

# Who gets heard when all are in shock? On Changes in Lobbying Access before and after the outbreak of the Coronavirus in Europe\*

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## Abstract.

Covid-19 induced a massive shock for all political institutions and societal groups. A crucial question is whether interest organizations, which try to influence public policy, can maintain access to political gatekeepers in such extreme circumstances. To address this, we focus on changes in interest group access to key venues of public policy: government, parliament, the bureaucracy, and the media across 10 democracies in Europe. Based on novel survey data, we test how affectedness by the crisis, organization type and resources affect changes in access shortly after the outbreak of Covid-19. Our findings show that affectedness is the most important driver of changes in access to all venues. We interpret this as good news for the functioning of European systems of interest representation. Yet, while resources mattered little, public interest groups have lost access more often than other organizations. This suggests that an external shock can aggravate biases in interest representation.

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The ability of different social and economic groups to voice their needs and concerns is an integral part of how the policy process should ideally function. Already in normal circumstances, factors such as the limited availability of time, information and other resources, make it hard for interest groups to mobilize into the policy process and for relevant gatekeepers to consult relevant interests. This leads to inequalities that are potentially at odds with ideas of proportional representation of interests before government. Moreover, a mismatch between the interests consulted in the policy process and the ‘actual’ distribution of interests in society is commonly assumed to produce inefficient policy outputs (Olson 1965), an upper-class or business bias (Schattschneider 1960) and other systemic challenges to democratic politics (Lowery et al. 2015). Notably, existing scholarship suggests that variation in access to decision-making likely benefits more resourceful and business interests in society (e.g. Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015, Eising 2007, Danielian and Page 1994).

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 pressure. They have to make tough choices that can change the fortunes of families and companies for years to come, while lacking some of the necessary information to make informed decisions. Input from affected interest organizations might here be a pivotal factor. However, these organizations might themselves be so hard-hit by the crisis that they become unable to advocate their interests as usual. 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 during the Coronavirus crisis as a case of a massive, system-wide shock across ten European polities. Based on an elite-survey of interest representatives, we analyze these changes for four important venues of

policymaking: governments, parliaments, the bureaucracy, and the media. Specifically, we assess which types of interest groups gained *increased* access to policymakers and the public debate during the Covid-19 pandemic, and which interest groups instead saw their access *decrease* since lockdown measures were taken. The crucial question is: did organizations, which were most *affected* by the crisis, also gain more access to the various political institutions? Or did the *usual suspects*, such as business organizations and wealthy groups, increase their access during the crisis, regardless of how badly they were affected by the pandemic (cf. Baumgartner and Leech 2001, De Bruycker and Beyers 2015, Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015)?

An answer to this question is vital to understand which economic and societal interests shaped 'pandemic politics'. At the same time, the dynamics during the Covid-19 crisis can give more general insights about how systems of interest representation respond in times of a major 'shock' or 'event' (Kingdon 1995, Sabatier 1988). Our novel theoretical and empirical focus on *change* in access allows us to evaluate long-standing normative concerns related to pluralist and elitist theory (cf. Olson 1965, Schattschneider 1960, Truman 1951) on another dimension: is the relationship between interest groups and policymakers sufficiently adaptive to deal with major shifts in socio-economic interests and information needs on the parts of policymakers? Or are patterns of policy access sclerotic and rigid to important external shocks? In other words, the study of how policy access changes in crisis circumstances unveils theoretical and normative insights into the role of interest groups in contemporary democratic government.

To study variation in access since the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, we constructed a *novel dataset* on the responses by interest groups and firms to the current crisis across ten European democracies: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the EU-level. Based on survey data collected for 1437 interest group leaders from these diverse contexts, we assess how lobbying access to political venues

has changed after the outbreak of Covid-19. Our findings show that affectedness, rather than resources or a business bias, is the most important driver of increases and decreases in lobbying access during the Covid-19 pandemic. Changes in access during this crisis are, therefore, more in line with pluralist than elitist expectations, which might be interpreted as ‘good news’ on the adaptability of consultation practices under extreme circumstances. At the same time, however, we find evidence of important distributional consequences of the crisis on access to decision-making. Our analyses also show that the access of public interest groups (citizen groups and NGOs) to policy venues has suffered the most during this pandemic.

### **The Dynamics of Lobbying Access in Times of Crisis**

Interests that cannot get a voice in the policy process are likely to lose out, be overlooked, or full-blown exploited. Such patterns are worrisome both for *input* legitimacy-related reasons (cf. Schattschneider 1960, Scharpf 1999), as well as potentially crucial for the *outputs* of the policy process, since access can give influence to special interests in decision-making (cf. Truman 1951: 264).

It is, therefore, not surprising that an important strand of the interest group literature has focused on lobbying access. These important studies 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, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015, Chalmers 2013, Dür and Mateo 2013, Eising 2007, Danielian and Page 1994). These existing accounts of biases in access bear many important insights, as we will summarize in the next section. However, a shortcoming we noted 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 among interest organizations active in a given community (cf. Baumgartner and

Leech 2001, De Bruycker and Beyers 2015, Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015). A small number of organizations generally receive most access opportunities while a large number of interest representatives are occasional ‘tourists’ in the policy process (Berkhout and Lowery 2010). This finding holds across policy venues, including the media (Binderkrantz, Bonafont, and Halpin 2016), and there is evidence that the same organizations persistently secure access across venues (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015). Arguably, the ‘network’-nature of lobbying (LaPira, Thomas, and Baumgartner 2014, Ackland and Halpin 2019) can be an explanation for these patterns, with particular groups forming central ‘bridges’ between multiple venues and activities.

Moreover, many studies suggest that political insiders (i.e. those that gain more regular or privileged access to policymakers and journalists), tend to be actors with higher resources, while less resourceful actors are more likely to be part of the periphery of the political process (cf. Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015, Dür and Mateo 2013, Rasmussen and Gross 2015). When it comes to access to *policymakers*, some studies also highlight that policymakers interact more frequently with business actors than citizen groups (e.g. Baumgartner et al. 2009, Berkhout and Lowery 2010, Beyers 2004). Others, however, provide more mixed evidence on the effects of group type, pointing to differences between access to different ‘inside’ venues, such as the bureaucracy and parliament (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015), or between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ arenas (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015, Junk 2019). Overall, though, there is a relatively broad consensus in the literature that access to several political venues is skewed towards business organizations and/or more resourceful groups.

