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CHAPTER

19 Interest groups in Belgium

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Abstract

This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of the organization, political engagement, and policy influence of interest groups in Belgium. It begins by defining interest groups and clarifying typologies, distinguishing between economic groups, which include business associations and trade unions, and citizen groups focused on public causes and identity-based issues. The authors then characterize Belgium's interest representation system as neo-corporatist with consociational roots, describing how federalism and strong institutional linkages among political parties and social groups shape interactions between interest groups and policymakers. A core–periphery dynamic emerges, with economic interest groups and trade unions holding a central role in advisory councils and the media, whereas citizen groups are comparatively underrepresented. The chapter also identifies key trends, including the declining influence of advisory bodies, increased competition from non-membership organizations, the changing party landscape, and growing attention to transparency and lobby regulation.

Keywords: [interest groups](#), [neo-corporatism](#), [consociationalism](#), [advisory bodies](#), [media](#), [political parties](#), [lobby regulation](#), [transparency](#)

Subject: [European Union](#), [Politics](#)

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19.1. Introduction

Insight into the dynamics of interest representation is crucial for understanding the well-functioning of representative democracy. Interest groups can act as intermediaries, connecting society's diverse needs with policy-making processes (Albareda 2018; Truman 1951). By offering valuable assets such as policy expertise, societal legitimacy, and political intelligence, they can wield significant influence over policymakers, who often rely on them to craft policies. However, there is a significant caveat: the system of interest representation is prone to bias. Narrowly delineated and concentrated business interests organize themselves and mobilize politically at a much higher rate than citizen groups that represent broader segments of society or advocate for public causes. Additionally, business associations often enjoy higher levels of access to policymakers. As a result, unequal levels of political mobilization and access to the political and media arena can distort the policy-making process, potentially sidelining certain societal voices while elevating others. When such distortions become structural—where specific societal interests frequently prevail over others—interest representation may actually threaten rather than enhance the functioning of representative democracies (Fraussen and Braun 2018).

This chapter provides an overview of the academic state of the art regarding the organization and political engagement of interest groups in Belgium, outlining key trends and suggesting promising avenues for future research. In the section on the state of the art, we clarify definitions and typologies of interest groups. Second, we reveal the defining features of the system of interest representation and describe the composition and diversity of the interest group population in Belgium. Third, we discuss the involvement of interest groups in the political and media arena, highlighting findings from recent scholarship. The following section highlights promising research avenues on key trends, such as the declining role of advisory bodies (focusing in particular on advisory councils, the most strongly institutionalized advisory bodies in Belgium).

By applying this structure, we provide a clear overview of the system, clarifying key concepts and the legacy of the historical context on the interest group system in Belgium. Our focus on the composition and diversity of the interest group population, and the representation of business and citizen groups in advisory councils and the media, facilitates a comparative approach, as these are classic debates. Finally, we provide important nuances to this review by outlining four key trends and, in this way, address challenges to interest representation that are currently emerging in many established democracies.

19.2. State of the art

19.2.1. Interest groups: definitions and typologies

We define interest groups as formal organizations that have a collective character, aiming to represent specific constituencies or advocate for particular causes. Their goal is to influence public policy through informal and formal channels outside the electoral arena. This latter characteristic differentiates interest groups from political parties. Unlike political parties, interest groups do not seek office through elections but instead attempt to achieve their objectives via formal (e.g., advisory bodies) or informal engagements with policymakers (e.g., personal meetings) (Beyers, Eising, and Maloney 2008). This emphasis on political engagement also means that many civil society organizations, often labelled as service groups or non-profit organizations, are not classified as interest organizations as they do not exhibit political activities and are primarily focused on providing services in areas like health, welfare, or education. Nevertheless, these organizations can play a vital role in policy-making as they deliver essential public services (e.g., social welfare, youth work) and are sometimes responsible for policy implementation (see also Carré et al. 2024). Moreover, when their role or services become the subject of political debate, they may decide to engage in political activities, thus transforming into a more hybrid organization that combines service provision with political advocacy.

The collective nature of interest groups is critical to their role as a transmission belt, which can relate to different methods of collective action, ranging from groups with a formal membership of citizens, or other organizations such as firms or public institutions, to organizations that speak for more informal or diffuse constituencies linked through donations or supportership. By focusing on formal organizations, our approach in this chapter excludes social movements and collective and voluntary political engagements of citizens without links to a formal organizational structure.

