

Private Groups vs Public Interests: Who Has Greater Initial Access to Legislators?

A Lobbying Field Experiment and Survey in Spain

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Abstract

With a growing interest group population across European countries, organizations are increasingly competing for a first-time access to policy makers. While research points to a potential interest group representation bias that favors private economic groups, no study has provided a causally identified estimate on the effect of an organization's type of interest on achieving initial political access. This paper argues that the social desirability and positive reputation of nonprofit public interest groups provides an incentive for legislators to grant greater access to these groups, compared to private economic interests. Two studies explore how representatives grant initial political access: a lobbying field experiment by partnering with an NGO network and a business group, and a novel survey with legislators in Spain. Results show that, though legislators receive a similar proportion of meeting request across interest groups, the public interest organization is systematically more successful in scheduling first-time meetings.

1 Introduction

One of the key tenets of representative democracy is the equal right for organized public and private interests to share their preferences by petitioning elected officials. In practice, political access is not equally distributed, therefore making the conditions under which interest groups successfully enter the legislative institutions a central research puzzle for scholars (Beyers, 2004, 2000; Beyers, Eising & Maloney, 2008; Dür & Mateo, 2012; Dür & Mateo, 2016; Ehrlich 2007; Eising, 2007; Grossmann, 2012; Kalla & Broockman, 2015; Klüver, 2011, 2012, 2013; Pakull, Marshall & Bernhagen, 2020). While most studies

have focused on incumbent interest groups that regularly participate in the policy-making process, little attention has been paid to how newly petitioning organizations, outsiders to the lobbying process, manage to access legislators for the first time. This scope offers a promising venue to examine the effect of group type on political access, specifically, if there is interest representation bias between private economic interest groups and nonprofit public interest groups (Dür & Mateo, 2016; Fraussen, Beyers & Thomas, 2015, 2015; Gilens & Page, 2014; Drutman, 2015).

Much research points towards how private economic interest groups enjoy a comparative advantage in their political access due to their superior resource endowments (Coen 1998, 1997; Dür & De Bièvre, 2007; Dür & Mateo, 2016; Dür et al., 2015; Lowery & Gray, 2004). Even in European countries where campaign-financing regulations restrict corporate donors, private groups have greater material means to acquire and provide political goods in order to connect with their target legislators (Beyers, 2004; Beyers et al., 2008; Eising, 2007). However, the determinants of political access are very different for newly petitioning organizations, defined as those groups that directly contact a legislator for the first time.

For policy makers, the cost of granting access to a newly petitioning group is comparatively high due to uncertainty (Vis, 2011), as legislators have to assess, with limited information, what type and amount of necessary political goods is the newly petitioning organization likely to deliver, given resources are unequally distributed across groups (Olson, 1965). Therefore, the main incentive to grant initial access is the perception that engaging with newly petitioning organization provides a clear political opportunity to increase the chances of reelection or succeeding in the policy-making process (Austen-Smith, 1993; Hall & Deardorff, 2006; Wright, 1996).

In this context of first-time petitions, the paper argues that nonprofit public interest groups enjoy an initial political access advantage because their social desirability and positive social reputation maximizes the legislator's political opportunity. Legislators place greater trust in entities that advance public interests, instead of exclusively narrow private interests (Jia, 2018; Leech, 2013; Torcal & Montero, 2006) because their positive social reputation signals that the organization will share truthful information (Stevens, Xie & Peng, 2016; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002), will provide insight about broader constituent preferences (Berry, 1999; Coen & Katsaitis, 2013; Kollman, 1998; Mahoney, 2008), will help the

legislator to be perceived as responsive to those constituents (Ainsworth, 1997; Bartels, 1991; Berry & Howell, 2007; Miller & Wattenberg, 1985), and will overall add legitimacy to the policy making process by including diverse groups in the debate (Dür et al., 2015; Rasmussen & Gross, 2015; Kløver, 2011, 2013; Flothe & Rasmussen, 2091).

To test the extent to which an organization’s type of interest affects its initial political access, the current project implements a lobbying field experiment in Spain and a novel elite survey with policy makers. The lobbying field experiment was implemented by partnering with a private business group and a nonprofit organization. These entities sent a formal first-time meeting request to 400 national and regional representatives, assigned through blocked randomization by gender and party ideology. Results show that a public interest organization is more likely to have its meeting request accepted, even when its issue expertise is unrelated to the legislator’s policy work and committee appointments. For the private interest group, a shared policy issue-domain predicts both the response to the organization’s email and the acceptance to schedule a meeting. The original survey amongst Spanish national and regional legislators shows that legislators receive a similar proportion of meeting requests from both private and public interest groups, though public interest groups petition liberal legislators more often.