The open question we raise against the backdrop of this literature is whether these potential biases persist, aggravate or decrease in the face of an external event in a policy system, that potentially disturbs the existing ‘equilibrium’ of access to decision-making. Kingdon

(1995: 94-95) uses the term ‘focusing event’ to highlight ‘a crisis or disaster that comes along to call attention to [a] problem’ (also see: Birkland 1997). Such an event is ‘focal’ in the sense that a ‘government may respond by putting a new policy issue on its agenda’ (Walgrave and Varone 2008: 368). 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, seek to formulate a theory of access that focuses on major external disturbances, and test this in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis.

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

Our analytical approach starts with two main 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: 307) note, ‘for access to be present, interest groups need to seek it, and relevant gatekeepers need to allow it.’ 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*. Empirically, we will also come back to this distinction and explore whether changes in patterns of access are more driven by demand or supply factors.

Second, our theoretical approach starts from the assumption that there are many venues, in which interest groups can convey input to public policy. As Binderkrantz and Pedersen (2017: 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)’. In our analytical approach, we acknowledge the importance of such different venues without, however, developing strong theoretical expectations on differences in the change in access across these venues.

The remainder of this section presents two sets of hypotheses related to potential changes in access as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. The first hypothesis is rooted in pluralist theories of interest group politics and focuses on the nature and scope of the disturbance(s) which groups face when subject to such an external shock. The second hypothesis takes an elitist perspective, arguing that, even under changing circumstances, the same economically powerful organizations should enjoy systematic access benefits.

#### ***A Pluralist View on Changes in Access in Covid-19 times***

Our first hypothesis is rooted in *pluralist* theories of interest group politics. Truman (1951: 511) identifies changes in society as main drivers for people to organize themselves. A ‘disturbance in established relationships anywhere in society may produce new patterns of interaction aimed at restricting or eliminating the disturbance’ (see discussion by Lowery and Brasher (2004: 31-21)). In this way, latent interests lead to potential groups, which, in turn, may become organized groups that plausibly aim their claims towards political decision-makers. 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 whether, when and on which issues they become politically active (see discussion in: Rasmussen, Carroll, and Lowery 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: Truman's theory would lead us to expect that the magnitude of the disturbance and the 'attitudes widely held' (Truman 1951: 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: 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, 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, Broscheid and Coen 2007) and in public debates (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015, Binderkrantz, Bonafont, and Halpin 2016, Junk 2019). The political energy of legislative, bureaucratic and media attention towards certain issues attracts lobbyists into the policy process, both in a short-term strategic sense, i.e. 'bandwagoning' (Baumgartner and Leech 2001, Halpin 2011) and in a longer-term underpinning organizational survival (e.g. Gray et al. 2005).

The 'demand' by policymakers is here sometimes specified in exchange-theoretical terms as including the need to gather valuable information on the many issues on the political

agenda, which no ministry, parliamentary or media staff could digest without external input (e.g. Chalmers 2013, De Bruycker 2016, Flöthe 2019, Klüver 2012). The great importance of such exchange relationships between interest groups and gatekeepers is also prominent in interest group scholarship more broadly. A common assumption is that political actors exchange policy-relevant information for access and influence in political arenas (see, e.g. Klüver 2013, Godwin, Ainsworth, and Godwin 2013) or exposure in the media (De Bruycker and Beyers 2015, Junk 2019). To do so, gatekeepers arguably need to weigh the potential contribution of different organizations for the case at hand to obtain some combination of technical and political information relevant for the policy. This implies that when an external event such as the spread of Covid-19 poses new policy challenges, decision-makers should be inclined to seek input from organizations that are best equipped to provide this information. Organizations that are heavily affected by this disturbance should be of high importance, as their information is likely to be most useful in addressing the crisis faced.

In short, while classical and contemporary pluralists, as well as exchange theorists have different starting points, their conclusions are rather similar: groups that are most 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: ‘Pluralist hypothesis’: The more intensely affected an organization is by effects of Covid-19, the larger its increase in access to political venues since the start of the Covid-19 crisis.*

### *An Elitist View on Changes in Access in Covid-19 times*

Our second, and to some degree competing, hypothesis is rooted in *elitist* theories of lobbying. Olson (1965) harshly challenged Truman's assumptions regarding mobilization and political responsiveness: firstly, Olson (1965: 125) was not convinced that 'unorganized' or 'potential' groups emerge when disturbed, nor that politicians would account for their existence. He argues that it is unlikely that politicians will be 'as solicitous of the unorganized and inactive group as they are of the organized and active interest group' (1965: 129). Politicians will not anticipate any mobilization, future lobbying campaign or needs of vulnerable groups, unless these make themselves heard.

Moreover, Olson warns that Truman and other pluralists failed to take the free rider problem seriously: Individual potential members do not have an incentive to contribute to a group effort unless selective benefits are offered or coerced (see discussion in: Lowery and Brasher 2004). The organizational capacity to provide such selective benefits and, ultimately, to seek access are not related to the level of disturbance to the collective interests of groups. This leads to severe differences among 'disturbed' groups, only some of which can make resources available to actively engage with the policy process. Other authors mirror Olson's concerns, warning that interest mobilisation is shaped by an upper class bias at the expense of the interests of the broad public (e.g. Schattschneider 1960). These arguments lead to the expectation that there are major differences at the supply side when it comes to interest mobilisation in reaction to an external shock. Specifically, collective action problems are likely to vary depending on organizational *resources*, as well as the *type* of organization.

Regarding group type, it is commonly assumed that business compared to non-business interests are especially set back by free rider problems (but see: De Bruycker, Berkhout, and Hanegraaff 2019). We follow this argument that *organization type* is a relevant proxy for the underlying incentive structures and ability to mobilize during the Coronavirus crisis, expecting

business interests to be best equipped to act effectively and public interest groups to face the largest mobilization problems. Labor and professional organizations, such as teacher unions or the association of hairdressers, should here be located in between these extremes. In contrast to public interest groups, the membership of professional organizations and unions is less diffuse and better suited for offering selective incentives to overcome collective action problems (Moe 1981). However, when compared to business organizations, profession and labor groups still have less well-defined and more dispersed interests than those of the corporation (Offe and Wiesensthal 1980).