Scholars often classify interest groups into two main types: those representing economic interests and those advocating for citizen interests or public causes (Baroni et al. 2014; Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2020). First, economic interest groups include business associations, professional groups, and trade unions. Business associations may represent specific industries, act as umbrella organizations for multiple industries, or include other industry federations as members. Prominent examples in Belgium include the Federation of Belgian Enterprises (VBO-FEB), Agoria for the technological industry, and Embuild for the construction sector. Professional groups bring together individuals based on their professions, often regulating and setting standards for specific occupations. Examples include the Belgian Association of Physicians (ABSyM-BVAS), the Flemish Association of Journalists (VVJ), and the Order of the French-speaking Bars (AVOCATS.BE). Trade unions are also often considered to defend economic interests as citizens join based on their work/professional activities and for primarily economic motives. In Belgium, the largest trade unions are the Christian and socialist trade unions, respectively ACV-CSC and ABVV-FGTB.

Second, citizen interest groups include organizations that gather individual citizens as members or advocate for specific causes. Some research further distinguishes between identity and public interest groups within this category. Identity groups represent specific constituencies like minorities, patients, or students. Public interest groups advocate for broad causes such as human rights (e.g., Amnesty International), animal welfare (e.g., Gaia), environmental protection (e.g., Bond Better Environment, Greenpeace), or consumer protection (e.g., Test Achats/Test-Aankoop).

This distinction between economic and citizen interests aligns with another typology that distinguishes between concentrated and diffuse interests. Concentrated interests, such as professional associations or industry federations, have specific, exclusive constituencies and provide selective material incentives. Their members are enfranchised within the organization, and these organizations advocate for issues that are of

concern to their specific members (Halpin 2006). In contrast, diffuse interests, such as environmental or consumer rights groups, have a more open membership, allowing anyone to affiliate with or sponsor the organization.

In addition to economic and citizen groups, on which the next section focuses, a third category exists: institutional groups. These associations have (public) institutions as members, such as local governments (e.g., Association of Flemish Cities and Towns), schools (e.g., General Secretariat for Catholic Education—SEGEC), or hospitals and welfare institutions (e.g., Zorgnet-Icuro).

Finally, there is a significant difference between organizations that utilize a direct-membership framework and those employing a nested-membership model, often referred to as umbrella groups. Direct-membership organizations establish a direct connection between the constituency and the organization, exemplified by patient groups where individuals are members, or industry federations that consist of individual companies. In contrast, chambers of commerce that include multiple industry federations, or peak trade unions that incorporate numerous industry-specific unions, have a nested-membership structure. In such cases, the members are not individual citizens or companies, but rather other associations that represent individuals or organizations (for a more detailed discussion see Fraussen 2022b).

19.2.2. The Belgian interest group system: defining features and composition

19.2.2.1. Defining institutional features

The Belgian system of interest representation is traditionally characterized as neo-corporatist with a consociational legacy (Jahn 2016; Siaroff 1999; Van Den Bulck 1992). It is also shaped by the federal political system.

In a neo-corporatist system (see chapter ‘Corporatism and the welfare state in Belgium’ in this *Handbook*), the government aims to strongly institutionalize the role of interest groups in policy-making. Belgian neo-corporatism involves extensive institutionalized concertation processes (i.e., social dialogue and advisory bodies) between the government and a limited number of ‘relevant institutional voices’ that represent major (mostly economic) societal groups. As a result, a select number of interest groups enjoy high levels of access, including business and employer federations, trade unions, and institutional associations representing key sectors like hospitals, health insurance providers, local governments, and schools. Historically, these neo-corporatist practices emerged from the traditional collaboration between these organizations and the government in economic, labour market, and health care policies. Since the 1970s, these practices have expanded from socio-economic policies to other domains, such as environmental protection (Hooghe 1995, 1998; Kriesi 1995). These domains are also characterized by privileged access for a few prominent interest groups, albeit not in the classic tripartite format of business associations and trade unions as government interlocutors (Fraussen 2014; Fraussen and Beyers 2016; Fraussen, Beyers, and Donas 2015; Willems 2020).

This neo-corporatist mode of policy-making contrasts with a more pluralist approach, as found in the United States and the United Kingdom. In a pluralist system, the relationships between interest groups and policymakers resemble an economic market, where many actors compete for access and where interactions are shaped by the more informalized dynamics of societal supply and political demand. Moreover, in pluralist systems, the worlds of policy-making and lobbying are more separated, with politics taking precedence. The role of interest groups is typically limited to a consultative function during the input phase of the policy process. In neo-corporatist systems, interest groups often have a more central role, ranging from policy formulation (and consultation) to implementation, and sometimes even co-decision-making (in the case of social dialogue).

