

Contrary to popular opinion, business actors are less successful than citizen groups at lobbying EU legislators

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*How powerful are business interests in lobbying for changes to EU legislative proposals? **Andreas Dür**, **Patrick Bernhagen** and **David Marshall** present findings from an analysis of 70 legislative proposals introduced by the European Commission between 2008 and 2010. They note that contrary to popular opinion, business actors proved far less successful than citizen groups at achieving their desired outcomes in EU legislative decisions. They reason that this may be because with the single market completed in most areas, the contemporary European legislative agenda tends to be dominated by proposals aimed at protecting consumers or the environment.*



From legislation governing the safety of chemicals (REACH) to the EU's current data protection regulation, critics of business lobbying warn that corporate interests are highly influential in EU legislative politics. But do business interests really pull the strings in Brussels? In the framework of **INTEREURO**, a collaborative international study of lobbying in the EU, we took up the question of business power in EU legislative politics. Our findings have just been published in a [recent article](#) in *Comparative Political Studies* – also available as an [ungated working paper](#).



Our result, at first, seems surprising: Business interests are less successful, on average, in achieving favourable policy outcomes in the EU than citizen groups that advocate issues such as environmental protection or human rights. This result rests on highly labour-intensive empirical research. We interviewed officials in the European Commission about a sample of 70 legislative proposals introduced by that institution between 2008 and 2010. These interviews provided us with data about the conflictive issues within the proposals and the positions of interest groups that lobbied on these issues. We also recorded the positions of the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament, as well as the locations of the status quo and the outcome of the decision-making process. In total, we found 112 conflictive issues and 1,043 non-state advocates lobbying on these issues.

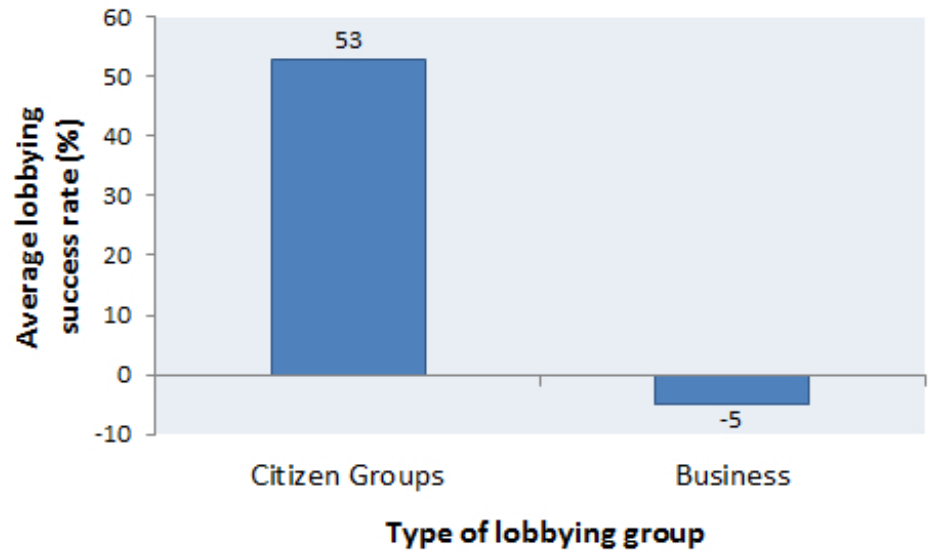


We used these data to calculate a measure of lobbying success, built on the idea that lobbyists are more successful the more they manage to pull the outcome closer to their ideal points, relative to the status quo. The larger the distance to the status quo, and the smaller the distance to the outcome, the more successful an actor should be considered (and vice versa).

We then analysed variation across actors with respect to this success score. Controlling for a variety of factors such as media attention, the actors' endowment with relevant information, the distance between the actors' ideal positions and the European Commission's position (and in some variations also distance to the Council majority and distance to the majority in the European Parliament), and the number of actors pulling in the same direction, we found that business actors are, on average, less successful than citizen groups. An illustration of our results is shown in the chart below.

Chart: Average lobbying 'success' for citizen groups and business actors in the EU's legislative process

Note: The chart is based on subtracting the percentage of citizen groups/business actors that ‘lost’ in their attempts to influence a given legislative proposal from the percentage of groups that ‘won’ (based on the authors’ ordinal success ‘score’). In this case, 65% of citizen groups ‘won’ and 12% ‘lost’, while only 39% of business actors ‘won’ whereas 44% ‘lost’. For full calculations see the authors’ [longer paper](#).



While at first sight this finding may be surprising, the fact that business influence on EU legislation is limited actually makes sense. Contrary to citizen groups, business interests often lack a “natural ally” in contemporary EU legislative decision-making. With the single market largely completed, much of the EU’s contemporary legislative activity is about regulating the European market. In the mature European polity, proposals aiming to protect consumers or the environment tend to dominate the legislative agenda.

On these proposals, business actors – often unanimously – defend the low regulation status quo. By contrast, citizen groups, the European Commission and the European Parliament all tend to support these proposals. Beyond substantive grounds, the European Commission has an incentive to advance these proposals as doing so gives it the opportunity to strengthen or at least preserve its position vis-à-vis the other EU institutions.

With business actors thus confronting coalitions of citizen groups, the European Commission and the European Parliament, it is not surprising that they often tend to lose. In fact, what we see is that nearly all of the proposals on the EU’s legislative agenda get approved eventually. On most of these, we see a shift away from a low-regulation status quo favoured by business interests towards a high-regulation state favoured by citizen groups.

This is exactly what we are witnessing in the case of the EU’s aforementioned data protection regulation. Although not yet finally approved, it seems likely that the regulation will go through in 2015 despite strong business opposition from large companies including Google, Facebook and Microsoft. The result, while probably less far-reaching than the original Commission proposal, is unlikely to be a success for business. Business lobbying in the EU in this and many other cases is of a defensive nature; we see so much of it because business actors face a loss that they try to minimise.

What conclusion can we take away from this research? Overall, the project of European integration has been a major success for European business. Business actors on average benefitted from the liberalisation of intra-European trade. In the current phase of European integration, however, the popular perception of powerful business lobby groups likely overestimates the actual level of influence business exerts on EU legislation. On the whole, business actors now appear to be less successful than citizen groups in achieving their desired policy outcomes.

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