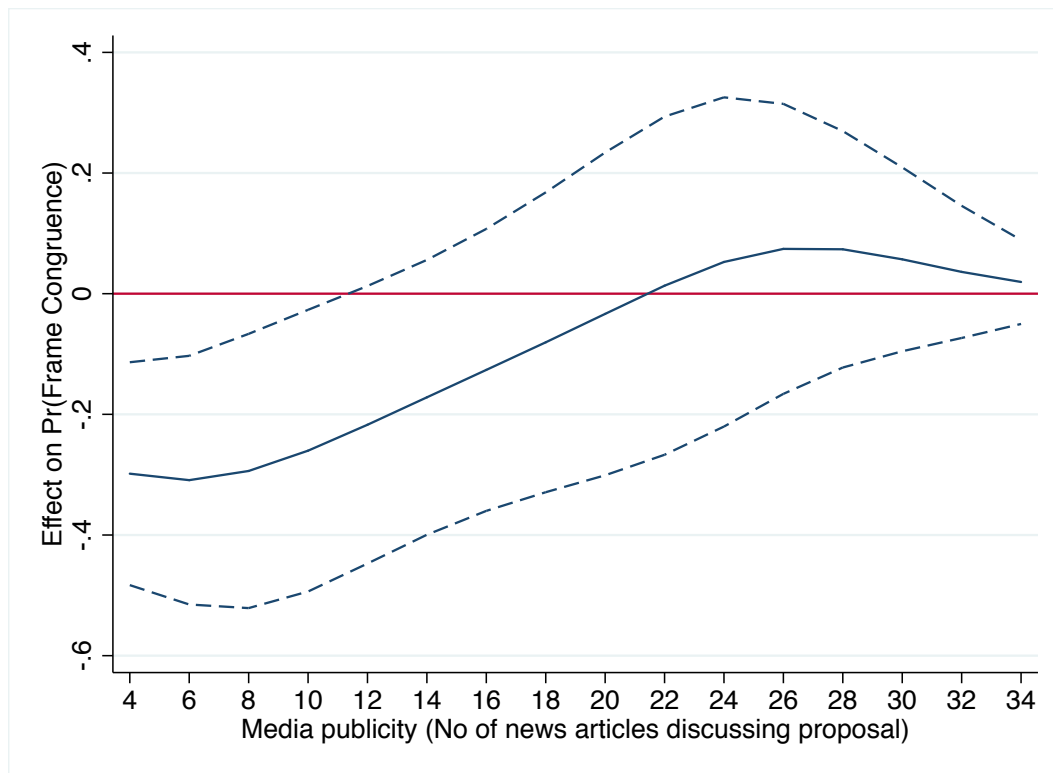
Figure 1. Marginal effect of shifting from legislative proposals with few to many interest groups involved on business interests' predicted frame congruence compared to civil society interests.



Note: The dashed lines indicate 95% confidence intervals around the predictions.

Figure 2, on the other hand, shows that media publicity gives the opposite effect. At low levels of media publicity, civil society groups are more than twice as likely as business groups to be promoting the same frames as Commission officials. At higher levels of media publicity, on the other hand, the probability of frame congruence evens out between the two types of groups.

Figure 2. Marginal effect of media publicity on business interests' predicted frame congruence compared to civil society interests



Note: The dashed lines indicate 95% confidence intervals around the predictions.

Discussion

The main normative worry of lobbying is that it leads to biased policies in favour of the specific interest of narrow and resourceful groups, in particular business interests. A well-known result from interest group research across political systems and over time is that business interests are better mobilised than diffuse civil society interests, and that they dominate the lobbying scenes both in numbers and resources. The EU, of course, is no exception in this respect, as shown by the INTEREURO project.

This study demonstrates, however, that the dominance of business in terms of mobilisation does not necessarily translate into frame congruence with key policy-makers. Two conditions are important in this respect: Pluralism, in terms of the number of actors, perspectives and ideas that engage in policy debates,

work against the narrow self-regarding frames that business actors often promote, and benefit civil society actors with broader other- and ideal regarding perspectives. A media dominated by resourceful and discontent business actors, on the other hand, has the opposite effect.

The role of media publicity may seem counter-intuitive at first, given that civil society actors often are conceived of as outsiders, who need the media in order to affect policy. However, the findings of this study are in line with previous research that has found that the ‘insiders’ also get the most media attention, which means that they are in a better position to promote their frames when there is a lot of media coverage. Furthermore, in the cases that we analyse in the INTEREURO project, the status quo defenders – most often business – have already lost the first fight, in that a policy proposal was submitted at all. Business actors therefore have both the incentives and resources to seek attention, and the news value stemming from being the negatively affected actors who are stirring up conflict.

Our results indicate, however, that most often business’s lead in the media is not enough to offset the disadvantage they have compared to civil society groups in terms of frame congruence with Commission officials. The common picture of Brussels of being in the hands of big business is clearly not confirmed in this study. To the contrary, civil society actors are more likely to share views with the Commission officials of what is at stake in legislation compared to business. When competition is low, and a few business actors get to dominate the process and the media, the odds even out between the two types of actors.