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Statsch, P.; Berkhout, J.

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# Lobbying and policy conflict: explaining interest groups' promiscuous relationships to political parties

Patrick Statsch<sup>1</sup> · Joost Berkhout<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Do interest groups prefer to interact with party political supporters or opponents, and why do they do so? Recent research has provided different explanations and mixed findings for this question, highlighting the role of institutional contexts and differences between interests. Here, we focus on the effects of issue-level factors instead. We hypothesize that higher levels of conflict lead interest groups to lobby both supporters and opponents. Our argument emphasizes that the reason to do so lies in interest groups' desire to gain or maintain *prominence* within a policy sub-system, rather than in persuasion attempts. Analyzing quantitative and qualitative data on the lobbying targets for 80 Dutch interest groups on more than 300 issues, we find support for our theoretical claims. When the level of conflict is high, prominence often trumps persuasion. These findings suggest that interest groups, by contacting many different parties, can contribute to policy making in positive ways.

**Keywords** Interest groups · Parties · Lobbying · Conflict · Issue level

## Introduction

One of the perennial concerns about interest group politics relates to its narrow character: Interest groups, by their nature, focus on particular issues, engage with only a select set of other actors, and favor or oppose individual policies rather than ideologically based world views. The narrow defense of particular issues may lead to institutional sclerosis (Olson 1982), and it attracts the representation of only relatively powerful groups at the cost of the interests of weaker groups in society

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✉ Patrick Statsch  
p.d.statsch@uva.nl

<sup>1</sup> Department of Political Science, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Postbus 15578, 1001 NB Amsterdam, The Netherlands



(Schattschneider 1960). In an otherwise pessimistic assessment of group politics, Schattschneider (1960, p. 42) optimistically notes that the interaction of political parties and interest groups is likely to incentivize (business) interest groups to avoid division and articulate political views that go beyond the specific interests of individual members. Others, also classically and optimistically, note that broad policy interaction between legislators and interest groups fosters the production of effective policy alternatives and the formation of political consensus (Lindblom 1968).

For this to occur, interest groups are critically assumed to interact with legislators across the political spectrum rather than maintain contact within only a narrow policy subsystem of like-minded political parties. However, numerous studies note that this narrowness is likely to occur: Interest groups lobby parties whose preferences align with their own, and preferably the most powerful of them (Marshall 2015). This pattern follows from the idea that lobbying is an exchange of information in return for influence, essentially a ‘legislative subsidy,’ and that changing one’s opponent’s preferences is unlikely and extremely costly (Hall and Deardorff 2006). In particular in the USA, this pattern of party lobbying is observed repeatedly (Hojnacki and Kimball 1998, 1999; Schlozman and Tierney 1986). However, recent empirical research questions the generalizability of these findings outside the USA. Interest groups in the EU have been found to interact with policy opponents (e.g., De Bruycker 2016) or balance their interaction with both party political supporters and opponents. It may be that specific institutional contexts, such as the requirement for multi-party coalitions in the legislature, encourage interest groups to engage with their policy opponents (Marshall 2015; Otjes and Rasmussen 2017) or that the salience of particular issues leads interest groups to interact with opponents (Beyers and Hanegraaff 2016).

In this paper, we examine why interest groups interact with party political supporters or opponents. We contribute to existing studies by focusing on the differences between policy issues rather than differences among interests or institutional contexts and by paying particular attention to the causal mechanism potentially linking issue characteristics to party lobbying. Issues—i.e., topics of discussion within the political system—are fundamental and universal ingredients to politics. Their characteristics and their systematic effects on interest group behavior may plausibly occur relatively independently of the institutional context (e.g., Hanegraaff and Berkhout 2019). The specification of issue-level factors is needed to produce better specified models of interest group lobbying and add important nuances to our observations and conclusions. We argue that characteristics related to the conflict surrounding an issue, most notably its public salience, interest group activity, and party polarization, affect whether interest groups reach out to policy opponents in addition to their party political supporters. In most circumstances, providing legislative subsidy to one’s partisan allies promises the greatest chances of success. However, we hypothesize that under particular issue-specific circumstances, groups will *complement* this strategy by also lobbying opposing parties. We expect groups to do so to claim or maintain recognition and prominence (Halpin and Fraussen 2017) in a policy subsystem rather than to persuade opponents of their position, as noted by Austen-Smith and others (Austen-Smith 1993; Austen-Smith and Wright 1992; Beyers and Hanegraaff 2016).



We rely on elite interview data from the Dutch component of the *Agendas and Interest Groups* project (McKay et al. 2018) on the lobbying targets of 100 Dutch interest groups for more than 300 issues. The Dutch institutional context—strong proportionality in the electoral system, weak government-opposition dynamics, and center-oriented coalition politics—seems to encourage groups to follow a lobbying strategy targeted broadly across the political spectrum (Otjes and Rasmussen 2017). This presumed institutional origin for the high level of broad interaction may make it less likely to find additional issue-level effects. In this sense, the Netherlands is a least likely case for finding our hypothesized relationship. Our analyses show that issue characteristics relate to the decision whom to lobby largely as expected: Interest groups are more likely to lobby both supporters and opponents when issues are more conflictual. We also illustrate that the reason they do so is probably related to their desire to become or remain prominent actors in the policy subsystems where they are active. In many instances, the need to retain prominence in the long term trumps the more immediate objective of persuading opponents to win a particular policy battle.

