

# Quantitative analysis on interest group influence using data from EU open consultations

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## **Abstract**

Online submission of interest group comments was introduced in year 2000 and since then has become a regular instrument of stakeholder consultation, providing a new, recent data source, which has largely been ignored so far. The empirical analysis in this research confirms that information supply via online consultations has only a limited effect on interest group influence. The findings of this research are valuable in gaining a more improved view of the effects of interest group activity targeting EU decision-making.

**Keywords:** interest representation, democracy, public consultations, EU policy, decision making process.

## **Introduction**

The research presented here seeks to understand how advocacy process using EU open consultations is distributed among interest groups and influenced by a number of factors. In terms of Mahoney, the advocacy process is “the process by which advocates mobilize, formulate arguments, choose targets, select tactics, and decide whether to work with others in an attempt to influence public policy and ultimately whether they are successful in their efforts. The advocacy process is not only the series of decisions that these various types of actors must make throughout an advocacy campaign, but also the final outcome of the issue” (Mahoney, 2008: 32). In addition, institutional, issue, and interest group factors intertwine to determine the decisions of each stage of the advocacy process (Mahoney, 2008: 35). For the purposes of this research and in order to better understand advocacy strategy and outcomes, Mahoney’s factors at issue level only, i.e. scope, salience, level of conflict will be considered (Mahoney, 2008: 40). In Mahoney terms

“scope” of issues refers to whether a policy proposal affects only a few individuals or sectors or it impacts numerous massive industries, thus having ramifications for the entire political system (Mahoney, 2008:40). “Salience” matters in such a way that highly salient issues “lead to more arguments evoking commonly shared goals and public opinion, more use of inside and outside lobbying tactics, and more alliances with like-minded organizations” (Mahoney, 2008:40). As an issue is more salient to the public and the number of people watching the case increases, the likelihood of lobbying success should decrease (Gormley, 1986). Finally, issues that are highly contentious with opposing camps are controversial and with a number of various perspectives or one viewpoint dominating the discussion, involve a high level of “conflict”. “The level of conflict on an issue is expected to influence the lobbying positions that advocates assume; the targeting strategies they developed and the final outcome of the case” (Mahoney, 2008: 40).

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## Material and Method

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The theoretical model, which will be used throughout this research, is so-called “attributed influence” (March, 1955 quoted in Dür, 2008:9) and will be measured by way of surveys. Respondents, both public and private actors, lobbyists and decision-makers (hopefully, well informed) will be asked to provide self – assessment on the extent of influence and also to assess the influence of other groups. An advantage of this method is the fact that it is relatively straightforward to execute and design. Even though there could be some difficulties in formulating questionnaire, establishing the population and sample of respondents, ensuring a sufficient response rate, these are still minor problems in comparison to the problems, researchers face when using other methods (Dür, 2008:9). For instance, applying most commonly used method of so called process tracing (an assessment of interest group influence based on detailed knowledge of a case), researchers study the preferences of societal actors, their political activities, the way decisions are changed during a political process, the degree to which interest group preferences are considered in policy outcomes, and groups’ statements about their satisfaction with outcomes. However, for such studies it is very challenging to assess the degree of influence on outcomes. Also, considering the data intensity of process tracing, scholars using this method can only study a few cases. “Generalizations across issues and across policy fields from these very specific studies tend to be difficult” (Dür, 2008:1224).

According Dür “the method of measuring attributed influence is likely to capture all channels of influence” (Dür, 2008:9). It relies on either of interest groups’ self-evaluation or experts assessment. However, the author of this thesis paper is well aware that results obtained from measuring influence by self-assessment or expert judgment are not conclusive, certainly debatable, and have limitations as well. “On the one hand, groups might overestimate their influence in order to signal success to their members. On the other hand, groups might underestimate their influence

in order to drive public authorities to grant them more access and to avoid the creation of counter-lobbies” (Klüver, 2008:2). Expert assessments may also be influenced by certain cases, e.g. “focusing events” that are prominent in their view or by other academic findings. A more general problem of the attributed influence method is the fact that it deals with perceived influence rather than actual influence (Dür, 2009 in Klüver, 2008:2).

