



# The Expanding Core and Varying Degrees of Insiderness: Institutionalised Interest Group Access to Advisory Councils

Bert Fraussen, Jan Beyers and Tom Donas

*University of Antwerp*

The interaction between organised interests and policy makers is an important ingredient of contemporary political systems. In earlier work, interest group scholars have distinguished groups that enjoy access to consultation arrangements from those that are bound to stand on the sideline. Frequently, these insiders are considered to be equally connected to public authorities. Yet their degree of 'insiderness' differs significantly. By unpacking the set of organised interests that have gained access, this article distinguishes core insiders from groups that occupy a more peripheral position in an interest intermediation system. Empirically, we demonstrate and explain varying degrees of insiderness in the community of insider groups in Belgium, using the extensiveness of representation in advisory bodies as a proxy for access. Our findings show that, although nowadays a diverse set of organised interests gets involved in policy-making processes, the inner circle is dominated by traditional economic interests.

**Keywords:** organised interests; access; corporatism

In most democratic countries, interactions between policy makers and societal interests are structured through consultative arrangements, such as advisory bodies, working groups, public committees and commissions. This coordinated interaction between organised interests and policy makers is a key ingredient of contemporary policy-making processes and plays an important role in transmitting societal concerns, political knowledge and policy expertise to government officials. Various research demonstrates that the access enjoyed by different group types relates to a range of internal and external factors, including socio-economic inequalities, collective action problems, resources and government policies (Binderkrantz, 2012; Lowery and Gray, 2004a; Schlozman, 2012). However, the precise character of the community of policy insiders depends to a considerable extent on how governments establish venues for the consultation of organised interests. Such participatory systems show how societal conflicts are being resolved, and how organised interests get involved in public policy-making processes. Although policy makers aim to include societal interests in policy-making processes by establishing advisory bodies, these venues also have exclusionary effects. The restricted number of seats means that some organised interests might gain no or rather weak access, whereas others could enjoy a much better representation. Hence, a crucial political science research question is whether governments frequently interact with a high variety of organised interests, or whether they mostly cooperate with a small set of privileged partners. In the latter case, the nature of this inner circle, and how its quality of access differs from the broader community of consulted organised interests, deserves close attention.

In many developed countries, as well as within several supranational and international organisations, regular and broad formalised interactions with organised interests are a



common practice (Hanegraaff *et al.*, 2011; Jönsson and Tallberg, 2010; Quittkat, 2011; Saurugger, 2007). Such systems are meant to facilitate political participation, acquire expertise and enhance political legitimacy. Inclusion in these advisory bodies can be regarded as an important form of (institutionalised) access, which David Truman considered the ‘facilitating intermediate objective of political interest groups’. More precisely, he argued that ‘towards whatever institution of government we observe interest groups operating, the common feature of all their efforts is the attempt to achieve effective access to points of decision’ (Truman, 1951, p. 264). As a result, interest group scholars have spent much effort in characterising systems of interest intermediation by identifying insiders and outsiders, distinguishing groups that enjoy access from those which are bound to stand on the sidelines (Beyers, 2002; Binderkrantz, 2005; Eising, 2007; Lundberg, 2013; Poppelaars, 2007).

However, the distinction of insiders vs. outsiders is only one part, albeit an important one, of the picture. If we seek to analyse the interaction between policy makers and organised interests, the variation within the set of groups that regularly interacts with public officials should be scrutinised more closely. Frequently, these insiders are considered to be equally connected to public authorities, thus enjoying a similar quality of access. Yet as argued by William Maloney *et al.*, the degree of ‘insiderness’ of these groups may differ significantly, as there exists ‘an important divide between the relatively few groups with privileged status and the greater number of groups who find themselves consigned to less influential positions’ (Maloney *et al.*, 1994, p. 17). That is, while the threshold to insider status might be relatively low, by unpacking the set of organised interests that have gained access, core insiders can be distinguished from groups that occupy a more peripheral insider position.

This article describes the varying involvement of organised interests in advisory bodies and aims to identify the key factors explaining varying levels of insiderness. In the first two sections we clarify the relevance of consultation practices theoretically and develop hypotheses explaining degrees of insiderness. Subsequently, we demonstrate the relevance of studying the role of advisory councils in a traditionally corporatist system, such as Belgium, where consultation practices are strongly institutionalised. More specifically, our focus on the advisory setting in one of Belgium’s regions, Flanders, enables us to assess the extent to which this sub-national entity has adopted a system of interest intermediation that resembles the neo-corporatist state from which it devolved. In the fourth section, we assess the relation between varying degrees of insiderness and key organisational characteristics, using non-linear multivariate regression analysis. Our analyses demonstrate that, although policy makers involve a diverse set of interests in these advisory bodies, there are significant differences regarding the quality of access enjoyed by different types of organised interest. While resources and the representative character of an interest group play an important role, we also notice that traditionally powerful economic interests have been able to expand their involvement in this system of interest intermediation. The final section concludes and reflects on some broader implications of our findings regarding interest group participation and democracy.

### **Conceptualising Interest Group Participation through Advisory Bodies**

Regarding the interaction between state actors and organised interests, a traditional typology involves the distinction between corporatist and pluralist polities (Granados and

Knoke, 2005; Lowery and Gray, 2004b; Streeck and Kenworthy, 2005). These two types relate to particular state–society constellations, which imply variance regarding ‘the extent of state autonomy, the degree of societal organization, the variety, legitimacy and degree of interest group participation’ (Eising, 2008, p. 1169). In a corporatist system, the state plays a prominent role in shaping state–society relations, as it takes ‘a leading role in orchestrating interest group participation in the policy process’ (Granados and Knoke, 2005, p. 293). These systems are more restricted and top down, as governments grant privileged and often institutionalised access to a limited number of (mostly) socio-economic interests. Pluralist systems are characterised by a more dense and diverse organisational landscape. Rather than state intervention, societal dynamics – more precisely, competition among a wide array of groups – shapes the community of policy participants.