We continue with a discussion of existing studies and specify our hypotheses. We follow with the presentation of our data and subsequently present multivariate regression models and a qualitative empirical discussion of the plausibility of the distinct rationales for interaction with opponents (persuasion or long-term policy recognition). We conclude with a discussion of our findings and suggestions for future research.

## Previous research: I get by with a little help from my friends... don't I?

A number of studies assess whether interest groups lobby actors who are undecided or taking opposing stances on an issue, or those supporting or sharing their position. Most studies conceive of lobbying as an exchange relationship, in which interest groups offer information to (party political) policy makers in return for influence on public policy (Berkhout 2013; Bouwen 2004; Pappi and Henning 1998). The literature is divided over which patterns of interaction we should typically observe, differently weighting the effects of ideology, power, and their institutional embedding.

First, a substantive body of studies demonstrate interest groups' tendency to lobby policy makers who are in agreement with their position (Brunell 2005; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998, 1999; Holyoke 2003). Building upon the work of earlier scholars (e.g., Bauer et al. 1963; Schlozman and Tierney 1986), Hall and Deardorff (2006, 69 emphasis in original) provided the broader theoretical argument underpinning these findings, namely the proposition that lobbying should be considered a form of 'legislative *subsidy*—a matching grant of costly policy information, political intelligence, and labor to the enterprises of strategically selected legislators.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the power of US policymakers has been identified as another factor shaping lobbying patterns in Congress (Hojnacki and Kimball 1998, 1999; Kingdon 1989; Wright 1990). Legislators' power, however, is considered an additional—rather than a moderating or mediating—factor that leaves the initial relationship between positional alignment and lobbying activity intact.



Second, and in contrast, earlier US research argued that interest groups focus their lobbying activities on policymakers with opposed or undetermined preferences (Austen-Smith and Wright 1992, 1994; Hansen 1991). According to this view (e.g., Austen-Smith 1993), lobbyists provide information to policy makers to persuade them to change their preferences in the direction desired by a group. Interest groups are inclined to target their policy making allies under specific circumstances only, such as to counteract the lobbying efforts of opposing groups (Austen-Smith and Wright 1992) or in cases where policy makers are a priori predisposed in their favor (Kollman 1997).

More recent research, mostly outside of the USA, also questioned the exclusive and narrow allure of parties with shared preferences. Marshall's (2010) study of lobbying in the European Parliament (EP) committee system found that lobbyists frequently contact opponents. He noted that the formal and informal operating procedures of EP committees 'determine how legislative influence is distributed among committee members, which determines the structure of lobbying activity' (Marshall 2010, p. 557). Power—and its institutional structuration, it seems—trumps positional proximity. In another study of lobbying in the EP, Marshall (2015) reported similar patterns: Interest groups lobby both friends and foes (also see De Bruycker 2016). He argued that this behavior is due to the uncertainty of the power of different actors—it is usually not clear which party will be part of a winning coalition on a given legislative proposal. Interest groups therefore spread their bets and lobby parties with differing positions.

In line with this, Gullberg (2008) demonstrated that interest groups lobby both like-minded and opposed policymakers on EU climate policy. More explicitly defining the interrelationship between power and positions, Otjes and Rasmussen (2017, 4) stressed that 'interest groups should be particularly keen to establish close relations with powerful parties.' Thus, in some situations, patterns of lobbying will not follow the friend-foe divide, because the incentives of power and position can mutually reinforce or counteract each other. Additionally, Beyers and Hanegraaff (2016) revealed that the level of public attention an issue receives also increases the likelihood of contacting opponents rather than supporters, further adding to the mixed picture of empirical findings.

With this exception (also see De Bruycker 2016), implicitly or explicitly, most studies have devoted only little attention to how the motivation to lobby (powerful) supporters or opponents is affected by issue characteristics. Rather, the theoretical and empirical focus was on how lobbying patterns are determined by institutional contexts (Austen-Smith 1993; Crombez 2002; Holyoke 2003; Marshall 2010, 2015; Otjes and Rasmussen 2017). However, given the notoriously difficult conditions for cross-country comparative interest group research (Beyers et al. 2008; Lowery et al. 2008), which would greatly improve tests of the external validity of institutional effects, evidence for their impact remains thin. In its current state, research of interest group party lobbying is facing a challenge: Findings are mixed, and the commonly pursued strategy to explain these differences—theorizing about the institutional context—is difficult to follow. We see this circumstance as a chance to reconsider common theoretical arguments and develop a research design able to test their implications.



