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The Nature and Dynamics of Access: Conceptualizing and Measuring Procedural Engagement Dynamics Between EU Interest Groups and Public Officials

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ABSTRACT

Policy engagement procedures now demand more from interest groups and require them to adopt more collaborative-minded behaviors when interacting with policymakers. While existing scholarship largely conceptualizes policy engagement as policy access, commonly measured by frequency or type of engagement, studies examining the precise nature and dynamics of policy access remain rare. We examine how interest groups experience their engagement with policymakers, and whether this impacts their overall level of satisfaction in consultation processes. We unpack the nature of what this engagement entails by considering enabling and restricting procedural aspects covered by the collaborative governance literature to complement the focus on policy access by the interest group literature. Analyzing EU interest group survey data, we find engagement processes feature both enabling and restricting elements, and vary across group types. Furthermore, we clarify the relation between enabling features, and levels of satisfaction with the consultation process, as well as the role of political contestation and prior involvement.

1 | Introduction

Interest group scholars have long been interested in studying the policy engagement of interest groups. By and large, groups' policy engagement has been conceptualized as a matter of securing access to the policymaking process. This is not surprising as having access to the policymaking process is an important condition for exerting influence on public decision-making.

Founded on an exchange logic (Bouwen 2002, 2004; Grömping and Halpin 2019 for a more recent application), leading hypotheses conjecture that interest group access to engagement processes is secured by offering policy goods demanded from public institutions. Such goods mostly include expertise and policy information that public officials require for effective policy and lawmaking to have societal support. Studies examining how policy access varies across public institutions and

interest groups (for instance, see C. Braun 2012; Bruycker and Beyers 2019; Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Binderkrantz et al. 2017), have predominantly adopted count measures as indicators of access (i.e. frequency) or types of engagement. That is, they offer counts of how frequently interest groups filed input in consultations, participated in roundtables, or attained membership to advisory boards in order to access the policymaking process (D. Halpin and Thomas 2011; Weiler et al. 2019; Beyers 2002; Bouwen 2002; Binderkrantz et al. 2017; Eising 2007; Rasmussen and Gross 2015).

Although this has brought us fundamental knowledge regarding which activities groups engage in, as well as subsequent biases in policy access or consequences regarding policy and political influence and representation, it arguably provides us a relatively static or partial snapshot of interest group policy engagement. Take for instance the EU AI Act introduced in June 2024—one of the world's first comprehensive AI regulatory packages.

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Consultations held by the EU Commission spanned over 2 years involving an array of diverse stakeholders and consultative methods (Cancela-Outeda 2024). While many stakeholders were granted formal access to submit feedback or attend multiple sessions, many scrutinized the process for reasons such as resource asymmetries, technical capacity barriers, timing or format constraints and (lack of) information flows. In plain terms, having a seat at the table did not translate into ideal policy engagement across stakeholders uniformly. Merely accounting for stakeholders' presence therefore paints an incomplete picture of how we understand engagement beyond initial access. Instead, we need to also more carefully consider what groups encounter during the process and the nature of their interactions.

A parallel picture also emerges when casting a wider view on how stakeholders perceive public consultations more generally. In a 2019 European Court of Auditors special report surveying stakeholders on public consultations, only 43% of groups were satisfied with the engagement process (EU Commission 2019, 18). This low percentage invites us to more carefully scrutinize how we understand engagement processes by means of how groups *experience* these processes with EU policymakers.

Taken together, this signals the existence of a black-box that emerges once groups attain access. This implies an important gap in our understanding of how groups engage and interact with policymakers when formulating policy. More specifically, it requires a different approach, that identifies and assesses distinct components of these dynamics, and what adjacent factors may simultaneously impact them. As of now, studies examining the *nature of policy engagement*, and interest groups' process experiences, are rare.

This study aims to address this gap and contribute to the literature in three ways. First, we advance our understanding of policy engagement between interest groups and EU officials, by conceptualizing the nature of engagement beyond initial access, commonly measured by frequency (i.e. number of meetings) or types of engagement (presence across different consultation procedures) (Albareda 2020; Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Binderkrantz et al. 2017; Fraussen et al. 2015; D. Halpin and Thomas 2011). Second, we add a behavioral perspective to study policy engagement by examining how interest groups *experience* their engagement rather than *counting* it. In this way, we complement studies on the frequency and diversity of engagement with policymakers. Finally, we demonstrate its analytical value by testing the relation between engagement experiences with overall levels of satisfaction as an important indication of decision-making quality and inclusive stakeholder engagement.

This is carried out in a step-wise approach. First, we offer a more contextualized understanding of the engagement dynamics by conceptualizing policy engagement (and thus the nature and dynamics of access) as a multidimensional process with features that either *enable* and/or *restrict* interest groups and policymakers to engage with one another. We do this by merging insights from interest group and collaborative governance literature to conceptually unpack policy engagement. The literature on collaborative governance sheds light on key procedural aspects of engagement and interactions between

policymakers and stakeholders. Complementing the common approach of studying policy access, as mere participation or presence with procedural dynamics of engagement, allows us to disentangle engagement processes and conceptualize how interest groups experience their engagement with public officials.

Adopting this conceptualization therefore provides an additional yardstick for current scholarship to study policy engagement of interest groups and policymakers. Its novel value is two-fold. Firstly, access can imply different things to different actors. Capturing these simultaneous dynamics thereby provides a more contextualized understanding of policymakers' behaviors and what groups experience when seeking to influence policy. This can help inform us on the quality of engagement (Tanasescu 2009) but also reveal additional reasons why groups continue to employ certain strategies (Binderkrantz et al. 2023; Lowery 2007). Secondly, our conceptualization can inform practitioners directly—be that government officials or interest groups, as a reference point to pinpoint bottlenecks and catalysts in engagement processes and offer a more fine-grained tool to evaluate the collaborative activities of groups who do have access. This can complement and apprise current studies on how to design or improve current consultation and collaborative regimes to enable more constructive interactions among interest groups and policymakers (Binderkrantz et al. 2021; Fraussen et al. 2020; Emerson et al. 2011).

Secondly, we empirically assess the added value of our policy engagement conceptualization. We conduct a factor analysis of how interest groups perceive their interactions with EU policymakers. Subsequently, we create two latent variables captured by the factor analysis to empirically examine how these enabling or restricting experiences are related to stakeholder satisfaction in consultation processes via a regression analysis. Stakeholder satisfaction is a measure commonly used in the collaborative governance literature on process dynamics (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson et al. 2012), as it is key to the procedural quality of policy engagement.

Our findings show that groups who experience more enabling elements in their interactions with policymakers indicate higher satisfaction in the consultation process and groups who experience more restricting engagement show less satisfaction. Notably, additional findings underscore the importance of political contestation. Regardless of whether interest groups experience more enabling or restricting dynamics in their interactions with policymakers, higher levels of political conflict are associated with lower satisfaction.