Usually this typology is applied to the macro level of political systems. Some scholars have argued that, when taking a meso-level perspective, considerable intra-system diversity can be observed (Christiansen, 2012; Falkner, 2000; Lang and Schneider, 2008), and that across the different phases of the policy cycle, such as policy preparation and implementation, interaction modes may vary (Christiansen *et al.*, 2010). In addition, taking a longitudinal view, research has demonstrated the dynamic nature of these concepts, implying that the formal institutions structuring interest group participation, as well as societal norms and practices linked to these interactions, may alter over time (Gerlich *et al.*, 1988; Lindvall and Sebring, 2005; Öberg *et al.*, 2011). Still, while acknowledging that the strength of corporatism, or pluralism, may vary across policy sectors as well as over time, other researchers have highlighted the significant and persistent impact of institutional legacies on state–society relations (Granados and Knoke, 2005, p. 303; Grote *et al.*, 2008; Pierson, 2004; Van Waarden, 2002). That is, while state–society relations evolve over time, peculiar features of neo-corporatist or pluralist polities tend to persist, albeit in adapted forms (Molina and Rhodes, 2002). For instance, in the ICT and chemical sectors, respectively, Achim Lang and Jürgen Grote observe that while sector-wide interest group networks in neo-corporatist Germany have become more diverse over time, they still display a higher degree of centralisation compared to the more pluralist practices in the United Kingdom, implying that the German inter-organisational networks encompass a few central and many peripheral players (Grote, 2008; Lang, 2008). Consequently, it can be argued that ‘every political system contains a specific set of organizing principles, which persist over time and can hardly be modified or even abandoned’ (Lang, 2008, p. 125). In a similar vein, Francisco Granados and David Knoke note that ‘national policy domains remain comparatively stable, socially constructed macrosystems whose boundaries and constituents persist over long periods’ (Granados and Knoke, 2005, p. 303). Hence, although the emergence of issue networks implies a more fragmented and disaggregated mode of policy making, much research emphasises the overall stable nature of state–society relations.

In recent years, our knowledge of interest community dynamics has increased considerably, as scholars started systematically to map interest group populations at the domestic, European and international level (Berkhout and Lowery, 2011; Halpin and Jordan, 2012; Hanegraaff *et al.*, 2011; Messer *et al.*, 2011). Although these efforts provide an excellent

picture of civil society dynamics, this work has not specifically focused on how governments seek to structure and regulate communities of organised interests, nor has it explored the extent to which organised interests enjoy similar degrees of access. Still, public authorities do not only affect the density and diversity of interest group communities through public funding, or the official recognition of particular types of organised interest as representatives of a certain field, sector or profession (Fraussen, forthcoming). They also shape interest community dynamics by determining the institutional and regulatory framework of consultation arrangements (see Broscheid and Coen, 2003; 2007). Advisory bodies are one particular form of consultation through which organised interests can be induced to provide useful information to policy makers, and they provide an excellent indicator of the extent to which privileged organised interests are institutionally integrated in policy-making processes (Christiansen *et al.*, 2010). By selecting policy insiders, thus including some interest organisations in advisory bodies while excluding others, public authorities ‘manipulate the strategic environment in which these associations and other direct interest representatives interact’ (Broscheid and Coen, 2003, p. 182).

Inclusion in advisory bodies can be conceived as an important institutionalised form of access, as governments aim to involve those organisations they consider most representative and/or knowledgeable of a particular policy domain. As a result, different types of policy insider may emerge, depending on the precise nature of these consultative arrangements and the objectives of government. For instance, by establishing a set of advisory bodies, governments may aim to broaden the set of policy participants. By involving a more diverse set of organised interests, such as environmental NGOs or consumer organisations, policy makers could become less dependent on traditionally powerful players, such as umbrella business associations and labour unions, particularly in the case of neo-corporatist countries such as Belgium. In this way, the community of policy insiders would embody a broader diversity of societal interests, and citizen and cause groups would enjoy rather similar degrees of access as focal labour unions and business associations. However, rather than providing equal access to all types of interest, a system of advisory bodies can also be characterised by a strong centre–periphery structure, with particular types of organised interest enjoying higher degrees of representation or a core position, while the involvement of other groups in the advisory setting remains rather restricted.

### **Explaining Varying Degrees of Insiderness**

Some organised interests manage to become members of many advisory bodies, holding multiple seats in each of them, while others are represented in just one advisory body or occupy only a single seat. This ‘insiderness’, or the varying involvement of organised interests in the consultation arrangements, is our main dependent variable. Our conceptualisation of interest groups includes all organised actors that do not seek public office and demonstrate some policy interest by seeking access to policy makers (Beyers *et al.*, 2008). As a result, our population encompasses a large and diverse set of group types: citizen organisations, labour unions, business associations, institutional groups, firms and institutions. Yet measuring and comparing variables such as resources, membership or decentralisation for a set of actors marked by considerable diversity (in terms of structure and main objectives) appears both methodologically and theoretically unsuitable. There–

fore, our theoretical expectations mostly concern constituency-based organisational forms, and consequently the empirical analysis will also focus mostly on this type of organisation.