## An issue-level theory of interest group–party lobbying

Issues differ from one another in politically important ways. The *level of conflict* of issues is often seen as crucial in that regard.<sup>2</sup> Here, we draw on the politicization literature to determine which aspects of conflict to focus on. Typically, politicization captures the politics surrounding a given issue and involves (at least) three partially related dimensions (de Wilde et al. 2016): the *polarization* of positions, the level of *salience*, and the *expansion of involved actors* (de Wilde et al. 2016; Hutter and Grande 2014; Hutter et al. 2016; Van Der Brug et al. 2015). Here, these three dimensions take on a more context-dependent meaning, given that this study is situated at the intersection of interest group and party politics. As we elaborate as follows, what matters most for interest group decisions on whom to lobby are the *polarization of party positions*, the *public salience*, and the involvement and *activity of other interest groups*. Importantly, we assume that changes in these dimensions are not at the discretion of individual political actors but are the result of the interaction of various actors in political contexts. Individual groups can have a marginal impact on some of the dimensions of politicization only, implying that, at any given point in time, groups make strategic choices in the context of issue characteristics that are externally given. As one of these choices, the decision of whom to lobby and the resulting patterns of interest group party lobbying are shaped by these characteristics.

In the following section, we develop a baseline expectation that illustrates lobbying on ideal–typical nonconflictual issues. We subsequently specify how we expect changes in polarization, salience, and the number of other groups active to affect patterns of interaction between parties and interest groups.

### Lobbying on (non-)conflictual issues

On nonconflictual issues, few actors are involved, their positions largely align, and the public does not pay (much) attention. On these issues, policies are favorable to the actors involved and policy change is absent, it takes the form of (favorable) ‘policy drift’ (Hacker et al. 2015), or it remains incremental to the extent that is needed to avoid de-freezing the pre-existing policy conflict (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). In the narrow and ‘cozy’ policy niches of unpoliticized issues, we should find only limited interaction between interest groups and political parties. Individual interest groups may only be in touch with particular bureaucratic actors or take a monitoring role and provide information to friendly parliamentarians and their parties. In this situation, lobbying will mostly appear as providing

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<sup>2</sup> Naturally, there are other characteristics that issues differ on, such as the distinction between distributive, redistributive, and regulatory issues (Lowi 1964) or their technical complexity (e.g., Dür 2008; Dür and De Bièvre 2007; Klüver 2013). However, we think that these distinctions are of secondary importance when explaining interest group decisions on whom to lobby, as their impact on the exchange relationship between groups and parties is unclear. For example, providing legislative subsidy is relevant irrespective of the type and complexity of an issue.



legislative subsidies to one's supporters, if it occurs at all. Since the involved parties take positions similar to those of involved interest groups, there are little opportunities, and even less reasons, to lobby opposing parties.

This behavior changes when issues are politicized and more conflictual. On ideal-typical conflictual issues, the attention devoted to the issue by the public (salience) is higher, more interest groups and parties are involved, and the positions they take are more polarized. Under these circumstances, providing legislative subsidies to one's friends is still interest groups' default strategy. However, an additional need arises to complement it by contacting opposing parties as well. Here, we discuss how the three different dimensions of politicization influence the likelihood of contacting opponents in addition to supporters—thus, to engage in complementary lobbying—in turns.

First, as regards salience, previous studies noted that higher levels of public salience make interest groups more inclined to lobby their foes (Beyers and Hanegraaff 2016, p. 467; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998, p. 779). On highly salient issues, political parties—even if they were disinterested in an issue before—will be keen to respond in some way or another (e.g., Klüver 2018; Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016) and will therefore be interested to hear a broad range of inputs. For interest groups, it makes sense to respond to the information demands of a broad set of parties to ensure that their voice is heard as much as possible. Additionally, when parties are thus pressured by electoral concerns and the stakes for interest groups are high, groups will be willing to invest more in an attempt to change their opponents' positions. Reciprocal persuasion attempts will result in a pattern of group-party lobbying that includes contacts between opponents and supporters.

**H1** Public Salience Hypothesis: The more salient an issue is to the public, the more likely interest groups are to lobby both supporting and opposing parties.

Second, salience and actor expansion are likely to move together. As noted by Schattschneider (1960, p. 34), 'scope and bias are aspects of the same tendency,' implying that when issue saliency goes up (conflicts are 'socialized'), additional actors are involved and the balance of forces on a given issue potentially changes. When the attention devoted to an issue increases, more and more actors become involved, especially when the so-called cue-givers trigger a bandwagon of attention to a particular issue (Halpin 2011). Such a bandwagon effect assumes that there are sufficient numbers of interests organized that can potentially be drawn into the policy process. Population-ecological studies substantiate that, on most areas, there are sufficient organizational resources available to allow for the survival of at least some interest groups (this concept is the area or supply term of the Energy-Stability-Area model, e.g., see Gray and Lowery 1996, but see qualification: Berkhout et al. 2018). More involvement and activity by other interest groups—increasing interest group density—indicates that the policy subsystem in which the issue is dealt with becomes unstable, and that punctuated and long-term changes to the policy and the interests represented within the particular subsystem become more likely (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).



