

# Interest Groups, Public Opinion & Political Representation

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## Definition / abstract

This chapter sets out to introduce the literature tackling the interplay between interest groups, public opinion and public policy. Even after nearly sixty years of political science research, there is still much controversy concerning the involvement of interest groups in public policymaking and how lobbying might affect policy congruence and responsiveness to public opinion. While interest group politics and public opinion have long been examined in separate scholarly communities, this changed in recent times. We first cover recent studies addressing (1) the alignment between interest groups and public opinion, next we discuss (2) the independent but simultaneous effects of interest groups and public opinion on public policy, and finally (3) we cover how the interaction between interest groups and public opinion affects public policymaking. We conclude by reflecting on the findings in current literature, discuss some of its analytical limitations and propose possible avenues for future research.

## Introduction

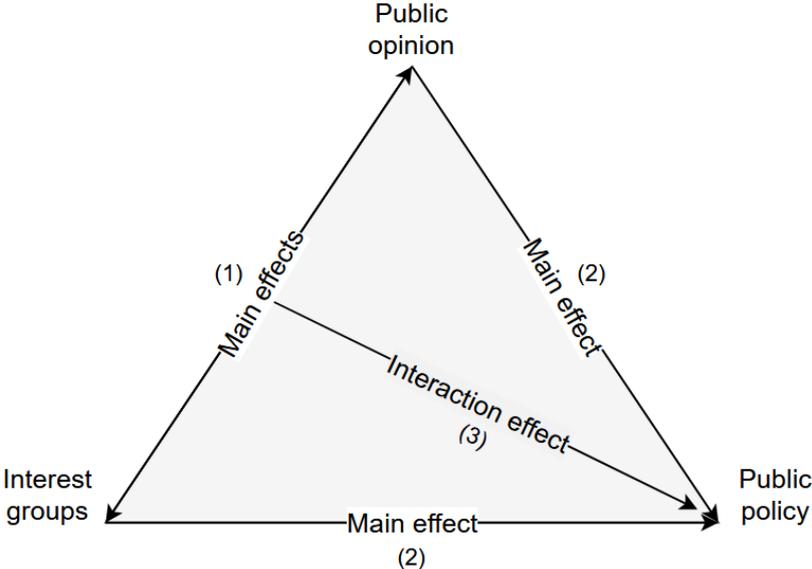
To what extent do interest groups function as representatives of the public? And do they strengthen or weaken the connection between citizen preferences and public policymaking? Even after nearly sixty years of political science research into these questions, there is still much controversy concerning the involvement of interest groups in public policymaking. On the one hand, organized interests are sometimes seen as important representatives of the wider public that can function as intermediaries— or as so-called ‘transmission belts’ - between citizens and policymakers strengthening the connection between the policy preferences of the general public and public policy (Bevan & Rasmussen, 2020; Klüver & Pickup, 2019; Rasmussen & Reher, 2019). For instance, through media advocacy, groups can amplify public concerns and thereby put pressure on policymakers to act accordingly (Agnone, 2007). This perspective closely aligns with the traditional pluralist account (see entry on “Pluralism”), which holds that groups in society collectively mobilize and take political action whenever it is in their best interests, leading to the presence of a wide diversity of groups reflecting the issues of concern for the public as a whole. On the other hand, critics of the pluralist view argue that interest groups may systematically shift public policy away from citizen preferences due to the unequal distribution of mobilized interests that tends to disadvantage non-business interests (see entry on “Elite Theory”). Not only do narrowly delineated and concentrated business interests mobilize at a higher rate than groups mobilizing broader societal segments, these groups often also gain more access to the policy process

(see entry on “Interest Group Access”). A strong tenet in the interest group literature is thus that not all potential interests are equal in their capacity to mobilize and the organizational landscape does not necessarily reflect society as a whole. This bias considerably reduces the ability of group communities to voice the diversity of interests and viewpoints in society before government and leads to the expectation that interest groups negatively affect government responsiveness to citizen preferences. Lobbying scandals making news headlines invigorate such concerns.

Most interest group studies have tackled this controversy from an interest group population perspective and studied bias in access to political-administrative venues and public debates in relation to group type and resources (see entry on “Group Populations” and “Interest Group Access”). More recently, scholars have started to analyze interest groups’ alignment with public opinion and included both interest groups and public opinion in studies of public policy. By putting public opinion center stage as a benchmark for assessing bias in interest representation and for evaluating the impact of interests groups on public policy (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019), scholars have made much-needed advances in the normative debate on the role of interest groups for public policymaking. Assessing how representative interest groups are of the public and how these groups affect policy responsiveness to public opinion are key for enhancing our understanding of the democratic legitimacy of public policies.

