

Shadowy Agitators or Representatives of the Public?

Interest Advocates and Public Opinion

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Abstract

While “lobbying” has a rather sketchy reputation, democratic theory often expects interest groups to act as important intermediaries between the public and the political system. We examine their potential to fulfill this function analyzing a new dataset of more than 700 actors on 50 policy issues in five European countries. Advocacy positions are in line with public opinion roughly half the time but our evidence regarding variation across group types challenges some of the conventional views of these actors. Whereas public interest groups are most likely to be aligned with public preferences, a substantial share of these groups do not represent majority opinion. In contrast, approximately half of the firms and business associations, which are often expected to move policy outcomes away from majoritarian preferences, hold preferences in line with the public majority. Moreover, despite concerns of bias in group type mobilization, issues with low diversity in the substantial interests represented do not display lower correspondence between public and advocacy opinion.

According to the Corporate Europe Observatory campaign group, as many as 30,000 lobbyists are working at influencing EU politics, a number that roughly corresponds to the staff employed by the European Commission¹. By some estimates, “these shadowy agitators are estimated to influence 75 per cent of European legislation” (ibid.). This negative view of interest advocacy is not unique to the EU: More than half of those asked in Germany and the UK respond that their national governments are run by business interests (Global Corruption Barometer 2013, p. 13). Germany has recently been criticized for its lack of transparency and lobby regulation, and the lack of lobbying transparency has been on the agenda in several other countries (Lobbying in Europe, 2015). Lobbying is often viewed negatively and is likely to account, at least partly, for an increasing skepticism towards the political elite.

This debate has also been on the academic agenda for decades. In line with public fears, the elitist perspective (see e.g. Schattschneider, 1960) casts a skeptical view on the ability of organized civil society to represent society as a whole. Empirical research shows that business organizations dominate, regardless of whether one considers interest group systems as a whole or mobilization on specific policy issues (e.g. Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; Schlozman, 2010; Schlozman & Tierney, 1986). Moreover, the preferences of business actors and the economic elite have been shown to be more likely to be reflected in policy outcomes than the preferences of the average citizens or interest groups that represent mass-based opinion (Gilens & Page, 2014). This stands in stark contrast to the pluralist perspective (see e.g. Truman, 1951), according to which interest groups are seen as a valuable link between policy-makers and citizens (Burstein, 2010; Dür & De Bièvre, 2007). Indeed, evidence shows that interest groups are more active on issues that are salient to the public, suggesting that groups have the potential to act as a transmission belt between the public and the political system (Klüver, 2015; Rasmussen, Carroll, & Lowery, 2014).

Nevertheless, we lack knowledge as to whether they also have an incentive to do so.

Understanding whether and when lobbyists counter public preferences, and which lobbyists are representative of what the public wants is important for understanding the role of lobbying in modern policy-making. Such analysis is important to address both the public fears of lobbying capture corrupting democratic outcomes, as well as the discussions in democratic theory. However, apart from important exceptions (see e.g. Claassen & Nicholson, 2013; Dür & Mateo, 2014; Gilens, 2012; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987), the correspondence between the preferences of the public and interest advocates has not been examined in a systematic manner. Importantly, no one has linked the policy positions of advocates and the public on a high number of specific policy issues in a comparative study of several countries, which is the purpose of our study. Doing so allows us to test whether opinion correspondence between the two varies between different types of policy issues and to control for system-level variation that might influence these patterns.

Our analysis is based on a new dataset of 50 issues in five West European countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and the UK). For each issue, we have measures of public opinion and have coded the positions of advocates who were in contact with their national political system or appeared in major news media. Relying on a behavioral definition of interest groups (Baroni, Carroll, Chalmers, Marquez, & Rasmussen, 2014) we analyze activity for a broad range of advocates that engage in actual lobbying behavior, including membership associations, firms and expert organizations. We theorize about the conditions under which these advocates and the public are more likely to align their positions. First, we address whether the extent to which interest groups are aligned with the public depends on the types of substantial interests they represent. Second, we scrutinize whether the likelihood of finding correspondence between public opinion and the opinion of the advocacy

community on an issue is higher when a diverse set of substantial interests is active in the group community.

Despite the polarized discussion between elitists and pluralists, our findings underline how there is substantial variation between policy issues in how closely the positions of the advocates and the public are aligned in practice. Regardless of whether we analyze congruence at the individual or issue level, advocates are on the same side as the public in a little over half of the cases. Our findings cast doubt on many of the conventional wisdoms in existing scholarship: Even though we find support that public interest groups are more likely to be aligned with public opinion than other types of organized interests, there are also limits to the transmission capacities of these actors, 23% of whom do not side with the public on the issues. In contrast, approximately half of the firms and groups representing concentrated interests—often suspected of wanting to distort public policy away from the interests of society as a whole—actually have similar positions to those of the public. For these actors, correspondence with public opinion is not significantly lower than for most other types of interest advocates such as trade unions or hobby and identity groups. Finally, whether or not the advocacy community consists of similar numbers of actors from different group types has no effect on the likelihood that advocates and the public are on the same side on an issue. Advocacy communities with a biased distribution between different substantial interests are not more likely to be unrepresentative of public opinion.

Advocates and the Public

In a situation in which public opinion will seldom be well-known, understood, and identified (Burstein, 2010, p. 74), interest groups can act as agents to help the public get its message across to policy-makers. In the words of Furlong and Kerwin, interest groups can act as

“surrogates for the public” which allows policymakers to produce outputs that “benefit directly from the public’s considerable wisdom and experience with the topic at hand” (2005, p. 354). Even if advocates can help transmit information about public preferences, their incentive to do so should be considerably lower in case they hold different preferences than the people. Consequently, how much potential groups have to act as a transmission mechanism may depend on whether their policy interests are in line with those of the general public.

We are interested in two aspects of opinion correspondence between the public and advocates. First, we examine *opinion congruence*; that is, whether advocates are on the same side as the majority of the public on a given issue. Second, we examine *opinion linkage*; that is, the correlation between the positions of the general public and the advocates.² The latter considers not only whether the positions of advocates on a given policy represent the median member of the public but *the sensitivity* of the relationship between the positions of the public and the advocates. More specifically, it asks whether the advocacy support for a given policy change increases as *the level* of support for the change in the general public increases.