As already mentioned above interest group influence differs depending on the complexity of policy issues (Dür, 2008: 1217). The European Commission plays an essential role in European policy-making as it has the exclusive right of initiative. The Commission is able to initiate new legislation and is thus accountable for the elaboration of policy proposals. Drafting legislative proposals is a rather complex and long process in which the Commission needs a substantial amount of expertise. The Commission it is extremely dependent on external information in order to elaborate policy proposals (Klüver, 2009: 5). However, the need of expertise varies from policy proposal to policy proposal. Some concern the whole internal market and may be highly technical, whereas other proposals may only affect a very small sector and constitute an adjustment to existing legislation. Thus, the scope and the technicality of legislative proposals determine the degree of complexity. The chance of being influential should be particularly high if policy proposals are highly complex because in those cases, the European Commission is highly dependent on external expertise (Klüver, 2009:7).

In an attempt to gain some leverage on the question of influence, this analysis is constrained to those actors that have submitted contributions on issues “low” on the political agenda, with variation in their level of complexity. However, one should consider that perhaps policy makers already wanted a particular outcome and were moving in that direction or perhaps public opinion had long been trending toward support for that policy. Therefore, to precisely identify the unique influence of a single actor remains difficult. In addition, knowing the interest groups’ stated

objectives via their consultation papers and the policy outcomes that materialized, one might again ask the question does an interest group achieve some or all of what it wanted and can that really be attributed only to its activities? Other shortcomings of the empirical findings that follow relate, for instance, to the fact that certain interest groups indicated involvement in multiple issue areas, instead of strictly being engaged with Transport or Information society sectors. Also, respondents' provided varying or own interpretations of variables such as "salience" and "complexity" and, in addition, data entered in the EU Register was often unreliable or outdated, which eventually resulted in a lower response rate. For these limitations among others, the author is aware that the findings below are not conclusive and that still more information is needed for correct assessment of influence.

According to Mahoney, by comparing the

lobbying objectives of interest groups with the policy outcomes, it is possible to assess lobbying success. Choosing lobbying success as a measurement of influence is an attempt to be more precise and draw a distinction between this measure and the broader concept of interest group influence. "Interest groups can wield influence through mobilization, agenda setting, and electoral support of political candidates, among others. Measuring lobbying success and analyzing its determinants can provide us with better understanding of one aspect of the influencing process related to shaping policy" (Mahoney, 2008:184). For the purposes of this research, success will be measured on an ordinal scale – achieved some/none/fully achieved objectives. The analysis will hopefully also provide an answer as to what extent contextual determinants affect who wins and who achieves compromised success.

## Results and discussion

### 1. Factors determining lobbying success and variation in influence across issues

As already mentioned before, the interviewed answers on advocates' lobbying success and goals achieved form the dependent variable of this analysis and serve as an indicator to operationalize influence. The degree of success is measured as: 0 did not achieve objectives at all; 1 achieves some objectives; 2 fully achieved objectives. Some of the relationships between the factors at the issue level and lobbying success are explored through correlation analysis and cross tabs followed by a simple regression analysis.

Survey results indicate that 45 % of the respondents agree to have gained slight influence, 36 % moderate and only 5 % high influence on policy outcomes (see Fig. 4). Furthermore, 50 % admit to have achieved an average (rated 3) lobbying success and 20 % have achieved more than average via their contributions using EU open consultations (Fig. 1). Also, 66.7 % of interest groups in the field of Information society gained moderate influence, in comparison to 40 % in the field of Transport.

It is important to recognize, though, that the overall level of lobbying success in the two policy fields is not drastically different. With six degrees of freedom and probability value .678 associated with the Pearson Chi-square, far exceeding the .005 level of significance, however, these results should be considered with caution. There is no significant relationship found between lobbying success and policy fields either, with a Pearson Chi-square value of .269.