When it comes to organizational *resources*, we argue specifically that staff resources to conduct political work (cf. Mahoney 2008, Baumgartner et al. 2009) are an additional relevant proxy for the ability to organize constituent interests. Irrespective of actor type, organizations that have higher numbers of such staff should be better equipped than organizations with no or a small team to respond to the ‘shock’ of the Coronavirus and re-align advocacy efforts along shared preferences.

These advantages at the supply side, might further be aggravated at the *demand* side. First, in a more ‘elitist’ reading of exchange perspectives on lobbying (cf. Godwin, Ainsworth, and Godwin 2013), resourceful advocates should have clear advantages as they can adjust more easily to (new) demands of decision-makers during a crisis. Information that organizations can provide in such situations goes well beyond accounts of the affectedness of their members, but can include political and technical information, impact assessments and studies, which are resource-intensive to conduct but can support the work of policymakers, especially in uncertain circumstances. Such an increased demand for ‘costly’ informational resources in times of crisis might enable *resourceful* organizations to expand their insider positions in times of crisis. An anecdote of this relates to the role of the consultancy McKinsey during the Coronavirus crisis in Denmark. To inform calculations for the 10 billion Danish Kroner’s worth Crisis Fund for

Danish companies, the consultancy offered free-of charge help support (DR 2020). Put differently, it was able to offer valuable resources to policymakers, either out of ‘community spirit’, as the Finance Ministry comments (ibid), or perhaps in the hope of securing preferential (future) access or contracts.

Secondly, when seeing lobbying and public policy as a ‘repeated game’, there are further demand-side reasons to expect decision-makers to favor exchanges with the same (resourceful) actors. When new and unexpected circumstances arise, it seems plausible that that long-term relationships between interest organizations and policymakers can be a crucial determinant of access. Political *insiders* at the core of policy networks (LaPira, Thomas, and Baumgartner 2014) are likely to have the advantage of building on their history and reputation, even more so when new and unexpected circumstances arise. As noted by LaPira (2014: 223) on the effects of 9/11 on interest communities, such previous insider positions also weigh heavily in crisis-situations: ‘Established groups’ entrenchment in antecedent subsystems appears to buffer against widespread policy disruption and interest upheaval.’ Applied to the Coronavirus crisis, this would lead us to expect that previous insiders – presumably those with higher resources and mobilization advantages – would keep and even increase their access.

In short, based on different strands of elitist thinking, one would expect business organizations and organizations with higher resources to increase their access during the Covid-19 pandemic more than other organizations. Hypotheses 2a and 2b summarize these expectations.

**H2a:** *‘Elitist business hypothesis’*: For business organizations access to political venues has increased more since the start of the Covid-19 crisis than for professional associations, and even more than for public groups.

**H2b:** *‘Elitist resources hypothesis’*: The higher an organization’s resources, the larger its increase in access to political venues since the start of the Covid-19 crisis.

## **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 6,000 interest groups and large firms in these ten democracies. These countries were selected foremost based on the availability of comparable lists of interest group populations (see details below). At the same time, the list of countries includes a good mix of different types of welfare states, types of interest mediation systems, types of electoral systems, level of affectedness by the crisis, and government responses to the crisis. The survey therefore provides a good indication of interest group activities and access across Western democratic states more broadly.

### ***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 either on existing lobbying registers (e.g. Ireland and the EU), or existing overviews compiled by scholars (e.g. Denmark, Sweden). Notably, compiling lists of the active interest group population is a huge task itself, and we were fortunate to be able to rely and build on existing efforts by lobbying scholars (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2020, Naurin and 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>

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<sup>1</sup> See details in Appendix A (Appendix available upon request)

More specifically, 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 summarises the general sampling frame and sampling considerations for each polity in detail.

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

Response rates vary considerably between countries, which is a common pattern in interest group surveys (e.g. Binderkrantz and Rasmussen 2015, Klüver 2013). While the Nordic countries (Denmark and Sweden) in the study attain high response rates (ca. 42% and 35%, respectively), the Netherlands and Ireland score somewhat lower (at ca. 27% and 23%), followed by Germany, Austria, and the EU survey (ca. 15% or above). For Italy, France, and the UK we register very low response rates between 12.5% (Italy) and 7% (UK). We include these countries in the analyses (with fixed effects), however excluding them does not change our results (see Table F1 in Appendix). Table C1 in the Appendix also summarizes response rates and N in each country.

In our pooled sample, our response rate lies at 22.6%. For these 1,437 organizations that answered the survey to the end, we do not see a considerable bias regarding group type, as 513 responses are from Business Organizations and Firms (ca. 36%), 473 from Professional Organizations and Labor Unions (ca. 33%), and 451 from Public Interest and Ideational Groups (ca. 31%). This is fairly balanced although these shares vary across countries (see Table C2 in the Appendix). While we cannot rule out non-response bias, Tables C3 and C4 in the Appendix further probe the distribution of responses across 1) Lobbying staff resources and 2) perceived affectedness by this crisis, which both could have impacted non-response. It shows that our

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<sup>2</sup> Only the EU is an exception, where we used a higher total sample of organizations in order to cover this large polity adequately.

observations include organizations with low (ca. 34% of the observations), medium (ca. 43%) and high (ca. 23 %) staff *resources*, as well as organizations across all different levels of *affectedness* (between ca. 7% and 36% of observations in each of the five categories). Based on this, we believe that our data allows us to assess how organization type, resources, and affectedness impact changes in access during this crisis.

### ***Dependent Variables: Change in Access***

We analyze changes in access to four important venues of public policy: 1) the media, 2) the executive, 3) the legislature and 4) the bureaucracy. For each of these venues, 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 ‘usual’ frequency of access to the venue *before the crisis* from the frequency of access to this venue *during the crisis*. 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>3</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. Our four dependent variables therefore indicate the venue-specific change in access, that is, 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*

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<sup>3</sup> Question-wording for all relevant questions is listed in Appendix B.