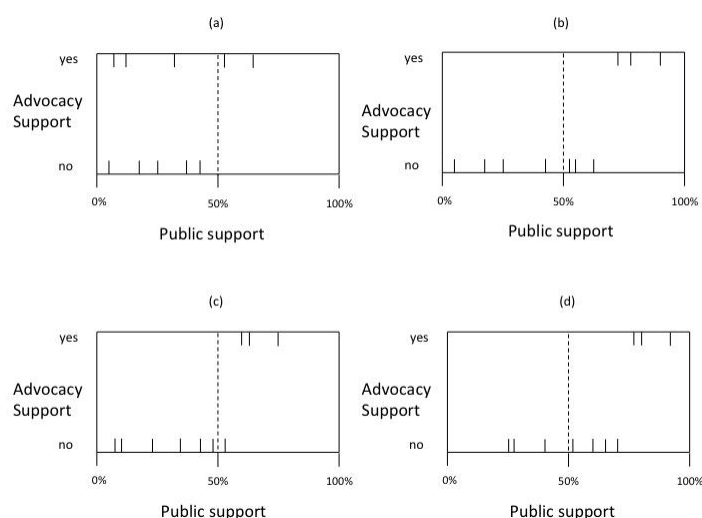


Figure 1. Hypothetical example of opinion congruence and opinion linkage (adapted from Rasmussen, Reher & Toshkov, 2015).

The examples in Figure 1 illustrate the difference between opinion congruence and opinion linkage. In both panels a) and b) there is opinion congruence in 70% of the cases, as the public and the advocates either both support or oppose change in 7 out of 10 cases. At the same time there is a substantial difference in the opinion linkage between the two examples, since panel a) demonstrates a weaker relationship between advocacy and public opinion support for change than panel b). The opposite pattern becomes apparent when comparing panels c) and d): whereas opinion linkage is similar in the two, there is congruence in 9 of the 10 cases in panel c) compared to only 6 out of 10 in panel d).

There are different paths leading to these two types of opinion correspondence. To begin with, the advocates and public have possibly held common positions on an issue before it becomes subject to attention. Yet it is also possible that both sets of actors are able to influence each other's behavior and opinions in the course of policymaking (Dür & Mateo, 2014; Kollman, 1998). Public opinion may influence advocates by affecting whether and when they mobilize on an issue (see e.g. Dür & Mateo, 2014; Klüver, 2015). For example, interest groups have been argued to be more active on issues that are salient to the public as well as issues that have consequences for budgetary spending (Rasmussen et al., 2014). Similarly, Klüver (2015) has shown how issue attention among the general public triggers interest group activity. However, we can also expect the opposite causal relationship; that is, interest groups trying to shape public opinion (Andsager, 2000; Schlozman & Tierney, 1986). According to Kollman, 56% of interest lobbying applies so-called outsider strategies, where groups aim at lobbying for their cause by mobilizing the public (Kollman, 1998, p. 101). Existing research provides mixed evidence on the success of interest groups in such efforts. Some studies find that groups are able to steer public opinion by ways of framing (Andsager, 2000; McEntire, Leiby, & Krain, 2015) or by providing policy-relevant information to their members (Kim &

Margalit, 2016). Dür, on the other hand, conducted an experiment on TTIP that found that public opinion can be shaped by groups but that the opinion is only responsive to certain arguments and is not influenced by the source of the argument (Dür, 2016). This is supported by studies arguing that public opinion is not easily manipulated by elites but informed by policy content (McAdam & Su, 2002; Nicholson, 2011, p. 1165) and that interest groups find it difficult to influence informed voters (Lupia, 1994). Some studies have even found that interest groups have a negative impact on public opinion. In more than 25% of the cases analyzed in the seminal study by Page and colleagues (Page et al., 1987, p. 37), public opinion moved away from their positions (see also McAdam & Su, 2002; Smith, 2000).

We use insights from the research on the different potential paths leading to opinion correspondence when theorizing about opinion correspondence at *any given point in time*. Hence, we expect that at a certain point, understanding (the lack of) correspondence between the opinion of the public and the groups on an issue goes beyond the exogenously given differences between these actors; it may also be affected by the extent to which groups and the public manage to influence each other. Rather than starting from a predetermined conception of the direction of the causal relationship, we allow for the possibility that causality flows in both directions. Thus, we can conceive of correspondence between the opinion of the public and groups as occurring both as *bottom-up* and *top-down* processes with interest groups influencing the public or the other way around.³ We begin by examining the potential differences in opinion correspondence between different types of interest groups before discussing how it is affected by the configuration of interest group types on an issue.

Variation across group types

In a study of issues related to US federal policy focusing on the most powerful interests in the US that took a position on an issue, Gilens (2012) did not find a relationship between the policy preferences of interest groups and the public. Yet, whereas this overall correlation was insignificant, there was a positive correlation between the public and organizations that tend to side with the poor (Gilens, 2012, p. 136/156). This suggests that some group types may be more likely to have preferences aligned with public opinion than others. One reason is that some group types might represent a constituency that is likely to be a closer match to public opinion than others. A key distinction in the literature is often drawn between interest associations representing concentrated and diffuse interests (Olson, 1971). The former typically represent a well-defined, narrow constituency and aim at providing concentrated benefits to their members or supporters, whereas diffuse interests are those aimed at representing broader societal interests that often involve the provision of public goods such as clean air. Given that the former type of actor represents a more narrow constituency, their opinion might be less likely to correspond to public opinion. In the current study, we distinguish between six categories of interest organizations that represent different types of interests.⁴ Public interest groups defending collective interests of the general public (e.g. environmental and consumer groups) make up the first category and are seen as examples of diffuse interests. In contrast, the next two categories: business and occupational associations as well as firms are among some of the most conventional examples of actors that represent well-defined, narrower constituencies in the literature (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, & Pedersen, 2014; Dür & Mateo, 2013). However, also a number of other interest group types represent concentrated interests rather than the interest of the general public. In our study, these include trade unions representing workers, as well as the category of hobby and identity groups promoting the views of specific types of hobbies or identity subgroups (e.g. LGBT

support groups or women's associations). Finally, our sixth category of interest group pools expert organizations, think tanks and associations of different types of institutions (e.g. subnational governments), since actors belonging to these types might represent a mix of concentrated and diffuse interests. As indicated above, differences in the extent to which the opinions of these different types of advocates correspond with public opinion might not just occur because of differences in the constituencies of groups to begin with but can also arise because groups and public opinion have influenced each other. Importantly, we think that the likelihood of finding such relationships might vary for groups representing concentrated and diffuse constituencies.