This instability will start a battle over *prominence* rather than policy and persuasion. Halpin and Fraussen (2017, p. 726) define prominence as ‘the taken-for-grantedness a group enjoys among a given audience,’ most notably political elites or particular subsections of policy makers, which results from the acknowledgement and perception of those external actors. It relates to the long-term credibility or reputation of policy participants (e.g., Berry 1999, pp. 131–132) is of a more informal nature than the formal attribution of representative status, common in corporatist policy arrangements (Offe 1981), and also matters more broadly as groups carefully cultivate a recognizable identity in order to occupy a particular issue niche (Browne 1990). Critically, not all groups can be prominent and ‘only a limited number of groups become placeholders for a constituency or issue perspective’ (Halpin and Fraussen 2017, p. 727). Interest groups compete among each other for prominence, and this competition is likely to intensify when the policy subsystem of a given issue seems to change. They will increase their activities aimed at maintaining and establishing relations with a broad set of parties to ensure their long-term prominence. Reaching out to many parties is a way of ensuring that one will be recognized as a ‘consequential actor’ (Pappi and Henning 1998). Even worse than being momentarily on the losing side would be to lose the ability to affect policy change in the future. Being recognized as a relevant, prominent actor is crucial in that regard. To reach this goal, interest groups will lobby both supporting and opposing parties.

**H2** Interest Group Activity Hypothesis: The more other interest groups are active on an issue, the more likely interest groups are to lobby both supporting and opposing parties.

Third, two conflicting expectations can be formulated regarding the effect of polarization. They are based on the different assumptions regarding why interest groups lobby that we have already touched upon: to persuade their opponents or to ensure their prominence. To begin with the persuasion perspective, positions of political parties are likely to be sticky on polarized issues and malleable when there are only moderate differences (Austen-Smith and Wright 1994; Hall and Deardorff 2006, p. 78). Parties might be open to persuasion or to strategically adjusting their behavior when there are relatively minor differences among them. In contrast, when positions are farther apart, electoral concerns will make it more difficult for parties to adjust their positions. Interest groups are then less likely to spend scarce resources on cultivating contacts with opponents, as it is unlikely to pay-off. We would thus expect that interest groups are less likely to lobby both supporters and opponents when party positions are more polarized.

**H3** Polarization–Persuasion Hypothesis: The more polarized party positions are on a given issue, the less likely interest groups are to lobby both supporters and opponents.

However, we would expect the exact opposite when taking on the ‘prominence perspective.’ When parties take strongly polarized positions on an issue, the



likelihood of drastic policy change increases, creating uncertainty regarding future actor constellations. Siding with one side under these conditions might lead to policy success in the short term, but it might mean burning one's bridges with parties that could be influential in the future. With an eye on their long-term ability to affect policy by maintaining their status as a prominent and relevant actor, interest groups would therefore not just focus on their supporters but contact their opponents as well.

**H4 Polarization–Prominence Hypothesis:** The more polarized party positions are on a given issue, the more likely interest groups are to lobby both supporters and opponents.

## Research design, data, and operationalization

We use the Dutch data collected from the *Agendas and Interest Groups* project (McKay et al. 2018). We conducted semi-structured interviews with a stratified random sample of 100 Dutch interest groups over the course of 2017. The sample was stratified in two ways, ensuring that we would talk to equal proportions of business and non-business groups, as well as to politically more and less active groups. Our sampling frame for the highly active groups consisted of groups that participated in parliamentary hearings (2012–2016) or had meetings with Ministers or Secretaries of State (2012–2015), while our sampling frame for the less active groups was based on the Dutch *Pyttersen's Almanak*, a directory of associations, and the previous work of Berkhout (2015). Our overall response rate was 52%. Through the interviews, we gathered detailed information on groups' activities on up to seven issues, which they had worked on over the previous 6 months. In addition to their activities, groups revealed their perceptions of core features of these issues, such as the public's awareness or patterns of party political support for their own positions.

Our dataset contains complete information on 360 issues (our unit of analysis) derived from 86 interviews. Thirty-four issues were dropped because none or all parties supported an interest group's position, and interest groups therefore could not choose between supporters and opponents here. For each issue, we asked our interview partners to indicate which parliamentary parties supported or opposed their position and how often they had contacted these supporters and opponents. We recoded these variables into binary responses (no contact vs. any contact) and created our dependent variable *complementary lobbying*. It indicates whether interest groups contacted their supporters only (0) or both their supporters and opponents (1). A look at the cross-tabulation of the original two contact variables indicates that this decision is appropriate. Table 1 shows that in 183 out of the 185 issues (99%) on which interest groups lobbied their opponents, they also lobbied their supporters. In contrast, when interest groups lobbied their supporters, in 40% (121 issues) of the cases, they did not also lobby their opponents. As is suggested in our theory, the choice for interest groups often is not whether to lobby supporters *or* opponents, but whether to lobby their supporters exclusively or not. Exclusively lobbying opponents



**Table 1** Lobbying supporters and opponents

	Opponents lobbied?		Total
	No	Yes	
<i>Supporters lobbied?</i>			
No	54 (15.0)	2 (0.6)	56 (15.6)
Yes	121 (33.6)	183 (50.8)	304 (84.4)
Total	175 (48.6)	185 (51.4)	360 (100)

*Source:* (Agendas and Interest Groups project). Percentage of total displayed in parentheses

happens so rarely that we collapsed this category into the ‘complementary lobbying’ category of our dependent variable.

