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## Changes in interest group access in times of crisis: no pain, no (lobby) gain

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### ABSTRACT

The outbreak of Covid-19 provoked a massive shock for political institutions and societal groups. A crucial question is how such an external event affects the balance of access to political gatekeepers. In particular: Are organizations, which are highly affected by the crisis, able to increase their political voice? To address this, we focus on changes in lobbying access to key venues of public policy: government, parliament, the bureaucracy, and the media across 10 European democracies. Based on novel survey data, we assess changes in access shortly after the outbreak of Covid-19. Our findings show that affectedness is an important driver of changes in access to all venues. We interpret this as good news for the functioning of European systems of interest representation, and the ability of gatekeepers to open their doors to affected groups. However, we also show that the effect of affectedness varies considerably for economic and non-economic interests.

**KEYWORDS** Covid-19; focusing events; interest groups; interest representation; lobbying access; NGOs

The ability of different social and economic groups to voice their needs and concerns is an integral part of a well-functioning policy process. Yet, already in normal circumstances, factors such as the limited availability of time, information and other resources, make it hard for interest groups to mobilize and for political gatekeepers to consult relevant interests. Existing scholarship suggests that access to decision-making can be understood as an exchange relationship (Bouwen, 2004). Important research of this relationship gives evidence on whether and when access is biased towards particular interests in

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society (e.g., Beyers, 2004; Binderkrantz et al., 2015; De Bruycker & Beyers, 2015; Eising, 2007; Fraussen et al., 2015). A blind spot in existing studies is, however, that their focus on general patterns in access typically overlooks how access *changes* in the face of new and unexpected circumstances.

Times of crisis, such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, put decision-makers under special pressures, which are likely to impact access patterns: Policymakers have to make tough choices, while facing high levels of uncertainty and lacking some of the necessary information and time to make informed decisions. Input from interest organizations that represent constituencies affected by this crisis in different ways might, therefore, become a pivotal factor. However, these organizations might themselves be so hard-hit by the crisis that they become unable to provide these informational resources to policymakers. Put differently, crises or extreme events might upset both the *demand* for, and *supply* of interest group input, and it is important to know whether and how systems of interest representation are able to adapt to these pressures.

In this article, we analyze changes in lobbying access shortly after the outbreak of the Coronavirus crisis, which we see as a case of a massive, system-wide 'shock' or 'event' (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier, 1988) across ten European polities. Based on an elite-survey of interest representatives conducted in 2020, we analyze these short-term changes for four important venues of policymaking: governments, parliaments, the bureaucracy, and the media. Specifically, we assess which types of interest organizations gained *increased* access to policymakers and the public debate during the Covid-19 pandemic, and which groups instead saw their access *decrease*. The focal question in our analysis is: did organizations, which saw their interests most *affected* by the pandemic, also gain more access to the various political institutions? We here understand affectedness as a central *dynamic characteristic* of interest organizations when they face external challenges or threats that impact the representation of the organizations' aims, stakeholder interests or organizational maintenance. While seminal theories of interest mobilization focus on the importance of *disturbances* to social and or economic interests for the political process (cf. Truman, 1951), the empirical literature on lobbying and public policy rarely takes this factor of affectedness by a disturbance or changing external circumstances into account.

Our article provides a novel theoretical and empirical focus on *change in access* to test whether the relationship between interest groups and policymakers is sufficiently adaptive to deal with major shifts in socio-economic interests. We see the access dynamics during the Covid-19 crisis as a valuable case to study how systems of interest representation respond to an 'external shock' (Sabatier, 1988) or 'focusing event' (Kingdon, 1995), such as a health, financial or security crisis, which affects organizations to various degrees.

To study variation in access since the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, we collected a novel dataset on the responses by interest groups and firms to

this crisis across ten European democracies: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the European Union (EU) level. Based on survey data from 1441 interest organization leaders, we assess how lobbying access to political venues has changed after the outbreak of Covid-19.

Our findings show that affectedness is the most important driver of increases and decreases in lobbying access during the Covid-19 pandemic. This might be interpreted as ‘good news’ on the adaptability of consultation practices under extreme circumstances. In particular, we show that the increase of access registered for organizations representing highly affected interests is not just driven by a higher frequency of lobbying (i.e., the *supply-side* of lobbying after the focusing event). Gatekeepers in all venues seem to have pulled affected interest into policymaking and the public debate (i.e., a *demand-side* pull for input from affected organizations). Yet, we also show that this does not hold equally for *economic* and *non-economic*, yet affected, interests: highly affected public interest groups, which usually represent social or environmental causes, were not able to increase their access as much as affected business organizations, labor unions or profession organizations. In the following, we outline our theory of how affectedness impacts both supply- and demand-responses to a focusing event.

### The dynamics of lobbying access in times of crisis

Important existing studies on lobbying access address the organization-level and contextual factors that explain who gets a voice in different ‘venues’ or ‘arenas’ of public policy (e.g., Beyers, 2004; Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Chalmers, 2013; Eising, 2007; Fraussen et al., 2015; Rasmussen & Gross, 2015). These accounts of biases in access bear many important insights. However, a shortcoming is that they are relatively static, and do not explicitly assess how access *changes* when a polity is exposed to an unexpected event (for an exception see: LaPira, 2014).