The key contribution of this paper is the ability to isolate the organizations’ public or private interest from the legislators’ decision to grant access. This is the first study, to the best of my knowledge, that provides a causally identified estimate on the effect of an organization’s type of interest on achieving initial political access in a Western European democracy.

The findings have important implications and suggest new puzzles for future research. First, if initial political access favors public interest groups, scholars could explore at what stage in policy-making process we observe the interests of business and professional associations being advanced (Coen & Richardson, 2009; Rasmussen & Brendan, 2014; Schlozman et al., 2012; Yackee, & Yackee, 2006). Similarly, the findings encourage to examine the varying importance that legislators’ ideology can have on predicting which interest groups they associate themselves with. In this study, both liberal and conservative legislators displayed a similar responsiveness to each newly petitioning organization, regardless of their type of group interest.

Lastly, the results provide support for previous research on the relationship between

reputation and political access (Coen, 1998, 2009; Bouwen, 2004; Werner, 2015), by showing the extent to which social reputation facilitates the access of a newly petitioning interest group. This has clear policy implications for practitioners in search for mechanisms to increase their political comparative advantage when petitioning their target legislators.

The paper is divided as follows. The first section summarizes the literature on interest group representation bias and introduces the existing gap on the initial political access of outsider organizations. The theory section focuses on the informative role of social reputation to predict the greater initial access of public interest groups to legislators. The following section presents the case selection and the institutional context in Spain. Section five outlines the experimental design, followed by the results, of the lobbying field experiment. The following section complements these findings with an analysis of the novel elite survey, completed by Spanish legislators, about interest group access patterns. The final section discusses the significance of the paper’s findings for the direction of future research.

2 A Gap in Research on Interest Group Representation Bias

The conditions under which interest groups successfully enter the legislative institutions is a central research puzzle in political science (Beyers, 2004, 2000; Beyers, Eising & Maloney, 2008; Dür & Mateo, 2012; Dür & Mateo, 2016; Ehrlich 2007; Eising, 2007; Grossmann, 2012; Kalla & Broockman, 2015; Klüver, 2011; Pakull, Marshall & Bernhagen 2020). However, most of the literature looks at incumbent interest groups that frequently participate in the policy-making process, while scant research has explored the conditions under which newly petitioning organizations successfully obtain initial access to legislators. Exploring the effect of group type on an organization’s initial political access has a twofold importance.

First, it can provide novel insights about the potential sources of interest group representation bias by testing if legislators display systematic preferences to engage with a certain type of group, even at the initial stages of the policy-making process. Political access is a “golden standard” in lobbying practice, a central organizational goal for interests’ groups, and a key antecedent to influence (Dür et al., 2015; Dür & Mateo, 2016; Klüver, 2011, 2012, 2013; Levine, 2009). Therefore, how and which entities have a greater ability to

successfully connect with their target legislators has important implications for the overall policy-making process.

Second, initial political access is a common yet under-researched phenomenon that can improve our understanding of the type of incentives legislators have to grant access to interest groups. Western democracies have seen a constant yearly increase of politically active organizations competing to enter the legislative institutions (Bitonti, 2017; Gray & Lowery, 2000). This means policy makers are more and more frequently approached by organizations with which they have not engaged before. First-time meeting requests are part of the legislator's routine at the beginning of the legislature, during the legislative agenda-setting process, when a policy proposal is introduced into the floor, when a legislative committee appoints new members, etc. Nonetheless, it is still unclear what determinants shape which outsider organizations can secure a connection within their target policy makers.

Granting access creates and opportunity costs for elected representatives, as they only have the time to engage with a subset of all the interest groups that contact them (Dür & Mateo, 2016; Felli & Merlo, 2006; Klüver, 2011, 2012, 2013; Vis, 2011). For newly petitioning organizations, defined as those groups that directly contact a legislator for the first time, the entry barriers are higher because legislators face greater uncertainties about the type or amount of political resources that these organizations might be able to offer. Nonetheless, the progressive increase in the interest group ecology shows that entities that are normally outsiders to the policy-making process still manage to enter the policy arena. Understanding under which conditions do legislators grant initial access, conditional on type of interests an organization represents, is the key motivation of this paper.

3 A Theory on the Effect of Interest Type on Initial Political Access

Office-motivated policy makers have the incentive to meet with interest groups that can offer political goods that will increase their chances of reelection and that will reduce their uncertainties during the policy-making process (Austen-Smith, 1993; Dür & Mateo, 2016; Hansen, 1991; Hall & Deardorff, 2006; Klüver, 2011, 2012, 2013; Wright, 1996). In European countries with publicly-financed campaign systems, the most valuable goods that interest groups can offer to legislators are technical expertise and information about their

constituents' preferences (Bouwen, 2004; Maloney, et al., 1994; Esterling, 2004).

