

# Searching for influence

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## Searching for influence: interest groups and social movements in the European Union

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REVIEW ARTICLE

## Searching for influence: interest groups and social movements in the European Union

**Lobbying in the European Parliament: The Battle for Influence**, by Maja Kluger  
Dionigi, London, Palgrave, 2017, 199 pp., £86 (hardback), ISBN 978-331942-688-4

**Insiders versus Outsiders: Interest Group Politics in Multilevel Europe**, by  
Andreas Dür and Gemma Mateo, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, 288 pp., £64  
(hardback), ISBN 978-0-19878-565-1

**Social Movement Campaigns on EU Policy: In the Corridors and in the Streets**, by  
Louisa Parks, London, Palgrave, 2015, 210 pp., £65 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-13741-105-1

**Lobbying in the European Union: Changing Minds, Changing Times**, edited  
by Paul A. Shotton and Paul G. Nixon, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, 232 pp., £70  
(hardback), ISBN 978-1-47245-213-9

The study of lobbying in the European Union is an intriguing and ongoing story. Decades of research have yielded a large number of contributions that combine general perspectives on interest groups and lobbying with the specificities of the multi-level and multi-institutional context of the EU political system. Academic attention to interest groups has only increased as their numbers have risen with deepening European integration (Beyers, Eising, and Maloney 2008) and continues today (Eising, Rasch, and Rozbicka 2017). A number of questions regularly arise, not only about groups' influence on policy, but also potential bias in the interest group system and the factors behind it.

The four books reviewed here reflect the ongoing development of EU interest group studies as they dig into old questions but yield new insights. The books offer a wide array of theoretical, methodological and empirical perspectives on interest group research and social movements, and their combination suggests where further steps can be taken and where the limits to research may lie. We begin the review by examining the only edited volume, which provides a good overview of the current state of the art in EU interest group research as well as practitioners' insights. The rest of the review examines these insights' overlap with the current academic developments explored in the other three books, before reflecting on potential future advances.

### ***Theory and practice of lobbying in the EU***

Shotton and Nixon's *Lobbying in the European Union: Changing Minds, Changing Times*, the only edited volume in this review – and unique in including both academic and practitioners' perspectives – demonstrates the variety of directions EU interest group research could take. The academic contributions give a comprehensive overview of a large part of the literature on lobbying in the

EU and introduce new findings, particularly in two broad areas: the types of groups that are represented, and the extent to which they have access to the EU.

The chapters on group differences focus on the composition of the population of groups in the EU. Berkhout, for instance, stresses the fluidity of a large part of the EU's interest group system, which is made up of a core of permanent (and often more experienced) 'residents', complemented by a large number of 'tourists' that 'seem to switch between national and European policy work' (23). Binderkrantz and Pedersen point to the variation in access provided to different groups across three arenas (administration, parliament and the media) based on the resources that groups can offer and the needs of the 'gatekeepers' of these arenas. However, they highlight that it is difficult to find one general pattern of access as there is wide variation across policy areas.

Bunea examines interest group plurality and preference attainment in environmental policy. Her tentative conclusions point to the link between diversity of preferences and preference attainment. If groups of a similar type (particularly business groups in the EU) have unified preferences and lobby in 'disciplined lobbying coalitions', they are more likely to see their preferences fulfilled. Eising evaluates participation in EU consultations, concluding that civil society groups may be outnumbered by business groups; yet they are often *not* outgunned as they tend to have powerful allies among EU and national policymakers.

So why do business groups tend to have more institutional access than civil society groups? Hermansson's chapter provides some nuance to the idea that access depends purely on group type by pointing out that it is actually expertise that matters, which comes with a physical presence in Brussels and requires a substantial investment. This can provide a cautionary note, echoed by Shotton and Nixon's chapter, with respect to the role that social media can play in interest group influence. Although often regarded as a 'great leveller' of groups, social media may have actually 'play[ed] into the hands of those already in power' (117). Although social media itself is inexpensive, using it effectively requires resources, time and staff, giving resource-rich groups a significant advantage. Moreover, at the end of the day, even if social media facilitates mobilisation and access, it can be used by all groups – and may therefore level the playing field much less than is often assumed.

As well as providing interesting perspectives on interest group and lobbying research in the EU, Shotton and Nixon's edited volume's strongest added value is in its combination of academic and practitioners' contributions – although these both excite and disappoint. The disappointment stems from the lack of fit of some of these chapters (e.g. on 'Think-Do tanks' and public affairs) with the academic chapters and literature as a whole; while they are interesting, it is unclear how researchers can use them. Nonetheless, reading these chapters with an open mind raises questions that can move research on interest groups forwards and shows the need to take new forms of representation and groups into account when designing surveys and studies of representation. At the same time, these chapters indicate that the distance between academia and the world of public affairs is not impossible to bridge; on the contrary, many issues hinted at are already tackled by academic research, as the other three books reviewed here testify. We will examine these issues below.