It is noteworthy that while some traditionally neo-corporatist countries, such as Sweden and Norway, have experienced a decline of these practices, neo-corporatism has remained resilient in Belgium (e.g., Fraussen, Beyers, and Donas 2015; Pauly et al. 2021) or even increased. However, important differences exist between policy domains: neo-corporatism remains strong and persistent in areas like economics, health, and social policy, whereas these patterns are much less pronounced or even absent in other policy domains, such as immigration, civil rights, and energy (Willems 2020).

Additionally, the neo-corporatist nature of the Belgian system of interest representation is inseparable from consociationalism (Van Den Bulck 1992; see also the chapter ‘Consociationalism in Belgium’ in this *Handbook*). This implies a religious and socio-economic ideological segmentation into so-called ‘pillars’, which have historically pacified Belgium’s main political cleavages. The Christian, socialist, and liberal pillars represent(ed) dense organizational networks, with strong ties to their respective political parties based on shared values. Belgium shares this historical characterization with the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Austria, which are also classic cases of consociational democracy (Andeweg 2019). Although pillarization reached its peak in the 1960s, recent studies demonstrate that these traditional networks between political parties and interest groups can still secure voter support and impact policy-making (Martin 2024; Martin, de Lange, and van der Brug 2022; Van Haute et al. 2013).

Finally, the federal political system (see chapter ‘Federalism in Belgium’ in this *Handbook*), with a mix of federal, shared, and regional policy competencies, also shapes the Belgian interest group system. This ongoing process has resulted in the formation of substantial interest group communities that are (mainly) active at different levels of government—a process similar to that we can observe in the federal systems of Germany or Spain (Fraussen 2014; Keating and Wilson 2014). On one hand, the growing scope and volume of regional government activities triggered organized interests to mobilize at the sub-national level in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels. On the other hand, regional governments have actively stimulated a system of interest representation by subsidizing regionally based organizations and establishing a system of advisory bodies. This devolution dynamic also resulted in organized interests splitting along linguistic lines or creating separate ‘branches’ in each sub-national entity (Celis, Mackay, and Meier 2013; Heylen and Willems 2019; Verschuere and De Corte 2014). At the same time, neo-corporatist practices at the national level also affected the dynamics of sub-national interest representation, as they were mimicked at the regional level, where umbrella associations also play a central role (Fraussen, Beyers, and Donas 2015; Willems 2020).

19.2.2.2. Composition: diverse and fragmented

p. 288 While these institutional features still characterize the relations between policymakers and interest groups, the overall composition of the interest group population in Belgium has become more diverse and fragmented (Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021). This change has been driven by two processes: first, politicization, marked by increased public salience ↴ and intensified party-political conflict on cultural political cleavages instead of traditional socio-economic cleavages; and second, the widening scope of interest mobilization, especially of citizen groups, in policy domains such as the environment, human rights, and consumer protection (Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021).

Estimates of the total number of interest groups in Belgium vary significantly, depending on the definition applied (e.g., whether or not including non-profit organizations and groups organized on a more voluntary basis) and the scope considered (e.g., to what extent groups at national, regional, and local levels of government are included). When applying the definition outlined above, and including groups organized at a national and subnational scale, research identifies about 1,700 interest groups in Belgium (Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021).

A large-scale effort to characterize the Belgian population of interest groups, the Belgian Comparative Interest Group Survey (Beyers et al. 2020), focused on three distinct systems of interest representation: the national

federal level, the Flemish level, and the Walloon/Francophone government level. The study discovered that roughly 40 per cent of groups are mobilized nationwide, while 35 per cent and 24 per cent have organizational constituencies limited to the Flemish and Walloon/Francophone government level (Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021). In practice, there is a high correlation between the type of constituency and the governmental level at which these organizations are primarily politically active, except for a few larger associations (like the Flemish network of enterprises (VOKA), which, despite being regionally organized, is also politically active at the federal level).

When examining the distribution of group types, economic interests are most numerous. Economic groups, including business and professional associations, comprise 50 per cent of the Belgian interest group community. In contrast, citizen groups, including both cause and identity groups, constitute 30 per cent. The distinctiveness of the interest group communities at each government level is substantial. Business interests are highly active at the federal level, but their presence is somewhat less pronounced at the regional level. Conversely, public cause and identity groups are mainly active at the regional levels. Hence, when looking systematically at a wide range of interest groups, the enormous diversity across government levels is remarkable, which reflects the division of policy competencies in a federal setting (see also (Keating and Wilson 2014)).