The main challenge for legislators is overcoming the uncertainty about which of all the newly petitioning interest groups represents a greater political opportunity. Given the time and resource constraints to gather and contrast information about each organization, legislators will most likely assess the potential value of engaging with the petitioning organization by relying on the content of the meeting request; such as the entity's type of industry, socio-economic sector, their legislative oversight on the entity's activities, its number of employees, etc. Specifically, the type of interests an organization represents allows to make important inferences about its political goals (i.e. public or private), and the type of information it might offer (i.e. constituent preferences or technical knowledge).

This paper argues that nonprofit public interest groups are more capable of obtaining greater initial access because their social desirability and positive social reputation maximizes the legislator's political opportunity. Social reputation is defined as the set of beliefs and perceptions about an organization's capacities, activities, intentions, and mission (Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Dafoe, Renshon & Huth, 2014) to improve social well-being. Previous research already points to a positive relationship between reputation and political access (Coen 1998, 2009; Bouwen, 2004; Werner, 2015). In the lobbying context, social reputation entails that the organization will share truthful information and insight about constituent preferences (Coen & Katsaitis, 2013; Stevens et al., 2016; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002), that it will add legitimacy to the policy making process (Dür et al., 2015; Flothe & Rasmussen, 2019; Klüver, 2011, 2012, 2013; Rasmussen & Gross, 2015), and that it will help the legislator to be perceived as responsive to constituents preferences (Ainsworth 1997; Bartels 1991; Berry & Howell, 2007).

All things being equal, public interest organizations are perceived as having a higher positive social reputation than private entities (Bernauer & Gampfer, 2013; Torcal & Montero, 2006) because they advance general social interests and public goods provision; they are highly integrated in the communities where they operate; they are expected to provide transparency and visibility for their actions; they are less likely to engage in unethical behavior; and they have a wider support from the civil society. While private groups seek company-specific goods and deliver the benefits of the lobbying process to their members, public interest groups are seen as pursuing collective and non-selective goods, therefore not seeking profit, but social and environmental justice (Berry, 2015; Coen, 1998). Due to

the nature of their activities, nonprofit organizations work closely with local communities, which enables them to aggregate and communicate the citizen preferences of underrepresented constituents to which legislators rarely have access to (Coen, 2009).

Lastly, while the general public distrusts the lobbying process because private economic groups are seen as seeking influence through bribe (Cigler & Loomis, 2007; Harstand & Svensson, 2011), public interest groups are perceived as selflessly advocating for legislative fairness against private groups (Lang, 2012; Berry, 2015). This connects with the perception that public interest groups are transparent and provide greater visibility for their actions (Burger & Owens, 2010) therefore legislators can expect the general public will learn about their responsiveness. As policy makers have broader incentives to associate with and to place greater trust in entities that advance public interests, instead of exclusively narrow private interests (Jia, 2018; Leech, 2013), nonprofit organizations are therefore predicted as gaining greater initial access to legislators.

Conversely, the conditions under which legislators can maximize their political opportunity by granting access to newly petitioning private organizations are more limited. Compared to nonprofit public interest groups, private economic interests are not as capable of supplying information about constituency preferences and carry the risk of guilt or stigma by association as public opinion is not as supportive of these groups (Cigler & Loomis, 2007; Harstand & Svensson, 2011). It can be argued that the main incentive for legislators to engage with a newly petitioning private interest group is the prospect of the supply of technical expertise (Dür & Mateo, 2016; Eising, 2009; Drutman, 2015; Hall & Deardorff, 2006). The above logic is summarized in the following hypothesis:

H1: A public interest group will have a greater initial access to legislators than a private interest group.

Additionally, this paper considers two conditional hypothesis regarding the role of the legislators' ideology. Research shows political parties present themselves to voters as the most capable of handling specific policy issues; what is known as the issue-ownership framework (Petrocik 1996; Green & Hobolt 2008; Bélanger & Meguid 2008). This means voters perceive certain policy domains as key identity pillars of the political parties' agenda. For instance, social welfare issues are associated with liberal parties, while conservatives parties are associated with focusing on private economic issues (Walgrave et al. 2012).

Political parties, in turn, try to harness their identity through the voting on policies around these issue domains (Hix, 2002). Therefore, it can be argued that a legislators' ideology is likely to further affect the initial political access of a newly petitioning interest group based on these dimensions. In other words, conservative legislators have greater incentives to engage with business groups while liberal legislators do so with public interest groups. As a result, while a public interest group is predicted to have a greater overall initial political access, such access will be greater amongst liberal representatives, while the access of the private business group will be greater amongst conservatives representatives.

H2: The public-interest group will have greater access amongst liberal representatives.

H3: The private-interest group will have greater access amongst conservative representatives.