### ***Inside and outside strategies***

The first important finding from practitioners concerns the interaction between inside and outside lobbying, particularly the conditions under which the two lead to success. This requires an understanding of the triangular dynamic among policymakers, interest groups and the wider public (Shotton and Nixon 2015). While this has often been overlooked at the EU level as it was seen to lack a public to appeal to, more recent studies have examined the role of interest groups in mediating public opinion (Rasmussen, Mäder, and Reher 2017). Social media may impact this role: the ability of policymakers and interest groups to bypass traditional media may lead to more

outward-oriented strategies, as the broader public become easier to mobilise and traditional media – which select their own messages – can be avoided. However, in their chapter Parker and Gonzalez point out that even in the EU's multilevel context, direct public contact requires calibrating that message to national and even local circumstances, concerns and sensitivities – a theme which reappears in the following books.

The interaction between inside and outside strategies, and public opinion, is of utmost importance to Dür and Mateo's *Insiders versus Outsiders: Interest Group Politics in Multilevel Europe*. They examine the factors which explain interest group strategies, access and influence in the EU. A well-elaborated quantitative research design serves to answer these questions, based on two surveys. Their actor-centred survey is based on a sample of most groups in five countries (Austria, Latvia, Germany, Ireland and Spain). The policy-centred survey queried a sample of all groups in five countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland and Spain) active on at least one of three policy issues (ACTA ratification, the EU's position on post-Kyoto climate negotiations or the Fiscal Compact).

Dür and Mateo find that strategies at the EU and national level depend on interest group type, together with the interaction between group type and group resources. In other words, higher material resources enhance rather than reduce differences in terms of strategy choice, making citizen groups more likely to use outside strategies, and business groups more likely to use inside ones. This contradicts the usual hypothesis that resource-rich groups are more likely to use inside strategies regardless of group type. Access depends on the same factors, at least in terms of national and European executive institutions and European Parliamentary committees. Business groups enjoy better access than citizen groups and the difference is amplified for resource-rich business groups. However, the picture with respect to legislative institutions at the national and EU levels is different – here, businesses' advantage seems to disappear. The authors explain this with the institutions' informational needs: citizen groups are able to provide the political information that parliaments need, in contrast to the technical advice more often required by the executive and provided by business groups.

When it comes to influence, the authors study their three policy issues in depth to unravel the causal chain between lobbying, public salience, possible bandwagon effects and counteractive lobbying, and policy outcomes. When public opinion is aroused by an issue, interest groups that run counter to that opinion will lose. For this to happen, however, the issue must be publically salient or touch upon emotions that can easily be transformed into salience by mobilising groups and creating 'attention cascades'. Citizen groups can do this more easily than business groups due to their membership base. This finding helps to overcome some of the long-held assumptions about the relative importance and effectiveness of inside and outside strategies and instead indicates that outside strategies can be a serious option.

What is interesting is that Dür and Mateo link each of their findings to relatively straightforward causal mechanisms. The difference in strategies stems from the unequal ability of business and citizen groups to overcome collective action problems. For access, critical access goods, public actors' need of different goods, and the ability of groups to deliver them matters. For influence, it is the interplay between issue characteristics (salience), public opinion, and group types' divergent ability to exploit these through outside lobbying which is important.

In summary, Dür and Mateo provide a straightforward analysis based on clear conceptualisation, a strong theoretical underpinning, a transparent account of their research design and process, and detailed and well-presented reporting of results. As such, their work provides a clear step forward in our understanding of interest group behaviour and its effects in the EU.

### ***What you know or who you know?***

A second point which becomes clear from practitioners' writing is that interest group coalitions and networks matter significantly. In *Changing Minds, Changing Times*, Clarac and Desselas stress the importance that practitioners attach to the mapping of the various stakeholders with respect to an issue. This is not only about positioning your own group and 'knowing your enemies', but also message reinforcement and strategic efficiency: why do something yourself when you could join forces to work more efficiently? Despite this observation, academic research has a long tradition of focusing on groups as individual actors. Measuring coalitions and unpicking networks of interest groups at the same time as measuring influence which may be 'indirect', is challenging. Operationalisation may also be difficult – are coalitions measured by aligned preferences or must there be more long-term consultation and cooperation? Nevertheless, practitioners' experiences indicate that coalitions are vital to grasp interest group strategies and influence, and academics are beginning to pay more attention to the relationships between groups. In addition to recent studies on coalitions and the social aspects of lobbying (Bunea 2015; Chalmers 2013), Dionigi's book *Lobbying in the European Parliament: The Battle for Influence* highlights the importance of networking and contacts for groups (Dionigi 2017).

