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Lobbying in the European Parliament: the battle for influence

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The European Parliament (EP) has become one of the most important lobbying venues in the European Union (EU). Yet we know little about the many ways in which interest groups and lobbyists influence parliamentary politics. Based on her new book on lobbying in the EP, Maja Kluger Dionigi explains when and how interest groups are influential in the EP. She argues that lobbying success depends on a number of factors, most notably the degree of counter-lobbying, issue salience, and committee receptiveness. These factors are brought together in the framework of 'Triple-I' – interests, issues, and institutions – to determine the success or failure of lobbying.

Until recently, accounts of the EU lobbying field have paid little attention to the EP and the many ways to influence it. The EP has largely been viewed as a lobbying sideshow mainly to be targeted if interest groups have been unsuccessful in getting their demands included in the Commission's proposal. For a long time, the dominant narrative about the EP was one of a policy entrepreneur defending diffuse and electorally popular causes. This reputation, however, stems from a time when the EP's legislative influence was more limited. As the power of the EP has increased so has the attention it receives from interest groups of all shapes and sizes.

Today, interest groups lobby the EP regardless of whether or not they have managed to influence the Commission's proposal. I show in my recently published book that the EP is now perceived as being the most important lobbying venue in Brussels together with the Commission. Through process-tracing of four recent cases (food labelling, reduction of CO2 emissions from vans, working time, and pregnant workers) and 150 elite interviews, I demonstrate that the EP is no longer a lobbying sideshow attracting disproportionate lobbying from

diffuse interests, but neither do members of the European Parliament (MEPs) simply give in to the views of business.

When is lobbying successful?

Knowing the ins and outs of the EP is a prerequisite for anyone trying to influence its decisions, but it is not in and of itself enough to see one's lobbying effort bear fruit. Interest groups may be faced with countervailing forces that put a cap on their influence abilities. The ability of interest groups and lobbyists to shape policy outcomes in the EP depends on the constellation of what I call 'Triple-I' (interests, issues, and institutions). Triple-I refers to interest group factors (the level of internal unity as well as counter-lobbying), issue factors (the degree to which policy issues are (de-)politicised), and institutional factors (the committees in charge of scrutinising legislation and their natural disposition towards favouring some groups over others). The constellation of Triple-I and their interplay often determine 'who wins and loses' lobbying battles.

Business certainly has an advantage on the lobbying battlefield because of its superior capabilities and structural power. However,

the elitist assumption of all-encompassing business power falls short of explanatory power when faced with internal rift within the business community (interest group factors), politicised issues that run counter the cause of business (issue factors), and unfriendly institutional arenas (institutional factors).

Businesses often find themselves battling not labour unions or NGOs, but other corporate competitors. EU legislation has differential effects on individual businesses, often leading companies and national trade associations to compete against each other. Disagreement can occur between:

- Companies from different member states, who each want their own national rules to provide the template for EU legislation
- Companies situated at different stages of the production chain, or between market leaders and laggards
- Companies producing similar products, but who each want to gain a competitive edge over their competitors

If interest groups spend too much time battling with internal fragmentation, a vacuum is likely to occur in which those groups, who have managed to find common ground early, are less likely to have their views challenged by their opponents. Lobbyists are framers, who spend much of their time trying to convince decision-makers that their issue should be seen in a particular light. MEPs subjected to one frame are more likely to take up extreme positions compared with MEPs exposed to competing frames. This is particularly likely to happen if one side of a lobbying camp is internally divided and fails to take early lobbying action. In contrast, when



Business is less successful when politics get noisy



MEPs are subjected to competing frames, they are likely to reassess their position and less inclined to take up extreme positions.

The EP's internal bifurcation – as both a legislative branch in EU decision-making and a public venue for wider political debate – means that interest groups often reformulate their arguments when lobbying the EP to create wider issue linkages and focus on the wider public good. When issues are framed in emotive terms and arouse boisterous debates on the floors of the EP (noisy politics), businesses find it difficult to get their lobbying messages across to MEPs. On issues of a more technical nature and characterised by quiet politics, businesses find it easier to have their voices heard, provided that they do not suffer from internal division.



The EP committees are biased towards their own policy area



In the EP, the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs is often seen as being close to the views of labour unions, the Committee on Women's Right and Gender Equality to women's rights groups, the Committee on the Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety to environmental groups, and so forth. The degree to which committees' natural bias towards their own policy areas lead to biased policy-outcomes depends on the degree to which the views of the lead committee are challenged internally (by the opinion-giving committees) and externally (by the Council).

The possibility to challenge the views of lead committees internally is particularly high when there is a close cooperation between the lead and opinions-giving committees (i.e. the enhanced cooperation procedure). Increased cooperation between committees prevents committee reports from becoming biased towards their own policy remit due to the

need of balancing the views of several committees. On the contrary, dossiers falling within only one committee's jurisdiction make it more likely that the EP acts as a policy entrepreneur for the interest groups the committee is 'naturally' sympathetic to.

The external cooperation with the Council also matters as Parliament will have to moderate its demands to find an agreement with the Council under co-decision. The ordinary legislative procedure is generally characterised by more consensual behaviour and stable coalitions between the main political groups, marginalising smaller groups. Co-decision has led to a greater use of informal negotiating channels between the EU's institutions and early agreements. This has led the EP to acquire a feeling of shared responsibility – revealed in a softer use of language and more moderate stances in its reports.

The consultation procedure, on the contrary, tends to encourage free-riding behaviour in the EP and the Council, and both institutions are tempted to ignore the views of each other. Since the EP cannot be held accountable for the policy outcomes reached under the consultation procedure, it is free to take up a more confrontational stance on the Commission's proposal without being punished electorally.

Occasionally committees, primarily working under the consultation procedure, are assigned a co-decision file. When that happens, there appears to be a tendency for these committees to apply 'consultation behaviour' to a co-decision file.

Navigating in an unfavourable alignment of Triple-I

Interest groups standing to lose have three main possibilities for seeking to change the outcome in their favour:

1) Conserving their resources of shifting venue, for example from formal (politically elected) to informal institutions (such as bureaucracies), where attention and lobbying may be less intense or the addressees more receptive, or to another formal venue. Business often finds that the Council is more receptive to their views in employment and social affairs than the EP.

2) Reframe the issue at stake and divide the current majority (divide and conquer). Reframing depends on the ability to invent a new viewpoint as well as the rhetorical aptitude to persuade people of a new alternative.

3) Seek to influence the amount of noise an issue attracts. Bringing in a new dimension to an issue can expand a conflict. Turning up the sound button, by making noise, activates more contestants and redefines the conflict lines, often resulting in conflict displacement.

My book goes into detail with how Triple-I creates opportunities and challenges for interest groups trying to influence the EP, depending on their constellation and interest groups' ability to navigate in an unfavourable alignment of Triple-I to turn it to their advantage. In the book, I provide concrete examples of the way interest groups can have an effect on how the component of Triple-I play out individually and together.

This note represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA. It is based on her book ['Lobbying in the European Parliament: The Battle for Influence'](#) which has recently been published by Palgrave Macmillan.



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