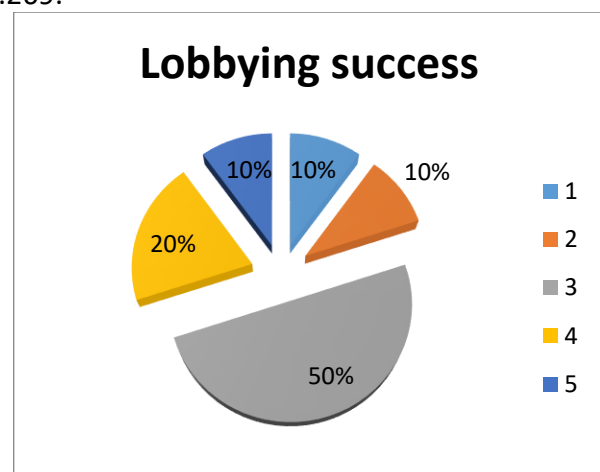


Fig. 1. Lobbying success  
Source: Authors' own data

### Degree of Influence

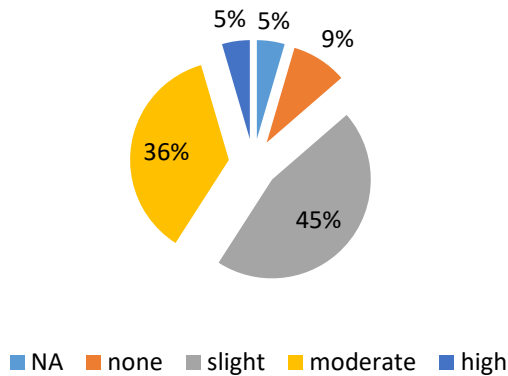


Fig. 2. Source: Authors' own data

Following Christine Mahoney's quantitative analysis of interest group influence in the United States and the EU across policy issues, this analysis will try to assess the relative importance of issue specific variables in determining the influence. The same issue-specific factors will be tested here in public consultations. Mahoney finds some differences between the EU and the United States, however, factors that are issue-specific, such as

salience of an event and degree of conflict, in her view play a more important role.

- Issue scope

Previous research indicates that in the European Union as the scope of the issue increases, the percentage of advocates fully attaining their goals steadily decreases (Mahoney, 2008: 194). Evidence shows that as the issues get bigger and their outcomes will impact larger and larger sections of the population, the likelihood of lobbying success declines because policymakers need to take into account the full range of interests concerned about the outcome (Mahoney, 2008:194). Results here, however, indicate that in 44.4 % of the cases attributed as large scope issues, 77.8 % of the respondents have exerted slight influence, while 88.9 % admit that they have exerted moderate influence (see Table 1, 2). This obviously contradicts Hypothesis 1, as the tendency of influence gained is increasing and not decreasing. Again, with three degrees of freedom, the Pearson Chi-square value .078 exceeds .005 significance level, meaning that the relationship between the two is not significant (to a large extent this is due to the small sample size).

Table 1 – Crosstab correlation scope/influence; Source: Author's own data

			Influence				Total
			none	slight	moderate	high	
Scope	,00	Count	1	2	1	0	4
		% within Scope	25,0%	50,0%	25,0%	,0%	100,0%
		% within Influence	33,3%	22,2%	11,1%	,0%	18,2%
	large	Count	2	7	8	1	18
		% within Scope	11,1%	38,9%	44,4%	5,6%	100,0%
		% within Influence	66,7%	77,8%	88,9%	100,0%	81,8%
Total	Count	3	9	9	1	22	
	% within Scope	13,6%	40,9%	40,9%	4,5%	100,0%	
	% within Influence	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	

Table 2 – Figure 6: Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1,086 <sup>a</sup>	3	,780
Likelihood Ratio	1,229	3	,746
Linear-by-Linear Association	1,037	1	,309
N of Valid Cases	22		

Source: Author's own data; a. 6 cells (75,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,18.

- Issue salience

Salience of policy issues is the attention that issues raise among interest groups and the general public. Policy issues can raise varying amounts of attention. Some issues are only of importance to a highly specialized and well-circumscribed sector, while other issues may raise a huge amount of attention among the public and consequently among interest groups as well. If policy issues are salient, a wide variety of interest groups are working on these issues, such as business groups, trade unions and non-governmental organizations. Following Mahoney (2008), this paper argues that salience has an important impact on the ability of interest groups to influence policy-making. The more attention the public gives to a specific decision, the more difficult it would be for special interest groups to have an influence on the outcome. "On such issues, a legislator cannot easily deviate from voters' interests

without fearing punishment in the next election" (Dür & de Bièvre, 2007: 33). Yet, salience is a subtle concept. It can be integral to the policy process, if the salience of an issue is raised in the public's perception for strategic reasons. For NGOs defending various interests, for example, increasing the "salience of an issue may be an efficient strategy to enhance their influence" (Dür & de Bièvre, 2007: 33).