This chapter addresses the scholarly efforts examining the interplay, visualized in Figure 1, between interest groups, public opinion and public policy. We first (1) shed light on the alignment between interest groups and public opinion, next we discuss (2) the independent but simultaneous effects of interest groups and public opinion on public policy, and finally (3) we cover how the interaction between interest groups and public opinion affects public policymaking. We conclude by reflecting on the findings in current literature, discuss some of its analytical limitations and propose possible avenues for future research.

**Figure 1. The interplay between interest groups, public opinion and public policy**



## Interest groups and public opinion

The alignment of priorities and positions between groups and public opinion

To assess bias in the interest group system and its possible effects on public policymaking, scholars have adopted interest groups' alignment with public opinion as a new benchmark (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019). Instead of relying on group type or resources, analyzing the extent to which groups' policy priorities and positions align with citizen preferences allows for a more direct and fine-grained assessment of the role of interest groups in policy processes. Can interest groups truly function as intermediaries between citizens and public policymaking? Are groups mobilized on those issues that concern the public? And do groups defend the policy positions of prevailing public opinion?

Scholars tackling these questions have studied the *alignment* or *congruence* between public opinion and individual interest groups (i.e. many-to-one) as well as interest group communities (i.e. many-to-many). First, taking entire interest group *communities within policy areas* as the vantage point, scholars assessed how the (1) density and (2) diversity of group populations relate to public priorities and positions. Recent studies have demonstrated that interest groups mobilize at a higher rate on policy issues regarded as salient by the general public compared to less salient areas (Klüver, 2015; Rasmussen, Carroll, & Lowery, 2014). Though, while interest group density in an issue area corresponds with the issue prioritization of the public, interest group communities with low group diversity (e.g. business dominance) are not significantly less likely to represent the public's policy positions (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019). Groups of the same type (such as business groups or NGOs) do not automatically adopt similar policy positions or lobby for the same cause. Arguably, for interest group communities to strengthen the connection between citizens and public policy, it is more important that different conflict dimensions are represented in the policy debate rather than just having a diversity of groups present.

Second, the extent to which the advocacy activities and positions of *individual* interest groups align with prevailing public opinion can broadly be attributed to two factors: (1) organizational characteristics and (2) the issue context. Regarding organizational characteristics, scholars have examined how group type and the internal consultation with members and supporters affect interest groups' degree of congruence with public opinion (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019; Willems & De Bruycker, 2019). These studies indicate that citizen groups representing diffuse constituencies such as women's organizations or environmental associations are more prone to share the position of the broader public compared to groups representing concentrated constituencies such as business associations, especially if they closely involve their members in advocacy activities. The narrower the membership base and the more closely these members are involved, the less interest groups have the objective and/or leeway to represent the opinion of public majorities (Willems & De Bruycker, 2019). Nevertheless, business interests have been found to share the opinion of the public almost half of the time (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019).

Issue salience is the second key factor affecting the degree to which interest groups are aligned with public priorities and positions (e.g. Willems & De Bruycker, 2019). When issues are salient in the

news, interest groups can more easily determine what the public wants, anticipate public (dis)approval and thus strategically prioritize these issues to put pressure on policymakers if their position is aligned with public majorities. Especially citizen groups seem to be able to seize the benefits of increased media salience, while business interests are more likely to see their positional congruence with public opinion decrease when issues are salient (Willems & De Bruycker, 2019). Several factors have been suggested that might explain the lower degrees of congruence for business interests on salient issues, such as the greater visibility of the costs and benefits of policies making business associations—acting on behalf of their members—to openly oppose prevailing public opinion (Dür & Mateo, 2014; Willems & De Bruycker, 2019).

#### Public opinion affecting interest groups

The alignment of groups with public opinion can have significant consequences for interest representation. Many interest groups depend on the general public for survival and groups with broad public support can put more pressure on policymakers when issues are salient. As such public opinion may help but also constrain interest groups to (1) survive, (2) execute particular strategies (inside or outside lobbying), gain access to the policy process, and (3) attain lobbying success. First, public opinion impacts how interest groups estimate their survival chances. Especially citizen groups—having a more encompassing and volatile constituency—are concerned about changes in public opinion negatively affecting their survival chances and it makes these groups more prone to rely on outside lobbying compared to business interests (Hanegraaff & Poletti, 2019). Through outside lobbying, groups can connect their political demands to a wider audience and attract members and supporters by lobbying on issues of concern to the public (Dür & Mateo, 2014).