This signals two broader implications of this study. On the one hand, from a process-design perspective—this finding spotlights a potential limitation to our current understanding of policy engagement. Namely, while scholarship has often focused on what makes processes more inclusive and accessible (i.e. enabling), political contestation seems to be a more fundamental driver to shaping engagement processes. This merits further research into the multidimensionality of political conflict and how it is managed by policymakers. This is especially important given the increasing politicization of policymaking processes at the EU and national level. On the other hand, from an organizational or actor level perspective, this may suggest

that policymakers and interest groups participating in these processes tend to withdraw from investing in collaborative behaviors when other factors create strong disincentives. This could mean for instance, that when an issue is more politically contentious, it derails or forces actors to halt an otherwise collaborative process. It may also indicate institutional stress on policymakers to abandon collaborative behaviors (Sullivan et al. 2025).

2 | Policy Engagement: From Policy Access to Procedural Engagement Dynamics

Leading theories on policy engagement distinguish between an interest group and government perspective toward engagement processes. The interest group perspective is mostly concerned with groups' ability to secure access to the policymaking process. These so-called exchange models emphasize an interorganizational interdependency from which it logically follows that groups offering valuable resources to policymakers obtain (higher levels of) access (e.g. Albareda 2020; Binderkrantz et al. 2017; Bouwen 2004; Pfeffer et al. 1978). The government perspective, also termed the "demand-side", emphasizes the demand of government officials for resources, thereby explaining patterns of engagement between policymakers and interest groups (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Leech et al. 2005).

Two decades after the first studies emerged on the demand and supply side of interest group access to the policymaking process, we observe a proliferation of multiorganizational arrangements that increasingly require policymakers to govern more collaboratively (Ansell and Gash 2008). This has intensified (resource) dependencies between actors more than ever before, creating unique challenges or demands that can often undermine certain stakeholders, and reinforce rather than alleviate existing shortcomings of policy formulation processes. For instance, increased participatory demands may inadvertently create obstacles for less-resourced groups who must consequently be more selective in their policy engagement (Binderkrantz et al. 2023; Waardenburg et al. 2020; Purdy 2012). Thus, existing power imbalances of well-resourced groups may be further entrenched. Nevertheless, current interest group scholarship only provides us a partial picture. While understanding stakeholder and policymaker positions is an important starting point for explaining access, the fact that these collaborative practices occur in contexts of unequal or contested access (Binderkrantz et al. 2023) requires us to consider other bodies of literature that can explain the dynamics of these participatory settings. It is at this juncture we therefore need to pause and conceptually peel back what engagement with policymakers looks like once groups gain access. To do this, we consider bridging insights from the collaborative governance literature.

The collaborative governance literature offers an appropriate complement to access studies in its ability to help us examine procedural dimensions of how actors work together in policymaking processes beyond their mere presence or policy positions. As our starting point, we make use of Emerson et al. (2012) collaborative governance regime framework who thoroughly outline three key "collaborative dynamics." A first

dynamic involves *principled engagement*- or quality interactions and dynamics required for how diverse parties come together to solve problems. This includes communicative elements like discourse, and how interests, concerns and values are explored between actors. Together, this contributes to the nature of deliberation and how agenda setting takes shape. In our framework below, this accounts for elements related to knowledge sharing and dialog. For instance, knowledge shared without communication is arguably just information provision, but communication without this substance or policy knowledge is just "talk." A second dynamic is *shared motivation*—relating to the interpersonal and relational dynamics or how interest groups and policymakers recognize the voices and interests to create shared understanding. In other words, how they foster interdependencies to work together. In our framework, this pertains to elements such as the management of positions and how policymakers maintain a neutral and objective role. Correspondingly, recognition of interests is essential, as well as fair procedures by public officials to manage them. A third aspect is *the capacity for joint action*—representing dynamics that enable actors to generate new value or outcomes. This includes how parties establish structural or institutional means to enable collaboration to take place. For example, actors' mandates for a process and co-creating process ownership. In our framework, this involves elements such as how feedback mechanisms are built into a process to evaluate inputs and whether groups have a mandate—i.e. "license to" collaborate with others (Emerson et al. 2012, 10–17). Reason being, ownership and evaluation are crucial for parties to (continue to) take action. Otherwise, it risks creating endless discussion and no action.

2.1 | Policy Engagement: A Mix of Enabling and Restricting Procedural Engagement Dynamics

Building on this foundation, we thereby complement research on interest group access (from both a supply and demand perspective) with insights into the process stemming from the collaborative governance literature, to discern policy engagement as a multidimensional process, involving several distinct yet related aspects that can co-occur or be individually prevalent. Policy engagement for instance, can start with knowledge sharing, the key aspect of policy access studies (Bouwen 2004). Yet, such knowledge sharing can be succeeded with further dialog, position-taking, deliberation, ownership, mandates regarding the process or evaluation (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson et al. 2012).

Below, six dynamics based on this previous research are outlined. Our rationale for identifying the individual dynamics is three-fold. Firstly, these dynamics cover key elements across an engagement process, -from initial engagement, managing tensions and creating an enduring process. Secondly, they address multiple levels of analysis that impact interactions between interest groups and policymakers, yet have otherwise not been considered simultaneously in previous studies. For example, understanding whether genuine or quality dialog took place represents individual interactions, whereas managing competing interests or positions represents group dynamics.

Lastly, each dynamic tackles a distinct collaborative challenge while remaining interdependent. For instance, meaningful dialog requires knowledge sharing while sustained collaboration needs a mandate from actors and adequate evaluation.

To assess each dynamic independently, we argue each of these dynamics can have restrictive or enabling features, affecting the nature of the engagement between interest groups and policymakers. Hence, there may be features that allow for more policy engagement (enabling) while either policymakers, interest groups or both simultaneously experience features that hinder policy engagement between them (restricting). By illustration, groups may be willing to be open and share information with one another, allowing for more in depth or fruitful dialog thereby enabling their engagement. But if there is limited time to discuss this information, engagement might be restricted. So, to obtain a better understanding of policy engagement, we need to unpack how these different features (i.e. enable or restrict) can co-occur or be individually present during engagement.

2.1.1 | Knowledge Sharing and Joint Fact Finding

A first important feature of policy engagement is knowledge sharing or joint fact-finding (Ansell and Gash 2008: 560, 576; Emerson et al. 2012). This involves advancing an environment by which policymakers and interest groups are able to exchange useful policy information, such as expertise, political intelligence (De Bruycker 2016), or the costs and risks associated with realizing collective policy goals. Collaborative governance scholars such as Emerson and colleagues (2012: 12) refer to these efforts as the “discovery phase” to emphasize action in revealing interests, concerns and values among parties. Knowledge sharing is also recognized in interest group scholarship, but as mentioned, refers to the underlying logic of exchange-relations whereby groups provide policymakers with information to gain access to the policymaking process (Berkhout 2013; C. Braun 2012). The distinction between literature therefore unveils how policymakers and interest groups are connected via the exchange of knowledge and information. This serves policymakers as it provides them information to make more informed decisions when formulating policy; it also serves interest groups by acting as a mechanism to gain insider policy understanding and open up direct communication channels with policymakers to exert influence (Leech et al. 2005; Halpin and Fraussen 2017). Together, this creates a joint exploration and fact-finding effort as emphasized by collaborative governance scholars. This joint knowledge sharing therefore can enable parties to be more transparent about their interests or information about possible consequences concerning draft legislation or policy. This is intended to contribute to enhanced mutual understanding and reciprocal commitment (Ansell and Gash 2008, 557; Bryson et al. 2015; Emerson et al. 2012; Gray 1989).