4 Case Selection

To test if public or public interest groups gain greater initial political access, this paper present two studies. First, it presents a lobbying field experiment implemented by partnering with a nonprofit organization and a private business group. The hypotheses and experimental design of this study have been preregistered before its implementation. The second part of this project introduces an original survey with national and regional legislators in Spain.

Spain has been a democratic constitutional monarchy since 1978, joining the European Union in 1986 (Montero, 1997; Torcal & Montero, 2006). The country has 17 one-chamber regional parliaments (1175 members), a national Lower House (350 members) and Upper House (265 members) that represent its 47 million citizens. All of the representatives are appointed to at least one legislative committee. It is a predominantly bi-party system, with the Socialist Party (liberal) and the Popular Party (conservative) historically winning the majority of the votes. However, Spain's electoral rules have allowed for another 19 smaller parties to successfully participate in its legislative institutions. These parties, nonetheless, still identify along the ideological spectrum in their party manifestos, and tend to systematically vote in coalition with one of the two majority parties (Montero & Lago, 2010; Torcal, 2014).

Spain was chosen to implement this research project for the following reasons. First, it has the main characteristics of most developed Western democracies, which increases the generalizability of the findings. Like the majority of European countries, Spain has a parliamentary system with party discipline, where elected officials are appointed according to the D'Hondt method of proportional representation. Second, Spain has strict limitations on campaign contributions, similar to the regulations in Portugal, Belgium or Finland. Since 2007, only individual party affiliates, but not companies, can donate the political party's treasury, and contributions to specific candidates are not allowed. Though this does not fully eliminate the possibility of illicit contributions becoming a confounding variable in this project, there is also no evidence to suspect that such illegal practices are common amongst interest groups in Spain (Bitoni & Harris, 2017). Finally, during 2019, Spain held regional elections (May 26th) and general elections (November 10th) which allowed for the entrance of 64% new representatives into its legislative institutions. At the time when this project was implemented, legislators were deciding on the policy priorities for the term, therefore the expectation was that they will be more willing to meet with new interest groups.

5 Study 1: Lobbying Field Experiment

5.1 Experimental Design

5.1.1 Ethical Considerations

Field experiments and audit studies are popular amongst political scientists who research on patterns of discrimination in the responsiveness of elected representatives (Butler & Broockman, 2011; Grose et al., 2020). A common ethical concern is the role of deception. For this project, the partnering organizations had a genuine interest in meeting with any of the randomly contacted legislators that decided to respond to the request. Both organizations chose to participate in this study in order to have an initial access to a large number of elected representatives to raise their institutional profile, to present their projects, and to convey their policy preferences. Therefore, the study had minimal ethical concerns and was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

5.1.2 Partner Organizations

The lobbying field experiment was implemented in February 2020 by partnering with a business group and nonprofit group in Spain, both being average organizations within their respective populations. The organizations were chosen to fit the following definitions. A public interest group is a nonprofit association, one that seeks a general social goods, where the achievement of these goods will not selectively or materially benefit the membership of the organization (Berry, 2015). Conversely, a private economic interest group is defined as an entity that concentrates the benefits of their lobbying efforts solely on its immediate members. Therefore, these partnering organizations serve as a bundled treatment that includes all of the differences between public and private interest groups.

The partnering public interest group is a nonprofit network for social welfare issues and human rights. The NGO's activities involve community projects on subjects such access to healthcare or food security. Though the organization's network has some projects at the national and European level, it has a low institutional profile and low public visibility, given it does not engage in lobbying, public communication strategies, social media or large-scale advocacy campaigns. Currently, Spain has over 50,000 registered as nonprofit organizations, 70% of which have a small membership with an annual budget of less than 30.000€, according to the 2017 Spanish National Associations Registry. Our partnering NGO fits this profile.

The private partnering organization is a business group that provides economic investments and technical assistance in the development and management of renewable energy sources. Even though this company has some projects in small municipalities across Spain and Europe, it also has a low institutional profile and public visibility. For instance, the company only engages with local technicians, and has never launched a marketing campaign to advertise its services or lobbied for a specific policy. Spain has over 2 million small business with less than 250 employees, 13% of which belong to the industry classification, according to the 2020 Census of the Spanish Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism. The partnering private organization belongs to this population.

Both the business group and NGO network are mostly comparable in terms of their lack of lobbying experience and institutional exposure, the regions where they operate and size of the organizations' network. Their main difference comes from the industry classification of their socio-economic sectors, which is acknowledged as a potential shortcoming when

comparing the treatment effects between the groups.