Next to public opinion affecting interest groups' survival, public opinion can affect the strategic use of inside and outside lobbying tactics (see entry on "Outside Lobbying"). In this regard, Kollman (1998) was one of the first to posit that the proportion of the public that supports the position of an interest group and the salience policy issues attract are key factors determining whether it will pay off for an interest group to pursue outside lobbying. Many policymakers face electoral and legitimacy concerns when issues grow salient, increasing policymakers' demand for broad public support and thus increasing group's prospects on lobbying success when visibly defending a position with broad public support (Kollman, 1998). Groups enjoying broad public support are thus triggered to strategically and visibly mobilize on the issue to put pressure on policymakers (Dür & Mateo, 2014). In contrast, groups facing widespread public opposition are more likely to rely (solely) on inside lobbying as advocating on highly visible issues may easily backfire (e.g. counter-lobbying, conflict expansion). Yet, recent research has nuanced these findings and demonstrated that also lobbying and gaining access to inside venues such as advisory councils can hinge upon the supply of broad societal support by interest groups to policymakers in politicized policy areas (Willems, 2020). And vice versa, interest groups faced with public opposition may have no escape from the media gates. High levels of issue salience often entail

that these groups have to visibly defend their position to counteract their political adversaries and to secure ties with members and supporters (Willems, 2021).

Finally, interest groups' lobbying success is affected by public opinion. In general, interest groups enjoying broad public support have a higher likelihood to attain their policy preferences, especially when issues are highly salient and/or many groups mobilized (Dür & Mateo, 2014; Rasmussen, Mäder, & Reher, 2018). However, also here a complex picture emerges. Lobbying success for citizen groups is more dependent upon public support in comparison to business interests (Rasmussen, Mäder, et al., 2018). And public support may help interest groups to challenge the government and see their policy preferences reflected in opposition proposals while not attaining their preferences in final policy outcomes (Willems, 2021).

#### Interest groups affecting public opinion

While public opinion can help or constrain interest groups in their lobbying activities and success, groups themselves can also attempt to shape public opinion. Next to interest groups endorsing political candidates in an attempt to affect vote choices (e.g. (Neddenriep & Nownes, 2014), groups may also aim to shape citizens' policy priorities and positions (e.g. (Dür & Mateo, 2014). Through outside lobbying, groups can reach previously unaware segments of the public and/or persuade citizens—generally possessing less specialized expertise—to consider particular cost-benefit trade-offs of policies, present new viewpoints, and consequently lead citizens to form or change their opinion. A relatively recent body of literature has therefore started analyzing the impact of interest groups on public opinion (e.g. Dür, 2019; Jungherr, Wuttke, Mader, & Schoen, 2021; Junk & Rasmussen, 2020) but its findings are mixed. Some studies like the one by McEntire, Leiby, and Krain (2015) demonstrate an effect of campaign frames used by interest groups on the attitudes of individual citizens (see entry on “Interests Groups Framing”). Other studies underline that there are limits to the ability of groups to sway public opinion. This is for example evident in Leeper's (2013) survey experiment on U.S. immigration policy where groups face difficulty affecting public opinion. Similarly, a recent field experiment of a German business group's ability to affect public opinion on economic policy finds a relatively modest effect, which only lasted a week (Jungherr et al., 2021). Finally, an older observational study by Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987) even found a negative effect of interest group lobbying on changes in public opinion on specific issues.

These studies highlight the complexities for interest groups in pursuing successful outside lobbying to sway public opinion in practice. Scholars have pointed out that one potential reason might be that groups distinguish themselves from political parties by having a less persuasive appeal to function as source cues. In a recent survey experiment, Jungherr et al. (2021) find that, while citizen attitudes towards parties affect how successful parties are in affecting public opinion, credibility assessments of groups matter less for the impact of interest group campaigns. Relying on a similar theoretical underpinning, another recent survey experiment by Dür (2019) shows that when interest

groups move public opinion it is their arguments which matter whereas the particular interest group conveying the argument matters less. At the same time, not all existing evidence points in the same direction. *Who* conveys the arguments does seem to matter when outside lobbying is done through protest manifestations (Wouters, 2019). There is thus scope for additional research on how *the way* interest groups communicate with citizens can affect groups' ability to shape public opinion. Ultimately the success of groups in swaying public opinion could be conditioned by a number of factors such as the characteristics of the *recipients*, *sender* and *message* in the campaign.

