

# **Fight or flight? An elite survey experiment on the effects of access barriers and interest disruption on the activities of interest organisations in 10 polities across Europe\***

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## **Abstract:**

Central theories of lobbying access and public policy posit that interest group activity is demand-driven, meaning highly responsive to the levels of access that gatekeepers, such as policymakers and journalists, offer to interest groups. Other theories, in contrast, stress drivers at the supply-side, and describe interest mobilisation as a response to the levels of disruption to an organisation's constituency interests. We test these central arguments in interest group theory in a large-scale survey experiment conducted in 10 polities in Europe (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands Sweden, United Kingdom, and the EU-level) with ca. 1,400 interest group respondents. By varying the level of access and the severity of the threat to an organisation's interests in a scenario of an (at that point) hypothetical second wave of Covid-19 in Europe, we address whether access barriers and more severe disturbances lead to a *fight* or *flight* response among interest groups. Our findings show that while higher access barriers trigger a *flight* response, whereby interest groups suspend their political advocacy and fear for their survival, higher disruptions mobilise groups into a *fight* mode, in which organisations spend more resources on lobbying and increase their activities in alternative venues. With these results, our study serves novel causal evidence on the dynamic relationship between policy disturbances, political access and their effect on interest group strategies.

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The ability of interest organisations to mobilise different social and economic interests is an integral part of the policy process (cf. Truman 1951). While elections only secure occasional participation by citizens in the political system, regular consultation of interest representatives can ensure a continuous inclusion of different societal interests in the political process. A precondition for this to work, however, is continued activity or ‘supply’ of interest mobilisation in various contexts. To date, it remains under-researched, whether and when this holds: Does interest mobilisation result from changes in external conditions, such as the introduction of barriers that make lobbying more difficult and/or the emergence of severe threats to an organisations interests? If so, do access barriers and severe threats produce the same type of mobilisation? While existing research has shown that interest organisations tend to mobilise only on a few, selected issues rather than across the board (Baumgartner and Leech 2001, Halpin 2011), we still lack evidence on how interest representatives *react* to encompassing changes in their environment when choosing their lobbying strategies.

We identify two possible paths of organisational behaviour in response to changes in the interest group environment. Groups can *fight* (i.e. intensify their lobbying activities) or *flight* (i.e. stop, shift or pause their efforts). Building on the insider/outsider model (Grant 1978) and pluralist theory (Truman 1951), we hypothesise that access barriers and policy disturbances vary starkly in the interest groups responses they produce, and therefore, lead to different forms of interest group mobilisation. Our theory extends the relatively static view that an interest group’s insider/outsider position depends on 1) the strategies it chooses to use and 2) the status political gatekeepers ascribe to the group (Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew 1994, Binderkrantz and Pedersen 2017). We add that these two aspects are endogenous, that is, if a policymaker labels a group as outsider, this will influence that group’s strategy choice. Moreover, we take into account the degree to which the group’s interests are threatened in a given situation. While our theory builds on important arguments in the literature on political access (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015, De Bruycker and Beyers 2015, Dür and Mateo 2016, Fraussen and Beyers 2016, Golden 1998, Hanegraaff, Beyers, and De Bruycker 2016), we add to existing observational and correlational research by putting the proposed mechanisms to a direct test in a cross-country survey experiment.

Realistic experimental settings have the advantage of randomising key variables of interest, and thereby gauging their causal effect. Yet they are, to date, very rare in interest group research, potentially because it is difficult to design manipulations that are applicable and realistic for a diverse set of groups. In this article, we employ a survey experiment to provide a test of the causal

mechanisms that link a group's access status, as well as variation in the disturbance to the organisation's interests, to its behaviour and survival, and test it in 10 polities across Europe.

We were able to conduct this, because the high uncertainty connected to the spread of COVID-19 in 2020 provided a very realistic setting for different scenarios in which interest organisations suddenly saw their insider access undermined, as well as their interests severely threatened. The spread of the Coronavirus and the government policies implemented to tackle the pandemic have had profound impacts on the interests of organisations, such as business groups, professional associations or non-governmental organisations, as well as on the way decision-makers interact with them on policy-related matters (cf. Fraussen et al. 2020, Eady and Rasmussen 2021). In this context, we conducted a large-scale 2x2 survey experiment with 1,400 politically active interest organisations respondents in 10 polities (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands Sweden, United Kingdom, and the EU-level). Our treatments were designed to test how lobbying activities and perceived organisational survival are affected when organisations face mild as opposed to severe access restrictions (*severity of access barrier*), and when they see their interests threatened for longer or shorter periods (*level of disturbance to the organisation's interests*).