Our main independent variables measure the three conflict-related issue characteristics as identified above. All three are based on the perceptions of our interview partners and were inquired about in a close-ended fashion at the end of each interview. *Party polarization* measures the degree to which an issue is seen as conflictual among political parties. Based on a three-point scale (0 = not conflictual; 1 = somewhat conflictual; 2 = very conflictual), we created a dummy variable separating very conflictual (1) from somewhat or nonconflictual issues (0). While this variable falls short of measuring the actual (weighted) distribution of party positions on a given issue, it still captures the essence of the *polarization* concept: ‘the intensity of conflict related to an issue among the different actors’ (Hutter and Grande 2014, p. 1004).<sup>3</sup> *Interest group activity* is a dummy variable that indicates whether more than five other interest groups are active on an issue. It is based on an original five-point scale (0 = none; 1 = one to five; 2 = six to twenty; 3 = twenty-one to one hundred; 4 = more than one hundred) but was recoded to reflect the uneven distribution of this scale. Last, *public salience* measures whether the public was very aware of an issue (1) or at most somewhat aware (0), recoded from an original four-point scale (0 = unaware; 1 = a little aware; 2 = somewhat aware; 3 = very aware).

We control for a number of potentially confounding factors. To begin, business groups might be more likely to lobby on less conflictual issues and as they are ‘lobbying insiders’ to lobby a broader set of parties in general (Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Dür et al. 2015; Dür and Mateo 2016; but see Hanegraaff and Berkhout 2019). Furthermore, the structural, institutionalized ideological alignment of interest groups and parties comes conceptually prior to our issue-specific patterns of interaction. Particularly, research has shown that business groups are typically aligned with right-of-center parties, while non-business groups are ideologically close with left-of-center parties (Otjes and Rasmussen 2017; Wessels 2004). Interest groups might

<sup>3</sup> We find that this measure is correlated with a number alternative specifications of party polarization; more specifically, these are measurements based on linking our issues to party manifesto data following Klüver (2018), or on the (partial) information on party positions as provided by our interview respondents. However, we consider our measurement the most valid one, given that these alternative operationalizations bring a number of additional conceptual and empirical challenges, for instance, related to the dimensionality of the policy conflict.



be more likely to stick with the parties that support them on an issue if these are also ideologically close, and to lobby supporters and opponents if they find their ideological allies on both sides of an issue. *Left friends* therefore measures the number of left-of-center parties (based on the ‘LRGEN’ variable from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, Polk et al. 2017) among the parties that share an interest group’s position and is interacted with a dummy variable that indicates whether a group is a non-business group. We inquired about which parties shared an interest group’s position on a given issue directly through our questionnaire.

As we have discussed above, interest groups should also pay attention to the distribution of power within parliament. In the context of this study and its group-issue-based research design, it is not the power of individual parties that matters, but the power of those parties that share an interest group’s position versus those that do not. When groups enjoy the support of a legislative majority on a given issue, they should be less likely to contact opponents. *Majority support* therefore indicates whether groups were supported by a legislative majority on an issue. Since more resourceful groups are less constrained in how much they can lobby, we control for the (logged) number of lobbyists a group employs (*staff*). It might also be that interest groups that are more frequently asked to participate in institutionalized forms of interaction with political parties—such as parliamentary hearings—are drawn to politicized issues and contact both supporters and opponents in this context. We therefore control for the (logged) number of times a group participated in parliamentary hearings during the period 2012–2016 (based on our sample data). The priority an individual group attaches to an issue might matter for how intensely and whom interest groups decide to lobby. *Priority issue* therefore indicates whether the given issue was a top priority for the interest group over the previous 6 months. Lastly, as a technical control we include the proportion of supporting parties in our model. Descriptive statistics of all variables can be found in Appendix in ESM.

## Analysis

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a number of logistic regression models explaining interest groups’ decisions to engage in complementary lobbying rather than to focus on their supporters exclusively. As our units of observation (group-issues) and error terms are clustered within groups, we estimated all models with random intercepts at the group level. Likelihood-ratio tests indicate that doing so is appropriate for all models. Table 2 displays the results. Models 1–3 suggest that there is some evidence in favor of our hypotheses: When analyzing the bivariate relationships between each of the issue characteristics and complementary lobbying, we estimate significant effects for interest group activity and for public salience. Model 1 indicates that the likelihood of lobbying supporters and opponents increases when the public is perceived to be very aware of an issue ( $p < 0.1$ ). Similarly, model 3 shows that higher levels of interest group activity lead to a higher likelihood of complementary lobbying ( $p < 0.05$ ). The effect of increasing party polarization bears a positive sign, as predicted by our polarization–prominence hypothesis (H4), but turns out to be insignificant. However, given that logistic regression coefficients are