Naturally, there are also notable challenges associated with knowledge sharing, which can restrict engagement between interest groups and policymakers. For example, fears of sharing information may be a barrier if participants do not have equal access (Bouwen 2004), or if policymakers misinterpret or lack expertise to understand groups perspectives (Waardenburg

et al. 2020, 12). Lack of expertise may also result in officials falling short to design a clear process of how input is gathered (Fraussen et al. 2020). Officials may fail, for instance, to adequately determine how flexible or controlled they should be when requesting input, or to assess the extent to which involved parties have equal knowledge on a topic (Stewart 2009, 72–75). This becomes particularly apparent in more collaborative settings where joint understanding is required.

2.1.2 | Dialog and Deliberation

Engagement processes may also include dialog or deliberative elements. Information exchange implies more than filing input for consultations or attending roundtables. The interest group literature often acknowledges the importance of dialog and deliberation, as it frequently highlights the value of inside lobbying for interest groups to gain direct access to policymakers to convey their interests and share input. Inside strategies are frequently measured by types of engagement like presence or participation in consultation arrangements, next to face-to-face or bilateral meetings with (senior) policymakers or politicians (Beyers 2004; Hanegraaff et al. 2016). Yet, while inside strategies focus on getting and sustaining access, they rarely conceptualize the way stakeholders thereafter *actually* engage with policymakers when these exchanges occur. More often than not, dialogue serves as an engine for both policymakers and interest groups to discuss problems and address conflict(s). For policymakers, this gives purpose to build legitimacy for their policy decisions such as gauging opposition, conflict and building political support for initiatives. Dialog can also provide a space to identify risks and early problem identification. Whereas for interest groups, dialog creates an opportunity to proactively shape deliberations and build strategic relationships to advance their interests (i.e. represent their constituents) and discern upcoming policy. Moreover, it is a chance to network, hear other stakeholders' views, and strengthen their ties to policymakers, the latter often being critical for policy influence (Baumgartner and Jones 2010).

From a collaborative governance standpoint, the enabling aspect of dialog lies in its facilitation to explore mutual gains among actors. Facilitating or stewarding the process should therefore serve to promote or safeguard engagement, and avoid leaders taking exclusive, decisive action (Vangen and Huxham 2003; Chrislip and Larson 1994; Ansell and Gash 2012). This includes seeking broad participation by exploring “ways of knowing” and giving participants voice (Doberstein 2016; Feldman et al. 2006, 93); Ansell and Gash 2008, 555–556; Lasker and Weiss 2003, 31).

Constraints can occur when interests or positions diverge or when actors face time constraints, making deliberation arduous (Huxham et al. 2000; Waardenburg et al. 2020). Consequently, officials may be prone to revert to more traditional roles, and override decisions for the sake of efficiency (Sullivan et al. 2025). This can challenge the quality of dialog, and otherwise dismiss preceding deliberations. Navigating these engagements within conventional institutional setups may further strain actors' ability to (re)build trust and remain interdependent (Booher 2004, 33–34; Wondolleck and Ryan 1999).

2.1.3 | Management of Positions of Participating Actors

A third feature addresses the management of groups' positions or interests by policymakers. Interest groups advocating for distinct preferences will engage in strategic ways to get their preferences reflected in policy. This can serve as an opportunity to position themselves advantageously—by means of adapting their individual messaging, or to build cross-stakeholder coalitions. For instance, many interest groups consider coalition-building to stress the widespread importance of their position they take toward policymakers (Hojnacki 1997). This is with the intention to secure a strong position in the eyes of policymakers (Baumgartner and Jones 2010; Hojnacki 1997). Generally speaking, the more distinct preferences are articulated by groups, the more challenging it will be to find common ground (Bunea 2014). The same goes for the number of partners involved on an issue as it can further complicate the ability to merge perspectives toward a common problem definition (Golden 1998; Klijn and Koppenjan 2000). Hence, policymakers hold a complex task to manage expectations in how they consider competing interests and positions across diverse stakeholders. This may include for instance, using different consultation tools to understand diverging positions more clearly (i.e. industry roundtables), or signal this through more procedural means such as impact assessments or reporting.

Similar notions surface in collaborative governance studies concerning the complexities to manage actors' competing interests, and being vulnerable to "collaborative inertia" (Vangen and Huxham 2010, 163; Doberstein 2016). Actively managing groups' interests is therefore key to enable inclusive, dynamic engagement that adequately considers different perspectives for collective decision-making, and acknowledges groups' participatory efforts (Binderkrantz et al. 2021). What may restrict positions from being adequately explored may include policymakers lack to explore diverse interests beyond positions taken (Arras and Beyers 2020). So, even if positions or demands are expressed or conflicting, a factor that may restrict policy engagement is whether interests are actually compatible. In such cases, not exploring diverse interests may hinder policy engagement, which is frequently pronounced when underrepresented or marginalized perspectives are not actively sought (Doberstein 2016; Ulibarri 2015).

2.1.4 | Objectivity and Neutrality

Fourthly, policymakers must have a sound approach to remain objective in how they invite alternative perspectives. This is to demonstrate procedural fairness and maintain institutional credibility. This avoids relying on subjective benchmarks (i.e. personal beliefs or ideas) that may hamper collective deliberation (Downs 1957). Sometimes, this involves bringing in an external, third-party facilitator (for instance, see remarks in Wondolleck and Ryan 1999). However, if a policymaker otherwise overrides collective decision-making, policy engagement will be restricted and reverted to more conventional decision-making modes. For example, Matthews and Missingham (2009) study underscores stakeholders' loss of faith when engaging due to power struggles among bureaucrats who lacked

flexibility and undermined collective efforts by prioritizing individual agendas (Matthews and Missingham 2009; also see (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). Remaining a neutral party is therefore critical to manage stakeholder expectations and give grounds for policymakers to justify their decision-making to political superiors.

For interest groups this dynamic is a key accountability mechanism once attaining access and working with public officials to protect against arbitrary policy decisions. Mainly, it provides reassurance that their input is fairly considered. This is particularly important for membership organizations who represent specific constituencies, who will often emphasize to what extent their specific positions or policy demands reflect more general public opinion (Willems 2020; Flöthe 2020).