Our results provide strong evidence that political 'outsiders' chose *flight* (suspension of activity or organisational termination) over *fight* (escalation of activity) and are more likely to be driven into inaction. We find that organisations that were assigned to the scenario with high access barriers are more likely to put their political work on hold and perceive it as more likely to see their organisational survival threatened. There is no tendency among participating organisations to increase outside strategies in the media when facing barriers to inside access. However, we see that difficulties in securing inside access make initiating protest activities by interest organisations more likely. This indicates that diversion towards different advocacy strategies is a *possibility* when facing barriers to inside access. At the same time, our results underline the challenge that media action is not readily available as a 'weapon of the weak' (Thrall 2006).

While thus supporting the expectation that political demand drives interest group activity (Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew 1994), we also show, in line with pluralist theory (Truman 1951), that more severe disturbances drive organisations into *fight* mode: Our treatment condition with a longer duration of the COVID-restrictions (severity of the level of disturbance) had a high activating effect. When seeing their interests under threat for longer periods of time, organisations see themselves as more likely to spend additional resources on political work and use more media and protest strategies.

At the same time, however, also in this scenario, organisations deem themselves as less likely to survive, which we attribute to the fact that a system-wide shock like this pandemic decreases overall stability in the interest group system (cf. Messer, Berkhout, and Lowery 2011, Lowery and Gray 1995, Gray et al. 2005). At the same time, we argue that mortality anxiety might be a possible driver of the *fight* response in the pluralist disturbance model.

Our findings are relevant for scholars of interest representation and public policy interested in how organisations adjust to challenges in their external context. It adds considerably to existing research concerned with interest group access and strategies following the insider/outsider model (cf. Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew 1994, Grant 1978, Dür and Mateo 2016, Broscheid and Coen 2003, Weiler and Brändli 2015, Hanegraaff, Beyers, and De Bruycker 2016), as well as to the work of scholars of the population ecology paradigm interested in mortality anxiety and group survival (Halpin and Thomas 2012, Gray and Lowery 1997, Witjas, Hanegraaff, and Vermeulen 2020).

Normatively, the findings give both reasons for relief and concern: while it is encouraging to see that groups in our survey experiment were willing to invest in advocacy and persist in representing their interests in the scenario of seeing their interests threatened for longer periods of time, we see it as troubling that access constraints trigger a higher likelihood of putting work on hold. This suggests that, while interest groups are able to adapt to disturbances, in their opinion, there is little they can do if their political work faces a closed door. Ultimately, and perhaps worryingly, our results even demonstrate that higher access barriers and disturbances affect perceived organisational mortality anxiety. Both our experimental treatments significantly increase the perception that an organisation's survival is threatened. In this sense, but also taking all findings together, threats to an organisation and its insider status appear to have far-reaching effects that can impact the entire balance of interest representation.

### **Theory: Demand- and disturbance-driven perspectives on lobbying activities**

Distinctions between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' have become the bread and butter of research on interest organisations (e.g. Dür and Mateo 2016, Fraussen and Beyers 2016, Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015). Notably, the question of which types of actors are included in the policy process (*insiders*) and those that can only follow from the side-lines (*outsiders*), has high practical, societal, and normative relevance. Those organisations that are political outsiders are less likely to get a voice in the policy process, and are less likely to be advantaged by political rulemaking

(cf. Yackee 2005). In this way, the status as an outsider is likely to have distributional consequences and might, ultimately, even threaten the survival of organisations.

Yet, early work in the field warned already that the insider-outsider distinction conflates group *strategy* and group *status* (Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew 1994: 17). As Grant (1978: 2) put it, ‘the acquisition of insider or outsider status by a group involves both a decision by government and a decision by the group concerned’. Put differently, the inside/outside distinction points to two important – but empirically intertwined – facets of exclusion: the outsider *status* ascribed by the political institution, because access is denied, as well as the outsider *strategy*, which is a choice by the organisation itself. Subsequently, interest group scholarship has extensively addressed these aspects of inside/outside *strategies* (e.g. Dür and Mateo 2013, Kollman 1998, Thrall 2006) and insider/outsider *access* (e.g. Beyers 2002, Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015, Bouwen 2004, Eising 2007, Fraussen and Beyers 2016). Studies of *access* often acknowledge that access (or an insider *status* in Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew’s terms) is a product of the behaviour of interest organisation (*seeking access*) and the behaviour of gatekeepers (*granting access*) (cf. Binderkrantz and Pedersen 2017). What we know relatively little about, however, is how these two latter components of access interact, for instance how gatekeeper behaviour affects the strategies of interest groups.