First, some types of groups may be more successful in swaying public opinion than others. One strategy for success for advocates when trying to convince policymakers is to "go public." By raising the awareness of an issue and framing it in a certain way, some groups are able to shift public opinion in their preferred direction (Dür, 2016). Existing research shows that citizen groups representing diffuse, mass-based interests are more likely to apply such outsider lobbying strategies (Dür & Mateo, 2013; Kollman, 1998; Schlozman & Tierney, 1986). Going public is relatively cheap and effective for such types of citizen groups. In contrast, groups such as business associations and firms often prefer inside lobbying to promote the views of their concentrated constituencies in order to avoid publicity, bad press, or a negative image. This means that arenas of direct lobbying are often dominated by many of the classical representatives of concentrated interests (Golden, 1998; Jewell & Bero, 2007; West & Raso, 2013). Perhaps as a result of such a difference in lobbying focus, Page et al. (1987, p. 37) found that public opinion often moves in a way that is contrary to the positions of groups that represent specific and narrow interests, whereas groups that represent broader, mass-based interests can have a positive effect.

Second, when we consider the reverse relationship in which groups adapt to public opinion, we also find reasons to suspect a weaker relationship for actors representing concentrated interests. Considering the fundamental nature of organizations, it can be argued that such groups are under weaker pressure than public interest groups to adapt to the public. Hence, even if all organizations aim to ensure survival (Klüver, 2011; Lowery & Gray, 1995), they differ in their survival strategies. Many organizations representing concentrated interests depend on internal resources for survival. Ensuring organizational maintenance is frequently a question of maximizing profits, by, amongst other things, delivering certain services to the more specific, narrow interests that they represent (Klüver, 2011, p. 4). Public interest groups, on the other hand, rely on broad-based membership to survive (Berkhout, 2013, p. 234). For these groups, satisfying both their existing and potential members in the general public is more likely to affect survival. Failure to adapt their views to a shift in the public mood can be costly for such interest groups, as members might withdraw their membership, possibly selecting another organization that better represents their interests, and potential members would be disincentivized from joining. Overall, then, there are numerous reasons to suspect that public opinion should be more weakly aligned with the preferences of concentrated than diffuse interests, irrespective of whether examining opinion congruence or opinion linkage.

H1a: Interest groups representing concentrated interests experience lower congruence between their positions and majority public opinion than groups representing diffuse interests.

H1b: The linkage between the positions of the public and advocates is weaker for interest groups representing concentrated interests than for groups representing diffuse interests.

Diversity in the interest group community

When scrutinizing the correspondence of the opinion of the public and advocates on an issue as a whole, we also expect the configuration of mobilized advocates on the issue to play a role. Following pluralist theory, the mobilization of diverse types of substantial interests can be expected to increase the likelihood that different parts of society are represented compared to an issue on which very homogenous groups mobilize (Bevan & Rasmussen, 2015). This is not least the case because a lot of the issues on which only one side mobilizes are the ones on which special interests such as business associations play a dominant role as opposed to groups more likely to represent mass opinion (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001). Business groups are often affected by niche politics and lobby on low-conflict issues. In contrast, resource-poor groups (e.g. NGOs and citizen groups) cannot mobilize on every issue and must carefully consider how to spend their resources. They jump on the bandwagon on highly contested issues in order to represent their interests but do not lobby alone, having to compete with many other actor types (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001).

The mobilization of a diverse set of interest group types might also play a positive role in the alignment of public and advocacy opinion when we consider the ability of groups and the public to influence each other. In the case of diversity, we would expect that, if a diverse set of groups is active, the public discussion is informed by multiple perspectives and arguments based on which citizens form their opinion. In such a scenario, a group community representing different perspectives might be regarded as more credible by the public and has an easier time affecting public opinion on an issue than if the group community is dominated by a single interest. In turn, it might also be more likely for various segments of the public to affect the voice of the advocacy community when the public can interact with groups representing a multitude of substantial interests. Having a more diverse set of groups with

which to engage increases the likelihood that any given segment of the public can have its voice heard. Bevan and Rasmussen find that the size of the group population positively conditions government attention to public priorities and conclude that if many groups are active, information about public priorities gets transmitted to policymakers “more easily and with a louder voice” (2015, p. 19). Underlying this study is an idea that interest groups can represent public opinion vis-à-vis decision-makers and that the sheer number of groups makes such representation of public opinion vis-à-vis decision-makers more likely. Gray, Lowery, Fellowes and McAtee (2004) have also found evidence that the number of interest groups has a positive impact on the extent to which the ideological orientation of policy corresponds to that of the people. We might expect a similar dynamic for interest group diversity; that is, the likelihood that public views are carried forward by groups is higher when the active population on an issue is diverse, representing different segments of the public.

H2a: Congruence between the positions of the public majority and the advocacy community on an issue is more likely, the more diverse the advocacy community mobilized on the issue.

H2b: The linkage between the positions of the public and the advocacy community on an issue is stronger, the more diverse the advocacy community mobilized on the issue.

Analysis Design

Our dataset pools information on public opinion and interest group activity on 10 issues in five countries. Low barriers of entry and a high degree of open competition between stakeholders in a pluralist setting might mean that the interests that mobilize are more representative of the public than in a corporatist setting in which access to the political system is likely to be more selective and favor corporatist interests (Siaroff, 1999). Even if we do not

necessarily expect such differences in who is granted access to decision-making to translate into differences in whether advocates on specific policy issues are representative of public opinion, our selection of countries allows us to control for such system-level variation. Hence, we include both systems experiencing different degrees of corporatism (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden) and a pluralist case (the UK) (Siaroff, 1999).