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 before and after the crisis.

### ***Independent Variables***

We include three independent variables. First, we operationalize an organization's '*level of affectedness*' by the spread of Covid-19 based on a survey question asking respondents to rate the extent to which their interests were 'more or less affected by the Coronavirus crisis, compared to other stakeholders in [country]' in each polity under investigation. We used 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. While it gives a specific, organization-level rating, it is subject to potential over- or under estimation and requires an implicit comparison to other stakeholders *in a given polity*. We address these limitations in two ways. First, our analyses include fixed effects for polities. Second, we also consider an alternative (though less precise) proxy for affectedness, namely the categorization of less and more highly affected sectors. Appendix D (Figure D1 and D2) compares this distribution of changes in access by *sectors*, and shows how this relates to the self-perceived organization-level measure, which we use in the main analysis. Moreover, Appendix G, Table G1 shows that our findings are extremely robust to using this alternative measure of affectedness. In the main analyses, we cluster standard errors by sector.

Second, to assess variation across '*organization types*', we use three categories: 1) business organizations, which includes business associations and firms; 2) professional groups, which includes professional associations and labor unions, and 3) public interest groups, which contains cause-centered groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen associations.

Third, as proxy for ‘*lobbying resources*’, we include the number of full-time staff working in public affairs in the organization. Staff numbers are commonly used as an indicator for lobby resources, and previous studies suggest that, especially in a non-US context, these indicate resources in a more reliable and valid manner than budget allocated to lobbying (Mahoney 2008). Moreover, we see staff resources as the best proxy to measure the mechanisms we addressed in the theory section: Organizations with higher staff capacities for their political work can mobilize swiftly and effectively on Coronavirus issues and can provide more ‘costly’ informational resources to policymakers. To measure this, 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’, ranging from 1) one or less (e.g. one part-time) to 5) More than 15. For the analysis, we grouped these into three categories: low (<1), medium (1-4) and high (>=5) lobbying staff resources. Appendix D gives a descriptive overview of the distribution of access by group type and resources (Figure D3).

### ***Control variables***

We add two controls that tap directly into the role of supply-side factors in explaining changes in access during this pandemic. Firstly, a dummy variable for 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. Around 20% of our respondents answered yes to this. We expect this inability to remain active to have a negative impact on access in all venues. Secondly, 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* activity 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’. As other

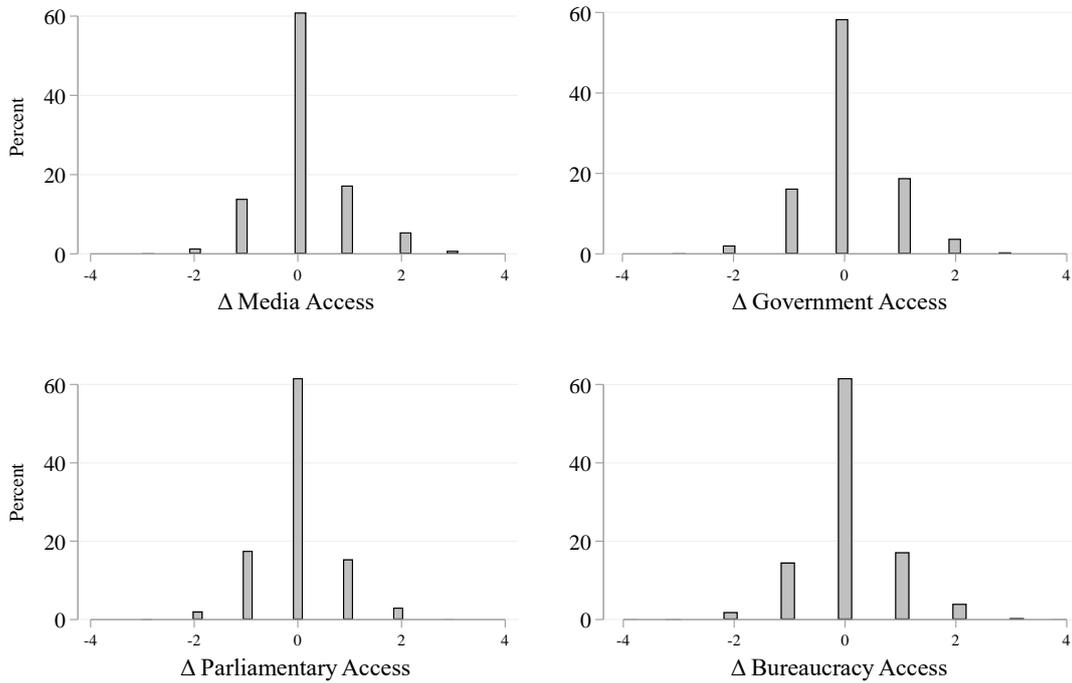
relevant controls, we include an organization's *age* in three intervals (under 21 years, between 21 and 50 years, over 50 years), as this might affect existing relationships to gatekeepers, as well as other variables, such as resources. Moreover, we include the polity of operation (10 polities in the study).

## **Analysis**

To provide a relevant context for the multivariate regression models that follow, we start with a brief descriptive overview of the variation in access across venues and countries. First, concerning variation across venues, we did not expect the gatekeepers of the different venues to vary strongly in how they adjust their provision of access during the Coronavirus crisis. Figure 1 shows the change in access during this crisis for each of these venues: the media, parliament, government and the bureaucracy. It suggests that patterns of change in access are, indeed, similar in the four venues. Around 60% 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% of the observations are roughly equally distributed to the left and to the right of zero. This indicates that some actors gained more access compared to their previous position, while others lost access.

Despite the similarities, however, Figure 1 also reveals some nuances. Access to the media seems to have increased the most since the Covid-19 outbreak (mean: 0.13), while parliamentary access has decreased for a higher share of actors than it increased (mean: -0.01).