2.1.5 | Mandate and Ownership

A fifth feature to enabling policy engagement is characterized by policymakers having a shared mandate, or creating shared ownership of the process with stakeholders (Flöthe 2020). This dynamic is therefore mutually sought—as it boils down to the needed buy-in from all actors who hold up the collaborative process and commitment for subsequent implementation. Policymakers will largely define the scope of the policy issue at hand, while interest groups will seek to expand their scope of (institutional) influence to (i) secure their relevance to function (Lowery 2007) and (ii) seek a clear understanding of their role as transmission belts in the process to shape process design or rules and to secure their position to remain accountable to their constituency and internal stakeholders (Albareda 2018; Fraussen et al. 2021). This is evident in the interest group literature, which demonstrates how groups often initiate their interaction with policymakers by defining their mandate and employing subsequent strategies to co-build this mandate that encompasses their views as much as possible. However, the process of working together to create shared ownership is more central in collaborative governance studies which emphasizes this as a first step for actors to come together and initiate dialog (Innes and Booher 2003). This aims to create co-responsibility of the process from stakeholders to reconcile with adversaries and find a common purpose to work together. Similarly, restrictive policy engagement occurs when political agendas supersede the collective agenda, resulting in actors not being explicit with their intentions to create a common purpose for action. Consequently, this may tarnish trust and commitment to the interaction as parties are forced to deal with competing commitments and dismiss joint work (Ansell and Gash 2008; Edelenbos and Klijn 2006, 15; Waardenburg et al. 2020).

2.1.6 | Evaluation and Feedback Mechanisms

A final important feature is creating a transparent evaluation approach on how different types of input can be incorporated into decisions. This provides a basis to show policymakers process stakeholders' feedback, and make sense of input in a systematic and consistent way in line with the demands of evidence-based policymaking (for instance, see Bunea 2017). Not only does this

yield incentives for stakeholders to collaboratively participate based on their perception or awareness of how their inputs are used in decision-making, but it also creates more clarity on how decisions are implemented (Emerson and Nabatchi 2015). For policymakers, this involves filtering inputs based on political feasibility and maintaining policy coherence, as well as balancing competing interests and considering practicalities for implementation. For interest groups, this is also an important dynamic to demand clear criteria for input evaluation in order to understand their impact, seek feedback on their contributions and receive insight about how input is utilized (Leech et al. 2005; Braun 2024; C. Braun 2012). The collaborative governance literature frequently refers to this as reiterative or “adaptive feedback loops” (Emerson et al. 2012), whereby policymakers actively evaluate input or the process to adapt to evolving circumstances. What would restrict engagement is if policymakers inadequately or outright fail to provide feedback on how stakeholder input is used for decision-making. For instance, give zero rationale behind why certain aspects were weighed more than others. This leaves room for multiple interpretations of what outcomes should be pursued or worse, negate parties to engage further on a given issue (Bryson et al. 2006). These two factors can occur simultaneously: it is possible to have a clear understanding of how input is being evaluated but still receive limited feedback on how that input was ultimately used in final decisions.

2.2 | From Access to Engagement: A Focus on Procedural Engagement Dynamics

Our conceptual discussion highlights six procedural dynamics of policy engagement processes. In Table 1, we provide an overview of the corresponding features that can either enable or restrict policy engagement. To reiterate, the rationale behind focusing on these six procedural dynamics is that they center on participatory elements that make up decision-making processes in the context of seeking more collaborative-like engagement. Each of the literature consulted therefore provide interdependent arguments

to study procedural dynamics. Whereas interest group literature provides an important anchor to situate stakeholder and policy-maker positions as an exchange of information to explain access to the policymaking process (e.g. dynamics 1–3); collaborative governance literature uncovers additional procedural dimensions of how actors work together more extensively during policymaking processes given initial knowledge and positions shared (e.g. dynamics 4–6) (see Table 1).

Unpacking these procedural dynamics facilitates a more nuanced understanding of why policy engagement might deliver certain policy outcomes yet can yield limited levels of satisfaction regarding the process as perceived by stakeholders. Indeed, two key nuances that emerge from our conceptual discussion are significant to highlight regarding how stakeholders experience or perceive their engagement with policymakers:

One, these different procedural dynamics are not automatically opposites of one another. This implies that different aspects of policy engagement can have a restrictive or enabling feature in practice. Referencing the example regarding limited time to deliberate would mean that it does not necessarily imply no attempt at facilitating dialog. As Crosby et al. (2017) rightfully underscore, “it is important to stress that there is no incompatibility between collaboration and conflict” (Crosby et al. 2017, 664).

Two, within each dynamic, both an enabling and restricting feature can occur simultaneously. Accordingly, groups experiencing restrictive features in one part of the engagement process does not imply that engagement is fully restrictive. Rather, individual aspects can presumably co-occur and act as functional equivalents, being present simultaneously or hypothesized to have different consequences. Thus, experiencing significant restrictive features is different from mere low enabling features, and may therefore have different repercussions or affect actor behavior differently. This implies that enabling and restrictive features form two underlying, latent dimensions, which may

TABLE 1 | Dynamics of policy engagement.

Dynamics	Enabling features	Restricting features
1. Knowledge sharing	An environment that invites actors to share information to discover interests and collective goals or joint fact-finding.	Policy actors lack competence to design a clear process or understand information and inputs during engagement.
2. Dialog	Conversations are well facilitated to stimulate dialog and explore mutual gains among actors.	Limited time to deliberate among diverse interests and foster genuine dialog.
3. Management of positions	Both actors' interests, needs and positions are actively recognized and considered during discussions to ensure better understanding among diverse interests.	Diverse interests and needs of stakeholders are not adequately explored, merely positions (via statements) are considered.
4. Objectivity/neutrality	Policymakers actively sought or encouraged alternative viewpoints among stakeholders.	Collective decision-making is overridden by government decision-making or other bureaucratic red tape.
5. Mandate/Ownership	A clear mandate is established to ensure there is shared ownership of the process alongside stakeholders.	Ulterior political agendas dominate collective agenda or mandate.
6. Evaluation of input/ Feedback mechanisms	Clear criteria to evaluate how input is considered during decision-making.	No feedback on how input is used in the final decision-making by policymakers.

materialize differently for each dynamic. This emphasizes our claim to unpack whether groups characterize their interactions as modest levels of enabling policy engagement or are actively restricted to engage more or less collaboratively. We therefore expect that the more enabling aspects mentioned to co-occur, the more likely enabling policy engagement will take place. Likewise, if more restricting aspects co-occur, the more likely restrictive policy engagement will ensue.

3 | Research Design

We empirically assess these procedural dynamics by analyzing interest group engagement at the EU -level. Our focus on EU interest groups was selected for three reasons. First, groups active in the EU are a seminal part to strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU governance, by providing a voice to civil society in policymaking processes (European Council 2013; Greenwood 2017). More specifically, groups' role as "transmission belts" is of particular importance as they provide a nexus between society and EU institutions (Albareda 2020). Second, EU interest groups typically play an explicit role in influencing EU decision-making, and understanding the participatory dynamics can shed light on how policies are shaped. The implications this has for the generalizability of our findings will be discussed in concluding sections. Lastly, the EU Commission explicitly adopts consultation practices that aim to foster participatory or collaborative engagement based on their Better Regulation agenda (Bunea and Chrisp 2022, 4; Greenwood 2017). The EU Green Deal's Fit for 55 package is a clear case in point. Empirically examining how key procedural dynamics characterize policy engagement is therefore warranted. Our empirical focus therefore facilitates observations on the nature of collaborative-like policy engagement that the Commission has adopted recently.