Under ‘normal conditions’ access to political discussions tends to be skewedly distributed: A small number of organizations generally receive most access opportunities while a large number of groups are occasional ‘tourists’ in the policy process (Berkhout & Lowery, 2010). This finding holds across policy venues, including the media (Binderkrantz et al., 2016; De Bruycker & Beyers, 2015), and there is evidence that the same organizations persistently secure access across venues (Binderkrantz et al., 2015).

The open question we raise against the backdrop of this literature is how the existing ‘equilibrium’ of access changes in response to external events. Kingdon (1995, pp. 94–95) uses the term ‘focusing event’ to highlight ‘a crisis or disaster that comes along to call attention to [a] problem’. When such an unexpected event occurs, the information needs of politicians and

the preferences of organized interests are likely to change. As LaPira (2014) shows for the case of the effect of 9/11 on lobbying in Washington, such shocks have the potential to both mobilize usual insiders but can also activate other groups (temporarily) in the new issue context. How much and for whom lobbying access fluctuates under these extreme circumstances has, however, been scarcely researched. In this article, we therefore formulate a theory of access that focuses on major external disturbances, and test this in the context of the Covid-19 crisis.

### ***Supply and demand responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in different political venues***

Our analytical approach starts with two assumptions. First, our theory is grounded in a conceptualization of access as a *two-way* process including the activities of interest groups, on the one end, and policymakers or journalists on the other. As Binderkrantz and Pedersen (2017, p. 307) note, 'for access to be present, interest groups need to seek it, and relevant gatekeepers need to allow it.' Similarly, Halpin and Fraussen (2017) stress the importance of distinguishing between 'involvement', meaning the intensity and frequency of the advocacy effort, and 'access', which (also) depends on the discretion of gatekeepers. In our reasoning, we therefore consider both the effects of the spread of the Coronavirus based on a *supply logic*, which relates to how organizations *seek access*, and based on a *demand logic*, related to the actions of gatekeepers when deciding to whom access is *granted*.

Our second assumption is that there are many venues, in which interest groups can convey input to public policy. As Binderkrantz and Pedersen (2017, p. 307) argue further, access can be defined as a situation where 'a group has *entered a political arena* (parliament, administration, or media) *passing a threshold controlled by relevant gatekeepers* (politicians, civil servants, or journalists)'. We acknowledge the importance of such different venues and test potential differences between them without, developing strong theoretical expectations on differences in the change in access across these venues. Instead, our theoretical focus lies on introducing a new and potentially crucial explanatory factor for understanding changes in political access in response to external events: The level of 'affectedness' or 'disturbance' to an organization's interests as a result of the external shock.

### ***Affectedness as a driver of changes in access: pluralist and exchange perspectives***

Our focus on *affectedness* of an organization's interests can, firstly, be rooted in *pluralist* theories of interest group politics. Truman (1951, p. 511) identifies changes in society as main drivers for people to organize.

A 'disturbance in established relationships anywhere in society may produce new patterns of interaction aimed at restricting or eliminating the disturbance'. Disturbances can, thus, be seen as driving the 'initial' mobilization of interest groups. At the same time, however, this part of pluralist mobilization theory also applies to the mobilization of existing organized interests when they decide on which issues they become politically active (see discussion in: Rasmussen et al., 2014).

Truman's theory of disturbances pairs exceptionally well with the aim of analyzing changes in access after a focusing event, such as the spread of Covid-19. Its focus here lies mainly on the *supply* side: This theory would lead us to expect that the magnitude of the disturbance and the 'attitudes widely held' (Truman, 1951, p. 159), should affect an organization's incentives to mobilize. If not constrained by some limiting factors, this should translate into actual political mobilization. This implies that the intensity with which particular sub-sections in society are affected ('disturbed') by the spread of Covid-19, or the policy responses resulting from it, should broadly translate into the extent to which their interests are voiced. From this view, we should expect that the *supply* of highly affected groups seeking access has risen dramatically since the start of the Covid-19 crisis.

From the *demand* side, Truman's theory would arguably not predict any limiting factors for access. According to Truman (1951, p. 511), all (potential) groups have 'a minimum of influence in the political process'. In fact, he argues that policymakers have incentives to anticipate the effects of the disturbance on different social and economic groups by seeking to include these in the policy debate. According to more recent interpretations of pluralist theory, this could result in a *demand-pull* for input from the affected interests (e.g., Rasmussen & Gross, 2015, p. 349), as policymakers seek to consult and appease groups whose interests suffer most under the disturbance.

Many contemporary authors place more emphasis on the demand side. They expect the numbers and activities of interest representatives to be triggered by political 'demand', both within the political arena (e.g., Leech et al., 2005) and in public debates (Binderkrantz et al., 2016 and 2015). The 'demand' by policymakers is here sometimes specified in exchange-theoretical terms as including the need to gather information on the many issues on the political agenda, which no ministry, parliamentary or media staff could digest without external input (Bouwen, 2004; Chalmers, 2013; De Bruycker, 2016; Flöthe, 2019). A common assumption in interest group scholarship is that political actors exchange policy-relevant information for access and influence in political arenas (see, e.g., Klüver, 2013) or exposure in the media (e.g., De Bruycker & Beyers, 2015). To do so, gatekeepers arguably need to weigh the potential contribution of different organizations for the case at hand to obtain the technical and/or political information relevant for the policy.