We conceive the interaction between organised interests and government as an exchange relation in which interest groups supply policy-relevant resources to policy makers in return for representational benefits, in our case access to advisory councils (Beyers and Kerremans, 2007; Bouwen, 2002; Braun, 2012; Eising, 2007; Öberg *et al.*, 2011). This relational perspective presumes that the insider status of interest organisations is only partially a matter of strategic behaviour, and also depends on the legitimacy policy makers ascribe to a group (Maloney *et al.*, 1994, p. 26). This legitimacy relates to the possession of valuable resources, such as economic power, policy expertise or political support. Previous research has demonstrated that various organisational features that can be linked to these resources – such as group type, size of staff and nature of membership – may shape the degree of access enjoyed by organised interests (Halpin *et al.*, 2012; Klüver, 2012; Minkoff *et al.*, 2008). Here we distinguish features related to the type of interest represented, its resources, the organisation's structure and representative character, and its age.

Following a neo-corporatist logic, we expect one organisation type to be highly prominent, namely economic groups such as business and labour. Two crucial mechanisms lead to this hypothesis. First, organisations with a strong stake in economic policy-making are expected to prioritise administrative venues, as they are able to provide specialised and valuable expertise to public officials (Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2012; Christiansen *et al.*, 2010). Second, the constituency of these organised interests benefits directly from the policies advocated by these organisations. This structural feature gives them a comparative advantage in gaining access, as they are able to provide encompassing political support to policy makers. In contrast, citizen groups that represent minorities, or cause groups that pursue public goods or diffuse interests, are expected to enjoy a lower degree of insiderness (Halpin, 2006).

Resources are important as they allow organisations to survive, develop specialised expertise and set up campaigns to attract new supporters and members. Furthermore, in order to obtain political favours, groups should monitor political processes, need regular contact with policy makers and like-minded advocates and gather informational evidence to convince policy makers. And importantly, they have to maintain all these activities over long periods of time. Since upholding a regular presence at political-administrative venues exhausts organisational resources, well-resourced actors are more likely to become and stay active in the long run. In this article, we use the number of full-time equivalents employed by an interest organisation, which is also frequently considered a proxy for a group's degree of formalisation and professionalisation (Klüver, 2012; Klüver and Saurugger, 2013; Staggengborg, 1988), as indicative of its organisational resources. We expect organisations that employ more staff to enjoy higher degrees of insiderness.

Our third set of hypotheses deals with the structure of an organisation, which provides an indication of its representative nature. Our main expectation is that government officials are primarily interested in organisations that are able to speak on behalf of a large constituency, be it individuals or other associations. We use three variables to measure this representativeness. First, we expect umbrella organisations, that is, associations of

membership groups, to enjoy a higher degree of access. Public authorities seek to include such organisations as they are considered representative and knowledgeable of a broad field, and consequently can offer both policy expertise and broad societal support. Second, groups with a larger number of members, be it institutions, firms or citizens, are also more likely to belong to the set of core policy insiders, as this too implies a high level of societal support. Third, we distinguish between centralised and decentralised interest groups. Whereas some organisations have local chapters in provinces and cities, others lack such grassroots antennae. Organisations with local affiliates could be regarded as more representative, given their stronger embeddedness in society. On the other hand, organisations with decentralised offices might spend more resources on providing services to their members. We argue that decentralisation will have a positive effect on insidership, as the establishment of maintaining local chapters may generate considerable political and technical informational advantages.

Another important feature of organisations involves their age. Organisational ecology theory argues that newly established organisations face a higher threshold in being recognised as legitimate players by public authorities and other organised interests (Gray and Lowery, 2000; Hannan and Freeman, 1989). As older organisations have had more time to develop organisational capabilities and are better embedded in social and institutional networks, they will be more familiar to policy makers. Furthermore, by controlling for age, we can also examine how easily recently established groups gain access to advisory bodies.

To summarise, an overview of our six hypotheses is presented:

- H1. Socio-economic interests (business groups and labour unions) enjoy a higher level of access to the consultation system.
- H2. Interests with a higher number of staff enjoy a higher degree of access to the consultation system.
- H3. Umbrella organisations are more likely to enjoy a high degree of access to the consultation system.
- H4. A larger membership will be positively related to the degree of access to the consultation system.
- H5. Organisations with a decentralised character will enjoy a higher degree of access to the consultation system.
- H6. Older organised interests enjoy a high degree of access to the consultation system.

### **Advisory Councils in Belgium**

We test these hypotheses empirically by analysing varying levels of insidership in the community of insider groups in Belgium. More specifically, we focus on the advisory setting in one of Belgium's regions, Flanders, the northern part of the country that contains 60 per cent of the population. Traditionally, Belgium has been classified as moderately corporatist, having a system of generalised political exchange that has become somewhat less neo-corporatist since the 1970s, rather similar to Germany and Denmark, yet less corporatist than, for instance, Austria or Norway (Bloodgood *et al.*, 2013; Lijphart and Crepaz, 1991; Luyten, 2006; Siaroff, 1999). In addition, the Belgian federation can be



characterised as a dual federal system, which implies the absence of a hierarchy of legal norms. As a result, the regional parliaments and governments stand on equal footing with the federal political institutions. Through a set of successive state reforms during the past four decades, Flanders has gained substantial political autonomy. Currently, Flanders enjoys a high degree of legislative, executive and administrative self-rule in a wide range of domains, including education, agriculture, environment, research and development, urban planning, culture and logistics.

Our focus on a sub-state entity such as Flanders has broader relevance, as it enables us to address some general questions regarding the representation of organised interests. First, issues that are typically managed through neo-corporatist arrangements, such as labour market policy and social security, are still largely situated at the Belgian federal level. The policy responsibilities of Belgian sub-national authorities, however, are mostly concentrated in areas that traditionally were not characterised by strong neo-corporatist structures. One of the key questions is whether the institutional development of sub-national entities with broad policy responsibilities, such as Flanders, leads to a reproduction of the neo-corporatist arrangements that are typical of the entity from which Flanders devolved (for other sub-state jurisdictions, see also Keating, 2013). More generally, many scope conditions resemble trends and patterns observed in other Western democracies, such as the growing density and diversity of the interest group population and a gradual decline of corporatist practices (Christiansen *et al.*, 2010). While much research on interest group behaviour has focused on pluralist polities (such as the UK and the US), knowledge of these dynamics in continental and neo-corporatist European systems is generally more limited (Bernhagen, 2012, p. 572).