*Figure 1 – Difference between access during and before the Coronavirus crisis*

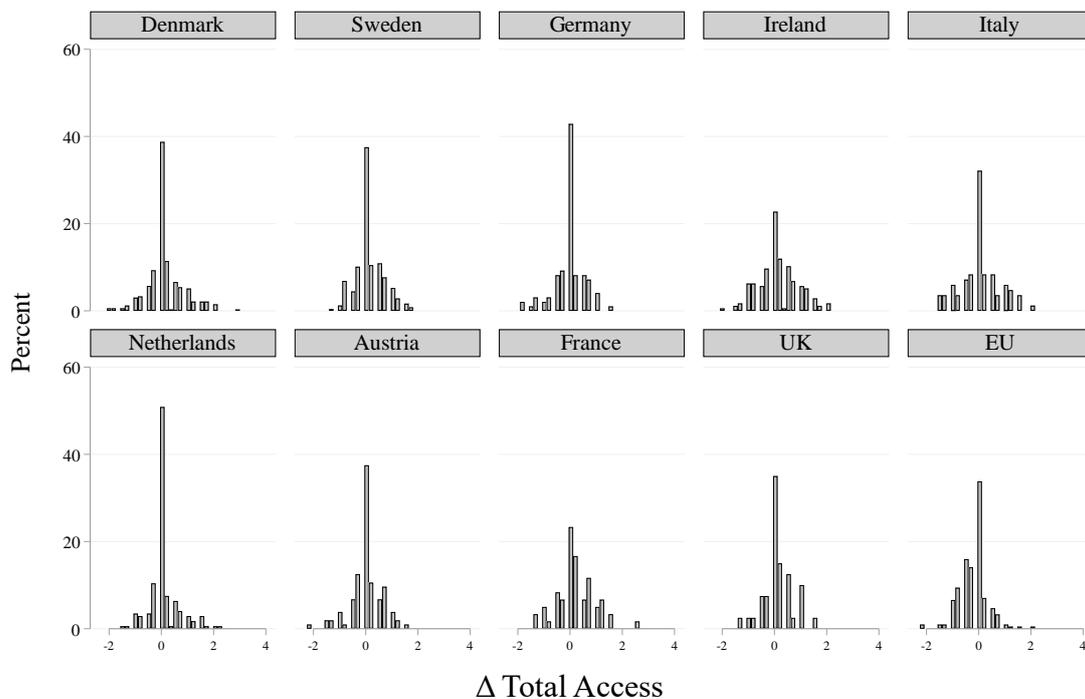


The overall observation is, however, that there has been no change in access after the outbreak of Covid-19 in ca. 60% of the cases, which indicates that interest representation has continued to function despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Interest groups and firms continued to have opportunities to give input and voice to the social or economic interests of their constituents. In approximately 20% of the cases, access has even increased since the Covid-19 outbreak in particular to the media, government and bureaucracy venues, whereas another 20% registers a decrease of access during the pandemic. To understand which organizations have experienced these distributional changes in access is paramount in our study because it reveals the extent to which the crisis has generated or alleviated biases in interest representation.

We believe that the general perspectives of pluralism and elitism can provide useful macro-theories to explain variation in access across political systems. We therefore did not include specific *country* differences in our theoretical design. A rivalling explanation to this

assumption would be that changes in access are highly context-dependent, visible in big differences between countries. However, this does not seem to be the case: we do not find strong country-based differences in the way our four dependent variables are distributed. Figure 2 shows this graphically - for illustrative purposes - for  $\Delta$  Total Access, i.e. an organization's mean change in access when considering all four venues. The share of zeros (no change in access) is here lower than for the venue-specific measure, because total access summarizes all fluctuations in access.

*Figure 2 - Difference between total access before and during the Coronavirus crisis by polity*



We here see similar patterns of access-‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in all polities, as well as a stable core taking the value of zero. Slight outliers are France and Ireland in which there is a smaller share of a stable core (i.e. no change) compared to other polities. Interestingly, in the EU, the pattern of access is clearly right-skewed, with fewer organizations having access to the EU venues during the Covid-19 pandemic. This might not be surprising, considering the limited

scope of EU policy in matters of global health and crisis management and the tendency towards intergovernmental decision-making in times of crisis. In the case of France, we cannot rule out that the pattern we observe is partly driven by a lower response rate than in the other countries. At the same time, however, we also see a variation in the share of zeros in high-response countries, for instance when comparing Ireland (ca. 23% of organizations with stable access) with Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands (between 38% and over 51% of stable access). Some of this higher level of continuity might be explained by strong neo-corporatist traditions in the latter countries, which institutionalize access for insiders hence providing a stable point of access also in times of crisis. Overall though, differences between countries seem limited and we will move on to test a more generic model of variation in interest group access while including fixed effects for the polity in the analyses.

### ***Multivariate analysis: a pluralist or elitist change in access?***

We use OLS regression<sup>4</sup> to systematically explore the effect of *affectedness* (H1), *organization type* (H2a) and *resources* (H2b) on our four dependent variables. Specifically, these measure the change in access between the time during and before the pandemic to (1) the media, (2) government, (3) parliament, (4) and the bureaucracy. We control for the organization's *age* and the *polity of operation*. To account for heteroskedasticity in the residuals, we cluster standard errors by sector. Moreover, we run additional analyses, which include 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. Note that Table E1 in the Appendix shows all pairwise correlations for variables included in the same models and does not give reason for concern about multicollinearity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In Appendix G, Table G2, we additionally show that our findings hold equally in ordered logistic models of the 0-10 scale of influence.

<sup>5</sup> Additional checks show that all Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for the eight presented models are <2.3

**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***	0.12***	0.14***	0.07**	0.13**	0.08**	0.13***	0.09***
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 >=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)
Mobilization Prob. (bin)		-0.37*** (0.06)		-0.41*** (0.05)		-0.41*** (0.04)		-0.38*** (0.07)
Freq. of lobbying venue		0.19*** (0.02)		0.25*** (0.04)		0.20*** (0.03)		0.17*** (0.02)
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.

Note: Polity/country coefficients are omitted to limit table size, see Appendix F, where these are reported

Table 1 shows our results, with two regressions for each of the four dependent variables – one with, and one without these additional variables (Models 1-8). Measures of fit show that Models 2, 4, 6, and 8, which include these variables on mobilization problems and frequency of activity, fit our data well, capturing approximately 19-25% of the variation. In contrast, the models without these factors explain only 7-9% 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 negative effect of *Mobilization Problem* ( $p < 0.001$ ), meaning that activity in all four venues was put on hold at some point during the crisis, as well as the positive effect of the venue-specific *Frequency of lobbying* under the crisis ( $p < 0.001$ ).