3.1 | Data

We conducted an online survey within the context of a larger research project on civil society engagement and policymaking from November 2021-January 2022. This survey is designed to examine how EU interest groups engage in policy processes, considering various stages of the process and policy issue management within their organizations. Respondents were selected based on a full population of groups identified through the EU Transparency Register. Despite criticisms of the comprehensiveness or validity of the EU register, it arguably offers a relatively robust sampling base for interest groups active in the EU provided that the register's recent reforms classify it as a combination of a bottom-up organizational activity-based sampling and a top-down policy activity-based sampling source (Berkhout et al. 2018; Greenwood and Dreger 2013; Năstase and Muurmans 2020).

A total of 2298 groups were contacted, representing various business, citizen, labor, professional and research organizations involved in EU policy engagement. The sample is based on organizations for which we could identify the relevant specific person involved in EU affairs, and their contact details. Of this, 343 organizations completed the questionnaire, a response rate of

15%. After removing partial responses, the final sample was $n = 272$. Response rates across group types mirror relative representation normally seen in EU processes including: business groups (i.e. companies, business or trade associations; professional consultancies) ($n = 139$, 51%), civil society groups (NGOs) ($n = 83$, 31%) and public groups (i.e. trade unions, think tanks, public authorities or other transnational associations and networks) ($n = 50$, 18%) (European Council 2013). Among these stated categories, we excluded sports, religious, purely scientific associations and leisure groups, as these are considered outside this study's scope.

3.1.1 | Measuring Enabling and Restricting Policy Engagement

Variables linked to our policy engagement conceptualization are measured with a question asking respondents to what extent certain features characterized their interactions with policymakers. Individual survey items are designed as an operationalization of either the enabling or the restricting aspect of each procedural dynamic. Each aspect is measured with a five-point Likert item (1 = not at all; 2 = a little; 3 = a moderate amount; 4 = a lot; 5 = very much) to assess whether interest groups found the statement to be applicable to their experience. These questions followed a prior question requiring respondents to identify a specific policy issue for which they engaged with EU policymakers. Our measure is therefore related to interest groups' experiences engaging with policymakers related to the specific context of a particular policy issue. This allows us to more carefully decipher between enabling and restricting engagement as respondents have a concrete policy issue to which they could relate their experiences, thus yielding better specified answers. To avoid order effects, the presentation of these items was randomized. Table 2 below outlines how each item relates to the conceptual aspects of policy engagement we describe above. (See appendix for descriptive statistics).

The analysis proceeds in several steps. First, we present descriptive statistics of all Likert items indicating the individual aspects of policy engagement. Subsequently, we analyze whether these items cluster according to the theoretical constructs of enabling and restricting engagement. Finally, we used the empirical latent variables that resulted from the PCA analyses, and corresponded that with our theoretical constructs of enabling and restricting, as the two key independent variables to assess how satisfied groups were with their engagement, and how this satisfaction varies across group type, perceived issue conflict and groups' prior involvement (i.e. engagement) given the issue at hand.

4 | Analysis

4.1 | How Are EU Interest Groups Experiencing Policy Engagement With EU Policymakers?

Below is a descriptive overview of the key items regarding the nature of engagement, representing our two key independent variables. In light of restricting features, a number of results are noteworthy. Firstly, most respondents found policymakers to be

TABLE 2 | Indicators of the enabling and restricting procedural engagement dynamics.

	Enabling policy engagement	Restricting policy engagement
Information/ Knowledge sharing	<i>We had as much access to information as policymakers had.</i>	<i>Policymakers often lacked a level of expertise to understand our perspective.</i>
Managing positions	<i>Our position was taken into account by policymakers.</i>	<i>The majority of the stakeholders had policy positions contrary to ours.</i>
Mandate	<i>Policymakers' intentions were explicit and/or clear.</i>	<i>Shifts in political leadership affected the way we interacted with policymakers.</i>
Dialog	<i>There was a genuine dialog with policymakers. Policymakers facilitated discussions among stakeholders.</i>	<i>There was limited time to discuss the different policy issues with policymakers.</i>
Deliberation	<i>Policymakers showed a commitment to objectivity and proactively sought/encouraged alternative viewpoints.</i>	<i>Policymakers often overrode decisions already agreed upon collectively.</i>
Evaluation	<i>It was always clear how our different types of input were evaluated/considered by policymakers for decision-making.</i>	<i>There was limited feedback from policymakers on how our input was used for the final decision.</i>

limited in their feedback during their engagements. Approximately 67% of groups claimed limited feedback from policymakers was moderately (25%), largely (26%) or substantially (16%) experienced during their engagement (see appendix; Figure 1a). A similar trend (approx. 71%) is also noted by groups who moderately (31%) and largely (29%) or substantially (11%) experienced limited time to discuss policy issues with policymakers (see appendix; Figure 1b). The remaining survey items associated with our restricting features, indicate groups are only slightly or moderately confronted by policymakers overriding decisions, lacking expertise, or affected by changes in political leadership during their engagement. Hence, these items did not seem to be a major concern to EU interest groups.

Three noteworthy observations from survey items are associated with our enabling features. The first concerns information access. Most respondents experienced low (32%) to moderate (28%) equal access to information by policymakers (see appendix; Figure 1c). Similar outcomes were observed regarding how dialog was facilitated and whether policymakers provided sound evaluation of groups' input. For example, most groups experienced low (35%) to moderate (29%) levels of facilitated dialog (see appendix; Figure 1d), and none (20%), low (39%) or moderate (26%) levels of clear evaluation from policymakers on input provided during their engagements (see appendix; Figure 1e). The remaining items associated with enabling engagement yield more subtle findings. Most respondents indicated policymakers largely made their intentions clear during engagement. Furthermore, most groups felt policymakers considered their position during decision-making and alternative viewpoints on issues. Interestingly, more mixed responses stemmed from perceptions whether policymakers engaged in genuine dialog, with 26% to a small degree, 31% moderately, and 28% to a large degree respectively (see appendix; Figure 1f for frequency distributions).

4.2 | Do we Observe Enabling and Restricting Policy Engagement?

Based on the descriptive findings, we test whether individual items cluster into predicted categories that represent enabling or

restrictive policy engagement. We do this by conducting a principal component analysis (PCA) to test our conceptualization of policy engagement empirically, and to see the extent to which it impacts the level of satisfaction by groups. This provided us a first confirmation of our theoretical constructs based on the consulted literature. In other words, it supports our supposition to provide a more granular analysis of how these dynamics impact engagement between interest groups and policymakers.

The internal validity of the enabling features of our policy engagement construct was confirmed with an acceptable level of Cronbach's alpha test of reliability ($\alpha = 0.79$). Our PCA for the restricting features estimated a lower level of Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.61$), which remains a moderate range of reliability in the social sciences. This lower result may also reflect the conceptual heterogeneity stemming from merging various collaborative studies for our conceptualization. Future research should therefore explore further to strengthen the internal validity of this construct. The PCA was conducted with varimax rotation and the two principal components in our analysis, explain approx. 37% of the variance—22% and 15% respectively. Table 3 shows the factor loadings after rotation and reflects the restricting and enabling aspects (see appendix for full overview).