All of the issues come from high quality national opinion polls conducted among a representative sample of the adult population. In line with recent research (Gilens, 2012; Anne Rasmussen, Mäder, & Reher, 2017), we screened a high number of national and international opinion polls to identify questions containing information about public preferences on specific policy issues. All of the selected questions involve a call for future policy change on a specific issue that would fall under the jurisdiction of the national government and include responses measured on an agreement scale. As an example, one of our Dutch issues asks whether euthanasia should be banned and a Swedish one concerns the question of allowing free downloads of all films and music from the Internet. The 10 selected items per country (see Appendix) vary in policy type (regulatory, distributive, redistributive), the level of public support for policy change, and media saliency.⁵

The lowest unit in our analyses is an actor on a policy issue, of which we have 737 cases. We include all actors on the 10 issues in the five countries for whom we could identify a policy position either in favor of or against a given call for policy change.⁶ Following Gilens (2012), we gathered data on advocacy on the issues for an observation period of up to four years.⁷ To determine whether and when policy changes took place we collected information through legislative databases, governmental websites, electronic newspaper archives and interest group websites. Three separate rounds of data gathering yielded the sample of active

advocates on the specific issues: First, we conducted a keyword search for each issue in two broadsheet newspapers in each county (one left- and one right-leaning, to control for potential differences in the overall tone of advocacy between news sources of different political orientations). Subsequently, we coded all active advocates making statements on the specific issues in these sources and coded their position as in favor of or against the proposed policy change. Second, we conducted expert interviews on the 50 issues with a policy official who had worked on the issue in our period of observation (response rate 82%), asking them to identify advocates active on the issues and their positions, in addition to those identified in the media. Third, we relied on in-depth desk research of online sources and physical archives to identify government interaction with advocates of relevance to the issues (e.g. public consultations, parliamentary committee hearings, formal advisory bodies). Student assistants coded the positions of the actors in these sources where they contained information about an advocacy opinion on the issue addressed in the public opinion question (e.g. through consultation submissions). For actors in the desk research for whom this was not possible, student coders tried to gather the policy positions by conducting a search for policy documents or position papers by the actors on the issues using the same keywords as those used in the media coding.

Our dependent variables examine *opinion congruence* and *opinion linkage* at both the actor and issue levels. This means that for individual actors we first consider whether the majority of the public holds a position that is congruent with their view;⁸ that is, whether a given actor has public opinion on its side. Second, we examine the relationship between level of support in the public and the position of individual actors in favor of or against policy change.

Correspondingly, at the issue level, we first consider the *congruence* between the positions of the majority of the public and the active interest advocates. Again, congruence occurs when

groups and the public are on the same side, regardless of whether they both support or oppose a given policy change.⁹ Second, we examine the relationship between the shares of the public and advocates on the different issues supporting policy change.

The regressions include a number of independent variables and controls. Our actor-level models include the effect of advocacy type to test Hypotheses 1a and 1b and distinguish between the six categories of interest groups mentioned previously: 1) public interest groups, 2) business and occupational associations, 3) firms, 4) trade unions, 5) hobby and identity groups, and 6) expert organizations, think tanks and institutional associations. Our appendix provides a detailed list of the group types included in each category. Public interest groups are prominent examples of groups that “seek to advance diffuse benefits to their members as well as everybody else” (Binderkrantz et al., 2014, p. 881) and include environmental and consumer groups and associations promoting civil liberties and international humanitarian work. Groups in the second, third, fourth and fifth categories all defend the interests of concentrated constituencies, irrespective whether the subgroups promoted are economic (as in the case of business groups, firms and trade unions) or identity based (as in the case of hobby and identity groups). Finally, expert organizations, think tanks and institutional associations may promote either diffuse or concentrated interests. The opinion congruence models directly examine whether the likelihood that an advocate and the public are on the same side on an issue varies for different types of interest groups. In contrast, the opinion linkage models examine whether the relationship between public opinion and group opinion varies for different group types by interacting public opinion and advocacy type.

Our issue-level models include measures of diversity to test Hypotheses 2a and 2b. First, we calculate the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), which indicates the distribution of

advocates between the five categories of actor types. It equals the sum of the squared proportions of actors in the different categories and ranges from $1/\text{number of group types}$ (in our case $1/6$) to 1, 1 indicating the lowest degree of diversity with all groups falling into one category. The HHI can be criticized for implicitly assuming that our six categories of actors are equally important for representing public opinion. For this reason, we also consider an alternative measure of diversity by including the share of public interest groups out of all interest groups on an issue. Similar to the share of “non-for-profit” interest associations used by Gray and Lowery (1996), the share of public interest groups on an issue might also be seen as a way of measuring the degree of bias in interest representation. Again, the congruence models directly test the main effect of these diversity measures, whereas the opinion linkage models include interactions between public opinion and the diversity measures to examine whether the relationship between public opinion and advocacy opinion varies between issues with different degrees of diversity.

In addition to these variables, our issue-level analyses include a control for the number of actors on an issue, since the chance of correspondence between public opinion and the advocacy community may increase the higher the number of advocates on an issue.¹⁰ To consider such a possibility, we examine both whether the number of actors has a direct effect on congruence between public opinion and advocacy opinion and whether it moderates the effect of public opinion on advocacy support for change. Moreover, all of the models include dummies for the different policy types in our sample distinguishing between distributive, regulatory and redistributive issues (Lowi, 1964; 1972), and control for the media saliency of an issue. This is measured by the number of articles in one daily newspaper per country; identified with a Boolean keyword search for articles that have been published one month prior until one month after the question has been asked in the opinion poll.¹¹ The measure is

standardized within each country and higher numbers indicate higher media attention. Finally, the models include country-fixed effects to control for unobserved heterogeneity between observations from the different countries in our study.

Analysis

According to Table 1, we find congruence between the position of an advocate and public opinion roughly half the time. This means there is no predominant support for either the elitist or pluralist view, which would expect a clear difference between congruence and incongruence, respectively. Nevertheless, we find a higher frequency of congruence for public interest groups than for the actor types representing concentrated interests as expected based on Hypothesis 1a. Perhaps more noteworthy, however, 23 per cent of the public interest groups, typically being regarded as important safeguards for ensuring that public views are represented, hold a position that is incongruent with public opinion.

Table 1. Share of Advocates of a Given Type Whose Position Is Congruent with the Majority Public Opinion

		Diffuse Interests	Concentrated Interests				Mixed Interests	Total
			Public Interest groups	Business & Occupational associations	Firms	Trade Unions	Hobby & Identity groups	
Incongruent	N	29	74	108	51	16	62	340
	%	22.66	47.44	54.55	48.11	39.02	57.41	46.13
Congruent	N	99	82	90	55	25	46	397
	%	77.34	52.56	45.45	51.89	60.98	42.59	53.87
Total	N	128	156	198	106	41	108	737
	%	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Pairwise chi-square tests examining whether public interest groups are different from the other group types find a significant difference at the 0.001 level except between public interest groups and hobby & identity groups where the difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

In contrast, approximately half of the groups representing concentrated interests are actually lobbying for a position in line with the majority public opinion. It is noteworthy that

congruence for citizen groups representing hobby and identity interests is not significantly higher than for group types representing concentrated interests of an economic nature such as business associations and trade unions.