An external event such as the spread of Covid-19 poses new policy challenges and raises uncertainty about political consequences, feasible policy solutions, and their societal reception. In such a situation, decision-makers should be inclined to seek input from organizations that are best equipped to provide information that is relevant to meet these new needs. Organizations whose interests are heavily affected by the event should arguably be of high importance, as their information is likely to be useful in addressing the crisis, its adverse effects, and gauge the likely effects of different policy interventions.

In short, while classical and contemporary pluralists, as well as exchange theorists have different starting points, we reach similar conclusions based on their perspectives on the supply and demand-side of interest representation. We reason that, organized interests that are highly affected by a crisis or 'disturbance', in this case the consequences of the spread of Covid-19, should be able to increase their access to relevant political venues during the crisis as opposed to the status-quo ante. We therefore formulate our first hypothesis as follows:

**H1:** The more intensely affected an organization's interests are by the Covid-19 crisis, the larger the organization's increase in access to political venues since the outbreak of Covid-19.

To substantiate the analysis of how access patterns change in times of crisis, we add two further expectations to this main hypothesis. Firstly, it is critical to enquire whether potential increases in access are mainly *supply-driven* i.e., due to more frequent efforts by affected interests (cf. Halpin & Fraussen, 2017), or whether political gatekeepers (also) prioritize affected groups in their *demand* for contact with organized interests.

As indicated above, based on pluralist theory, one would mainly expect there to be a supply-driven change in access, because highly affected interests mobilize more intensely in response to the 'disturbance' (Truman, 1951). At the same time, however, we expect a demand-driven pull for input by organizations representing affected interests. Even if these face challenges to mobilize after a focusing event or external shock, gatekeepers should, from a normative and information-seeking perspective, foster consultation practices with highly affected organized interests. If this is the case, organizations that do not represent affected interests should not be able to increase their access as much as highly affected organizations when they lobby more intensely. We add this qualification to Hypothesis H1, in form of our exploratory Hypothesis H1a.

**H1a:** More frequent lobbying efforts during the Covid-19 crisis lead to larger increases in access for organizations whose interests are more intensely affected by the Covid-19 crisis, compared to less affected interest organizations.



Secondly, we expect that different *forms of affectedness*, such as economic and social affectedness, vary in their effects on changes in access. Given that *social* and/or *environmental* impacts are often more difficult to assess and quantify than *economic* impacts (Burdge, 2002), we expect that economic affectedness is also easier to mobilize and communicate (*supply side*), and prioritized by gatekeepers (*demand side*) in these crisis circumstances. Theory on collective action problems similarly holds that clear economic benefits are, in general, easier to organize (cf. Olson, 1965). This can explain evidence found in existing studies of access suggesting that policymakers interact more frequently with business actors than citizen groups (e.g., Berkhout & Lowery, 2010; Beyers, 2004). Economic groups, including business associations and trade unions, might, in this sense, be seen as the ‘usual suspects’ for privileged access.

Arguably, these biases in favor of economic affectedness might be even more pronounced in crisis-situations. Economic distress, unemployment and economic recessions can have overwhelming effects on voters and the electoral prospects of incumbents, actually more so than in times of prosperity (Bloom & Price, 1975). This gives policymakers strong incentives to address threats to economic stability, and the inclusion of economically affected interest organizations can be an important mechanism to do so. In case of the pandemic, the economic consequences of lockdowns and travel restrictions were very uncertain, but highly feared. This uncertainty and wide-spread anxiety about an economic downturn due to the pandemic is likely to have increased the demand from political gatekeepers for input from economically affected actors, for instance to gauge consequences of a lockdown and inform the design of economic rescue packages.

While we expect this focus on economic affectedness to be strong during Covid-19, we also reason that gatekeepers have more general incentives to be especially attentive to economic groups that are affected by a focusing event. To qualify our Hypothesis H1, we therefore add a focus on the effect of *affectedness* for different types of interests. In particular, we expect higher *economic* affectedness to increase lobbying access after the focusing event more than *non-economic* affectedness. Hypothesis H1b summarizes this expectation by distinguishing between the effect of affectedness for economic and non-economic interest organizations after the outbreak of Covid-19.

**H1b:** Higher affectedness by the Covid-19 crisis leads to larger increases in access for organizations representing economic, compared to non-economic, interests.

## Research design

To assess the impact of the Coronavirus crisis on political interest representation, we conducted an online survey across active interest groups and

companies in ten polities in Europe (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the EU-level). From early June to mid-July 2020, this survey was conducted among a sample of over 7,000 interest groups and large firms in these ten democracies. These polities were selected foremost based on the availability of comparable lists of interest group populations. At the same time, they include a mix of different types of welfare states, types of interest mediation and electoral systems, and different government responses to the crisis. The sample of polities is therefore well suited to understand changes in access across Western democracies.