## Interest groups, public opinion and public policy

### Independent main effects of interest groups and public opinion on public policy

Even if both interest groups and the public may influence each other, their ultimate goal is typically to affect public policy. It is therefore not surprising that large bodies of literature have examined how successful these two types of actors are in attaining their policy preferences, despite the challenges involved in studying policy influence. Perhaps more surprisingly is that, with few exceptions, such research has primarily been conducted in separate scholarly communities. As a result, scholars have often had to draw conclusions of the relative importance of one of these actors for public policy without knowing how including the other could have affected their conclusions. Focusing on the literature on the link between public opinion and public policy, Burstein explains how, “many studies of the impact of opinion ignore everything (or almost everything) other than opinion itself, including variables that might be related to both opinion and policy” (Burstein, 2010, p. 73). According to him, interest groups are such an important variable. At the time of Burstein's criticism, there were few studies paying attention to both groups and public opinion. Moreover, most of them focused on the US, had a focus on social movements, and typically examined one type of interest or policy area (e.g. Burstein & Freudenburg, 1978; Soule & Olzak, 2004).

Yet, in recent years we have witnessed a revival of studies on public policy considering both interest groups and public opinion. Burstein (2014) himself has recently conducted a study of 60 policy proposals. He found some evidence of a link between public opinion and policy, although policy was also often not aligned with what the majority of citizens would wish, and he had difficulty finding public opinion data for many of his policy issues. When it comes to interest groups he found that many types of information submitted to Congress affected the likelihood of enactment of a given policy issue but that many other types of advocacy did not. Similarly, a recent longitudinal analysis of the impact of media lobbying and public opinion on four policy issues in Sweden raised doubt that neither groups nor public opinion acted as strong drivers of the policy developments (Rasmussen, Romeijn, & Toshkov, 2018).

Other studies have offered a more positive view of the ability of groups and public opinion to affect policymaking. Looking at outcomes on large number of specific policy issues, both Lax and Phillips (2012) and Gilens (2012) have presented similar results. In a study of nine policies across eight

issue areas in the U.S. states, Lax and Phillips documented how the likelihood of policy change is higher when the net alignment of powerful interest groups supports it and the higher the share of public support a given policy enjoys. Gilens analysis of 1,779 national policy issues corroborates these findings. Yet, it also points out that when disaggregating both the public and groups, certain subsets of actors within these two communities matter more than others. Among citizens, the likelihood of policy change is most strongly influenced by high income citizens and among groups, the opinion of business groups matters more than that of mass-based interest groups representing broader public interests (Gilens, 2012).

Overall, these studies thus provide evidence that both public opinion and interest groups can matter for policymaking. At the same time, they also emphasize that there may be inequalities in who matters within these communities and that public opinion and interest groups far from matter all the time. The mixed findings in the literature might partly result from differences in research designs, sample sizes and area focus but might also illustrate how the exertion of policy influence is conditioned by a number of additional factors (e.g. characteristics of policy issues). The positive findings with respect to groups in the studies of Lax and Phillips (2012) and Gilens (2012) might also partly result from the fact that they both focus on the most powerful interest groups. Lax and Phillips create their measure of group lobbying based on whether types of groups expected to support and oppose a given policy exist in a given state. Gilens' measure relies on a search of whether up to 43 powerful US interest groups voiced an opinion on the issues.

#### Interaction effects on public policy

While insightful, the discussed studies integrating groups and public opinion only take us part of the way towards understanding how interest groups ultimately affect policy representation. Hence, when concern is voiced about the role of groups, it is typically not only related to whether decision-makers also listen to groups, but also to whether groups can affect *the extent to which* decision-makers pay attention to public opinion. In the words of Rasmussen et al. (2021), we can think of interest groups acting as a *weight* affecting how important policymakers perceive public opinion. In some situations, groups might stimulate decisionmakers to pay more attention to the views of the public, whereas in other cases groups may have the opposite effect and suppress the policy representation of citizen preferences.