The Flemish advisory system has recently been considerably reformed. The main aim of this reform was to establish a more transparent advisory setting that would allow the participation of a greater diversity of organised interests in policy-making processes. The main advisory bodies involve the Strategic Advisory Councils (SACs) (Popelier *et al.*, 2012). They are considered a central component of the Flemish administration and a crucial instrument to 'keep a finger on the pulse of civil society' (Bourgeois, 2009, p. 22). At this moment, there are twelve SACs. These SACs can establish sub-councils or committees, as most of them have done. The sub-councils are usually established in order to seek more specialised input regarding a particular sub-field. For instance, the Minaraad (Environmental Council) has sub-councils dealing with forestry, conservation, sustainable development and hunting. However, the twelve SACs represent the most visible components of the consultation landscape in Flanders. These councils endorse the reports drawn up by the sub-councils (and working groups), which are primarily involved in the preparation of more specialised policy advice and consequently deal with rather technical affairs. With the exception of one SAC (VLABEST – Administrative Affairs), all SACs are 'societal councils', implying that organised interests account for the majority of members. In this way, the focus is on 'representative advice' – counsel from organisations that are considered representative of the field – rather than 'expert advice' from independent specialists, as is the case in the Administrative Affairs Council (Fobé *et al.*, 2009, p. 32). The set-up and functioning of these bodies is specified in the Decree on Strategic Advisory Councils, which defines them as 'every permanent body, established by decree, whose

main task involves advice on strategic policy matters to the Flemish Parliament, the Flemish Government or individual ministers' (Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 2003). As a result, the SACs may play an important role in several phases of the policy cycle, including agenda setting, policy formulation and policy evaluation.

We should underline that the selection mechanisms for the twelve SACs and the various sub-councils are not identical. The composition of the twelve SACs, the organisations included and the number of seats they hold is determined by the Flemish government. The government invites the 'representative' organised interests to propose possible members for the SACs, and finally appoints a selection of these candidates. What 'representative' actually implies remains under-specified, and is largely left to the discretion of the Flemish government. It appears that this notion primarily relates to existing organisational and bureaucratic routines, and refers to organised interests 'that regularly knock on the policy-maker's door or participate in formal platforms bringing together policymakers and the most important interest organizations' (Poppelaars, 2009, p. 218). In contrast, the set-up and composition of the sub-councils is largely controlled by the particular SAC. This implies that the members of a respective SAC decide who participates in its various sub-councils. As a result, insiders, that is, organised interests that are included in the SACs, possess the ability to shape the form of the Flemish consultation system.

### **The Core–Periphery Structure of Advisory Arrangements in Belgium**

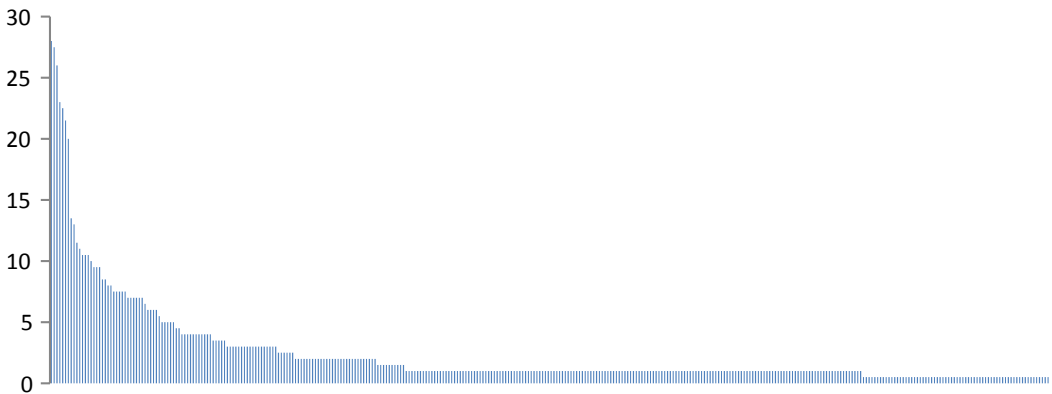
Most research on the advisory setting in Belgium has focused on the (sub-optimal) functioning of these councils and their role in the policy process, whereas the degree of access enjoyed by different organised interests to these advisory bodies has received little scholarly attention (Fobé *et al.*, 2009; SERV, 2009; but see Verlinden, 2010). Nonetheless, the particular composition of advisory bodies can be a rather contested matter (Dewachter, 1995, p. 74; Ongena, 2010, p. 231). One of our first tasks involved the identification of the organised interests that enjoy institutionalised access to policy makers through these advisory bodies, encompassing the twelve SACs and the 31 sub-councils. Based on publicly available information on the SACs' websites and their yearly reports, we created a database containing all individuals who are members of a council, as well as the organisation they represent. In case of doubt, the secretariat of the particular SAC or the affiliated organisation was contacted.

In total, 1,574 individuals (including experts, government officials and interest group staff) were identified. These individuals can be related to 352 organised interests. Subsequently, all these organisations were coded, using information available on their websites, annual accounts or publicly available reports. In order to code organisational characteristics, an adjusted version of the coding scheme developed by Marcel Hanegraaff *et al.* (2011) was applied. For each actor identified, we coded the organisation type. In the case of membership organisations, we coded variables such as organisational structure (e.g. level of decentralisation), membership (type and numbers), staff size and the year of founding. When we could not find this information on the website or in other sources, we contacted the organisation's secretariat.