### ***Sampling of organizations***

The organizations to receive the survey were selected as stratified samples from existing overviews of the population of politically active organizations in the respective polity. This was done by drawing on lobbying registers (e.g., Ireland and the EU), or existing overviews compiled by scholars (e.g., Denmark, Sweden). Compiling lists of interest group populations is a huge task itself, and we were fortunate to be able to build on existing efforts by lobbying scholars (Binderkrantz et al., 2020; Naurin & Boräng, 2012; Pritoni, 2019). In the process of collecting contact information of the lead political or public affairs specialist in each sampled organization, we updated the lists from which we started out.<sup>1</sup> The stratified samples were drawn to ensure the inclusion of 1) similar total samples across countries, and 2) similar shares of different types of organizations in each polity.<sup>2</sup> Appendix A summarizes the general sampling frame and sampling considerations for each polity.

### ***Response rates and distribution of observations***

Response rates vary considerably between countries (see: Appendix Table C1), which is a common pattern in interest group surveys. While the Nordic countries (Denmark and Sweden) in our study attain high response rates (ca. 42 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively), the Netherlands and Ireland score somewhat lower (at ca. 27 per cent and 23 per cent), followed by Germany, Austria, and the EU survey (ca. 15 per cent or above). For Italy, France, and the UK we register very low response rates between ca. 13 per cent (Italy) and 7 per cent (UK). We include these countries in the analyses (with fixed effects). However, excluding them does not change our results (see Appendix Table F1).

In our pooled sample, our response rate lies at 20.4 per cent. For these 1441 organizations that answered the survey to the end, we do not see a bias regarding group type (see Appendix Table C2). While we cannot rule

out non-response bias, Appendix C further probes the distribution of responses. Especially important for our purpose: it shows that our observations include organizations across all different levels of self-assessed *affectedness* (Table C4). Based on this, we believe that our data allows us to assess how affectedness impacts changes in access during this crisis.

### ***Dependent variables: change in access***

We analyze changes in access to four venues of public policy: 1) the media, 2) the executive, 3) the legislature and 4) the bureaucracy. For each venue, we assess how interest group access has *changed* during the Coronavirus crisis relatively to the time before the crisis. To do so, we construct four dependent variables, which subtract the 'usual' frequency of access to the venue *before the crisis* from the frequency of access to this venue *during the crisis* based on the survey responses.<sup>3</sup>

The survey asked respondents to rate, on a five point scale from 'never' (1) to 'almost on a daily basis' (5), how frequently their organization has had access to 1) media platforms, such as TV, newspapers and radio; 2) elected government officials at any level of government; 3) members of parliament; 4) and civil servants of government departments and agencies.<sup>4</sup> We asked this question concerning the time *before* the Coronavirus crisis and for the time *during* the Coronavirus crisis (i.e., since March 2020) separately. We use these questions to construct a measure for each access venue by taking the difference between the frequency of access before the crisis and the frequency of access during the crisis for the particular respondent and venue. This means that even if respondents over- or underestimate their own access, this only affects our measure if these biases vary for the same respondent between the two time points.

In sum, our four dependent variables indicate the venue-specific change in access to the media ( $\Delta$  *Media*), government ( $\Delta$  *Government*), parliament ( $\Delta$  *Parliament*) and the bureaucracy ( $\Delta$  *Bureaucracy*). These variables take positive values if access has *increased* during the Coronavirus crisis relative to the access before the crisis, and negative values in the opposite scenario. A value of zero indicates no change in access.

### ***Independent variables***

Our central independent variable is the level of affectedness of the organization's interests by the focusing event. We operationalize this '*level of affectedness*' based on a survey question asking respondents to rate the extent to which their organization's interests were 'more or less affected by the Coronavirus crisis, compared to other stakeholders in [country]' on a scale ranging from 1 (much less affected) to 5 (much more affected).

This *relative* and *subjective* measure of affectedness has both strengths and limitations. As a strength, it gives a specific, yet comparable, organization-level rating of how the focusing event is perceived to have affected the interests represented by the organization. In the case of an organization representing the elderly, or restaurant owners during the Covid-19 pandemic, we would expect a higher rating than for an organization representing the interests of farmers or real estate businesses. At the same time, a downside is that this rating is subject to potential over- or under estimation and requires an implicit comparison to other stakeholders *in a given country*. We address these limitations in two ways. First, our analyses include fixed effects for countries. Second, we also consider an alternative (though less precise) proxy for affectedness, namely our own categorization of less and more highly affected *sectors*. Appendix D compares this distribution of changes in access by *sectors*, and shows similar patterns as for the self-perceived organization-level measure, which we use in the main analysis. Moreover, Appendix G, Table G1 shows that our main finding is extremely robust to using this alternative measure of affectedness. In the main analyses, we cluster standard errors by sector.