19.2.3. Interest groups in the media and political arena

Interest groups can contribute to the political debate in many ways. Typically, two arenas are distinguished: the political and the media arena. Activities of interest groups in these arenas are described as ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ lobbying (Binderkrantz 2008; Dür and Mateo 2013). The former involves direct contact with policymakers. Such activities are based on information-based exchanges that do not generate much public exposure and are usually not visible to a broader audience (Bouwen 2002; Chalmers 2013). Inside lobbying thereby privatizes and restricts the scope of conflict (Schattschneider 1960). Inside lobbying can take many forms, such as face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, e-mail exchanges, or participation in expert committees and advisory bodies. ‘Outside lobbying’, in turn, can include press releases and conferences, contacts with journalists, public campaigning, social media advertising, or protest events. These tactics address policymakers indirectly and are geared toward raising awareness among a broader audience by communicating through various forms of public media (Kollman 1998). By signalling a high level of citizen support or engaging a larger and more diverse set of stakeholders, interest groups aim to exert public pressure on policymakers (Schattschneider 1960).

p. 289 Earlier research painted a picture of strictly separate worlds. The media arena was considered an inferior fallback option, primarily used by groups lacking direct (institutional) access. Politically weaker actors were thought to benefit from expanding the scope of conflict (Schattschneider 1960) and thus to prefer the media arena. However, recent research concludes that many interest groups attempt to be active on two fronts. It demonstrates that outside lobbying is also often conducted by powerful and resourceful actors, who enjoy high levels of access to the political arena (Danielian and Page 1994; Thrall 2006; Willems 2024).

19.2.3.1. Lobbying strategies

Even though many groups combine inside and outside strategies, one of these forms is often more dominant. The Belgian Comparative Interest Group Survey provides systematic and recent data about interest groups’ overall use of tactics (Beyers et al. 2020). The study shows that most Belgian interest groups prefer inside strategies over outside strategies. The data reveal that 41 per cent of organizations directly contact policymakers at least once a month or more frequently, whereas media-oriented strategies are employed at this rate by about 10 per cent of organizations (Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021).

When engaging in inside lobbying, the study demonstrated that interest groups least frequently contact members of parliament, and engage more regularly with the administration and executive branches of government (Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021). Possible explanations for this trend are Belgium's weak parliaments, politicized government administrations, and extensive ministerial cabinets. Targeting ministerial cabinets is considered particularly effective, as most bills originate within the government. Still, as in other West European countries, most contact occurs with the administration, especially at regional levels. This finding might be shaped by the close involvement of many interest groups in policy implementation, as well as the reliance of several groups on government subsidies.

When engaging in outside lobbying, Belgian interest organizations primarily rely on media-oriented strategies, such as contacting journalists and organizing press conferences (Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021). They less frequently engage in member-centred actions like signing petitions and staging protests. Furthermore, the least utilized external tactics, such as creating research reports, sharing opinions online, and hosting stakeholder meetings, tend to have smaller target audiences than the media-oriented approaches. This pattern fits the dynamics observed in other Western European countries (Kriesi, Tresch, and Jochum 2007; Tresch and Fischer 2015). Although the survey did not provide data on social media engagement, it is reasonable to assume that online platforms are becoming increasingly important channels for interest groups to directly engage with the broader public and policymakers, yet also to communicate with their members and other interest groups (see for example Chalmers and Shotton 2016; Halpin, Fraussen, and Ackland 2021).

19.2.3.2. Access to advisory bodies and the news

A crucial question is how these actions of individual groups impact the overall composition of a specific arena. Since Schattschneider (1960) introduced the notion of bias within the system of interest representation, scholars have been preoccupied with determining its inclusive nature and the extent to which it reflects diverse voices within society. Normatively, elite responsiveness is biased when important voices are excluded and policymakers act upon skewed signals. However, the primary challenge in addressing bias lies in the absence of a benchmark against which it can be evaluated (Lowery et al. 2015). Some argue that, in this regard, it is not so much a problem that a particular arena offers advantages to specific groups as long as multiple relevant arenas (or venues) give opportunities to different organizations (Lowery et al. 2015). However, when the same organizations dominate multiple arenas, some interests are systematically marginalized, reducing balanced representation and increasing the likelihood that policymakers are not attentive to the concerns and demands of particular constituencies. To clarify to what extent such a bias characterizes the Belgian interest group system, we examine the similarities and differences in composition between advisory bodies (focusing on advisory councils, their most institutionalized form) and the news media (see also Fraussen and Wouters 2015; Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021), and link this to the crucial features characterizing the Belgian system of interest representation.