One of the first things we observed when plotting all organisations and the number of advisory bodies in which they are represented is the highly skewed nature of consultation



**Figure 1: Distribution of Seats for Each Organisation in Flemish Consultation System ( $n = 352$ )**

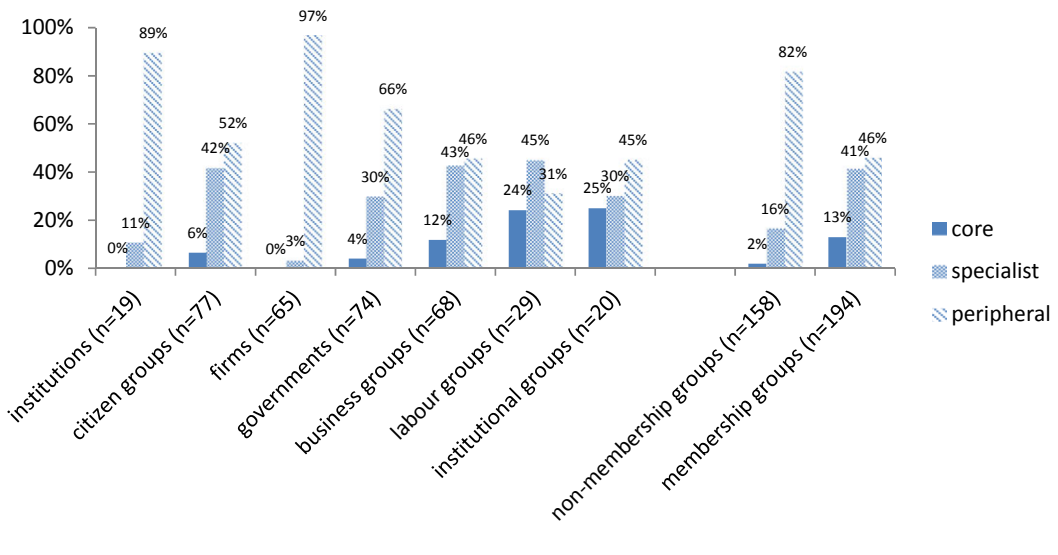


**Table 1: Degrees of Insideriness in the Flemish Consultation System ( $n = 352$ , Average Level of Councils and Seats)**

	Frequency	Strategic councils		Sub-councils		All councils	
		N Councils	N seats	N Councils	N seats	N Councils	N seats
Core insiders	28 (8%)	3.71	6.71	5.68	9.79	9.39	10.70
Specialist	106 (30%)	1	1.56	1.38	3.29	2.38	3.02
Peripheral	218 (62%)	–	–	1.14	1.61	1.14	1.14

practices (see Figure 1). When considering the distribution of the number of councils in which organisations are represented, we observed that most organisations have one seat in one council, and that about 15 per cent of the organisations possess 60 per cent of the seats in the advisory councils. Following Maloney *et al.* (1994, p. 30), we distinguished three categories of insiders, namely (1) *core insiders*, who are represented in more than one SAC; (2) *specialist insiders*, who are represented in only one of the twelve SACs; and (3) *peripheral insiders*, who are represented in one of the sub-councils, but do not have seats in one of the twelve SACs.

When this distinction is made, we observe that the largest proportion of groups (62 per cent) is only represented in the sub-councils (see Table 1), which we consider as the periphery of the Flemish consultation system. Furthermore, the core insiders, groups who enjoy access to more than one strategic advisory council, constitute only a small minority (8 per cent of the full population). Thirty per cent of the actors consulted are represented in only one of the twelve SACs. As suggested above, one might argue that the creation of more advisory bodies, for instance through additional sub-councils, would expand the opportunities for new groups to be included. This indeed happens, as 218 groups

**Figure 2: Organisation Types Involved in the Flemish Consultation System ( $n = 352$ )**

participate through these sub-councils. However, the establishment of these new advisory bodies and the selection of their members is to a considerable extent determined by the SACs. It is striking to observe that those who already have a substantial presence in the twelve SACs, the core insiders, are (on average) involved in many more sub-councils (on average almost six) and occupy the largest number of seats in these sub-councils (on average almost ten seats per organisation). Those who merely have access to the sub-councils, the peripheral players, usually occupy only one seat in one sub-council. The specialist insiders, who have one seat in one SAC, have a somewhat better representation in the sub-councils, although the number of their seats, and the number of sub-councils in which they participate, is much lower compared to the access enjoyed by the core insiders. This suggests that some basic features of the existing consultation system, for instance its skewed nature, are reproduced when new advisory bodies are created. That is, while the expansion of the advisory bodies implies relative gains for newcomers and makes the system more diverse, at the same time core insiders also tend to be strongly represented in newly established advisory bodies.

Before turning to the multivariate analyses that examine how varying levels of insidership relate to organisational features, we briefly describe the different organisation types that are represented in the advisory councils (see Figure 2). Confirming earlier research on interest group populations (Halpin *et al.*, 2012; Salisbury, 1984), we find that a large number of the organisations involved are institutions or non-membership organisations ( $n = 158$  or 45 per cent). Still, most organisations consulted ( $n = 194$  or 55 per cent) represent a specific membership or constituency. In the first group, we find institutions ( $n = 19$ , for instance cultural and educational institutions), firms ( $n = 65$ , frequently appointed by umbrella business associations) and governmental actors ( $n = 74$ , mostly cities and provinces, but also operational elements of government, such as universities, airports

and public agencies). These groups are less likely to be situated among the set of core or specialist insiders and mostly gain access through the more peripheral sub-councils. Among the membership and constituency-based groups, we have a highly diverse set of actors comprising institutional groups, such as associations of hospitals and schools ( $n = 20$ ), citizen groups, including for instance patient groups, environmental and development organisations ( $n = 77$ ), labour unions ( $n = 29$ ) and business associations ( $n = 68$ ), the latter two including sector-specific and multi-industry umbrella associations. Generally, these constituency-based organisations show a substantially stronger presence as core and specialist insiders, while they less frequently fulfil more peripheral forms of representation.