**Table 2** Random intercept logistic regression explaining complementary lobbying

	(1) H1: Public salience	(2) H2: IG activity	(3) H3/H4: Party polarization	(4) Full model
<b>Explanatory variables</b>				
Public salience				
Public is very aware (vs. public is at most somewhat aware)	1.99* (1.19)			1.42 (1.13)
Interest group activity				
> 5 groups are active (vs. <6 groups are active)		1.58** (0.65)		1.42** (0.66)
<b>Party polarization</b>				
Issue is very conflictual among parties (vs. Issue is not or somewhat conflictual)			0.87 (0.67)	0.67 (0.69)
<b>Control variables</b>				
Non-business group	-4.64** (1.93)	-4.79** (2.01)	-4.41** (1.93)	-4.61** (1.94)
Left supporters	0.002 (0.38)	-0.05 (0.38)	-0.005 (0.37)	-0.04 (0.37)
Non-business group * left supporters	0.84 (0.54)	1.08* (0.57)	0.80 (0.54)	0.93* (0.56)
Majority support	-1.80** (0.88)	-2.13** (0.92)	-1.75** (0.88)	-2.05** (0.93)
Priority issue	0.51 (0.53)	0.40 (0.54)	0.62 (0.53)	0.47 (0.55)
Staff (log)	1.39 (1.01)	1.50 (1.02)	1.44 (1.01)	1.35 (1.00)
Hearings (log)	1.32 (0.84)	1.22 (0.84)	1.23 (0.83)	1.25 (0.82)



Table 2 (continued)

	(1) H1: Public salience	(2) H2: IG activity	(3) H3/H4: Party polarization	(4) Full model
Supporting parties (proportion)	1.55 (2.61)	1.68 (2.68)	1.80 (2.57)	1.73 (2.68)
Intercept	-0.62 (1.60)	-1.34 (1.67)	-1.34 (1.71)	-1.89 (1.75)
Group intercept variance	23.6** (10.9)	24.8** (11.8)	23.7** (11.0)	23.3** (10.9)
$N_{\text{Issues}}$	306	306	306	306
$N_{\text{Groups}}$	80	80	80	80
AIC	266.6	263.3	268.0	264.3
Log-likelihood	-122.3	-120.7	-123.0	-119.2

Standard errors in parentheses; \* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

affected by omitted variables, even if these *were* unrelated to the independent variables included in the model (Mood 2010), we do not base our final conclusions on these bivariate tests. Rather we estimated a final model in which we include all three issue characteristics (Model 4).

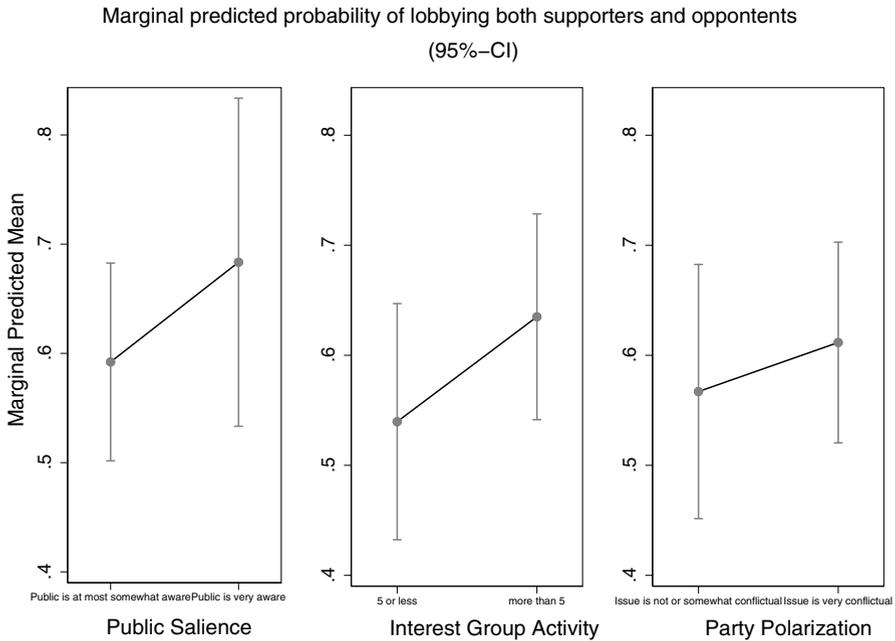
This model provides more support for one of our theoretical expectations. First, and in contradiction to our first hypothesis, we see that the effect of public salience is not robust to the inclusion of the other variables. While it was weak in the first place, it loses significance in the final model. This finding suggests that the public salience of an issue is less influential for the decision of whom to lobby than previously assumed (e.g., Beyers and Hanegraaff 2016), at least when other aspects of the politicization of an issue are included as well. Second, in support of our second hypothesis, the effect of interest group activity remains significant. In line with our expectations, interest groups are more likely to lobby both supporters and opponents when a larger number of other groups are active on the same issue as well. As argued above, this behavior might be due to the desire to maintain their prominence, which could come under jeopardy when many other groups demand the parties' attention.