Advisory councils are among Belgium's foremost institutional expressions of neo-corporatist practices (Fraussen and Beyers 2016; Fraussen, Beyers, and Donas 2015; see also Fobé et al. 2017 for an overview of advisory bodies in Belgium). Policymakers select a limited number of interest groups for inclusion in these advisory bodies to provide policy expertise via joint recommendations and to ensure that policy proposals have societal legitimacy. Interest groups, in turn, aim to effectively represent the policy priorities and preferences of their constituencies. They gain access and potential influence in exchange for policy expertise (gained through specialization in a particular policy area) and societal support (delivered by voicing the interests of a comprehensive constituency or large membership). Access, more explicitly obtaining seats in advisory councils, can thus be seen as a lobbying success; it reflects the effectiveness of an interest organization in passing a certain threshold that is beyond their own discretion, namely gaining recognition as a relevant interlocutor and spokesperson in the eyes of policymakers (Binderkrantz, Bonafont, and Halpin 2017; Halpin and Fraussen 2017).

The main advisory bodies at the Flemish level involve the strategic advisory councils, including the prominent Socioeconomic Council of Flanders (SERV). Similarly, the most important council at the Walloon/Francophone level is the Economic, Social and Environmental Council of Wallonia (CESE). At the national federal level, social dialogue is organized within the National Labour Council (NAR) and the Central Business Council (CRB). Prior research identified at least 616 advisory (sub-)councils at the various government levels (Willems 2020). Framework legislation provides the backbone for the overall design and functioning of the Flemish and Walloon advisory councils; such encompassing legislation is absent at the national level. Typically, ministers must solicit non-binding policy recommendations on initiated legislation from the relevant advisory councils in their domain(s). Furthermore, many advisory councils (e.g., those associated with government agencies) are tasked with providing recommendations for policy implementation. While less frequent, advisory councils can also proactively initiate policy recommendations.

Multiple studies demonstrate that access to advisory councils in Belgium is unevenly distributed among interest groups. Business associations, professional groups, and trade unions have the highest access rates, followed by associations of public authorities, public cause groups, and identity groups (Fraussen and Beyers 2016; Fraussen, Beyers, and Donas 2015; Willems 2020). The distribution of seats within councils reveals a core–periphery dynamic, with (very) few groups holding seats in multiple councils (Fraussen, Beyers, and Donas 2015; Willems 2020). The top organizations with the most seats are primarily trade unions and peak business associations, indicating a centralization of the interest group system around key socio-economic segments. These core insiders are the so-called ‘social partners’ consisting of the Christian, socialist, and liberal Dutch- and French-speaking trade unions (ACV/CSC, ABVV/FGTB, ACLVB/CGSLB), the peak employer association representing industry (VBO/FEB), small and medium-sized enterprises on both sides of the language border (Unizo and UCM), and the farmers’ unions (Boerenbond and Fédération wallonne de l’Agriculture).

p. 291 This centralization aligns with the consociational and neo-corporatist nature of Belgian policy-making, where a limited set of mostly economic interest groups enjoy a high level of access in advisory councils across various policy domains. While this pattern of neo-corporatist resilience corresponds with findings in other neo-corporatist settings such as Finland (Vesa, Kantola, and Binderkrantz 2018) and Denmark (Binderkrantz and Christiansen 2015), it should be noted that due to reforms by the Flemish and Walloon governments during the past decade, membership of advisory councils has expanded to include other organized interests besides these usual suspects (as in other Western European countries, see Binderkrantz, Fisker, and Pedersen 2016). Specifically, citizen groups have gained significant access to policy domains like the environment, transportation, social welfare, education, urban planning, and cultural and youth affairs (Van Damme, Brans, and Fobé 2011). As these policy domains became increasingly politicized, more citizen groups mobilized politically and managed to successfully enter the advisory system (Willems 2020). However, compared to the levels of access enjoyed by business associations and trade unions, the presence of citizen groups remains lower and they play a more peripheral role (Fraussen, Beyers, and Donas 2015; Willems 2020).