Nonetheless, these differences are minimized in the treatment conditions because the most salient difference between the organizations was their social-nonprofit or business-economic profile. After all, the project is concerned with about how the group's broader type of private(economic) or public(social) interest might affect its initial political access, not about the access variation within the same sectors. The content of the meeting requests reiterated the social or economic impact of the organization in the regions in which they operate. Furthermore, very limited information was given about their exact activities that the organizations that engage in, and rather highlighted their social or economic purpose. The content of the meeting request clearly placed these entities on either side of the private-economic versus public-social divide. Therefore, this salient difference is what makes the comparison between the treatment groups possible.

5.1.3 Sample Randomization

A total of 400 Spanish politicians were randomly assigned to be contacted either by the business group or the NGO group. This involved a block randomization by gender and party ideology from an original pool of 1402 representatives. This pool was created in February 2020 by accessing the publicly available contact information from the regional and national parliaments' web pages. Given Spain's party discipline, legislators were coded as liberals (left wing) or conservative (right wing) based on their party's ideology, using as a reference the Spanish Center for Sociological Studies and previous research (CIS Barometer, 2020; Marcos-Marne, 2020; Montero & Lago, 2010; Torcal, 2014; Vidal, 2018).

5.1.4 Treatment Conditions

Figure 1 contains an English translation of the meeting request emailed to the representatives. Each were assigned to receive just one email, sent either by the public interest NGO group or the private economic interest business group. Both meeting requests follow the same structure; a brief introduction of the organization's social/economic activity and a request to schedule a meeting to further talk about the organization's social/economic projects in the legislator's region.

While preserving the anonymity of the organizations, independent Spanish lobbying consultants were contacted to provided feedback for the content of the emails. Therefore,

the petitions resembled as much as possible a standard first-time meeting request. The consultants also indicated it is common for firms to petition a large number of heterogeneous legislators in order to gain institutional visibility, even without having a specific policy to discuss. Therefore, they also endorsed the research design from a practitioners' standpoint.

The information about the petitioning organization was manipulated so that either the private economic interests or public social interest were the organization's most salient feature. Group type was the most salient component through the economic or social treatment conditions. The request signals to the legislators that the organization has a potentially relevant social or economic impact in their constituents' region. The emails were signed by the respective entities' directors, both having Spanish male names. No attachments or web page links were provided in the email.

5.1.5 Independent Variables and Dependent Variables

The key independent variables of interests are organization type, issue related expertise and legislators' ideology. Issue related expertise is coded as a dichotomous variable that indicates whether the elected representative has legislative oversight on the petitioning organization's activity through the membership in a committee that legislates over issue-domains and policies that are directly related the organization's socio-economic sector and industry. The main control variables are legislator's gender, party ideology, seniority and chamber. These are, respectively, coded as male or female; liberal or conservative; and having served for more than one electoral cycle (i.e. four years) in office; national or regional chambers.

The two outcome variables of interest are "email response" and "meeting acceptance". The first is measured as a dichotomous variable indicating whether the legislator responded to the organization's email or not. The second, also dichotomous, is coded as success if the legislator responded by either requesting or suggesting a date to schedule the meeting, and as failure if the legislator declined the invitation.

5.1.6 Implementation

The 400 meeting requests were sent during the third and fourth week of February 2020. This was three weeks before any measures were approved regarding the spread of Covid-

Figure 1: Meeting Request Sent to Spanish Legislators by Treatment Group

From: **[Treatment Organization Name]**

Subject: Meeting Request

Dear: [Legislator's Name]

I am writing you in behalf of **[Treatment Organization Name]**; a growing **[NGO network/ business network]** with an important **[social/economic]** impact. Our work is focused on **providing social assistance and welfare programs to alleviate the social needs/ providing capital and direct economic investment for the development of renewable energy sources**].

Our organization has a large national and international presence and with our projects we wish to carry on creating **[social welfare/economic growth]** wherever we operate.

I would like to discuss with you our projects and the **[social/economic]** impact of **[Treatment Organization's Name]** in your region. Please, let me know if you would be interested in holding a meeting with us.

Kind Regards,

[Treatment Organization Director's Male Name]
[Treatment Organization's Contact Details] **[EU confidentiality disclaimer]**

19. For instance, the first politician who tested positive was the 10th of March, and the first national quarantine was issued by an executive order four days later. The legislative institutions were fully functioning without any restrictions when the lobbying experiment was implemented, though there is a possibility that, on average, response rate was lower than at any other time of the year. Empirically, those legislators with a potential concern about scheduling meetings were randomized in the treatment group assignment, therefore eliminating the possibility that individual concerns might have biased the outcome of the experiment in a systematic way.