### **Other variables and controls**

To disentangle higher ‘access seeking’ (cf. Binderkrantz & Pedersen, 2017) or lobbying ‘involvement’ (Halpin & Fraussen, 2017) by affected interests from the decisions of gatekeepers, we include two variables that tap into the role of *supply-side* factors in explaining changes in access in some of our models. First, we measure the intensity of lobbying efforts by the organization during the pandemic in each of the four specific venues under study. We thus include the venue-specific *frequency of lobbying* for the type of access change predicted. In the survey, participants rated the frequency of lobbying each venue on a 5-point scale from ‘never’ to ‘almost on a daily basis’. Second, we include a dummy variable to capture whether *mobilization problems* were faced by the organization at the outbreak of the crisis. This is measured based on a survey question on whether the organization had to suspend its lobbying activities at any point during the pandemic. We expect this inability to remain active to have a negative impact on access in all venues. To probe our exploratory Hypothesis H1a, we will look at the effects of these variables, as well as a potential interaction of lobbying frequency with affectedness.

Moreover, as common in studies of access (e.g., Beyers, 2004; Binderkrantz et al., 2015), we include ‘*organization type*’ in our analyses. Based on the survey responses, where respondents classified the type of organization, we distinguish three categories: 1) business organizations, including business associations and firms; 2) profession groups, including professional

associations and labor unions<sup>5</sup>, and 3) public interest groups, which contains cause-centered groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen associations. We also use this variable to test our exploratory hypothesis H1b on whether the effect of affectedness varies for organizations representing *economic interests* (i.e., business organizations and professional groups), and *non-economic interests*, (i.e., public interest groups).

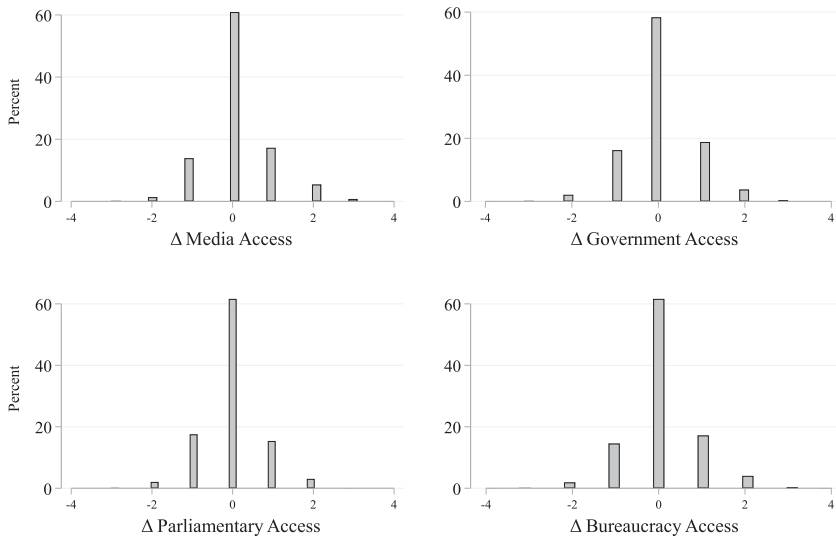
As other relevant controls, we include 'lobbying resources' measured by the number of full-time staff working in public affairs in the organization. Respondents were asked to place their organization in one of five categories, based on how many full-time staff members 'focus on political work, such as advocacy or public relations'. For the analysis, we grouped these into three categories: low (<1), medium (1–4) and high (>=5) lobbying staff resources. In addition, we include the organization's *age* in three intervals (<21, 21–50, and >50 years), as this might affect relationships to gatekeepers. Finally, we include fixed effects for the polity of operation in all models.

## Analysis

To inform the interpretation of the multivariate regressions that follow, [Figure 1](#) shows the change in access after the outbreak of the pandemic for each of the four venues. It suggests that patterns of change in access are relatively similar across venues. Around 60 per cent of the observations take the value of zero, which indicates that for these organizations access has not changed as a result of the crisis; The other 40 per cent of observations are roughly equally distributed to the left and right of zero. This indicates that some actors gained more access compared to their previous position, while others lost access.

Despite the similarities, [Figure 1](#) also reveals some nuances. Access to the media seems to have increased the most since the Covid-19 outbreak (mean: 0.13), suggesting that Covid-19-related stories gave interest organizations additional opportunities to appear in the public debate. In contrast, parliamentary access has decreased for a higher share of actors than it increased (mean: -0.01), potentially indicating an inability of parliamentarians to continue consulting interest organizations, or their lower importance during the crisis. Still, an overall impression from [Figure 1](#) is that interest representation has continued to function despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Some organizations (ca. 20 per cent) even increased their access to gatekeepers, whereas others (another 20 per cent) registered a decrease in access.