Based on the PCA results, we averaged the scores from individual items belonging to enabling or restricting constructs to create two independent variables reflecting the latent variables of enabling and restricting components that emerged from the PCA analysis. Averaging the items scored provided an individual score for each survey respondent. VIF scores in the main models ran from 1.015 to 1.106, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern.

4.3 | Assessing the Relevance of the Policy Engagement Conceptualization

Next, we use these two key independent variables to test whether the nature of policy engagement between interest groups and policymakers is related to overall levels of satisfaction with the EU consultation process as a first test to gauge the

TABLE 3 | Principal component factor loadings.

Survey Item	Component 1 Enabling engagement	Component 2 Restricting engagement
Position considered by public officials	0.77	
Genuine dialog	0.75	
Considers objective alternative views	0.69	
Facilitated discussion	0.61	
Equal access to information	0.61	
Public officials' intention clear	0.56	
Past experiences influenced interaction	0.51	
Public officials override collective decision-making		0.63
Public official lacked expertise		0.65
Limited time to discuss policy issues		0.62
Limited feedback on our input		0.52
Shifts in political leadership affected interactions		0.50

leverage of our concept.¹ Notwithstanding our core objective to assess the process engagement dynamics outlined above, relating it to the overall levels of process satisfaction is warranted for two reasons.

Firstly, collaborative governance scholars frequently consider satisfaction as a key measure to examine group or process dynamics. For instance, previous studies largely focus on the conditions under which stakeholders acted collaboratively and therein, whether they were satisfied *with the process*, not policy outcomes (Ansell and Gash 2008, 549). As mentioned above, the recent 2019 ECA report indicates mixed perceptions of groups' satisfaction with EU consultation processes. This was based on how stakeholders perceived means to participate and contribute to policy processes alongside policymakers (EU Commission 2019, 6, 18). As such, examining if levels of satisfaction are related to policy engagement dynamics can contribute to understanding the sources of (lower) levels of satisfaction related to consultation processes. Hence, offering an additional assessment of why participation in consultation practices may yield negative outcomes regarding groups' experiences.

Secondly, previous literature treats satisfaction as a key element to understand the quality of engagement (Emerson et al. 2012)—a core aspect to deepen our knowledge on engagement beyond initial access. For example, giving us initial insight into how groups' experiences with policymakers, and what elements constitute a sound process in the eyes of interest groups. In the same vein, process satisfaction has often been associated with procedural fairness, and distinguished from satisfaction with the substance of policy decisions. This includes the relevance of procedural aspects within engagement processes (Sunstein 2006) to better understand processes for legislative decision-making, how it influences groups' perception of policy outcomes and the perceived legitimacy of policymaking institutions (Grimes 2006; Ruder and Woods 2020).

To measure levels of satisfaction, we included a survey question asking respondents how satisfied they were with the overall consultation process regarding the specific policy issue they

were involved in. To clarify, this policy issue context was also a prerequisite to answer the other survey questions involved in this study to ensure that the issue context remained constant. Moreover, we take this dependent variable on board for our analysis as it helps us examine the engagement experience and interactions between interest groups and policymakers. This variable was measured with a five-point Likert item (1 = very unsatisfied; 2 = somewhat unsatisfied; 3 = neutral; 4 = somewhat satisfied; 5 = very satisfied). Responses indicate that the majority of groups were relatively satisfied. More specifically, 39% of respondents reported to be “somewhat satisfied” and 24% “somewhat unsatisfied.” A marginal number of groups had more extreme opinions, including 6% claiming to be “very unsatisfied” and 7% “very satisfied” with the process. The remaining 24% held a “neutral” stance. Results underscore that while most groups were rather satisfied with the consultation process (46%), many groups were rather dissatisfied (30%).

Lastly, we included several control variables commonly assumed to be important explanations for engagement within the interest group literature. This included commonly assumed group characteristics: group type and policy-issue dimensions, which we clarify in more detail below.

We measure group type by distinguishing between organizations that represent business, citizen or public groups; a common distinction made across the interest group literature (Baroni et al. 2014; Dür and González 2013). We also control for three additional variables measured at the policy issue level. The first is issue complexity, referring to respondents' perception of how technically and substantively demanding an issue is relative to other issues respondents typically engage on. The second is issue conflict, referring to respondents' perception of the extent an issue generated conflict between actors involved or affected by the issue at hand. Following the logic that context matters (D. R. Halpin 2014, 191), and given the vast literature addressing the complexity and conflict during collaborative engagement (Choi and Robertson 2011; Emerson et al. 2012; Fliervoet et al. 2016; Hardy and Phillips 1998; Huxham et al. 2000; Purdy 2012), we expect these variables to moderate

the effect of groups' experiences on the dependent variable. Lastly, we examine whether the involvement of interest groups in the same issue in prior EU legislation matters for how satisfied they were. This is justified because prior engagements may impact stakeholders' perceptions in subsequent processes.

4.4 | The Impact of Enabling and Restricting Engagement on Process Satisfaction

Tables 4 and 5 present a stepwise approach to outline the full models with all controls. Since our dependent variable is measured at an ordinal level, we employ an ordinal logistic regression to explore the relation between levels of satisfaction and engagement dynamics. Subsequently, we conducted a Brant test to check the robustness of our model.

Our latent (PCA) variables did not pass robustness checks. However, when running the same test on the clustered independent variables of each latent variable, robustness was confirmed. We therefore proceeded with the ordinal model, but

this should be considered with caution and supports our prior suggestion for future research to strengthen variables further.²

Nevertheless, procedural engagement dynamics—or how groups perceived engagement with policymakers—seem to relate to levels of satisfaction by groups in consultation processes. Even though the results of ordered logistic regression are not as straightforward to interpret as OLS regression models, this overarching finding is noteworthy as it appears to be a first indication of the analytical leverage of our engagement dynamic concept and the importance of measuring policy engagement via procedural dynamics to understand how we can discern stakeholder engagement and the multidimensionality of interest group influence (Baldwin 2019, 247).

Three subsequent findings surface that address our conceptualization of policy engagement. In models 1a–c, we observe a significant, positive relationship between enabling policy engagement and the level of process satisfaction. This implies that groups who experience more enabling dynamics during their engagement with policymakers seem to be more satisfied with the consultation process. Models 1b and 1c signal that civil

TABLE 4 | Ordinal logistic regression: enabling policy engagement on satisfaction levels in EU consultation processes.

	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 1c
Enables policy engagement	2.600*** (0.239)	2.623*** (0.240)	2.713*** (0.245)
Controls			
Level of conflict			−0.351*** (0.104)
Level of complexity			−0.038 (0.146)
Prior involvement			0.733** (0.245)
Actor type			
Business		REF	REF
Public		0.004 (0.310)	−0.155 (0.317)
Civil society		0.613* (0.273)	0.617* (0.280)
<i>N</i> =	272	272	272
AIC	620	619	603

****p* < 0.001, ***p* < 0.01, **p* < 0.05.

TABLE 5 | Ordinal logistic regression: restricting policy engagement on satisfaction levels in EU consultation processes.