The meeting requests were randomly assigned to be emailed by the either the business group or the NGO on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, with no follow-up emails. Sending the emails in two consecutive weeks served several purposes. First, it prevented

the servers from blocking the organizations’ email accounts, which is a common problem when a high volume of mails is sent in a short time. Second, it reduced the chances of a spillover effect, since some legislators share staff members to arrange their schedules. If several representatives receive similar emails from different organizations in the same day, this can generate a distrust that negatively affects the response rate. This risk is reduced if the requests arrive spuriously to the representatives’ inboxes. Finally, and in relation to the previous point, it protects the organizations’ institutional credibility. While it is strange for an organization to send a high volume of request at once, it is a common practice to slowly reach out again as these are accepted, rejected or simply ignored.

5.2 Results

This section presents the results of the field experiment by running an ANOVA difference of means test and OLS regression models. Table 1 reports the differences in the response and acceptance rate by treatment group. A total of 9.75% of the 400 legislators responded to the emails: both the NGO and the business group had a similar response rate. However, the meeting acceptance rate was 4.5% points higher ($p < .07$) for the public interest group. All the politicians that responded to the NGO’s emails accepted its meeting request, while less than half of the legislators that responded to the business group did so. This provides support for the paper’s first hypothesis.

Table 1: Acceptance and Response Rate by Treatment Group

Treatment Group	Response Rate	Acceptance Rate
Business	10.5%	4.5%
NGO	9.0%	9.0%
Treatment Differential	p-value=0.61	p-value=0.07*
Total Sample	400	400

Table 2 reports the difference in acceptance and response rate for each group based on their issue expertise, operationalized as a shared policy domain between the legisla-

tors' committee membership and the organization's socio-economic sector. The meeting response rate was 8.64% points higher ($p < .02$) and the acceptance rate was 12.7% points higher ($p < .09$) for members of committees with legislative oversight on the private group's business activity. Conversely, issue expertise is not related to the response to or acceptance rate of the NGO's meeting requests.

The results provide support for the argument that the political access of a newly petitioning organization is greatly determined by the type of interests it represents. No tracking system was placed with the request emails; therefore, it is not possible to know whether the legislators that did not respond lacked interest or simply did not receive the email (i.e. the parliament's servers discarded the organization's email as spam). Nonetheless, this does not confound the results, given the legislators with a potentially stricter server were randomized in the treatment group assignment.

Table 2: Acceptance and Response Rate by Treatment Group and Legislator's Committee

	Response Rate by Legislator's Committee			Acceptance Rate by Legislator's Committee		
	Issue Related	Unrelated	Differential	Issue Related	Unrelated	Differential
Business	17.9%	5.2%	p-value=0.02***	9.50%	0.86%	p-value=0.07*
NGO	9.76%	8.48%	p-value=0.99	9.76%	8.48%	p-value=0.99
Treatment Differential	p-value=0.29	p-value=0.83	-	p-value=0.99	p-value=0.09*	-
Total Sample	400	400	-	400	400	-

Table 3 shows the difference in means tests for the response and acceptance of the meeting request from each group based on the legislators' ideology. The results show there are no statistically significant differences in the outcome variables between liberal and conservative representatives. Therefore, there is no support for hypothesis 2 and 3. An explanation for this would be that, decision-makers do not have the same ties to newly petitioning such groups as they might have to established business groups and NGOs. Therefore, ideology might be a relevant factor in interest representation bias at later stages of the lobbying process, but it does not help predict initial access.

Table 3: Acceptance and Response Rate by Treatment Group and Legislator’s Ideology

	Response Rate by Legislator’s Ideology			Acceptance Rate by Legislator’s Ideology		
	Liberal	Conservative	Differential	Liberal	Conservative	Differential
Business	10%	11%	p-value=0.99	4%	5%	p-value=0.99
NGO	9%	9%	p-value=1	9%	9%	p-value=1
Treatment Differential	p-value=0.99	p-value=0.96	-	p-value=0.50	p-value=0.67	-
Total Sample	400	400	-	400	400	-

The rest of this section reports the OLS results for response and acceptance (Table 4) rate as dependent variables, corroborating the results from the ANOVA tables. The business group is the baseline category for all the models. Linear models can still be used for experimental design given randomization does not justify logistic regressions (Freedman, 2008).

Focusing on Table 3, a shared issue domain between the legislator’s committee membership and the private interest group’s economic activity increases the probability of response by 13.1%. Conversely, the interaction effect between an NGO treatment and issue expertise shows a negative relationship. In other words, issue expertise does not increase the probability of a legislator’s response in the case of the public interest group. Consistent with the paper’s hypothesis, the probability of legislators accepting a meeting request is 4.5% points higher for the public interest group. Conversely, the likelihood of legislators scheduling a meeting with private group is 8.6% points higher when they are appointed to an issue related legislative committee. No other independent variables provide explanatory power to the model. In sum, the field experiment supports the paper’s main research hypothesis regarding the initial political access of a newly petitioning organization, based on its interest group type. There is, however, no evidence to support the hypothesis that legislator’s ideology is a determinant factor in such initial access.