We now focus on testing our theory of affectedness by a focusing event as a driver of such changes. To allow for tracing possible differences in the effects of affectedness across venues we model access changes in each



**Figure 1.** Difference between access during and before the Coronavirus crisis (Share of Organizations).

venue separately. Moreover, all our models include fixed effects for the polity.<sup>6</sup>

**Multivariate analyses: increased access for affected interests?**

We use OLS regression<sup>7</sup> to systematically explore the effect of *affectedness* (H1) on our four dependent variables. For each venue, we run analyses with and without the variables *mobilization problem* and the venue-specific measure of the *frequency of lobbying* during the crisis to tap into the importance of supply-side factors for changes in access. All models include the *organization type*, *lobbying resources*, *age* and *polity of operation*. To account for heteroskedasticity in the residuals, we cluster standard errors by sector.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1 shows our results with two regressions for each dependent variable: one with and one without these additional variables on the supply-side (Models 1–8). Measures of fit show that Models 2, 4, 6, and 8, which include these variables, fit our data well, capturing approximately 19–25 per cent of the variation. In contrast, the models without these factors explain only 7–9 per cent of the variation. This indicates that organizations’ behavior during the Coronavirus crisis is an important driver of changes in access. This is supported by the significant positive effect of the venue-specific *Frequency of lobbying* during the crisis ( $p < 0.001$ ), and the significant negative effect of *Mobilization Problem* ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 1.** OLS explaining  $\Delta$  Access for four venues with fixed effects for the 10 polities/countries and clustered SEs by sector.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	$\Delta$ Media Access		$\Delta$ Government Access		$\Delta$ Parliament Access		$\Delta$ Bureaucracy Access	
Affectedness	0.17*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.14*** (0.03)	0.07** (0.02)	0.13** (0.03)	0.08** (0.02)	0.13*** (0.03)	0.09*** (0.02)
Freq. of lobbying venue		0.19*** (0.02)		0.25*** (0.04)		0.20*** (0.03)		0.17*** (0.02)
Mobilization Prob. (bin)		-0.37*** (0.06)		-0.41*** (0.05)		-0.41*** (0.04)		-0.38*** (0.07)
Org Type (Ref: Public)								
Business & Firms	0.22*** (0.03)	0.13** (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	0.22*** (0.04)	0.11* (0.04)	0.11+ (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)
Profession & Labor	0.26** (0.06)	0.22** (0.05)	0.21*** (0.03)	0.12** (0.03)	0.23** (0.06)	0.16** (0.05)	0.18** (0.05)	0.12* (0.05)
Resources (Ref: Low)								
Medium 1-4	0.06 (0.04)	-0.12* (0.04)	0.11* (0.03)	-0.06 (0.05)	0.10* (0.04)	-0.07 (0.06)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.05)
High $\geq 5$	0.08 (0.08)	-0.20* (0.09)	0.13 (0.09)	-0.18+ (0.09)	0.05 (0.06)	-0.23* (0.09)	0.02 (0.10)	-0.22* (0.10)
Age (Ref: < 21 years)								
21-50 years	0.05 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	0.04 (0.06)	0.03 (0.05)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)	0.05 (0.05)	0.05 (0.06)
more than 50	0.09+ (0.05)	-0.00 (0.04)	0.09 (0.06)	0.01 (0.05)	0.10* (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.13** (0.04)	0.10+ (0.05)
Constant	-0.76*** (0.08)	-0.73*** (0.07)	-0.82*** (0.10)	-0.85*** (0.05)	-0.88*** (0.09)	-0.89*** (0.08)	-0.81*** (0.09)	-0.89*** (0.08)
Fixed effects for Polity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of Cases	1336	1302	1329	1293	1331	1294	1336	1298
Number of Polities	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
R-squared	0.08	0.19	0.09	0.25	0.07	0.23	0.09	0.20

+  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  Clustered standard errors in parentheses. For country/polity coefficients see: Appendix C (Table C5).

### **Evidence for the main hypothesis (H1)**

A first important insight from Table 1 is that *affectedness* is a significant predictor of the change in access to all four venues across all models ( $p < 0.01$  or below) in line with our first hypothesis: organizations that saw their interests more affected during this crisis increased their access more than less affected groups. Increased access by highly affected groups is highest in the *Media*, followed by almost equal increases in access across *Government*, *Parliament*, and the *Bureaucracy*. These findings give support for our first hypothesis (H1). As we show in the Appendix (Table G1), this finding also holds when we use an alternative measure of *Affectedness* that differentiates more and less affected sectors.

A critical question is what *drives* these trends. As extensively theorized, changes in access can be driven by variation at the level of interest group activity (*supply-side*) and/or selective procedures of gatekeepers (*demand-side*). To this end, Models 2, 4, 6 and 8 suggest that the effect is not just driven by successful (Trumanian) mobilization, meaning that those highly affected by the crisis simply advocate more frequently and therefore increase their access. Even when holding lobbying intensity constant, more affected organizations increase their access. This suggests, on the demand side, that gatekeepers prioritized more affected organized interests in consultations during the crisis. We will probe this explanation further when assessing evidence for our explanatory hypotheses H1a and H1b.

Yet, first, a closer look at the control variables helps evaluate some alternative explanations. They provide mixed evidence on whether 'the usual suspects' were able to increase their access during the pandemic. On the one hand, we see significantly higher increases in access for both *business organizations* and *profession groups*, compared to *public interest groups*. These differences hold in all venues for profession groups ( $p < 0.05$  or below). When comparing business organizations and public interest groups, it is mainly in the media and parliamentary arena that business access has increased significantly more ( $p < 0.05$  or below), especially when controlling for lobbying frequency. On the other hand, regarding higher *lobbying resources*, there is no evidence that these consistently explain *increases* in access during the pandemic. Furthermore, there is limited evidence that *organization age* explains increases in access, with older organizations increasing their access to parliament and the bureaucracy more than young organizations. In Appendix C, we discuss relatively minor differences between countries.