To model this, scholars have incorporated interaction effects between interest groups and public opinion into their studies. Some scholars have started from a '*citizen engagement perspective*' considering whether the level of *associational engagement* in organizations affects the relationship between opinion and policy (Rasmussen & Reher, 2019). Others have taken a '*mobilization perspective*', primarily looking at whether the *volume of group activity* in a political system, the policy area or issue level affects the opinion-policy link (e.g. Agnone, 2007; Bevan & Rasmussen, 2020; De Bruycker & Rasmussen, 2021; Giger & Klüver, 2016; Gray, Lowery, Fellowes, & McAtee, 2004; Klüver & Pickup, 2019). Finally, some studies have adopted a '*pressure group perspective*' scrutinizing how the *opinion*

*of groups towards specific policies* affects how closely aligned policies end up being with public opinion (e.g. Lax & Phillips, 2012; Rasmussen et al., 2021).

Research from all three perspective find some evidence that interest groups can affect the relationship between opinion and policy. First, when it comes to associational engagement, Rasmussen and Reher (2019) revisit the social capital literature and argue that active involvement in associations should stimulate the opinion-policy link by facilitating information flows and accountability between citizens and policymakers. Their study of 20 policy issue in 30 European countries indicates that it is associational engagement *relevant to a given policy issue* which matters for facilitating a stronger opinion-policy link rather than overall associational engagement in a polity as a whole.

Second, group mobilization can also stimulate opinion-policy correspondence, even if the findings in research adopting such a perspective are mixed. Agnone's (2007) study of the passage of environmental legislation in the US showed how the level of protest amplified the impact of public opinion on legislative action. In Gray et al. (2004), the density of the interest group population in a given US state also stimulated the relationship between opinion and policy liberalism but only in one of the two years examined (see also De Bruycker, 2020). Finally, a recent study by Bernardi et al. (2021) also does not find a significant amplification effect of public opinion and protest on political agendas (see also Giugni, 2007). One possible explanation for these null findings is that the impact of group mobilization on the opinion-policy linkage is contextually contingent. In Bevan and Rasmussen's (2020) study of agenda responsiveness in the US, the density of the group population within a given area only mattered in the President's State of Union and not in the Congressional hearings and laws. They argue that group activity may matter more at the early stage of the policy process when institutional friction is low, compared to later stages characterized by higher institutional friction.

Another potential reason for the absence of a strong effect of the overall volume of interest mobilization in strengthening or weakening the opinion-policy linkage is that the mobilization by different types of groups has differential effects on policy outcomes. Klüver and co-authors (e.g. Giger & Klüver, 2016; Klüver & Pickup, 2019) have in a series of publications on Germany, Switzerland and Canada shown that cause groups representing broader societal interest stimulate the opinion-policy linkage whereas sectional interests representing more narrow constituencies weaken or do not affect this relationship. A recent study by de Bruycker and Rasmussen (2021) on the EU adds to this story. Rather than arguing that different types of groups have different 'transmission capacities' in general, they argue that the ability of a group to transmit public opinion to a decisionmaker is highest when the two are ideologically aligned. They find support for their theory of 'selective transmission' with rightist politicians being more congruent with right-wing constituents when business groups mobilize, while cause groups strengthen congruence between leftist politicians and their constituents.

Finally, scholars adopting a 'pressure group perspective' have found that positional alignment between groups and the public affects the link between public opinion and policy. The already discussed study by Lax and Phillips (2012) also demonstrates that policy is more likely to be aligned with the

majority of the public when public majorities are supported by a powerful interest group. Rasmussen et al.'s (2021) research on 160 policy issues in Denmark and Germany uses a similar research design but takes more of a bottom-up approach by mapping actual interest group involvement and positions in the media on the specific policy issues analyzed. Their findings present a somewhat more critical view on the ability of groups to affect policy representation. In this study, interest groups are found to be primarily capable of affecting opinion-policy congruence in cases where the public supports policy change and status quo bias needs to be overcome.

Together, these studies suggest that groups can indeed function as a weight affecting the relationship between public opinion and policy. There is thus support for the conditioning impact of groups no matter whether scholars start from a 'citizen engagement', 'mobilization' or 'pressure group' perspective. At the same time, many of the studies underscore the limits to the ability of groups to affect the opinion-policy linkage. Multiple studies have demonstrated that the effects of groups on policy representation are conditioned by the group types involved, the characteristics of the policy issues and the stage of the policy process examined.