In this study, the relationship between salience and lobbying influence, again tested via a Pearson chi-square test, demonstrates that the relationship between the two is significant at .055 level. It is confirmed that as the percentage of respondents rating salience increases, the percentage of EU advocates exerting high influence or fully attaining their goals is 0%, while the percentage of those attaining nothing or have slight influence is 77.8 % (Table 3, 4). This conclusion is in support of Hypothesis 2 of this research.

Table 3 – Crosstab correlation salience/influence

			Salience				Total
			,00	very important	important	neutral	
Influence	none	Count	1	1	1	0	3
		% within Influence	33,3%	33,3%	33,3%	,0%	100,0%
		% within Salience	100,0%	11,1%	9,1%	,0%	13,6%
	slight	Count	0	1	7	1	9
		% within Influence	,0%	11,1%	77,8%	11,1%	100,0%
		% within Salience	,0%	11,1%	63,6%	100,0%	40,9%
	moderate	Count	0	7	2	0	9
		% within Influence	,0%	77,8%	22,2%	,0%	100,0%
		% within Salience	,0%	77,8%	18,2%	,0%	40,9%
	high	Count	0	0	1	0	1
		% within Influence	,0%	,0%	100,0%	,0%	100,0%
		% within Salience	,0%	,0%	9,1%	,0%	4,5%
Total		Count	1	9	11	1	22
		% within Influence	4,5%	40,9%	50,0%	4,5%	100,0%
		% within Salience	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Source: Author's own data

Table 4 – Pearson Chi-Square Test

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16,617 <sup>a</sup>	9	,055
Likelihood Ratio	15,268	9	,084
Linear-by-Linear Association	,022	1	,881
N of Valid Cases	22		

Source: Author's own data; a. 16 cells (100,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,05.

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## Conclusions

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On the whole, this thesis paper set out to investigate under what conditions interest groups exert what kind of influence on European level, and how the findings are to be evaluated in the light of democratic legitimacy. When taking a cross-comparative assessment of influence exertion in examined policy issues, they all illustrate the power of factors conditioning interest group on-line submissions – especially, issue salience. Altogether, though, respondents seem to admit a remaining political autonomy of public institutions in EU decision-making processes and hence moderately exerted influence. High degree of influence was only obtained when technical issue was at stake that did not touch or that was in line with core political intentions of the proposed document. However, it should be noted that this conclusion is (based on conducted telephone interview) an individual observation and not a consistent pattern in this study.

It is possible to criticize the number of consultations studied here, as well as the response received or methodology applied in this research. However, the author took the task of this investigation with the underlying belief that rather than failing to tackle difficulties attached to some of the crucial questions central to our understating of interest representation in the EU, it is better to try and take some initial steps in this direction. As already suggested, “influence/power is a key concept and it is one that ought to be subject to systematic empirical scrutiny, regardless of the limitations which affect the attempts to do so” (Rasmussen, 2005: 498). This means that this paper leaves open various possibilities, which might be worth exploring in future studies in order to examine the issues in greater depth.

First, it might be rewarding to subject the theoretical model to additional testing. A variety of approaches could be taken in this respect. One might be to expand the policy fields examined, but it might also be possible to expand the issues relating to a single policy field that are studied in depth. Second, this might open another possibility by making it possible to introduce additional variables into the hypothesis concerning influence, while still being able to test the effect of one variable while excluding the effects of others. In this study, for example, the author hypothesized that the more salient the legislative proposal, the less room for maneuver for interest groups to act. However, one could also hypothesize the exact opposite: it is possible that the more salient a proposal is, the more willing advocates will be to overrule their own views and basically proceed with what legislators are trying to do. Along similar lines, there may be other variables that could affect the level of influence exerted, but which were unable to be taken into account within the confines of this project. These include: institutional characteristics, structural characteristics, focusing events, issue history (recurring, not recurring), etc. (Mahoney, 2008).

Finally, to conclude, a few words on democracy. According to Michalovitz (2005), “accountable structures together with participatory opportunities sustain those who can make the most professional and strategic use of public-private interaction – and they thereby facilitate the capture of decision-makers by special interest groups” (Michalovitz, 2005:24), i.e. mostly lobbyists and interest groups who possess the resources and the know-how to intensely engage in decision-making.

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