Turning to studies examining interest groups’ appearances in the Belgian news media, we want to highlight that, overall, interest groups enjoy limited attention from the media, especially compared with politicians and government actors (see Beckers and Van Aelst 2019), and that also the group composition in the media arena is characterized by considerable bias (Fraussen and Wouters 2015; Willems 2024; Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021). Media attention is the result of interest groups seeking news coverage (i.e., push) and journalists acting as gatekeepers selecting the information they deem newsworthy (i.e., pull) (Binderkrantz, Bonafont, and Halpin 2017). On the one hand, journalists decide which interest groups are newsworthy and get pulled into coverage. To select relevant groups, journalists rely on news values such as ‘elite status’ and adhere to routines and professional norms such as ensuring impartiality by balancing the coverage of political opinions. Pull dynamics are thus not a matter of a group’s propensity to seek coverage but concern the media’s own logic. On the other hand, interest groups can try to push themselves into the news using media strategies such as

organizing press conferences, issuing press releases, and by providing journalists with relevant input. By matching news routines and appealing to news values such as conflict and negativity, groups can adapt to the media logic and maximize their chances of being featured in the news.

Most Belgian interest groups do not gain media attention (Willems 2024). This attention scarcity may be attributed to the intense competition for news coverage among interest groups, political parties, and individual politicians (Tresch and Fischer 2015). Indeed, a consistent finding in interest group literature is that only a very few groups enjoy high media prominence, while most interest groups are never or only occasionally featured in the news (Binderkrantz, Bonafont, and Halpin 2017; Thrall 2006). Moreover, media attention exhibits a core–periphery dynamic similar to patterns of access to advisory councils. Recent studies revealed that many groups only appear in the news once or a few times on a prominent organizational issue, and indicated that business associations and trade unions attract more media attention than citizen groups (Fraussen and Wouters 2015; Willems, Beyers, and Heylen 2021).

p. 292

The prominence of business associations and trade unions in the news indicates that—although every arena has its own logic—some characteristics, such as the core–periphery structure of interest representation in advisory councils, are also reflected in the media arena (Fraussen and Wouters 2015). Research demonstrates that the news media often attribute news value to powerful political insiders and pays less attention to outsiders. This has led authors to characterize the Belgian media as an arena of ‘privileged pluralism’, similar to characteristics of media visibility of interest groups in Scandinavian countries (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015; Fraussen and Wouters 2015; Tresch and Fischer 2015).

19.3. Key trends and avenues for future research

Looking ahead, this section outlines key trends and challenges regarding interest representation in Belgium and relates these to promising avenues for future research. Specifically, we focus on (1) the declining role of advisory councils, (2) the increasing competition for political influence from non-membership organizations, (3) the impact of the shifts in the party landscape, and (4) the increasing attention to transparency measures and lobby regulation.

19.3.1. Declining role of advisory councils

Advisory councils traditionally play a key role in policy-making in neo-corporatist countries. However, their role is increasingly put under pressure in Belgium through a combination of developments.

First, their policy impact hinges on the extent to which they can formulate joint advice. In recent years, this has become increasingly difficult, resulting in recommendations mostly reflecting the lowest common denominator among the included organizations, or even a lack of joint advice. More specifically, the ‘permanent conflicts of interest’ between trade unions and employer associations frequently deadlock concertation at the federal level, especially in the context of social policy retrenchment and times of austerity (Arcq et al. 2010; Van Gyes et al. 2017). Moreover, the ‘mediatisation’ of public policy-making constrains corporatist interlocutors to negotiate and produce compromises behind ‘closed doors’ (Kriesi et al. 2006). In this regard, it seems valuable to examine the conditions that foster political compromise beyond the lowest common denominator, and to engage in (comparative) case studies to better understand the variation in policy impact of advisory institutions. For instance, how does the composition of advisory bodies, and their central organizational characteristics, shape the nature and policy impact of their recommendations? Under what conditions, taking into account issue characteristics such as media salience and level of political conflict, are advisory councils able to reach compromises among a diversity of societal interests?

Second, the nature of the policy advisory system also seems to be shifting. Two trends can be noted here. On the one hand, there is a trend of expertization, in which governments increasingly rely on (academic) experts or input from think tanks (see Fraussen and Pattyn 2024), rather than seeking advice from interest groups (for similar trends in other neo— corporatist countries, see Christensen and Holst 2017). This is reflected in a growing proportion of experts that are included in advisory bodies and task forces, and their dominance in the media relative to the presence of interest groups (Beckers and Van Aelst 2019). On the other hand, we see new tools for consultation emerging, linked with ideas about deliberative democracy (Caluwaerts and Deschouwer 2014). Via these tools (like G1000, online consultation of citizens, mini-publics, and platforms for co-creation and collaborative governance), policymakers aim to enhance citizen participation in policy-making and contribute to a more inclusive and responsive political system. So far, limited research has compared the policy role and impact of traditional and new tools for policy consultation, and assessed whether (combinations of) some tools indeed provide a more inclusive approach, or to what extent output from these different processes is integrated into legislative processes (Jacquet and van der Does 2021, see also Fraussen 2022a).