Table 2 presents the results of logistic regression analyses at the actor level of public opinion-advocacy congruence (Models 1 and 2) and advocacy support for change (Models 3–5), all of which are conducted as multi-level regressions with random intercepts for policy issues. A significant likelihood ratio statistic provides strong evidence that between-issue variance is different from zero in all of the regressions. In line with Hypothesis 1a, Model 1 shows that public interest groups are more likely to be on the same side of an issue as the public than the group types representing concentrated interests. In fact, the level of congruence for public interest groups is higher than all other actor types and this effect is robust when we add issue level controls in Model 2. In this model, the predicted probability of congruence for the different actor types ranges from 76% for public interest groups to 45% for firms.¹² Even controlling for other factors, we see again that, within the category of interest groups representing concentrated interests, there is no significant difference in congruence between those that represent identity and economic interests. Higher frequency of congruence is thus not a uniform characteristic for citizen groups as a whole but restricted to the subset of those associations representing diffuse interests. Finally, we do not find an effect of media saliency or policy types on the likelihood of congruence or variation between the countries. These findings support our expectation that whether the public and advocates share the same opinion is predominantly a question of advocacy type.

Table 2. Actor-level Opinion Congruence and Opinion Linkage (Logistic Regressions with SEs in Parentheses)

Dependent Variable	Opinion Congruence	Opinion Congruence	Advocacy support for change	Advocacy support for change	Advocacy support for change
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Share of public in favor of policy change			1.22 (0.85)	6.25*** (1.64)	6.19*** (1.63)
Actor type (<i>Reference category: Public Interest Groups</i>)					
Business & Occupational associations	-1.28*** (0.32)	-1.27*** (0.32)	-0.05 (0.30)	2.30** (0.81)	2.20** (0.81)
Firms	-1.62*** (0.30)	-1.59*** (0.30)	0.51+ (0.28)	2.99*** (0.82)	2.84*** (0.82)
Trade Unions	-1.37*** (0.36)	-1.34*** (0.36)	0.48 (0.34)	2.65** (0.91)	2.54** (0.91)
Hobby & Identity	-1.10* (0.46)	-1.13* (0.46)	-0.55 (0.45)	1.24 (1.11)	1.25 (1.12)
Expert Org & Think Tanks & Institutional associations	-1.60*** (0.33)	-1.58*** (0.33)	0.79** (0.31)	3.97*** (0.83)	3.93*** (0.83)
Group type*					
Share public in favor of policy change (<i>Reference: Public Interest Groups</i>)					
Business*				-5.52** (1.79)	-5.35** (1.79)
Share public in favor Firms*				-5.92** (1.86)	-5.63** (1.86)
Share public in favor Trade Unions*				-5.04* (2.04)	-5.00* (2.03)
Share public in favor Hobby*				-4.08+ (2.25)	-4.13+ (2.25)
Share public in favor Experts*				-7.66*** (1.85)	-7.60*** (1.85)
Policy type (<i>Reference category: Distributive</i>)					
Regulatory		0.47 (0.53)			0.21 (0.50)
Redistributive		0.06 (0.53)			0.36 (0.49)
Standardized media saliency		0.03 (0.18)			0.26 (0.17)
Country (<i>Reference Category: Germany</i>)					
UK	0.29 (0.52)	0.29 (0.53)	0.21 (0.50)	0.18 (0.49)	0.39 (0.49)
Denmark	0.49 (0.52)	0.41 (0.52)	0.57 (0.51)	0.51 (0.51)	0.58 (0.49)
Sweden	0.82 (0.55)	0.72 (0.55)	-0.08 (0.54)	-0.13 (0.53)	-0.26 (0.53)
Netherlands	0.34 (0.54)	0.26 (0.54)	0.67 (0.52)	0.58 (0.52)	0.54 (0.51)
Constant	1.01* (0.44)	0.83 (0.63)	-0.91 (0.57)	-3.04*** (0.83)	-3.15*** (0.90)
Policy issue intercept variance	0.91** (0.32)	0.85** (0.31)	0.81** (0.29)	0.77** (0.28)	0.69** (0.26)
Number of Cases	737	737	737	737	737
AIC	947	951	966	955	958
BIC	997	1016	1021	1033	1050