Third, we find no support for either of our *polarization hypotheses*. Model 4 shows that polarization of party positions on an issue is not systematically related to complementary lobbying. While the estimated effect retains its positive sign, it fails to reach an acceptable level of significance. As argued above, polarization could conceivably be linked to complementary lobbying in two ways. It could either lead to a stronger focus on lobbying supporters due to lower chances of successfully persuading opponents, or it could induce interest groups to target both supporters and opponents to maintain their long-term prominence on a given issue. Perhaps both of these expectations are valid under certain circumstances only, canceling each other out in our models, which might be why we do not find clear support for either of them here. Future research should further investigate this question.

To illustrate the strength of the estimated effects, we plotted marginal predicted probabilities (based on Model 4) over the range of our independent variables (Fig. 1). The figure shows that higher levels of interest group activity can be expected to increase the probability of complementary lobbying by 10 percentage points. The point-estimates also indicate that interest groups are 4 percentage points more likely to lobby supporters and opponents on issues that are very conflictual among political parties as compared to less conflictual issues, and 9 percentage points more likely to do so on issues that are highly salient to the public. However, the large and overlapping confidence intervals indicate that the relationships between public salience, party polarization and complementary lobbying are rather erratic.

Taken together, these findings provide sound evidence for one of our theoretical expectations: Higher levels of interest group activity increase the likelihood of complementary lobbying. In contrast, we find no support for our expectation that the public salience of an issue or the polarization of party positions exerts the same kind of effect. These results are interesting as previous research has highlighted the exceptional role that public salience plays in politicization processes (Green-Pedersen 2012; Hutter and Grande 2014). Apparently, when it comes to interest groups the behavior of other groups regarding a certain issue is more important than the public. With regard to party polarization, we do not yet want to rule out that a potential





**Fig. 1** Average marginal predicted probabilities of lobbying both supporters and opponents based on model 4.

relationship with interest groups' lobbying decisions exists. As mentioned above, perhaps the persuasion and the prominence mechanism operate alongside each other, effectively canceling each other out. At the same time, all our models consistently estimated a positive effect of polarization on the likelihood of complementary lobbying, and in a bivariate setting, without control variables it is even significant ( $p < 0.05$ ; results not shown). Together this might speak for the prominence mechanism.

Last, when looking at the control variables, we see that non-business groups are indeed less likely to lobby both supporters and opponents than 'insider' business groups. Surprisingly, this difference is significant only when they receive no or very little support from their ideological allies, and both types of groups behave similarly when more left parties support their position. Throughout the models, we also find consistent support for the assertion that groups let their behavior be guided by power considerations: When their supporters enjoy a legislative majority, groups feel little need to contact opposing parties. We conducted a number of robustness checks, which are presented in Appendix in ESM. All of them support our conclusions.

## Illustrating the mechanism

The correlational evidence presented above provides some support for our theoretical argument that issue characteristics affect whom interest groups lobby. A weakness of our research design, however, is that we cannot provide conclusive evidence



regarding which causal mechanism might connect these issue traits and interest group behavior. Remember that we identified two likely candidates: interest groups adjusting their attempts to *persuade* political parties or the desire to *maintain or enhance their prominence* on a given issue. While the lack of support for our *public salience hypothesis*—which was linked to the persuasion mechanism—indicates that the prominence mechanism is more likely to apply, our quantitative results for the party polarization hypotheses are inconclusive. Therefore, we want to go further and see what kind of qualitative evidence our interview data holds. The qualitative information gathered through our interviews illustrates that maintaining their prominence and being recognized as influential actor on an issue is what frequently drives interest group behavior.

To get to this conclusion, we systematically analyzed our interview data, searching for respondents' explanations for why they lobbied supporters and/or opponents. While we did not include an explicit question in that regard in our interview protocol, answers were frequently provided voluntarily or in response to probes. Thus, we cannot link the answers provided by our respondents to specific issues in all cases. However, our qualitative data do allow us to illustrate *generally* which kinds of explanations our respondents offered for their behavior.

On 79 occasions, respondents informed us explicitly on their lobbying targets, and in 22 instances, they provided explanations for why they lobbied both supporters and opponents. Theoretically, we can group these responses into four categories of evidence: evidence (a) in favor of or (b) against the persuasion mechanism, and evidence (c) in favor of or (d) against the prominence mechanism. Doing so leads to several relevant observations. First, we do see that a small minority of respondents explain their targeting behavior in a way that provides evidence for the persuasion mechanism. As the representative of an animal rights group described: 'I don't discriminate, I don't differentiate. [...] Yes, I do a lot with the Party for the Animals, but I don't need to convince them anymore. So most of my time I spend [...] on parties that simply think differently about the matter' (Interview, March 21, 2017).<sup>4</sup> Another respondent even more explicitly states that persuasion is the goal: 'With the other [parties] you can still start a conversation and try to convince them. We try that' (Interview, June 9, 2017).