### **Evidence for the exploratory hypotheses (H1a and H1b)**

To test our interpretation of demand-driven access changes further, we interacted the level of affectedness with the frequency of lobbying activities



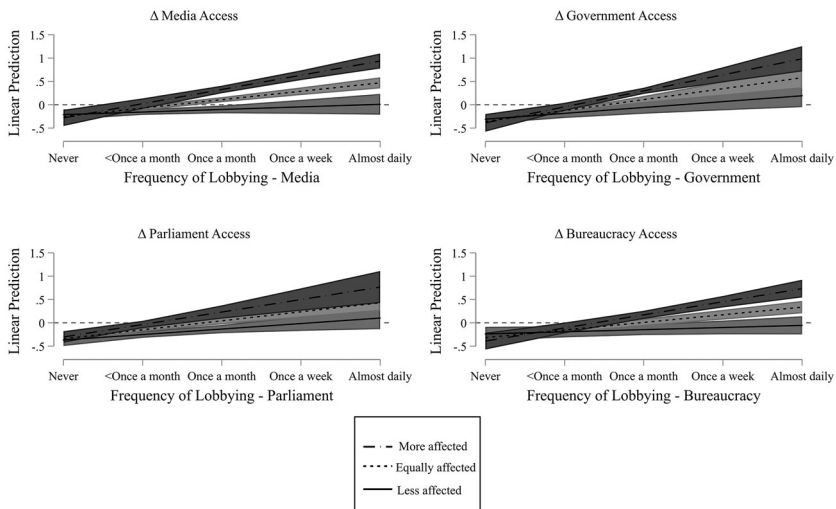
targeting the Media, Government, Parliament and the Bureaucracy. In doing so, we can distinguish affected organizations that did not have access because gatekeepers failed to grant it from those that did not have access because they did not seek it. The full models to test this are presented in the Appendix (Table F2), which show that the interaction effect is significant in all models ( $p < 0.01$  in the Media, Governmental and Bureaucratic arenas,  $p < 0.1$  for Parliament).

Figure 2 helps understand this association. To ease interpretation, we show predictions at low, high and average levels of affectedness.

The important finding from Figure 2 is that, across all venues, the effect of the frequency of lobbying on access change varies at different levels of affectedness. For ‘much less affected’ interests, the slope of the plotted line is relatively flat, whereas it is steep for ‘much more affected’ interests.

More specifically, we see that those organizations that lobbied a venue ‘never’ or ‘below once a month’ during the crisis tend to experience lower or equal access during the Coronavirus crisis than before the crisis. However, as Figure 2 shows further, the predicted change in access for slightly higher-activity organizations (lobbying ‘once a month’) is significantly different for the *more affected* compared to the *less affected* across all venues. This suggests that gatekeepers, such as journalists, government members and bureaucrats, were relatively successful in including more affected organizations in policy discussions, even when these had relatively low levels of lobbying activity.

At high levels of activity, the difference between more and less affected interests increases: Mostly evident for access to the media and bureaucracy,

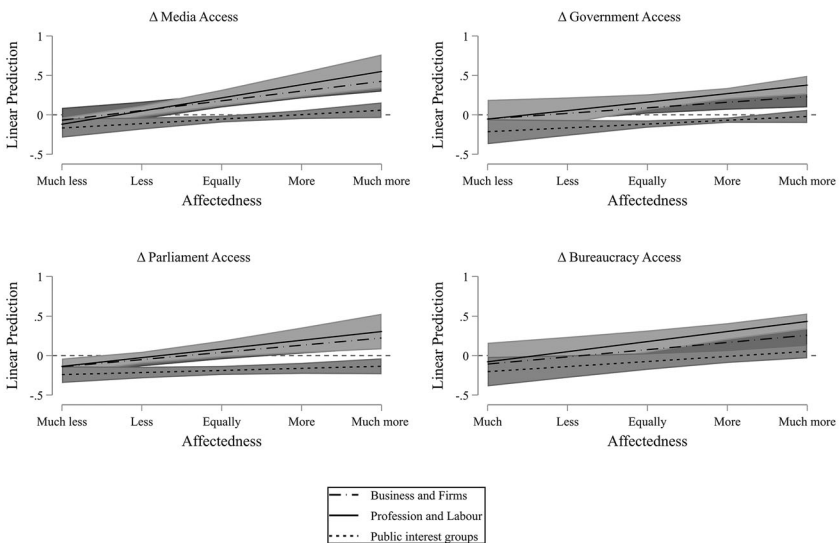


**Figure 2.** Effect of frequency of lobbying (venue specific) by level of affectedness.

those who lobbied almost daily but were *less affected* by the crisis register a substantially smaller increase in access than those who lobbied almost daily but were *more affected* by it. These findings provide support for our hypothesis H1a: More frequent lobbying leads to larger increases in access for organizations whose interests are more intensely affected by effects of Covid-19. In our view, these patterns showcase a responsiveness to the most affected organizations during the Coronavirus crisis, and they suggest that *demand-side* factors played an important role for including affected groups in policy debates, in addition to supply side factors.