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

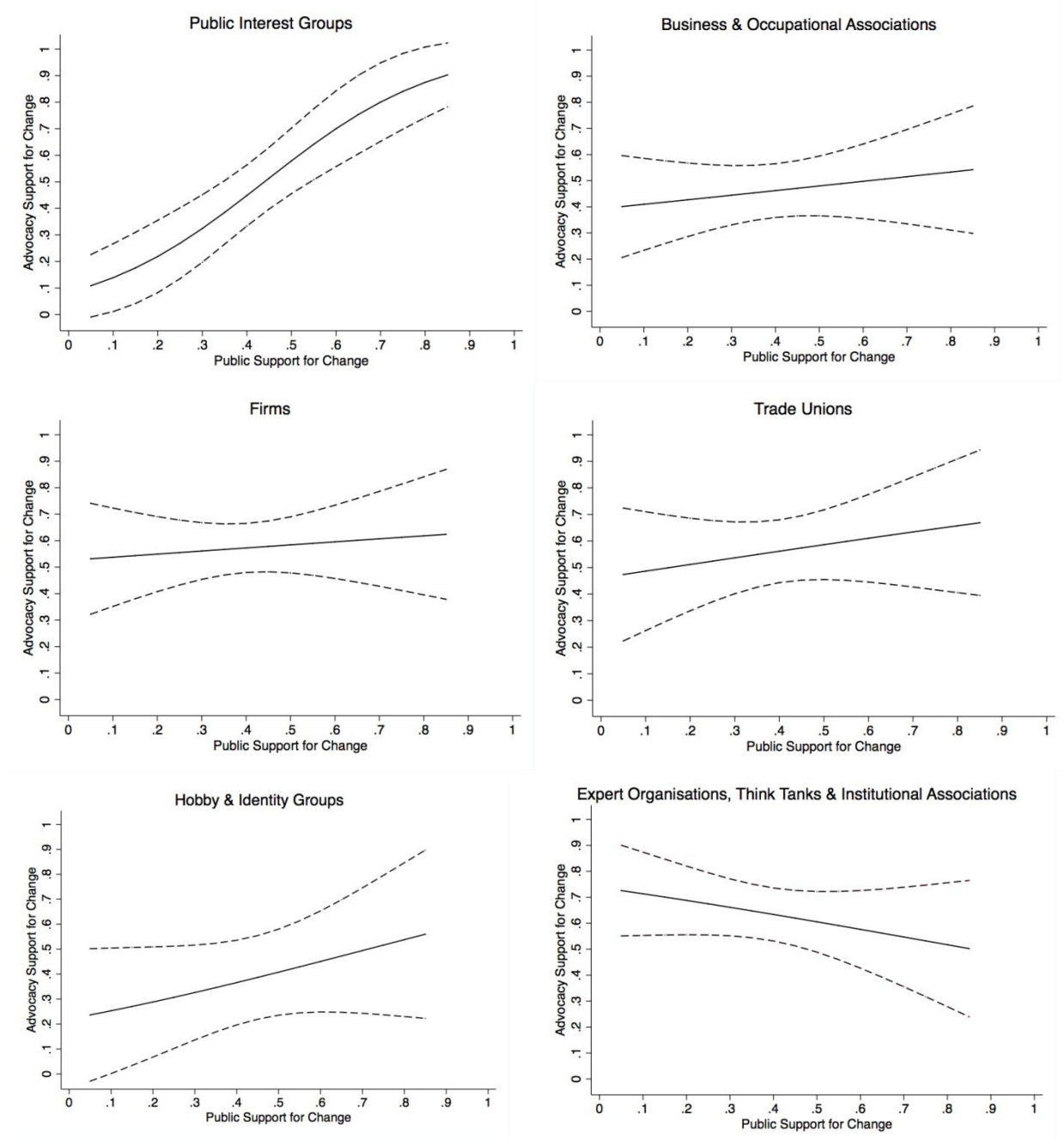


Figure 2. Predicted Probability of Advocacy Support for Policy Change for Different Types of Advocates (based on Model 5)

Models 3-5 show results for effects on advocacy support for change. Interestingly, there is no significant correlation between the level of support for change in the public and the opinion of an average advocate in Model 3. Instead we find evidence in Models 4–5 that this relationship varies between group types, as predicted in Hypothesis 1b, with several of the interaction terms between public opinion and group type being significant. As expected, the opinion of

public interest groups is not only more congruent but also more strongly related to public opinion than for many of the groups representing concentrated interests.

Figure 2 (based on Model 5) illustrates the predicted probability that different types of advocates hold a position in favor of policy change for different levels of public support for change. As expected, the likelihood that public interest groups support change is strongly affected by the level of support for change in the public, ranging from 11% to 90% as public support for change moves from its minimum to its maximum. For all the other interest group categories, the confidence intervals overlap in Figure 2 and there is no significant relationship. In the regressions in Model 3-5, there are again no differences between policy types and countries., nor does media saliency have an effect.

Table 3. Opinion Correspondence and Advocacy Types on the Issue Level

Actor type	Opinion Congruence: Share of issues with congruence between the positions of the majority of the advocates and the majority of the public ¹³	Opinion Linkage: Relationship between shares of the advocates and public opinion in favor of policy change	N
Public Interest Groups	67	0.36*	30
Business & Occupational associations	47	0.18	34
Firms	44	0.06	32
Trade Unions	43	0.08	28
Hobby & Identity Groups	59	0.29	17
Expert Organisations, Think Tanks & Institutional Associations	54	-0.08	41
All	60	0.21	50

*Note: The measures for the different actor types are calculated for all issues on which a given type of advocate mobilized. *p < 0.05.*

We now turn to the issue-level analysis and begin by exploring bivariate relationships in Table 3. In column two, the overall congruence score between public opinion and the groups active on an issue is 60%, in line with our individual-level findings. At the same time it is

striking that, when considering the relationship between the share of advocates in favor of policy change and the support for change in the general public in column three, there is no relationship for the advocacy community as a whole: Pearson's r is only 0.21 and not significant at the 0.05 level.

In line with what we saw in the actor-level analysis, we find substantial variation in the correlation between public opinion and advocacy opinion between the different advocacy types. There is only a significant correlation between public interest groups and the public (significant at the 0.05 level) and the size of this relationship is only moderate. The calculated number of cases by actor type on which public opinion and actor opinion is congruent on an issue displayed in column two show a similar pattern. Congruence for public interest groups on an issue is higher (67%) than for other types of interest groups. Overall, the issue-level results thus also deliver substantial evidence in support of Hypotheses 1a and 1b that public interest groups are more likely to be in line with public opinion than group types representing concentrated interests, both regarding opinion congruence and opinion linkage.

As a next step, we examine the effect of diversity in the advocacy community on opinion congruence and opinion linkage on an issue in Models 6–10. Models 6 and 7 present logistic regressions of the likelihood of congruence between the advocates and the public on an issue, whereas models 8–10 present OLS regressions predicting the share of advocates on an issue in favor of policy change.

According to Models 6 and 7, the extent to which the advocates are distributed evenly across different advocacy categories in the Herfindahl Index has no impact on the likelihood of congruence in the opinions of advocates and the public on an issue contrary to what we expected in Hypotheses 2a and 2b.¹⁴ There is also no effect of the share of all advocates that

represent public interest groups in Model 6, nor in Model 7 in which issue-level controls are added. Issue congruence is slightly higher in the Netherlands, Denmark ($p < 0.10$ level), and Sweden ($p < 0.01$ level) compared to Germany.

Table 4. Issue-level Opinion Congruence and Opinion Linkage (Models 6 and 7: Logistic Regressions with SEs in Parentheses, Models 8–10: OLS Regressions with SEs in Parentheses)