### Explaining Varying Levels of Insiderness

This descriptive mapping of the Flemish advisory system demonstrates that the system is skewed towards a small set of actors. There is a preponderance of constituency-based organisations in the core of the consultation system and a large number of non-membership organisations (institutions and firms) at the periphery. As mentioned above, our theoretical expectations regarding insiderness mostly concern constituency-based organisational forms, and therefore the multivariate analyses will focus on this type of organisation. In the first part of this section, we take a closer look at the measurement of our dependent and independent variables, after which we present our results.

The two sets of models we test have a slightly different dependent variable measuring an organisation's insiderness or embeddedness in the consultation system. Our first dependent variable is the categorisation we used above, namely the distinction between core, specialist and peripheral insiders. As policy makers define who gains access to the twelve SACs (and thus decide which organisations become core and specialist insiders), this measure taps the relation between organisational features and the status public authorities ascribe to certain groups. For analysing this variable we use a multinomial logistic regression (see Table 2). The second dependent variable is the number of seats an organisation occupies, weighted by whether it concerns full or substitute membership of a council, the latter implying that the delegated person only participates when a full member is unable to attend. This variable strongly correlates with the number of councils (including strategic and sub-councils) in which a group is represented ( $r = 0.95$ ), but the weighted measure is substantively justified as it measures the extensiveness of access. It also indicates more variation in terms of access, considering that some organisations have two or even three seats in only one council ( $\bar{x}$  seats = 3.86 while  $\bar{x}$  councils = 3.15). As the number of seats is characterised by a non-normal distribution ( $\bar{x} = 6.38$ ,  $s = 9.78$ ), and considering that all our tests demonstrate that the dispersion parameter differs significantly from zero, we use a negative binomial model for testing the relative impact of each independent variable (Long, 1997). Because the dependent variable cannot have zero values – all observations have at least one seat – the negative binomial is estimated with a zero truncated model.

Although the distinction between core, specialist insiders and peripheral actors correlates with the number of seats ( $F = 195.54$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.36$ ), there is an interesting and relevant conceptual difference between the two measures. While obtaining a position as a core or specialist insider – that is, being a member of one of the SACs – is primarily decided by public authorities, the weighted number of seats in all advisory councils is

**Table 2: Predicting Involvement in Flemish Consultation Bodies (Multinomial Logistic Regression,  $n = 188$ )**

	<i>Dependent variable</i>		
	<i>Core</i>	<i>Specialists</i>	<i>Peripheral</i>
<i>Independent variables</i>			
Intercept	-4.43 (1.23)***	-2.38 (0.79)**	–
Type			
1 = institutional group	2.29 (0.88)**	0.07 (0.62)	–
2 = labour groups	0.37 (0.93)	-0.20 (0.65)	
3 = business group	1.05 (0.78)	0.28 (0.44)	
4 = citizen group (ref category)	–		
Umbrella organisation			
1 = umbrella organisation	1.77 (0.64)**	0.83 (0.43) <sup>†</sup>	–
0 = otherwise	–		
Membership density			
3 = high density	1.32 (0.91)	0.73 (0.55)	–
2 = medium density	-0.11 (0.83)	0.40 (0.41)	
1 = low density (ref category)	–	–	
Decentralisation			
1 = organisation has local branches	0.36 (0.72)	0.10 (0.43)	–
0 = no local branches	–		
Staff resources			
Number of full-time equivalents employed by the organisation (logged)	0.65 (0.24)**	0.31 (0.16)*	–
Age			
Organisational age in years (logged)	-0.23 (0.32)	0.26 (0.22)	–
Model fit	$n = 188$ $-2LL = 0.324.3$ $df = 18$ $\chi^2 = 46.5$ Nagelkerke = 0.25		

Notes: Standard errors between brackets; \*\*\* > 0.001; \*\* > 0.01; \* > 0.05; <sup>†</sup> > 0.1.

significantly affected by the organised interests that are represented in the twelve SACs (see above). In other words, the weighted number of seats owned by an organisation is substantially shaped by the internal dynamics of the advisory setting, rather than by the status public authorities ascribe to particular groups. This has important consequences for the interpretation of our findings. Our overall expectation is that most core insiders are encompassing umbrella and/or well-resourced associations. If these same features explain why some actors occupy relatively more seats than others, this indicates that core insiders also have a high level of representation in the more specialised sub-councils. Such a finding would confirm the expectation that, rather than specialising in a policy niche, groups that

profit from existing neo-corporatist arrangements, such as labour unions or peak business associations, tend to maintain or even further expand their involvement in interest intermediation (Van den Bulck, 1992, p. 43).

As independent variables we have the organisational age in years (logged), the number of full-time equivalents employed by the organisation (logged), whether the organisation has local branches or not, whether it concerns an umbrella association, and the distinction between group types, differentiating between labour unions, business associations, citizen groups and institutional groups. Our measurement of the membership density needs some clarification. There is no straightforward indicator that allows us to analyse different types of organisation simultaneously, as one cannot simply compare a count of the individual membership of a labour union with the company membership of business associations. Therefore, we created a categorical indicator classifying the membership density for two membership types, namely individuals and institutions (private and public). Based on the respective number of individuals or institutions, three groups of equal size or tertiles were created, allowing us to distinguish interest organisations with a low, medium and high amount of members. Our main objective with this categorisation was to find out whether organisations with many members (individuals, corporations or institutions) are more strongly integrated in consultation practices. As it was in some cases impossible to find information on members, staff and age, our analysis remains limited to 97 per cent or 188 of the 194 organisations.