Dionigi examines the factors affecting interest groups' influence when lobbying the European Parliament. Her four in-depth case studies, based upon 145 interviews with MEPs, policy advisors and interest groups, provide evidence against the long-held claims that the European Parliament is a voice for the environment, consumers and other diffuse interests. Contrary to Dür and Mateo's finding that business access differs between legislative and executive institutions, Dionigi finds that businesses and trade associations hold a privileged position even in the European Parliament. Nonetheless, this does not always translate into influence, which – as highlighted by Bunea's contribution to Shotton and Nixon – requires internal unity. Indeed, 'businesses often find themselves battling not only labour unions or NGOs, but other corporate competitors' (152).

Dionigi particularly highlights the need for groups to form long-term relationships and coalitions; she states that about 80% of groups' time and resources are spent on 'informal lobbying' to protect their long-term interests, i.e. building a 'network of contacts built on mutual trust' (22). As previously highlighted by Hermansson, a physical presence in Brussels is vital for this. Dionigi's focus on the reality of lobbying and creating contacts with MEPs and other groups, for example through participation in parliamentary intergroups, is an important step towards a more realistic view of how groups work to gain influence. Such an approach may develop further with more cross-disciplinary work – for example, the discussion on social movements in the EU below.

As one of the only works to date focussing on lobbying towards the European Parliament, Dionigi provides impressive details about the specificities of lobbying at each stage of the policy process. While she finds evidence that groups adopt their strategies to the European Parliament by framing them in a less technical way and linking their proposals to the public good, businesses – unsurprisingly – shy away from outside strategies or 'noisy politics'. Moreover, she finds that even within the Parliament, certain committees are more open, including when there is cooperation between the responsible and opinion-giving committees (to avoid bias coming from one committee), and within committees with more experience with the ordinary legislative procedure.

The book's strongest points are its in-depth case studies and excellent technical knowledge of the fundamentals of lobbying the European Parliament; it is clear that the author spent a lot of time inside the institution and knows precisely how lobbying works on different dossiers. Perhaps a weaker point is the breadth of its theoretical framework: Dionigi conceptualises groups' influence as contingent on the constellation of 'the Triple-I of public politics' interest group characteristics, issue characteristics and institutional explanations (Chapter 3). This is a relatively catch-all theory of lobbying influence, and of course these factors are all found to be important in explaining the outcomes of lobbying; a more focused conceptualisation may have allowed

for keener insights into the causal mechanism of lobbying influence. Nonetheless, the attention to detail in her empirical work makes up for this and forms a thorough study of the realities of lobbying the European Parliament.

### ***Lobbying costs and politicisation***

Practitioners' third interesting finding concerns the cost of lobbying, even in a context where outside strategies through social media are relatively cheap. Different skills and resources must be mobilised to yield influence in the EU's multi-level and multi-actor political system in what one could call the advocacy-producing chain. This is not just the case for the acquisition and transfer of technical expertise or policy effects on stakeholders to policy-makers; it also applies when groups try to reach the public. Sending an email, tweeting or using Facebook does not mean that the majority will pay attention or act politically on it. Expert input is often necessary to achieve influence, and this comes with a substantial cost. Groups therefore face a trade-off between the costs and benefits of lobbying and the advantages and drawbacks of different strategies, which often need to be combined to gain influence.

The impossibility of politicising all policy issues reflects a dilemma which is at the heart of the other books in this review: why do outside strategies or 'noisy politics' sometimes work, and when do they fail? Interestingly – given the usual focus of social movement studies purely on outside strategies – this tension between inside and outside strategies is present even in the only social movements book in the collection, Parks' *Social Movements in the European Union: In the Corridors and in the Streets* (Parks 2015).

Studying social movements at an EU level can be challenging, not least because of the perceived lack of a public sphere for protest to take place. Early work on social movements highlighted that even on EU policies, protest tended to occur at a national level because of the institutionalised nature of lobbying (Imig and Tarrow 2001). Subsequent research has indicated that social movement organisations do not take significantly different actions to other interest groups in the EU, particularly NGOs (Diani 2012; Ruzza 2011). Moreover, the possibility for and advantages of popular mobilisation are increasingly being taken into account in the interest group literature, including the books reviewed here. Given this, is there any added value in distinguishing between social movement organisations and (coalitions of) NGOs at the EU level? Parks' book bridges the two fields, showing that the two literatures do provide a complementary rather than competing view and that examining both can help us better understand citizen representation in the EU.