### ***Evidence for the 'pluralist hypothesis' (H1)***

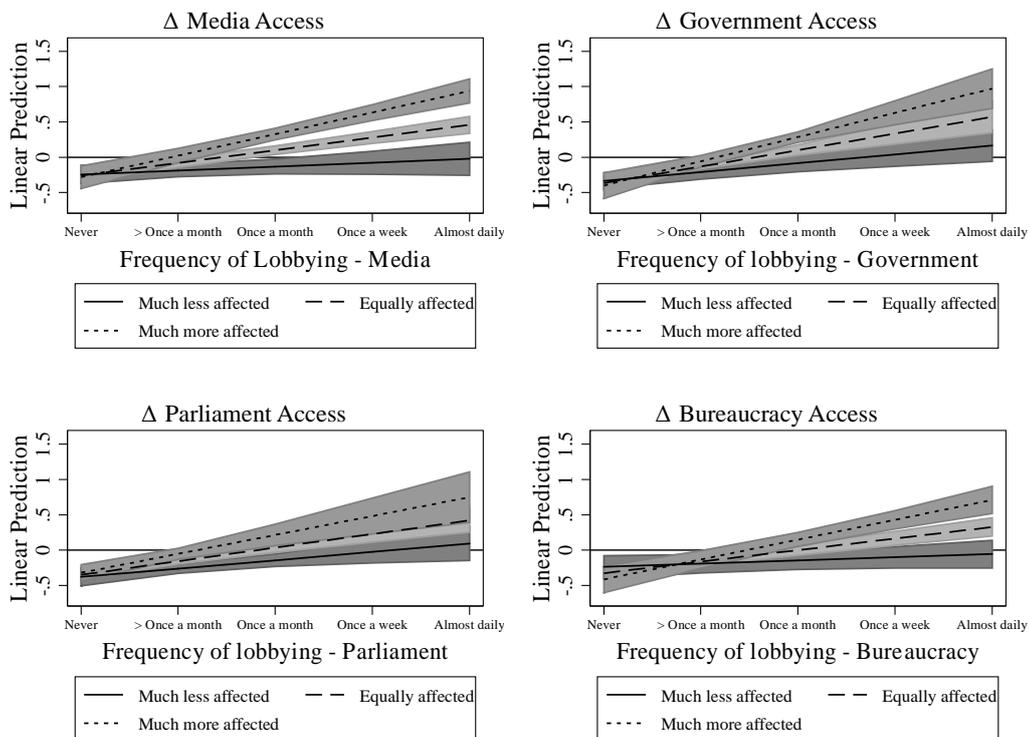
In this section, we first test the pluralist hypothesis. A first important insight from Table 1 is that *affectedness* positively correlates with the change in access to all four venues across all models ( $p < 0.01$  or below) in line with our first hypothesis: more affected organizations increased their access during this crisis 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**). Notably, as we show in Table G2 in the Appendix, this finding also holds when we use an alternative measure of *Affectedness* that differentiates more and less affected *sectors* rather than using the organizations' own rating. All eight models with this alternative measure show a significant positive effect of being an organization in a more highly affected sector.

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 factors) or driven by selective procedures of by gatekeepers at the political venues (demand-side factors).

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 organizations in consultations during the crisis.

To address this interpretation further, we also 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 organizations that did not have access because gatekeepers failed to grant it to them from those that did not have access because they simply 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 for all models. Figure 3 below helps understand this association. To ease interpretation, we show the effect only for low, high and neutral levels of affectedness but all findings are consistent with the below interpretation.

**Figure 3 – effect of frequency of lobbying (venue specific) by level of affectedness**



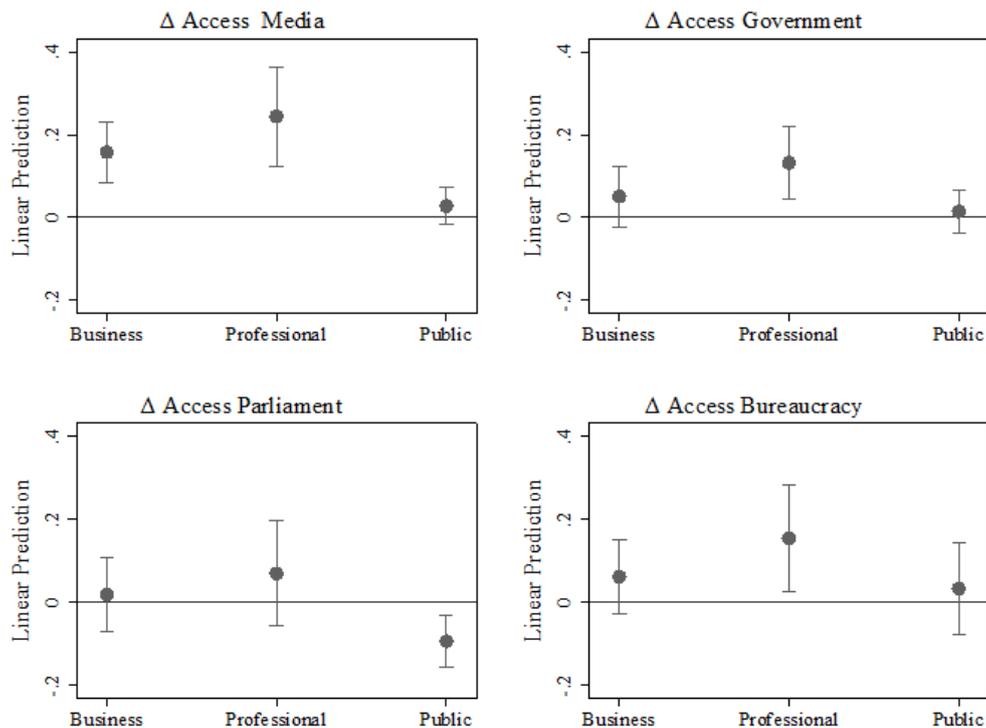
The important finding from Figure 3 is that, across all venues, the effect of the *frequency of lobbying* on the change in lobbying access during the crisis varies at different levels of *affectedness*. Firstly, we see that those organizations that lobbied a venue only rarely during the crisis tend to experience lower or equal access during the Coronavirus crisis than before the crisis. However, as Figure 3 further shows, the predicted change in access for these lower-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, MPs and bureaucrats, were relatively successful in including the more affected organizations in policy discussions, even when these had low levels of lobbying activity. This pattern also follows through to high levels of activity in a venue during the crisis: Mostly evident for access to the media and the bureaucracy, those who lobbied almost daily but were *less affected* by the crisis register a substantially smaller increase in access than those who lobbied almost on a daily basis but were *more affected* by it. In our view, these patterns showcase a responsiveness to the most affected organizations during the Coronavirus crisis in the politics we studied, and they suggest that *demand* side factors played an important role for including affected groups in policy debates during the Covid-19 crisis, in addition to supply side factors.