Dependent Variable	Opinion Congruence (6)	Opinion Congruence (7)	Advocacy support for change (8)	Advocacy support for change (9)	Advocacy support for change (10)
Share of public in favor of policy change			0.22 (0.19)	1.30 (1.06)	0.15 (0.84)
Herfindahl-Hirschman Index	-1.97 (1.59)	-2.24 (2.15)		0.79 (0.49)	
Share of public in favor* HHI				-1.04 (1.06)	
Share of public interest groups	1.80 (1.57)	1.70 (1.63)			-0.31 (0.52)
Share of public in favor* Share of public interest groups					0.97 (1.14)
Number of actors with statements on the issue (logged)		0.24 (0.65)		0.04 (0.16)	-0.12 (0.14)
Share of public in favor* Number of actors with statements on the issue (logged)				-0.28 (0.35)	-0.06 (0.34)
Standardized media saliency		-0.33 (0.45)		0.07 (0.05)	0.10* (0.04)
Policy type (<i>Reference category: Distributive</i>)					
Regulatory		1.40 (1.15)		-0.03 (0.12)	-0.03 (0.13)
Redistributive		0.78 (1.12)		0.03 (0.12)	0.02 (0.13)
Country (<i>Reference category: Germany</i>)					
UK	0.75 (1.00)	0.61 (1.12)	0.06 (0.12)	0.15 (0.12)	0.16 (0.12)
Denmark	1.93+ (1.03)	1.94+ (1.08)	0.12 (0.12)	0.18 (0.13)	0.15 (0.12)
Sweden	2.70* (1.16)	3.12* (1.38)	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.06 (0.13)	-0.12 (0.13)
Netherlands	1.72+ (1.03)	1.82+ (1.09)	0.11 (0.12)	0.12 (0.13)	0.05 (0.13)
Constant	-0.36 (0.94)	-1.96 (2.87)	0.40** (0.12)	-0.02 (0.57)	0.81+ (0.42)
Number of Cases	50	50	50	50	50
AIC	71	77	15	13	16
BIC	85	98	27	38	41

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

When looking at opinion linkage in Model 8, there is no significant relationship between the share of support in the public and the advocacy community on a given issue, just as we saw in the bivariate analysis. We also see in Models 9 and 10 that this relationship is not conditioned by the diversity in the advocacy community, irrespective of whether it is measured by the Herfindahl Index or the share of public interest groups. A reason for the lack of significant effect for the HHI might be that we calculate diversity across the six categories of actor types irrespective of the number of actors active on an issue despite the fact that on seven of the 50 issues, less than six actors were active. We have good reason for doing so given that what de facto matters according to our definition of diversity is whether the community of active groups represents different categories of actors (to an equal degree). Hence, the fact that active advocates on the one issue in question could not possibly represent all six categories is in itself an indication of bias in mobilization according to our definition of diversity. Nevertheless, we have run robustness checks of Models 6 and 9, examining the effect of diversity for issues above five actors, which still results in an insignificant effect for the HHI (not shown). There is also no significant interaction effect between the HHI and the number of actors on an issue on congruence, indicating that the effect of the index is not conditioned by the number of actors that have been active on an issue (not shown).¹⁵ Finally, there is a significant effect of media saliency at the 0.01 level in Model 10 on the share of advocacy support for change, whereas policy type and country play no role.

Conclusion

Whether or not interest groups serve as a transmission belt of public preferences has been a recurrent theme in the academic literature and real-world politics alike. Strong voices in both communities warn of the potential biases in the group community that may not represent the public at large. Yet whereas there is no shortage of recent studies demonstrating

how the interest group community is dominated by business groups representing narrow and specific interests, we know little about the scope and consequences of bias in practice.

In order to judge whether advocates can potentially act as a transmission belt between the public and the political system, we conducted a systematic analysis comparing their preferences with that of the public on a large number of policy issues. More specifically, we compared information about public opinion and interest groups positions on 50 specific policy issues in five Western European countries, relying on evidence about actors lobbying the government or appearing in major news media.

Overall, our findings neither confirm nor disconfirm the fears of elitist theorists regarding advocates that are involved in politics as “shadowy agitators.” Whether conducting the analysis at the individual or issue level, groups are congruent with the public position approximately half the time. While this underlines the potential for groups to serve as a transmission belt, it also reminds us to approach group involvement with a critical eye. Moreover, similar to what we have seen in research on the US, there is no correlation between the position of the group community as a whole and public opinion on an issue (Gilens, 2012).

As expected, public interest groups representing diffuse interests are more likely to hold positions congruent with the majority of the public than other types of advocates. What is perhaps more noteworthy, however, is that more than one fifth of these public interest groups expected to represent mass-based opinion are not on the same side of the policy issues as the public. In contrast, congruence with public opinion for the types of interests often feared the most in existing scholarship— business groups and firms —is not very different from that of the advocacy community as a whole. Hence, the fact that such actors represent narrower,

economic constituencies, as opposed to civil society as a whole, does not disqualify them from acting as representatives of public opinion altogether. Their level of congruence is also not significantly different from that of citizen groups representing specific identity subgroups or hobbies.

Our findings regarding diversity also cast doubt on some of the conventional wisdom with respect to groups and representation. While the literature has only begun to examine the effects of bias in a systematic manner, there is no lack of literature criticizing the lack of diversity in the heavenly chorus. Moreover, bias in representation figures prominently on the political agenda. Nonetheless, our results indicate that—when measuring diversity by examining the distribution of advocates among different interest group types—it affects neither whether the advocacy community sides with the public on a policy issue nor how strongly correlated its position is with public opinion. These findings do not rule out that diversity still plays a role for both democratic representation and, ultimately, policy responsiveness. Hence, we must remember that there may be many different ways of conceptualizing and measuring diversity in practice. Having the expectation that certain groups should dominate or that advocates should distribute evenly across a set of interest group categories for advocacy opinion to be in line with public opinion might be unrealistic. Rather than comparing the counts of different interest group types active on policy issues, we might therefore need to reconsider the relevant benchmark for judging diversity (Lowery & Brasher, 2004).

Future research will be able to add to our study by exploring the dynamic relationship between public and group opinion over time. As mentioned, the literature testing the specific causal mechanisms linking groups and opinion remains limited and the existing evidence is

mixed. A key challenge for conducting such studies is the lack of public opinion data at the level of specific policy issues over longer time periods as well as the costliness of gathering longitudinal interest group data. As more public opinion data at the policy issue level becomes available and new technologies for extracting interest group data develop, future research will be able to address these relationships in more detail. In the meantime, experimental designs might prove to have great potential to trace the causal flows between public opinion and advocacy.

Notes

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/08/lobbyists-european-parliament-brussels-corporate> (accessed 20.07.2016).

² For a similar distinction in an analysis of the relationship between public opinion and policy, see (Lax & Phillips, 2012).

³ In a recent study of representation, Holmberg refers to a similar two-sided logic. He distinguishes between “top-down” and “bottom-up” representation, the latter describing a situation in which politicians respond to the concerns of the people, whereas the former refers to the ability of the elite to shift public opinion in a manner whereby their preferences align (Holmberg, 2011).

⁴ Our Appendix provides a more detailed list of group types that are included in the seven categories. We rely on the coding scheme for interest associations developed by the INTERARENA project to which we have added firms and think tanks. (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, & Pedersen, 2015).