Table 4: OLS Regression for Legislators' Response and Acceptance To Meeting Request by Treatment Group

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Response		Acceptance	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
NGO	-0.015 (0.030)	0.029 (0.049)	0.045* (0.025)	0.070* (0.041)
Issue Related		0.131*** (0.043)		0.086** (0.036)
Female		-0.0004 (0.030)		-0.014 (0.026)
Liberal		-0.009 (0.042)		-0.009 (0.036)
Regional		-0.031 (0.032)		-0.010 (0.027)
Seniority		0.010 (0.030)		-0.013 (0.025)
NGO*Issue Related		-0.116* (0.061)		-0.069 (0.052)
NGO*Liberal1		0.008 (0.059)		0.007 (0.050)
Constant	0.105*** (0.021)	0.071 (0.047)	0.045** (0.018)	0.035 (0.040)
Observations	400	400	400	400
R ²	0.001	0.026	0.008	0.025
Adjusted R ²	-0.002	0.006	0.006	0.005

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6 Study 2: Original Elite Survey on Interest Group Access

One alternative mechanism that would explain the results of the experiment is the potential difference between the numbers of petitions that private economic groups and non-profit public interests submit to legislators. Arguably, if the petitions from public interest groups are less frequent, legislators could have a greater interest in granting access to this type of organizations. To address this concern, the second part of the project involves an original survey with policy makers to have a general understanding of the patterns of interest group access in Spain.

The elite survey was sent to the email account of a pool of 1402 national and regional legislators during the last week of June 2020 and had a 10% response rate. Such response rate might be seen as not be as representative of whole population of legislators but it does serve to provide a useful insight for the purpose of this project. Legislators were asked to respond based on their recollection of their weekly activities before policies related to Covid-19 (starting March 10th) altered their normal working schedules. Three main conclusions can be drawn from this survey; that the proportion of meeting requests from public and private interest groups is comparable; that the public interest groups tend to petition liberal legislators slightly more often; and that legislators grant access to the petitioning groups when their relevant issue expertise match the policy-making priorities.

In aggregate terms, the majority of representatives (57.34%) reported that one fourth of their weekly meeting requests come from private economic interest groups, while 49.65% reported that another one fourth of their requests come from public interest groups. The responses are constant across national and regional legislators. However, disaggregating the responses by the legislators' ideology reveals some interesting differences. Specifically, for 27.91% of the liberal legislators, three fourths of their total requests come from public interest groups, compared to conservative legislators. Likewise, 61.63% of liberal legislators report that only one fourth of their meeting requests come from private groups, compared to the conservatives. Finally, 24.4% of liberal representatives have never received a meeting request from a private interest group.

These findings suggest the following discussion. First, the slight variation between the legislator's meeting requests based on ideology potentially indicates that interest groups perceive certain policy makers as "natural" allies, compared to the rest of policy makers

(Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2002; Hall & Deardorff, 2006; Kollman, 1997). In this case, it could be argued that nonprofit groups perceive those allies to be liberal legislators. This would be consistent with theories of issue-ownership (Petrocik 1996; Walgrave et al., 2012).

Second, and most importantly, it provides support for the claim that, if public interests groups are able to secure greater initial access, the mechanism is not a difference in the volume of the meeting requests they might send, compared to private economic interests. Surprisingly, finding that legislators receive a comparable volume of meeting requests across groups challenges the expectation that public interest groups do not pursue direct lobbying as much as private organizations (Dür & Mateo, 2012).

It is important to acknowledge that a potential social desirability bias might have influenced the way the legislators chose to answer to the survey. This is a common challenge for questions that involve socio-politically sensitive issues (Bailer, 2014; Grimm, 2010). Even though the legislators were assured the responses would be treated anonymously, they might still have had self-presentation concerns. However, this concern applies not only to this study, but to the overall research on interest group representation bias that relies on survey self-reports data (i.e. Baumgartner et al., 2009; Beyers, 2004; Beyers & Braun, 2014; Chalmers, 2013). Therefore, this survey still provides a useful insight to the patterns of interest group access in Spain.

7 Final Discussion

Interest group representation bias has important practical and normative implications for representative democracy (Chalmers, 2013; Schattschneider 1960; Schlozman et al., 2012). One of the central questions whether the type of interests and organization represents has an effect on its political access, specifically, when looking at private economic interest groups and nonprofit public-interest groups (Alves, 2020; Dür & Mateo, 2016; Fraussen et al., 2015; Drutman, 2015; Hindmoor & McGeechan, 2013).