## Conclusion

Whether and how interest groups contribute to democratic decision-making has been a longstanding controversy with both positive and skeptical voices figuring in the academic literature and public debate. It has not always been easy for scholars to draw clear conclusions from these debates given the lack of research that bridges the study of public opinion, interest groups and policy representation. Yet, our chapter documents that, especially in recent years, there has been an impressive growth of literature doing just that. As a result, we now know a lot more about the extent to which interest groups function as representatives of the public and how they can affect the connection between citizen preferences and public policymaking. At the same time, it is also clear that this body of literature does not find straightforward support for either the views of the pluralists or that of their critics discussed in the introduction. As is so often the case with academic research, 'the truth' probably lies somewhere in between. Our literature review documents that interest groups and the public may hold congruent positions and be successful in affecting each other but also that they may not. Similarly we find that interest groups may both strengthen and weaken the connection between public opinion and policy.

Such conclusions may not seem very satisfactory given the issues at stake. After all, the answers to our questions touch upon the very core of political science, i.e. who gets what, when and how. Though, such conclusions are not astounding given the complex interplay between interest groups, public opinion and public policy in practice. Moreover, getting to a stage where discussions of these questions are based on systematic research with encompassing datasets is far from a trivial achievement. Many of the studies covered in this chapter make significant theoretical and empirical contributions to understanding *the conditions* under which groups represent the public and affect opinion-policy correspondence. For instance, whether interest groups share and manage to affect the policy priorities and positions of the

public depends on group type, their constituency links, how they communicate and the issue context in which they operate. Similarly, group type and contextual characteristics affect the ability of groups to affect the connection between public opinion and policy. Indeed, above all, our overview highlights some important scope conditions shaping the interplay between interest groups, public opinion and public policy.

The results in current literature therefore offer both good and bad news for the well-functioning of democratic policymaking. The fact that a significant proportion of business interests prioritize issues of public concern and surprisingly often share the position of prevailing public majorities (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2019; Rasmussen et al., 2014), is arguably good news. Similarly, the potential for associational engagement to stimulate opinion-policy congruence (Rasmussen & Reher, 2019) is something policymakers and interest groups could capitalize on by, respectively, subsidizing civil society organizations and launching membership campaigns. At the same time, we see that there are inequalities between the groups that play the greatest role in shaping policies (Gilens, 2012) and that interest groups not only strengthen but can also weaken the link between public opinion and policy (Giger & Klüver, 2016; Klüver & Pickup, 2019; Lax & Phillips, 2012). Normatively speaking, this entails that citizens and policymakers must remain vigilant concerning the potentially disruptive effect of interest groups on the opinion-policy linkage.

This leaves a lot of scope for future research to scrutinize many of these issues in more detail. While researchers have made significant headway in recent years, they also inevitably had to make analysis design choices that come with certain trade-offs. For example, focusing on specific policy issues has clear advantages since this is where most lobby activities occur in practice. However, it comes with the caveat that it has often been difficult to draw strong causal inferences due to the lack of public opinion data covering longer time periods. Another limitation of many research designs is the issue selection which again inevitably involves certain downsides, no matter how one draws the sample (Rasmussen, Mäder, et al., 2018). Restricting samples to issues for which public opinion data are available may entail that the issues examined are not representative of whatever a latent universe of policy issues would look like. Similarly, one important limitation of many studies is the focus on the issue positions of groups appearing in the news and thus engaged in visible instances of lobbying. This for example makes it more likely to capture groups expressing positions that resonate with the broader public compared to studying groups in more secluded advocacy arenas such as personal meetings with policymakers.

Future research could therefore add to the existing body of literature in a number of ways. Improved opportunities for automated data collection and coding can enable scholars to create larger datasets spanning longer time periods, covering a wide array of issues ranging from the technical and non-salient, on which the public has less articulated preferences, to contentious issues. As such, longitudinal designs would allow researchers to establish temporal causal direction in observational data disentangling which lobbying strategies could be detected *prior* to public opinion changes and/or policy

change and which lobbying strategies are *preceded* by changes in public opinion and/or policy change. Carefully designed experiments minimizing ethical concerns and maximizing external validity also have the potential to allow researchers to draw stronger causal inferences on the interplay between interest groups, public opinion and public policy. In sum, it is clear from our discussion that interest groups play a key role in democratic decision-making processes and that it is important to include them in the broader literature on policy representation and responsiveness.

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