⁵ The latter was measured by conducting a keyword search in a major national newspaper for each issue (*Politiken* in Denmark, German *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *the Guardian* in the UK, *Dagens Nyheter* in Sweden, and the Dutch *de Volkskrant*).

⁶ 16 actors who expressed opposing positions are excluded from the analysis.

⁷ More specifically, advocacy was measured one month prior to the relevant public opinion poll and until a policy decision was taken on the issue or 4 years in the cases in which there was no reaction to the call for action.

⁸ We include respondents who have answered “don’t know” in our calculation of the degree of support for a given policy change by the public. Hence, politicians will likely need to rely on a majority of not only those with an opinion but of the population as a whole when deciding on whether to adopt legislative changes. Only one case has a public in which the amount of respondents supporting change is 50%. Given the fact that the issue includes a small share of “don’t know” respondents, we regard public opinion as supporting change in this case.

⁹ On five of the 50 issues, the interest group community is perfectly divided on an issue. Since 50% of the groups are not sufficient to have support for change in the group community, we regard these cases as having minority support for change.

¹⁰ Given that we expect decreasing returns for the number of actors, the measure is logged in the analysis.

¹¹ Our measure does not cover the whole observation period in order to avoid bias resulting from issues that would experience policy change at a later stage and, hence, would receive more coverage in the time preceding change.

¹² The remaining covariates in the calculation of margins in this and subsequent calculations are held constant at their observed values.

¹³ Similar to our regressions, we classify the case as not having a majority for change in case of a tie in the advocacy community within the set of actors for and against change.

¹⁴ There is also no effect of the HHI in a model including only this diversity measure.

¹⁵ Instead of the HHI, we have run our models with Shannon's H index, which provides an alternative way of classifying how concentrated the distribution of different actors is across actor types and equals the negative sum of multiplying the proportion of the different actor types with the natural log of that proportion (Boydston, Bevan, & Thomas, 2014). None of our models show a significant effect of diversity when using this alternative measure either.

Appendix.

List of policy issues

Country	Policy issue	Policy type	Salience
Denmark	Building of a bridge for vehicles and trains across the Kattegat	distributive	low
	Reducing mortgage interest deduction from 33% to 25%	redistributive	high
	Granting asylum to families with children among rejected Iraqi asylum seekers	regulatory	high
	Reducing the unemployment benefit period by half from four to two years	redistributive	high
	Strengthening the control of the Danish agriculture in order to take action against the misuse of antibiotics	regulatory	low
	Controlled delivery of heroin for particularly vulnerable drug addicts at special clinics as a pilot scheme	regulatory	high
	Introducing differentiated VAT	redistributive	low
	Making schools' average test results public	regulatory	low
	Cutting the allowances paid to young people between 25 and 29 years by half	redistributive	low
	Creation of an equal pay commission	regulatory	high
Germany	Financial support of Arcandor through public money	redistributive	high
	Guaranteeing a pension above the poverty line for pensioners who have paid contributions for many years	redistributive	high
	Supplying citizens with consumption vouchers to boost the economy	redistributive	high
	Establishing a wealth tax	redistributive	low
	State control of electricity prices	regulatory	low
	Banning of computer games that glorify violence	regulatory	high
	Cutting the tax exemption for night, Sunday, and holiday supplements	redistributive	low
	Cutting coal subsidies	distributive	low
	Making it illegal to carry out a paternity test without the consent of the mother	regulatory	high
	Cutting social benefits	redistributive	low
Netherlands	Allowing all illegal immigrants who have lived in the Netherlands for a long time to stay	regulatory	high
	Raising the retirement age to 67	redistributive	high
	Abolishing the mortgage interest	redistributive	high
	Spending more money on development aid	redistributive	high
	Obligating stores to be closed on Sunday	regulatory	high
	Ban of smoking in restaurants	regulatory	low
	Banning embryonic stem cell research	regulatory	low
	Allowing more asylum seekers	regulatory	high
	Banning euthanasia	regulatory	low
Building new nuclear power plants	distributive	low	

Sweden	Permanent introduction of a congestion charge in Stockholm	redistributive	high
	Reinstating the wealth tax, which was abolished in 2007 and meant that anyone with a fortune of 1.5 million paid 1.5% in taxes	redistributive	low
	Rescuing Saab through government funds	redistributive	high
	Banning the construction of minarets in Sweden	regulatory	high
	Reducing third-world aid	distributive	low
	Introducing a language test for Swedish citizenship	regulatory	high
	Restricting the right to free abortion	regulatory	low
	Making household and domestic services tax deductible	redistributive	low
	Allowing free download of all films and music from the Internet	regulatory	low
	Increasing the old age retirement age	regulatory	high
UK	Giving amnesty to illegal immigrants who have spent ten years in Britain without getting into trouble with the police	regulatory	high
	Scrapping ID cards	regulatory	high
	Requiring food manufacturers to reduce the fat/salt content in their products	regulatory	low
	Introducing a graduate tax, where graduates would pay an extra income tax on their income after graduating	redistributive	high
	Allowing a third runway to be built at Heathrow Airport	distributive	high
	Reducing corporation tax	redistributive	low
	Increasing Air Passenger Duty, to be paid by people taking both short-haul and long-haul flights	redistributive	high
	Subsidising the building of new nuclear power stations	distributive	low
	Increasing the tax on large executive-style, estate, and 4x4 vehicles	redistributive	low
	Downgrading 'ecstasy' from a class-A drug to a class-B drug	regulatory	Low

Overview of interest group types

Public interest groups

Environment and animal welfare
Humanitarian – international
Humanitarian – national
Consumer Group
Government reform
Civil liberties
Citizen Empowerment
Other public interest

Business and occupational associations

Peak-level business group
Sector-wide business group
Breed associations
Technical business associations
Other business group
Doctors' associations
Other medical professions
Teachers' associations
Other occupational associations

Firms

Labour groups

Blue-collar union
White-collar union
Employee representative committee
Other labour groups

Identity, hobby and religious groups

Patients
Elderly
Students
Friendship groups (i.e. non-specific groups related to a country)
Racial or ethnic
Women
Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transsexual
Other – undefined - identity group
Sports groups
Other hobby/leisure groups
Groups associated with the protestant church
Roman/Catholic groups
Other religious group

Expert organizations, think tanks and institutional association

Expert organizations
Think tanks
Associations of local authorities
Associations of other public institutions
Associations of managers of public institutions
Other Institutional associations

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