Tables 2 and 3 represent the results of our analyses. Table 2 considers the categorical dependent variable distinguishing core, specialist and peripheral insiders in a multinomial logistic regression, estimating the core actors relative to peripheral ones, and comparing specialist players to peripheral ones. If we consider the model comparing core actors to peripheral actors, we observe that being an umbrella organisation increases the multinomial log odds of belonging to the core (relative to being peripheral) by 1.77 units, while holding all other variables constant. In terms of probabilities, this means that the chance of belonging to the core while being an umbrella citizen group without any staff has a probability of almost 6 per cent while this is only 1 per cent for the intercept model (meaning that niche organisations almost never belong to the core). This implies that umbrella organisations are five times more likely to be a core player relative to peripheral players.

The results in Table 2 also show that core, specialist and peripheral actors do not significantly differ as regards their organisational type. The only remarkable exception is that institutional groups are much more likely to be part of the core relative to the periphery. These associations represent, for instance, local governments, yet also hospitals or schools. Concerning resources we observe that, as hypothesised, organisations with more staff are more likely to be in the core or the specialist group, relative to the periphery. We have mixed findings regarding the relation between organisational representativeness and a group's position in the consultation system. Whereas umbrella groups have a higher chance of being part of the core and specialist set relative to the periphery, for membership density the findings are less clear-cut, while the effects of decentralisation are not significant. Yet generally, both representativeness and resources appear to have significant explanatory power for an organisation's position in the advisory setting.

**Table 3: Predicting Number of Seats in Flemish Consultation Bodies (Zero Truncated Negative Binomial)**

<i>Independent variables</i>	
Intercept	-0.23 (0.49)
Type	
1 = institutional group	0.39 (0.36)
2 = labour groups	0.76 (0.36)*
3 = business group	0.10 (0.26)
4 = citizen group (ref category)	–
Umbrella organisation	
1 = umbrella organisation	0.85 (0.07)**
0 = otherwise	
Membership density	
3 = high density	1.17 (0.36)**
2 = medium density	0.55 (0.28)*
1 = low density (ref category)	–
Decentralisation	
1 = organisation has local branches	-0.05 (0.29)
0 = no local branches	–
Staff resources	
Number of full-time equivalents employed by the organisation (logged)	0.30 (0.10)**
Age	
Organisational age in years (logged)	-0.12 (0.12)
Dispersion parameter	1.79 (0.51)***
Model fit	<i>n</i> = 188
	-LL = 1651.42
	AIC = 947.2
	BIC = 982.8
	df = 9

Notes: Standard errors between brackets; \*\*\* > 0.001; \*\* > 0.01; \* > 0.05; † > 0.1.

In Table 3 we present the parameter estimates, which can be interpreted as how much a unit change in the independent variable causes a change in the logs of expected counts of the dependent variable, given that other independent variables remain constant. For instance, a citizen umbrella group without local branches, with the median staff size (9 FTE), a high density of members and the average age (27 years) has a log of expected counts of 2.05, which results in an expected number of 3.86 seats.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, if the same organisation had a low membership density, its expected number of seats would diminish to merely one. Furthermore, citizen groups that are not an umbrella organisation and lack a considerable membership – compared to other organisations – would only have 0.51 seats, whereas a labour union with similar features would have an expected representation of 1.09 seats.



Based on these results, two hypotheses need to be rejected. First, although the sign of the age variable is negative, running against our expectation that older organisations gain access more easily, this effect cannot be considered as statistically significant. Second, whether or not an organisation has local branches equally generates no significant impact, and thus disconfirms one of our more debatable expectations. Although organisations with local affiliates might be somewhat more representative and have some specific political and technical informational advantages, this formal feature does not lead to more access.

Three factors have a significant and substantial impact. Organisations with a dense membership, umbrella associations and a large staff size occupy more seats. If we compare, for instance, the average non-umbrella citizen groups for the three categories of membership density, the expected number of seats increases from 0.76 (low), to 1.33 (medium) and 2.46 (high), respectively. For an umbrella citizen group these expected seats are 1.78 (low membership), 3.10 (medium membership) and 5.74 (high membership). Finally, although business and institutions have slightly more seats than citizens' groups, these differences are too small to be considered meaningful. But organisations representing labour interests have been very successful in gaining access, as they have considerably more seats compared to other organisation types. This latter finding is probably related to the broader network of these different types of organised interest. That is, business and institutional groups can easily involve their members in advocacy work, which is reflected in the high number of institutions and firms in the various sub-committees (see Figure 2). In contrast, labour unions cannot delegate seats to affiliated institutions (or companies for that matter) and consequently always rely on their own staff to fill vacancies in advisory bodies.

Three variables – staff resources, being an umbrella association and to some extent membership – that predict the difference between core, specialist and peripheral insiders (Table 2) are also significant in predicting the number of seats. This shows that resourceful and representative insiders have been successful in keeping their presence in the more specialised sub-councils at the same (high) level as their presence in the more centrally located SACs.

We can also illustrate this propensity to reproduce existing patterns of representation by looking at the decision process that defines the composition of the advisory bodies. As mentioned above, the composition of the twelve SACs is mostly decided by the government, but often public authorities delegate the appointment of consulted actors to the advisory bodies or the organised interests themselves. Our evidence suggests that core insiders to a considerable extent shape the development of the consultation system. If we consider the twelve SACs, we observe that 95 actors (mostly organised interests, institutions and other advisory bodies) decide on 315 available seats. More relevant, however, is how many seats are decided by each of these actors. Here, we notice that about 54 per cent of these seats are decided by 15 per cent of the identified actors. Moreover, 35 per cent of the seats are preserved for the organisations that are members of the Social and Economic Affairs Council (SERV). These include the three umbrella labour unions (ACV, ABVV, ACLVB) as well as the four main business associations (Boerenbond, Unizo, Verso and VOKA). In contrast, none of the citizen organisations, such as consumer and environmental NGOs, enjoy such extensive privileges.