Parks uses process-tracing to examine six case studies of social movement campaigns in the EU to examine how social movement organisations have adapted to deal with the EU and under what conditions they have influence over EU decisions. Her theoretical framework focuses on political opportunities – structural and contextual aspects – and their interaction with groups' framing of policy issues; she studies their outcomes for access, agenda and policy. In order to identify political opportunities and threats, Parks considers each institution separately, highlighting the needs of each institution and the requirements for groups to gain access. While such an exchange perspective is not novel in interest group studies and indeed appears implicitly or explicitly in each of the books reviewed here, her detailed examination of the specific institutional setting provides a significant contribution to the EU social movement literature. In fact, Parks finds that the main influence on social movement campaigns are the EU institutions themselves, which have the power to shape the type of campaign more than any other factor.

Given Parks' focus on movement campaigns, her work studies coalitions of groups and multi-level politics, as explored both in Dür and Mateo and contributions within Shotton and Nixon. Parks finds that national mobilisation is vital: umbrella organisations or EU coalitions mobilise the national level to target the EU in what she terms a 'boomerang' strategy. As she highlights, this becomes even more important in new forms of political action such as the European Citizens'

Initiative, which requires cooperation between the EU level (to complete the submission process) and national levels (to acquire signatures for the petition in enough member states). Despite this, Parks finds evidence against the assumption that social movement groups focus only on outside, protest-based strategies: 'all interviewees stressed that both [types of strategies] may be useful, but neither on its own will secure an impact' (177). Like the other books discussed here, this challenges longstanding assumptions of which strategies different types of groups use.

One point which is less conceptually clear is Parks' distinction between 'technical' and 'political' campaigns. At first glance these seem similar to 'inside' and 'outside' strategies, but they are in fact slightly more complex. Technical campaigns involve 'low levels of popular mobilisation at the national and local levels and high levels of engagement with EU level institutions, particularly the Commission', while political campaigns 'are characterised by higher levels of popular mobilisation at national and local levels and lower levels of engagement in consultation' (4). This definition would appear to depend mostly on the Commission's willingness to provide access to groups for a consultation, which Parks does acknowledge. In her conclusions, however, she highlights that the 'real contrast between technical and political campaigns ... [lies] in campaigning strategies and targets' (179). However, this appears to be more of a descriptive conclusion than explanatory, as it does not evaluate the factors influencing the strategies that groups use – and whether groups really have a choice or depend on institutions to make the choice for them.

Is this really important? We would argue so. One of Parks' main findings is that political campaigns led to more political influence for social movements. But the chance remains that the policy issues for which no consultation was held and where groups were forced to take a political route, were simply more easily politicised. In particular, the presence of elite allies and the strength of extant frames emerged as important conditions for an issue to be politicised, reflecting Dür and Mateo's findings of when an 'attention cascade' occurs. In that sense, groups may be limited in their options based on institutional or issue conditions, which in turn has important implications for the democratic representation of interests, as we turn to in the conclusion.

### **Conclusion: representation and bias in the EU**

As emphasised throughout this review, these books grapple with long-running questions about why interest groups use different strategies and how they gain influence in the EU's multilevel polity. However, they have also gone beyond these debates to deal with elements at the forefront of interest group research: the mediating role of NGOs between public opinion and policy, the creation of coalitions of NGOs, and the 'advocacy-producing chain' involving trade-offs between strategies to gain influence. Combining practitioners' and academic views has revealed future paths that academic research should take, and how the studies of interest groups and social movements have begun to complement each other.

A combined review of these books, however, also uncovers the potential implications of interest group representation for democracy and the risk of bias in representation – another debate which has been at the heart of interest group studies since their foundation (see Schattschneider 1960 and the debate in Dür and Mateo 2016, 214–220). From these books, it is clear that outside strategies *can* be successful in the EU, which seems positive for citizen representation; however, equally clear is that not all policies are conducive to outside strategies. Indeed, the requirements for whether a policy can be politicised are largely outside groups' control: while the most salient issues attract a lot of attention, many others are not exciting enough to capture public attention and may be ignored by all but the businesses with a lot at stake, potentially leading to regulatory capture. Finally, if – as Dür and Mateo find – citizen groups are more likely to use outside strategies *even with* more resources and when the Commission encourages consultation, it may be very difficult to change this bias. The debate on bias in interest representation and its democratic

implications is therefore set to continue; however, as research continues to evolve and take the changing reality of interest representation into account, it is likely to edge ever closer to an answer.

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