Regardless of the relevance of this issue, scant research provides a causally identified estimate of the effect that the characteristics of organized interests have on its political access. Furthermore, while most studies have focused on incumbent groups that regularly lobby, little scholarly attention has looked at how newly petitioning organizations, outsiders to the policy-making process, manage to access legislators for the first time. The current

paper addresses this research gap by testing the determinants of interest group initial political access through lobbying field experiment by partnering with an NGO network and a business group, and through an original elite survey with legislators in Spain.

Granting political access to an interest group creates and opportunity costs for policy makers (Dür & Mateo, 2016; Felli & Merlo, 2006). This is particularly the case when facing newly petitioning organizations, given the great uncertainty regarding the potential political gains that these new entities are likely to offer. This paper argues that the type of interests an organization represents the most important piece of information that the legislator needs to assess the potential political value of granting access. Specifically, nonprofit public interest groups are more likely enjoy a greater initial access because their positive social reputation and direct contact with constituents maximizes the representative's political opportunity and guarantees of obtaining political gains. Conversely, private economic interest groups have to rely on relevance of their technical issue expertise for the legislators' current policy priorities to gain access (Bouwen, 2002; Beyers, 2004; Eising, 2007; Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008).

The lobbying field experiment was implemented by partnering with two organizations, which emailed a formal first-time meeting request to 400 legislators, assigned through block randomization by gender and party ideology. These requests had an overall 9.75% response rate. Results show that the nonprofit public interest group was more successful in scheduling meetings than the private interest group (4.5% points higher) regardless of the legislators' committee membership. However, responses to the email and acceptance of the meeting-request for the private business group were 12.7% and 8.64% points higher, respectively, for issue-related legislators, compared to policy makers without legislative oversight over the business activity. Surprisingly, legislators' ideology did not help predict which organization would gain greater access; even though the original elite survey reveals that public interest groups tend to petition more to liberal legislators than to conservative legislators, and that that both private and public interest group send a similar number of weekly meeting requests.

The findings suggest the following discussion. First, it encourages scholars to identify other forms to test how the relationship between newly petitioning access interest groups and legislators differs compared to incumbent private interest groups, given legislators display a similar behavior when granting initial political access. For instance, at what

stage of the lobbying process do we observe business and professional associations have a greater advantage than public interest groups (Coen & Richardson, 2009; Rasmussen & Brendan, 2014; Schlozman et al., 2012; Yackee, & Yackee, 2006), or when does ideology start to play a role in shaping the patterns of interest group access. The original elite survey reveals that liberal legislators tend to receive more petitions from public interest groups while the experiment shows that conservative legislators are as responsive as liberal legislators. Therefore, future research could further explore what particular legislator-level attributes motivate interest groups to perceive certain legislators as “natural allies” and why.

Second, they invite to further examine political access in a comparative perspective: the paper shows that in institutional contexts where private campaign contributions are heavily regulated, the determinants of political access give a comparative advantage to nonprofit organizations. It would be interesting to replicate this study in other countries, such as the United States, where campaign contributions play an important role in interest group dynamics.

Lastly, this study builds on previous research on role of reputation in firms’ political strategies (Coen, 1998, 2009), finding that socially responsible companies have a greater access to legislators than their peers (Werner, 2015). The current project shows social reputation not only matters for within-sector access, but that it also shapes political access across interest group types. Therefore, the results have important policy implication regarding the positive effect of social reputation on political access. Practitioners should underscore the importance of developing a clear corporate social reputation plan to complement the implementation of their political strategies. In the case of nonprofit public interest groups, these findings should encourage them to engage in direct lobbying tactics more frequently, given their success in securing meetings with legislators.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to successfully isolate a petitioning organizations’ type of interest (private or public) from the legislators’ decisions to schedule a meeting. Through this method it is possible to causally compare the differences in the interest groups’ connections to legislators and identify any initial political access bias. By partnering with two organizations that never lobbied before, the project tests, for the first time, how newly petitioning organizations are able to enter the legislative institutions. The novel findings reveal that situations of initial access petitions can be seen as one condition

under which nonprofit public interest groups have a certain political advantage over private economic groups. The natural next step is for future research to develop new theories and empirical strategies to identify other instances that might reveal similar political patterns.

In a context of growing interest group formation, legislators inevitably will have to decide which newly petitioning interest groups provide a political opportunity and should be granted initial access to. Such situation is particularly common at the beginning of the legislature, after new committee appointments, or as new policies are introduced for deliberation. Though initial access does not guarantee political influence, it is a necessary first step for any organization that wishes to participate in the policy-making process, therefore its significance should not be underestimated. Hopefully this project inspires scholars to revisit some of the assumptions around interest group representation bias, and to further explore the antecedents of interest group political access, along with the legislators' decision-making process when engaging with newly petitioning interest groups.

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