In response to these two trends, rather than relying on institutional representation, many interest groups opt for direct lobbying of elected representatives in government and parliament, or combine a presence in advisory councils with a focus on other channels for influence (for similar trends in Denmark and Norway, see Rommetvedt et al. 2013). As this practice becomes more widespread, it further diminishes the capacity and relevance of advisory councils, which are based on the assumption that seeking consensus among key stakeholders is both valuable and effective.

19.3.2. Increasing competition for political influence from non-membership organizations

Another important trend that shapes the dynamics of interest representation and the role of interest groups involves the increasing competition for political influence from non-membership organizations, such as companies and public institutions (see Schlozman et al. 2015 for a discussion of this trend in the US context). In many European countries, for instance, companies increasingly seem to opt for individual lobbying, rather than the collective representation of their interests via industry associations (Aizenberg and Hanegraaff 2020). A similar dynamic can be observed among (public) institutions. For instance, local governments and cities increasingly invest in independent lobbying capacities.

This trend has two important implications. First, it implies that more organizations are trying to make their voices heard, increasing competition for political influence. Second, it might increase bias in the interest group system, as especially well-resourced organizations can engage in extensive individual lobbying. This raises important questions related to democratic representation. A first question involves how the increasing political activities of non-membership organizations affect the level of access enjoyed by umbrella associations. While these membership-based organizations in general still enjoy better and more access, this power balance could shift as the legitimacy of umbrella groups is increasingly questioned by politicians and civil servants. It also urges scholars to reconsider conceptualizations of interest organizations and assessments of bias. If many non-membership organizations increase their political activities, they should also be considered as lobby actors, and thus always be included in studies of access and influence. Furthermore, given the dominance of economic and institutional interests among non-membership organizations, this might reveal even more outspoken forms of bias among those lobby actors trying to influence public policy, and raise concerns about the extent to which some societal groups face a very unequal playing field.

19.3.3. Changing party landscape

p. 294

Until the 1960s, strong connections existed between ideologically aligned interest groups and the traditional mainstream parties. However, these links have weakened in recent decades, partly due to factors such as declining party and union membership, as well as electoral volatility. Consequently, the party landscape has become more fragmented, with new (niche) parties emerging and solidifying their position within the broader political landscape (such as the Greens and Flemish nationalists). As a result, while interest groups still engage with parties, these interactions are now less institutionalized and more driven by strategic considerations related to the (evolving) power status of parties (e.g. government participation, ↵ number of seats in parliament) and parties' positional proximity to the specific policy goals of interest groups (Otjes and Rasmussen 2017).

Important in this regard is the rise of radical right and left populist parties (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). On one hand, scholars assume that ideological reasons—such as partisan extremity and the ‘cordon sanitaire’ surrounding Vlaams Belang—and the absence of historical ties will imply limited interactions between these parties and interest groups (Berkhout, Hanegraaff, and Statsch 2021; Otjes and Rasmussen 2017). Especially radical right populist parties consider interest groups to be part of ‘the elite’, which in their view should no longer shape policy-making (Mudde 2007). On the other hand, given the increasing number of parliamentary seats held by these parties, their potential influence on policy-making has grown, making them more attractive targets for interest groups. Future research should explore how interest groups adapt to these shifts in the party landscape, in terms of seeking access, building relations, and shaping the positions and priorities of political parties (such as party manifestos). Do we see differences emerging in the approach of citizen groups and business associations, with for instance varying capacities to build ties with a larger and more diverse set of political parties? Similarly, it is crucial to include the perspectives of parties and members of parliament more prominently in future studies. How does party size, and being a member of government or opposition, shape the networks and relations between parties (or specific members of parliament) and interest groups? To what extent, and how, do these networks change over time? The changing and increasingly volatile party landscape provides a unique opportunity to examine these fundamental questions, which shine a light on the dynamic nature of party-group relations and the responsive character of parliamentary democracies.