Finally, we expected that access changes are affected by the nature of *affectedness* in terms of whether *economic* or *non-economic* interests are at stake. To test this, we include an interaction between the *level of affectedness* and *organization type*, as shown in Figure 3. The full models are reported in the Appendix (Table F3) and show a number of significant interaction effects in several venues when comparing *economic organizations* (business organizations and profession organizations) to *non-economic organizations* (public interest groups). When comparing public interest groups to profession groups (labor unions and professional organizations), the interaction effect is significant in all four venues ( $p < 0.1$  or below), while the constituent term for affectedness drops in significance.

Figure 3 illustrates the important implications of this interaction: For public interest groups, it matters less whether they were strongly or modestly affected by the crisis: the slope of the plotted line is relatively flat, especially in the parliamentary venue.



**Figure 3.** Effect of affectedness by group type.

We also see that the predictions of changes in access for public interest groups are, for the most part, a zero or negative change. In none of the venues, even at the highest level of affectedness, are public interest groups predicted to have increased their access. In contrast, business groups and profession groups both *increased* their access when they were more affected by the crisis. We interpret this as an indication that the level of affectedness matters more for organizations representing *economic* affected interests than *non-economic* affected interests, and, therefore, support for our second qualifying hypothesis H1b. Future research could build on this finding to shed more light on how *economic* and *social* affectedness affect access to public policy.

## Conclusion

Overall, our analyses provide evidence across ten European polities that affectedness by a focusing event, in our case the Covid-19 pandemic, is an important driver of changes in lobbying access. We interpret this as good news about the adaptability of European systems of interest representation: Under the sudden shock of this pandemic, these demonstrated the ability to react to the major disturbance of the policy space in a way that is responsive to the changes in the organizations' interests. The ten interest group systems we studied seem capable to translate the disturbance of their societal bases into the supply of political voice into politics. At the same time, these expressions of interests are weighted by institutional gatekeepers, which seem to have prioritized affected organized interests over less affected ones.

As we showed further, the effect of lobbying frequency varies considerably at different levels of affectedness. Those that lobbied a venue regularly but were least affected have not increased their access, while those lobbying with the same frequency but being most affected increased their access in all venues. We see this as evidence that part of the effect of affectedness is driven by efforts at the *demand* side to pull vulnerable groups into the policy discussion.

However, our findings also indicate that different *types of affectedness*, namely for groups representing economic and non-economic interests, have not been weighted equally by gatekeepers during this crisis. We showed that public interest groups, such as groups working for social or environmental causes, have been relative 'losers' of the pandemic: their access remained unchanged or decreased, even at the highest level of affectedness to the interests an organization represents. What effects this will have on future social policies remains to be seen. It is important we keep a close eye on developments in these fields in the future. Importantly, our analysis focused on short-term changes in access. Yet, at the time of writing, this

pandemic is not over. It will, therefore, be important for scholars to evaluate long-term dynamics in relation to interest representation in Covid-19 times.

In addition, we also see broader *implications* of our findings. While our study analyzed access in Covid-19 times as an example of system-wide 'event' or 'shock' (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier, 1988), we hope that it bears insights beyond this case. For major crises like this one, where conflict expands considerably and lastingly, there is a good chance that our findings travel to other disturbances. In such cases, we would expect a simultaneous supply-side triggering disturbance to match up with the demand of gatekeepers to pull the most affected interests into decision-making. Future research could assess under which circumstances the supply of and demand for interest representation meet productively in this way, and what role affectedness by changes to the status quo plays in lobbying processes more generally. While *affectedness* is not a variable commonly included in empirical interest groups research, it may be an important predictor of interest group access (and influence) on the policy process. It is plausible that policymakers weigh the needs and demands of interest groups based on the potential consequences or impact of policies for interest groups, irrespective of whether there is a crisis or not. We therefore hope that this variable (affectedness), which was so central in early interest groups research (Truman, 1951), finds its way back to mainstream interest group studies, as well.

## Notes

1. See Appendix A.
2. The EU is an exception to cover this large polity.
3. Our approach is inspired by experimental studies that predict changes in a dependent variable after treatment, here the spread of Covid-19. Given there are two possible modeling strategies in observational data like ours (Bicalho et al., 2019), we include additional robustness checks in Appendix H, where we predict access after the outbreak of the pandemic (DV), and control for pre-pandemic access. These models replicate our findings. We also assess the presence of floor and ceiling effects based on pre-Corona access (Appendix I).
4. See Appendix B.
5. In Appendix D, we disaggregate these two organization types, to show that patterns in access changes are comparable. Moreover, we show that our findings do not lose nuance by collapsing them (Appendix F, Table F4 and Figure F1).
6. See Appendix (Figure C1) on variation between polities.
7. Appendix G shows that our findings hold equally in ordered logistic regressions (Table G2), and with a simplified measure of access changes in three levels: -1 (decrease) 0 (no change) 1 (increase) (Tables G3 and G4).
8. Appendix E shows pairwise correlations and does not indicate multicollinearity (Table E1). Moreover, Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for the eight models are <2.3.

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