Evidence contradicting the persuasion mechanism is more frequent, however. Many respondents are very clear on the futility of trying to persuade opposing parties. Statements such as the following are representative of many more: '[...] I don't differentiate between political parties, so I talk to all of them actually [...] whether it makes sense, I'm not sure, but I do keep them posted' (Interview January 20, 2017). Directly responding to the question whether it is possible to change opposing politicians' position, another lobbyist said: 'No. Sometimes you can sit at the table with people... and I can talk all I want, but it does not make any sense at all' (Interview February 23, 2018).

When it comes to evidence regarding the prominence mechanism, we find that a large number of respondents support our argument, whereas none of them explicitly contradict it. Interest groups lobby broadly so as to be recognized as relevant actors and maintain their prominence, especially when they fear that this role will come

<sup>4</sup> The authors translated all quotes. The original quotes can be found in Appendix in ESM.



under jeopardy or they struggle for recognition to begin with. Thus, one lobbyist explained:

So the idea: I want to talk to that [supporting] party exclusively is very naïve [...] so I said, then I need to get in touch with [opposing parties] [...]; and not with negative intentions [...] but based on the idea: *do you understand who we are? And do we understand what is important for you?* [...] If you want to be heard, you have to listen [...].

(Interview June 22, 2017, emphasis added)

The statement of another respondent added to this idea: ‘You talk with everyone [...], *you have to make sure that you talk with everyone* [...]. Because, eventually *you have to make sure that your message is recognizably present on the political stage* [...].’ (Interview January 10, 2018, emphasis added). Yet another lobbyist stated: ‘After elections [...] we immediately make the rounds, and *we stop by to explain: what is* [name of the organization] *actually?* And then we try to give as much objective information as possible. Because you know: they don’t know anything’ (Interview January 31, 2018, emphasis added).

These and many other interview responses seem to suggest that lobbying opposing parties is a means to ensure that one is being seen and recognized as a relevant actor in a given policy subsystem rather than an attempt to make parties change their position. We see this as a good indication that the prominence mechanism, as suggested by our theory, operates in many instances.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated the question of whom interest groups lobby and why. Do they lobby their supporters or their opponents? While previous research has hinted at the importance of political institutional rules for explaining this question (e.g., Marshall 2010, 2015; Otjes and Rasmussen 2017), our contribution to the literature was a systematic focus on issue-level factors. This emphasis on differences between issues is justified and relevant, because issue characteristics and their systematic effects on interest group behavior may plausibly occur relatively independently of the institutional context (Hanegraaff and Berkhout 2019) and help us better understand patterns of interest group lobbying. Disregarding the issue level in explanations of interest group behavior risks missing important sources of variation and might lead to underspecified models. We argued that lobbying supporters is interest groups’ preferred strategy, but that they complement it with lobbying opposing parties when the conflict surrounding an issue is high—not to persuade them, but to make sure that they are being recognized as consequential and prominent actors.

Based on our analysis of Dutch data from the *Agendas and Interest Groups* project (McKay et al. 2018), we demonstrated that groups’ decisions on whom to lobby are affected by issue-level factors: They are more likely to lobby both supporters and opponents when the issue they are working on is more conflictual. In particular, the activity of other interest groups on a given issue seems to drive this behavior. Furthermore, we illustrated the causal mechanism that likely connects conflict



and lobbying patterns. In contrast to claims made in the previous literature (Beyers and Hanegraaff 2016; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998), we showed that interest groups rarely lobby their opponents in an attempt to change their position. Rather, they target their foes to remain on their radar and to maintain their status as consequential actor in their respective policy subsystem. As we have argued, this behavior becomes particularly important when the subsystem they are a part of is likely to change, which, in turn, can be linked to the conflict surrounding an issue. Importantly, we think that it is likely that these conclusions are valid beyond the Dutch case that we studied, as our theoretical approach stresses issue-level factors that are unlikely to operate differently within other institutional contexts. Future research should test whether this is indeed the case.

Our findings have implications for the literature on interest group party lobbying and for our understanding of interest groups in their (party) political context. First, our analysis shows that when interest groups decide whom to lobby, their decision is most likely not one between supporters *or* opponents, but between *an exclusive focus on their supporters and a complementary approach including opponents as well*. Future research should keep this result in mind when designing instruments to investigate lobbying patterns. Being predisposed to looking for an *either-or* pattern might bias findings and hinder future theorizing.

Second, this paper demonstrates the usefulness of a more completely specified issue-level theoretical framework for examining interest group lobbying. Issue-level factors, such as the ones specified here, clearly matter in interest group politics. General, issue-unspecific studies might miss important nuances and variation when it comes to various forms of interest group activity. Issue-level factors, accordingly, should be more systematically included in research investigating interest group activities.

Third, we have shown that interest groups approach both supporting and opposing parties, particularly when the political climate gets rough, on specific issues or more generally. This result is good news in normative terms, as broad policy interaction between interest groups and a variety of different parties might foster the production of effective policy alternatives and the formation of political consensus (Lindblom 1968). Therefore, even in times of increasing polarization and growing differences between (some) parties, interest groups maintain channels of communication with all sides. Interest group promiscuity might help mitigate some of the negative ramifications of a larger partisan divide, such as deadlock, by maintaining issue-specific policy networks and enabling compromise.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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