### ***Evidence for the ‘elitist hypotheses’ (H2a and H2b)***

Evidence that ‘elite’ actors, meaning business organizations and more resourceful actors, increased their lobbying access during the Coronavirus crisis is only weak. Regarding the effects of *group type*, the models show that advantages of business organizations only hold systematically in the models without controls for the ‘frequency of lobbying’ and ‘mobilization’ (Models 1, 3, 5 and 7). This suggests that increases in access for business

organizations during the crisis were driven, to a large extent, by their ability to lobby continuously and frequently. When we control for such a mobilization advantage, which is often attested to business groups (cf. Olson 1965), business organizations only significantly increase their access to the media and parliament more than public interest groups ( $p < 0.05$  and  $p < 0.1$ , respectively). When it comes to professional organizations, however, we see a significant effect in all models ( $p < 0.05$  or below). Figure 4, which plots the predicted changes in access for the three group types based on Models 2, 4, 6 and 8, supports this further. As shown, it has mainly been organizations representing professionals and workers that significantly *gained* access during this crisis (in three out of four venues), compared to their previous levels of access in each venue. Business organizations have only increased their access in the media; while public interest groups, in contrast, even experience significantly lower access to parliament than before the crisis.

*Figure 4 – effect of group type on venue specific access*



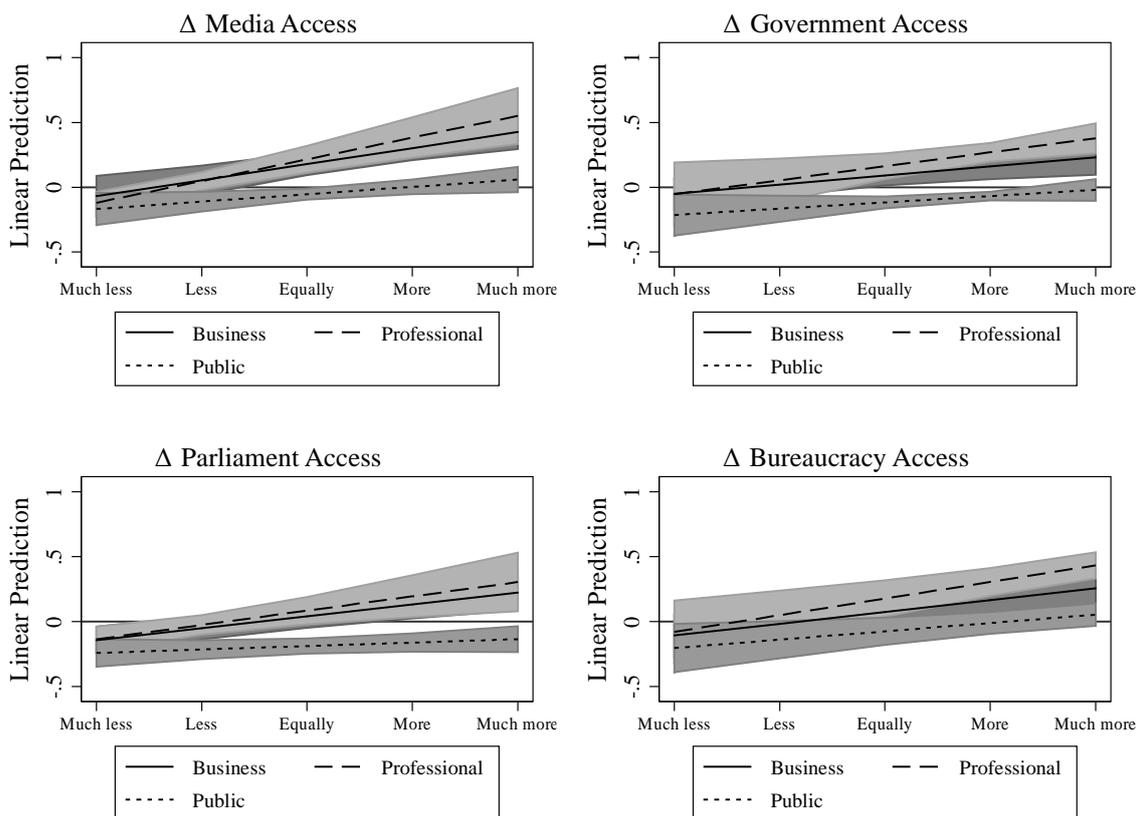
These findings provide only partial confirmation for our second hypothesis (**H2a**). On the one hand, public interest groups seem to have been the relative ‘losers’ in terms of access during the first months of the Coronavirus crisis. This is in line with elitist theories. On the other hand, it is not business that has profited (the most) from these developments; rather professional groups and unions have gained the *most* access since the outbreak of the Coronavirus. This challenges elitist theories as professional associations and labor unions are not the ‘usual suspects’ gaining privileged access to policymakers under ‘normal’ conditions. The fact that these groups were more successful than business groups in increasing their access during the crisis is therefore a remarkable finding from an ‘elitist’ point of view.