	Model 2a	Model 2b	Model 2c
Restricts policy engagement	−1.156*** (0.173)	−1.182*** (0.175)	−1.145*** (0.177)
Controls			
Level of conflict			−0.279** (0.101)
Level of complexity			0.185 (0.144)
Prior involvement			0.345 (0.230)
Actor type			
Business		REF	REF
Public		−0.362 (0.305)	−0.411 (0.309)
Civil society		0.426 (0.257)	0.487 (0.261)
<i>N</i> =	272	272	272
AIC	731	729	724

****p* < 0.001, ***p* < 0.01, **p* < 0.05.

society organizations are more likely to report higher levels of process satisfaction compared to other group types when policymakers demonstrate enabling engagement dynamics. This finding reveals an interesting initial insight into how different types of stakeholders experience their interactions with policymakers when they adopt more collaborative-like behaviors. Moreover, it aligns with existing interest group research suggesting that structuring consultation to adopt more deliberative aspects may enable more stakeholder diversity and representation thereby allowing more voices to be acknowledged (Fraussen et al. 2020; Bunea 2017). Future research could explore examining engagement experiences across groups further.

Model 1c additionally shows a significant relationship for groups' prior involvement in legislative processes as a factor contributing to groups' satisfaction with the consultation process. Although this requires additional examination, it invites further theorizing on how prior involvement affects subsequent engagement between groups and officials; something that is key when examining more collaborative "iterative" interactions or processes (Ansell and Gash 2008). For instance, how groups learn from or evaluate previous interactions for subsequent engagement; or alternatively, how policy issues develop over time and how this shapes engagement experiences between actors. Second, model 2a–c indicates a significant, negative relationship between restrictive engagement and levels of process satisfaction. It appears that the more interest groups experience restricting dynamics in their engagement with policymakers, the less likely they are to be satisfied with the overall consultation process. This finding may be of particular interest to practitioners as it points to specific interactive dynamics they can avoid to aid future engagements to serve the mutual benefit of parties involved (Doberstein 2016).

An important last finding to highlight concerns the importance of policy conflict during groups' engagement with policymakers. The findings seem to suggest that the more politically contentious a policy issue is, the less satisfied interest groups are with the process regardless of whether groups experience more enabling or restricting behaviors from policymakers. In other words, it hints at an independent effect—the negative impact of policy conflict on process satisfaction exists separately from whether policymakers adopt enabling and/or restricting behaviors. This gestures two possibly fundamental consequences. First, from a consultative design or process perspective—it could broadly suggest a potential limitation in how we typically regard sound policy engagement. While most scholarly attention is focused on making processes more inclusive, transparent and accessible (i.e. enabling), the underlying political contention between parties might be a more fundamental driver of process-related satisfaction. Future research should therefore further untangle engagement processes addressing highly contentious issues and what additional factors or engagement dynamics are at play. Second, from an organizational or actor-level perspective—this finding may very well signal that when an issue becomes more politically contentious actors may be more inclined not to invest or adopt collaborative approaches to their engagement and rather revert to more adversarial approaches.

For policymakers specifically, this may also be insinuating institutional stress, and halting an otherwise collaborative

approach to policymaking (Sullivan et al. 2025). This is in line with previous research on conflict in collaboration, that indicates that policymakers may resort to conventional roles if the process intensifies or deliberations face deadlocks (Cook 2015). Future research could unpack how political dynamics and history of conflict among actors impact their engagement (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson and Ahn 2022, 63).

5 | Conclusion

This paper examines how interest groups experience their engagement with policymakers, and whether this impacts their overall level of satisfaction with the consultation process. We unpack the nature of what this engagement entails by considering procedural aspects covered by the collaborative governance literature to complement the focus on policy access by the interest group literature. Our aim is to offer a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics occurring in engagement processes by conceptualizing policy engagement (and thus the nature and dynamics of access) as a multidimensional process that can have restricting and/or enabling features. Subsequently, we empirically examine the analytical leverage of our policy engagement concept with a factor analysis of how interest groups perceive their interactions with EU policymakers, and test how this relates to overall levels of satisfaction of the consultation process. Our findings indicate that when groups experience their engagement with policymakers to assume more enabling features, and less restrictive features, the more satisfied they seem with the overall consultation process. In addition, our findings also signal the importance of political contestation and prior involvement for understanding satisfaction levels. Namely, regardless of whether stakeholders experience their engagement with policymakers as being enabled or restricted, higher levels of conflict are associated with lower satisfaction in the process.

Our study is a valuable stepping stone for a richer understanding of how policy actors engage, spotlighting the types of responsibilities and roles policymakers assume during engagement. This is already revealed in our descriptive analysis, showing a number of shared challenges by groups when engaging with policymakers. This approach can support practitioners to navigate elements that contribute to their interactions. Particularly, EU groups experience a lack of equal access to information and seek more evaluation or direction on how their input is used in policymaking. More attention to facilitating discussions, especially given time constraints, may also be useful starting points to improve engagement in the EU.

Besides these descriptive accounts, our finding pertaining to political contestation further contextualizes what seems to be shaping engagement beyond initial access, and the complexities of relationship-building between interest groups and policymakers (Leech et al. 2005). Namely, that even when policymakers adopt more collaborative-like practices, broader political contexts continue to shape dynamics between parties. Recent studies have signaled that politically contested issues are an important driver to increase and diversify the overall composition of engaged groups as it can strengthen policymakers' ability to be less persuaded by one-sided information (Willems 2020, 868; Fobé

et al. 2017). However, when placing this finding next to the larger literature on business dominance in EU consultation processes, it may be driving these more conventionally powerful groups to be less satisfied with the process as they must engage differently, and in a more competitive environment.

While our findings speak to the analytical leverage of our concept, our empirical design has a number of implications for the generalizability of the findings. Our focus on EU procedural engagement dynamics is likely to hold different demands compared to other (sub)national level contexts (see Cristofoli et al. 2017; Sørensen et al. 2015). Future research should consider our policy engagement construct across such settings. For instance, although the Commission's deliberate policy goals when consulting groups renders collaborative-seeking engagement likely, the distinct competences of the EU and distance from (local) implementation make collaborative-like engagement less comparable (for instance, see Michali and Eleftherakis 2022; Sørensen et al. 2015). Another consideration is the use of satisfaction in the consultation process. Although a measure that is used in previous scholarship, respondents may have answered this question retrospectively—i.e. in light of the outcome of the policy issue or the relative success of other parties. For instance, satisfaction could very well be met if groups' demands were met, regardless of the interactive nature during the consultation process.