In sum, our results suggest that the Flemish advisory system is quite sensitive to the representative nature of the organisations consulted. Organisations with members, in particular those with many members and umbrella groups, are much better represented than those lacking such features. In addition, institutional groups, representing for instance local governments and health institutions, also gain considerably more access. This finding resonates with the dominance of institutions within interest group populations (particularly within the domain of health and education), and the observation that ‘much political lobbying is government lobbying government’ (Halpin and Thomas, 2012, p. 14; Salisbury, 1984). On the other hand, several of our findings point to neo-corporatist patterns. The fact that umbrella organisations are so well represented, in particular the peak business and labour associations (see above), confirms this expectation. Finally, the results also show that professionalised organisations – those with extensive staff resources – gain much easier access to a large number of councils compared to less well-equipped groups. All this indicates some resilience of neo-corporatist patterns in the Flemish advisory system, which implies that a limited number of mostly economic interests can be considered rather privileged partners of government.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Although the Flemish consultation system involves a diverse set of organised interests and creates opportunities for recently established groups, our findings portray the resilience of neo-corporatist practices in Flanders. When unpacking the community of policy insiders – that is, distinguishing core, specialist and peripheral insiders – we observe that umbrella associations and key institutional groups, representing local governments and public institutions, occupy a central or core insider position. Yet when considering the total number of seats, a more skewed image emerges. Vested interests, particularly labour unions and peak business associations, are much more likely to be represented in multiple strategic councils, while also gaining extensive access in the more specialised councils. Moreover, these groups generally have a broader level of engagement compared to more specialised citizen groups (see also Halpin and Thomas, 2012), as they also have a strong presence in councils that deal with non-economic issues, such as education, culture and environment. Furthermore, due to a higher degree of professionalisation and a greater amount of resources (in terms of financial means and staff), these interest organisations also demonstrate a higher degree of activity in the strategic advisory councils.

One might argue that the findings reported here overstate the political capacities of economic groups, as these consultation arrangements represent only one single and perhaps a less important policy-making venue. Perhaps more pluralist dynamics might be observed in other policy fora, which are less institutionalised or more public. The key players of the consultation system, however, are also quite dominant in the media arena (Wouters *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, economic interests and resourceful actors are also more likely to lobby through other (informal) channels (Fobé *et al.*, 2009), which corroborates earlier research underlining the cumulative nature of access, with ‘frequent access in one area spilling over to other areas’ (Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2012). In other words, core policy insiders tend to demonstrate a high level of activity across various venues. While a larger and more diverse set of interests might become involved through expanding consultation

systems, our study shows that in this case traditional insiders have benefited considerably from such developments, as they were able to maintain or even strengthen their degree of insiderness. Despite efforts to consult a more diverse set of organised interests, significant differences regarding the quality of access have remained a typical feature of the advisory system.

In the last decade, the systematic study of interest group communities has improved substantially. These studies have revealed crucial insights about community dynamics, such as niche behaviour, survival rates and bandwagoning, which are central to understanding skewed and biased representation patterns to which early scholars of interest group politics referred. Although generally the size of interest group communities has increased in numbers over time, some have argued that this development has not really affected the inner circle of policy participants, which has remained rather stable (Halpin and Thomas, 2012). While most of these analyses concern more pluralist polities, the tendency of any political system to 'discriminate in favor of established groups and interests' (Truman, 1951, p. xli) might be even stronger in neo-corporatist political systems, and could impede the mobilisation of new issues or conflicts into politics. Still, to assess truly how population dynamics translate into political action, and to assess the stability of the community of insiders, additional comparative research that relates the development of the community of policy insiders to the full population of organised interests, as well as research on organisational dynamics within policy domains, is needed.

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## About the Authors

**Bert Fraussen** is a PhD candidate in Political Science at the Antwerp Centre for Institutions and Multilevel Politics (ACIM), where he is preparing a PhD on the organisation and development of organised interests. In addition to interest groups, his research interests include public management, organisation studies and European Union politics. Bert Fraussen, Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, St-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium; email: [bert.fraussen@uantwerpen.be](mailto:bert.fraussen@uantwerpen.be)

**Jan Beyers** is Professor of Political Science at the University of Antwerp and Director of the Antwerp Centre for Institutions and Multilevel Politics (ACIM). In addition to this, he is Visiting Research Professor at Agder University (Norway). His current research and teaching cover institutional theories, comparative politics, European Union politics, interest groups and research methods. Jan Beyers, Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, St-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium; email: [jan.beyers@uantwerpen.be](mailto:jan.beyers@uantwerpen.be)

**Tom Donas** was a PhD Researcher at the Antwerp Centre for Institutions and Multilevel Politics (ACIM) where he defended his dissertation in 2013. His doctoral research dealt with the role of territorial interests in the EU, more specifically the lobbying practices of Brussels-based regional representations. He also obtained an MA in Statistics (QASS – University of Leuven, 2013). Tom Donas, Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, St-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium; email: [tom.donas@uantwerpen.be](mailto:tom.donas@uantwerpen.be)

## Notes

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- 1 Some organisations have one (or more) substitutive seats. These substitutive seats were counted as 0.5, giving some counts a fractional component of 0.5. Yet as count models such as a negative binomial cannot model decimals we multiplied the original dependent variable by two in order to have whole integers. For the interpretation of the parameter estimates we need to divide this number (in this example 7.72) by two in order to have the correct estimate of the predicted number of seats (here 3.86).

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