Regarding our last hypothesis (**H2b**), the results in Table 1 do not indicate a robust relationship between the availability of staff resources and increased access. While there is evidence in Models 3 and 5 that organizations with medium resources increased their access to government and parliament ( $p < 0.05$ ) compared to those with lower resources, these effects disappear when controlling for differences in mobilization and lobbying frequency. This indicates that any advantages of resourceful organizations during the Coronavirus crisis was driven by their better ability to mobilize. When we add controls for mobilization and lobbying frequency, Model 2 even suggests that organizations with medium levels of resources significantly lowered their media access, compared to less resourceful groups. Furthermore, according to these Models, organizations with the highest level of staff resources actually experience a significant decrease in access compared to the least resourceful organizations to all venues ( $p < 0.1$  or below).

To sum up, while we found strong evidence that affectedness drives changes in access during the pandemic (**H1**), we found only weak evidence for our elitist hypotheses (**H2a** and **H2b**). Instead of business groups, professional groups and unions have been the biggest access ‘winners’ during this crisis. However, a valid concern regarding these findings could be that

the nature and effect of *affectedness* by the crisis might vary between different *organization types*. To test this, we include an interaction between the level of affectedness and group type, shown in Figure 5 (cf. Appendix, Table F3). The results confirm the trends of the main models. For public interest groups, it did not matter whether they were strongly or modestly affected by the crisis: either way they did not increase their access across any of the venues. In contrast, business groups and professional groups both *increased* their access when they were more affected by the crisis. However, the increase for both group categories was roughly the same. This indicates there was no business advantage in access across the four venues compared to professional organizations; even if they were both equally affected by the crisis

*Figure 5 – effect of affectedness by group type*



In Appendix F, we probe our findings further. We show that public interest groups across *all* levels of lobbying frequency faced disadvantages compared to professional organizations and labor unions (Table F4, Figure F1). This suggests that the disadvantaged

position of public interest groups was not simply caused by their lack of *trying* to gain access. Rather, it seems that policymakers preferred the input of professional groups and unions more than the input of public interest groups. Second, we also explore whether resources play a different role across varying levels of affectedness or frequency of lobbying, but we do not find evidence that higher resources increased access at any level (cf. Appendix Tables F5 and F5).

## **Conclusion**

Overall, our analyses provide evidence across ten polities in Europe, including the EU, that affectedness, not lobbying resources or the nature of the represented interests, is the most important driver of increases and decreases in lobbying access during the Covid-19 pandemic. We interpret this as an indication that *pluralist* theory best describes how both interest groups and institutions behave in their interactions when the policy space is disturbed by critical events, such as a global health and economic crisis. The ten interest group systems we studied seem reasonably 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 groups. As we showed, 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 and significantly more than less-affected frequent lobbyists. We interpret this as evidence that part of the effect of affectedness is driven by efforts at the *demand* side to pull vulnerable groups during the crisis into the policy discussion. This supports more recent interpretations of pluralism and empirical studies into the demand-side of lobbying.

On the other hand, we did *not* find much support for elitist interpretations of lobby access. Organizations with larger numbers of lobbyists at their disposal did not see their access

increase more than less resourceful organizations during this crisis. Moreover, our findings do not suggest that business organizations increased their access more than the two other group types during the pandemic. What is clear, however, is that public interest groups have been relative ‘losers’ of the pandemic: according to our models, their access remained unchanged or decreased, even when considering their expected mobilization disadvantages, lower levels of affectedness and lower levels of lobbying activity. In contrast, we showed that professional organizations and unions have been access ‘winners’, significantly increasing their access to all political venues except for the parliament. Also in this case, the choice to give access to professional organizations and unions and less to public interest groups seems to be partially driven by demand-side pull factors, whereby political actors prioritize these group categories.

These findings have clear *normative* consequences. People often say that one’s true colors emerge when the going gets tough. If this is true, the ‘true colors’ of European democracies shone quite brightly during the crisis. Rather than including groups which constitute the lion share of our economy (business groups) or groups which spend the most on lobbying (resources), our research highlights that access has been granted mostly to those who have been hurt the most by the crisis. In our view, this is good news about the functioning and adaptability of European systems of interest representation: Under the sudden shock of this health crisis, gatekeepers in important venues of policymaking and public discussion have ensured that those interests that feel most affected by the pandemic and its economic consequences also increased their access. Of course, these good colors shone brighter for some than others, as changes in access have not been equally distributed. Most importantly, public interest groups have not been able to increase their access during the Covid-19 pandemic, even if they were highly affected by the crisis. What effects this will have on future social policies remains to be seen, yet it is important we keep a close eye on any developments in these fields in the years to come.

We also see broader *implications* of these findings. While our study analyzed access in Covid-19 times as an example of system-wide external ‘event’ or ‘shock’ (Kingdon 1995, Sabatier 1988), we hope that it bears insights beyond this *case*. For major crises like this one, that move to the level of ‘macropolitics’ (Baumgartner and Jones 1993), meaning that conflict expands considerably and lastingly (Schattschneider 1960), there is a good chance that our findings travel to other disturbances of group interests and changes in policy agendas. 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 and through which mechanisms the supply of and demand for interest representation meet productively or fail to lead to just policy outcomes. Further studies may also examine the applicability of such mechanisms for focusing events that have lower saliency. Arguably, effective provision of policy access to affected interests would be an important sign for a healthy and responsive system of interest representation. In this vein, our study has begun by showing that, in the case of the Covid-19 crisis, European democracies have adapted their access provision in what we hope to be a ‘healthy’ and ‘responsive’ fashion.

Our study has, of course, some limitations that we hope future scholars will address. While our theoretical and empirical story clearly shows the importance of considering demand-side factors, our analysis does not employ a pure demand-side measure. To better understand the causal mechanism we present in this study, future studies may want to explore to which extent interest groups have been contacted by gatekeepers. Next, access does not imply influence. While our findings hint towards a healthy and responsive system of interest representation, it might well be only an expression of symbolic politics, while it was the ‘usual suspects’ who influenced decision-making during Covid-19. Finally, the crisis is not over. It may be that, in the long run, organizations with more resources, such as business groups, will still prevail. Resources might, in fact, be crucial for the sustainment of lobbying efforts in the

scenario of a prolonged pandemic such as the current 'second wave'. It will, therefore, be important for scholars to evaluate long-term dynamics in relation to interest representation in Covid-19 times.

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