Notwithstanding these implications, we make three contributions to the literature. By testing the analytical leverage of our policy engagement concept for overall levels of satisfaction, we present an important outcome measure of engagement processes relating to evaluative studies (European Commission, 2019) and studies on procedural fairness (Grimes 2006). For example, how process assessments shape groups' perceived legitimacy of policy processes, or their willingness to accept decision-making outcomes. This also aligns with recent literature advancing measurements of perceived legitimacy of more participatory decision-making modes (Haesevoets et al. 2023). Unpacking engagement in this way can thus yield potential learnings to design consultation and participation arrangements that better recognize or address common trade-offs or challenges ensuing from them (Bryan 2004; Doberstein 2016; Fraussen et al. 2020). This may include designing communicative or engagement rules to enable more open yet efficient deliberation or negotiation, or structural rules to ensure more transparency or evaluation between actors. Accordingly, this conceptual novelty advances our understanding of policy engagement, complementing studies on policy access and dynamics occurring within engagement processes, and highlighting aspects that unquestionably relate to the outcome of engagements, yet have not been addressed in-depth in previous work.

Taken together, we introduce a behavioral lens to the study of policy engagement by examining how interest groups experience the process, rather than preceding work which merely outlines strategies groups choose to gain access to policymakers. Moreover, we contribute to scholarly demands to cross-pollinate literature to reveal more contextual nuances, which, in our case, enables deeper understanding of interactions among actors beyond initial access. Merging insights from interest group and

collaborative governance literature therefore speaks to broader discussions on how the nature of engagement may matter for consultation processes, interest group influence, and ultimately better collaboration and higher legitimacy of policy processes (O'Leary et al. 2012).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹ Important to note is that our study examines satisfaction as it relates to the collaborative dynamics within a given process, not as policy outcomes—an otherwise common measure in broader public policy and policy evaluation literature (see for instance the discussions of Coglianese, 2004). Our measure of satisfaction does not relate to a specific type of consultation, but to their overall experience of the consultation process in the context of the specific policy issue, broadly defined. This consultation process could include a variety of interactions and instruments, such as engaging in conversations with EU officials to provide detailed expertise or discuss possible political implementation, as well as participation in specific consultation instruments, such as advisory groups or online consultation.

² In addition, we conducted an additional multinomial regression, which revealed substantively similar findings for the enabling engagement latent variable. It remained a strong positive predictor of consultation satisfaction across categories, while policy conflict showed a consistent negative association. Its findings thus confirmed the direction and significance of the main effects.

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Appendix

Descriptive Statistics

N = 272	Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min-Max
IV	Genuine dialog	2.971	1.069	1–5
IV	Equal info access	2.485	1.133	1–5
IV	Facilitated dialog	2.574	1.049	1–5
IV	Limited discussion	3.14	1.114	1–5
IV	Limited feedback	3.158	1.233	1–5
IV	Clear input evaluation	2.375	1.005	1–5
IV	PM expertise	2.879	1.166	1–5
IV	Position considered	2.963	0.956	1–5
IV	Clear intention	2.96	0.957	1–5
IV	Overriding decision	2.364	1.029	1–5
IV	Open to alt. Views	2.772	0.998	1–5
IV	Stakeholder position contrary	2.434	0.973	1–5
IV	Political leadership shift	2.386	1.206	1–5
DV	Satisfaction in the overall consultation process	3.176	1.062	1–5
Control N = 83	Group type-civil society			31%
Control N = 139	Group type-business			51%
Control N = 50	Group type-public			18%
Control	Issue complexity	3.526	0.837	1–5
Control	Issue conflict	2.915	1.219	1–5
Control n = 118	Involved in previous legislative process (YES)			43%
Control n = 154	Involved in previous legislative process (NO)			57%

PCA Loadings (Independent Variable)

Variable -nature of policy engagement with policymakers	Survey item	Component 1 <i>Enable</i>	Component 2 <i>Restrict</i>
Policy position considered by PM	8	0.77	
Genuine dialog	1	0.75	
PM was objective to alternative viewpoints	11	0.69	
Facilitated discussion by PM	3	0.61	
Past experiences with PM influenced interaction	13	0.51	
Equal access to information	2	0.61	
Intentions of PM were clear	9	0.56	
PM provide clear input and evaluation	6		
Routine interaction	15		
PM lacked expertise	7		0.65
Shifts in political leadership affected interaction	14		0.50
Limited time to discuss	4		0.62
Limited feedback	5		0.51
PM overrode decision making	10		0.63
Key stakeholders had contrary positions to org.	12		
Eigenvalues		4.09	1.58
% Of variance		27.24%	10.52%
Cronbach's alpha		0.78	0.61

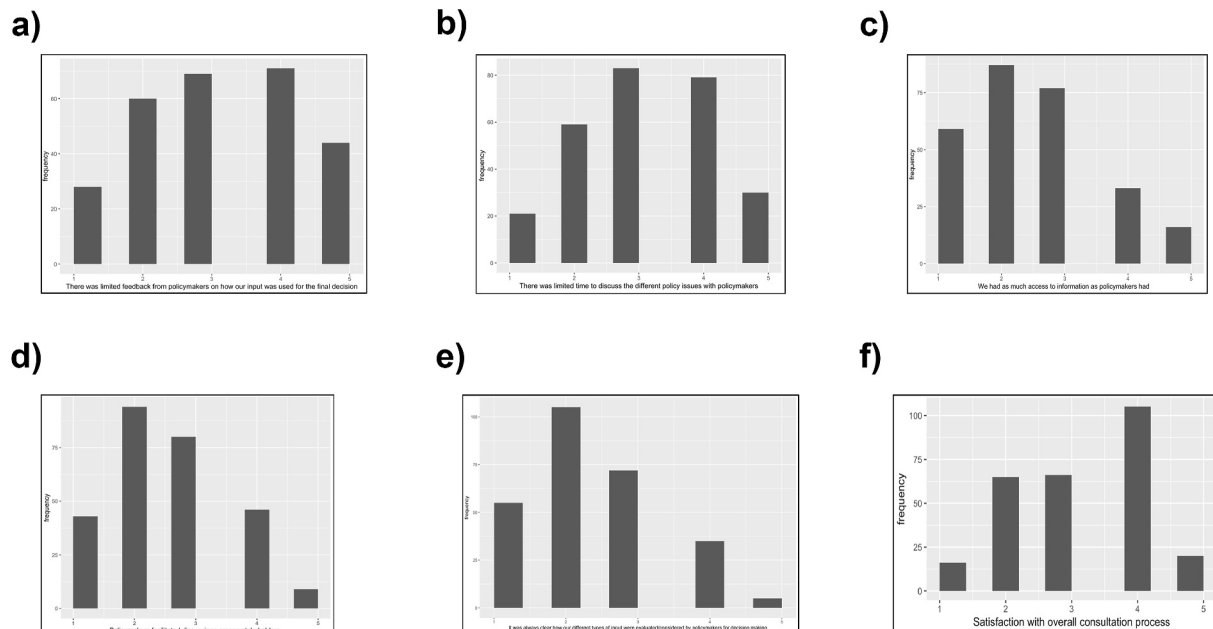


FIGURE A1 | (a) distribution of independent variable- Limited feedback. (b) Distribution of independent variable- limited time to discuss. (c) Distribution of independent variable- equal access to information. (d) Distribution of independent variable- facilitated dialogue. (e) Distribution of independent variable- clear evaluation. (f) Distribution of dependent variable- satisfaction with overall consultation process.