19.3.4. Lobby transparency and regulation

Efforts to regulate lobbying activities and enhance transparency are often considered essential for maintaining public trust and accountability in the political process, necessitating robust legislative frameworks and enforcement mechanisms. However, in Belgium, attention towards the regulation of lobbying and transparency has been limited and has only recently gained traction. The most significant measure is undoubtedly the lobby register, introduced in 2018 by the Chamber of Representatives (Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers), accompanied by a concise code of conduct. This register requires every organization and lobbyist wishing to enter the Chamber's premises and to meet with members of Parliament to register. Yet, in practice, only a fraction of lobbyists and interest groups active in Belgium are currently included in the register. Many lobbying activities still occur without registration. Any organization can effectively operate outside the Chamber, and individual companies and the social partners are exempt from the registration requirement. There is also no obligation to register interactions with members of government, their ministerial offices (known as ministerial cabinets), or civil servants in departments and agencies, despite all of these also being important targets for lobbying. Moreover, there is a lack of information regarding who lobbyists meet and the content of their discussions, as the register does not require such details. At the regional level of government, no such lobby register exist.

This light version of a lobby register (and lobby regulation more generally) contrasts sharply with practices implemented in the United States, the European Union, and other European countries. The European

institutions (Commission, Parliament, and Council), for instance, use a common transparency register for oversight of the activities of interest representatives, including the financial and human resources dedicated to these activities. Notably, registration is mandatory to request an access badge to the European Parliament and only registered interest representatives may be invited as speakers to public hearings of parliamentary committees. On the Commission's part, Commissioners, their cabinet members, and Directors-General are required to publish information on the meetings held with interest group representatives and lobbyists. They usually report the date the meeting took place and the topic being discussed.

In addition to lobby registers, many initiatives have been implemented to curb the so-called 'revolving door' phenomenon, which refers to the movement of individuals between roles as elected officials or top civil servants to positions as interest group representatives or functions related to lobbying or external relations within companies (Lapira and Thomas 2017). This phenomenon raises concerns about conflicts of interest and the potential for undue influence, as individuals may exploit their insider knowledge and connections for the benefit of private interests. Initiatives like 'cooling-off periods', designed to prevent former officials from immediately taking on lobbying roles in the industries or sectors they once regulated, have been implemented by several countries (e.g., Ireland and the Netherlands) and the EU.

Belgium, however, has not yet introduced such measures, making it difficult to address the likelihood (or perception) of conflicts of interest and undue influence. This laggard position can partially be explained by Belgium's neo-corporatist system of interest representation and the prominent role of ministerial cabinets, which often employ representatives from interest groups (see chapter 'Ministerial cabinets and advisers in Belgium' in this *Handbook*). This embeddedness makes it difficult to implement strict lobbying regulations without disrupting the established collaboration practices. The close interactions and mutual dependencies between government officials and (certain) interest groups create an environment where transparency measures might be seen as hindering effective policy-making rather than promoting it, at least from the perspectives of the policymakers and interest groups that currently benefit from these arrangements.

Future research should therefore evaluate the effectiveness and implications of existing regulatory frameworks, in terms of the promotion of transparency, regulation of lobbying, and curbing the revolving door phenomenon. To what extent do measures truly improve transparency, reduce potential conflicts of interests, or result in a more equal playing field (Fraussen and Braun 2018, Braun and Fraussen 2023)? Answers to these questions can help inform recommendations based on 'best practices', tailored to the particular Belgian context. This discussion should also extend to policy instruments that shape and regulate the role of interest groups in policy-making, such as the use of public consultations and legislative footprints (or lobby paragraphs), which provide an overview of all stakeholders involved in consultation processes and the input they provide. It appears that in Belgium, the public and political debate about these critical matters at the heart of the relationship between interest groups and representative democracy has only just begun.

19.4. Conclusion

The Belgian interest group system exhibits persistent neo-corporatist core-periphery structures, where traditional interlocutors like trade unions and peak business associations prevail, both in numbers and access to advisory councils and the news media. While traditional neo-corporatist practices persist mainly at the federal level, they also extend to the regional level, where similar structures prevail. These structures have consequences for the involvement of interest groups in policy-making. They tend to favour established and well-organized sectors of society, potentially sidelining newer and marginalized voices, and, overall, making policy-making less inclusive.

However, while traditional actors continue to hold sway in domains such as economic affairs, labour market policy, and social welfare, a notable shift is occurring. Citizen groups gained access to advisory councils in

policy areas such as environmental protection and transportation. This trend suggests a diversification of interest representation beyond the traditional neo-corporatist interlocutors. Moreover, public cause and identity groups are also gaining prominence in the news media arena. This increased visibility potentially affords them considerable influence over policy-making and might also translate into a stronger institutional presence in the near future.

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