A central discussion, in this regard, is the question of whether and to what degree interest groups have an active *choice* regarding their strategy. Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew (1994: 34) argue that strategy ‘is to a large extent determined by the nature of the policy demand’. They here follow previous arguments that strategies are the result of environmental factors (May and Nugent 1982, Walker 1991), including the level of access granted to the group by decision-makers themselves. This raises an interesting puzzle about a counterfactual regarding the interactions of interest organisations with policymakers: would organisations remain active, were policymakers to restrict access?

At the macro-level of interest group (sub-)systems, a number of studies have described the activities of interest organizations as driven by political ‘demand’ (e.g. Leech et al. 2005, Broscheid and Coen 2007, Baumgartner et al. 2011). In population ecology models, the ‘energy’ of legislative or bureaucratic activity in certain policy fields or on specific topics attracts lobbyists into the policy process (e.g. Gray et al. 2005), which can result in ‘bandwagoning’ on some issues (Baumgartner and Leech 2001, Halpin 2011). At the micro-level of individual organisations, however, it remains an open empirical question how interest organisations react to changes in the behaviour of

gatekeepers and other environmental factors. While the aim of Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew (1994: 17) almost three decades ago, was to invest the insider/outsider labels ‘with a theoretical spine’, our goal is to flesh out the dynamics that link an insider/outsider position to lobbying strategy.

An important alternative to the demand-driven view of interest group activities is Truman’s (1951) disturbance theory on interest representation, where threats to organisations’ interests are the vital driver of mobilisation. In this perspective, group mobilisation should depend on the size and nature of a ‘disturbance’ to a group’s interests (Truman 1951), rather than being reactive to political demand. In practical terms, Lowery (2007) reports, for instance, that Microsoft’s lobbying budget increased by 300 percent between 1998 and 2000 when its market position was threatened by American antitrust authorities who worked to investigate the company as a monopoly. This can be seen as a text-book response to a ‘disturbance’ that triggers the organisation into higher lobbying activity.

More broadly speaking, our second perspective on strategy choice focuses on environmental factors that threaten the interests of an organisation (cf. May and Nugent 1982, Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew 1994). Also in the political economy literature (Drutman 2015, Hansen 1985), actors are thought to be more inclined to mobilise in response to a *threatening* situation than, for example, when possible future prospects are presented. Potential explanations for such behaviour are threefold. First, a concrete threat or disturbance to an organizations’ interests may make the benefits of mobilising more salient and imminent, and might thereby even help to overcome potential collective action problems (cf. Olson 1965). Second, when political actors are exposed to an immediate threat, they are more likely to engage in ‘risk seeking’ behaviour as they are exposed to a large loss (Hansen 1985: 81). Lastly, according to Tversky and Kahneman (1991), possible losses weigh more in the minds of people in comparison to possible gains (see also Hansen (1985) for a discussion of this phenomenon in a political behaviour context).

In sum, our research design tests two important, but partly rivalling, views of interest group behaviour: On the one hand, the expectation that interest group activity is driven by political demand, and, on the other, the view that threats to the organisations’ interest at the supply side trigger groups into action. Two basic expectations follow from these views:

Basic expectation 1 (demand-driven lobbying): Organisations that face higher barriers to their inside access go into *flight* mode, i.e. decrease lobbying activity.

Basic expectation 2 (disturbance-driven lobbying): Organisations that face more severe threats to their interests into *flight* mode, i.e. increase lobbying activity.

Our survey experiment will test these basic expectations in a 2x2 design varying the level of access barriers faced by an organisation, as well as the level of disturbance to the organisation's interests in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the next sections, we explain a set of testable hypotheses<sup>1</sup> we formulated based on these basic expectations, and in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, in which our experiment is conducted.

### **Demand-driven lobbying: “Flight” in response to Access Barriers?**

Firstly, we focus on how political ‘demand’ or the openness of gatekeepers affects interest group strategies. Following the discussion by Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew (1994), one would expect the strategies of interest organisations to *follow* access provision by gatekeepers. Facing a closed door, interest organisations would not waste resources but wait for demand to arise again. This expectation might go hand-in-hand with a view of lobbying as a ‘legislative subsidy’ (Hall and Deardorff 2006), where organisations lobby their friends and those with open arms, rather than going against resistance.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, high levels of uncertainty, social distancing rules, and a state of emergency, meant that normal consultation practices were disrupted, and there was higher uncertainty for groups about what levels of access to policymakers they would enjoy in the coming months. In Spain, for instance, scholars report that one of the major umbrella organizations representing the elderly was surprisingly not invited to parliamentary consultations to discuss crisis measures (Fraussen et al. 2020). This illustrates that, even the ‘usual suspects’ that normally have a seat at the negotiation table, faced more uncertainty about their future level of access during the global pandemic. This means that our experimental treatment that varies information about how difficult it is to get access to policymakers in an (at that point) hypothetical second wave of COVID-19 is likely to be relatable and realistic for organisations in this extraordinary situation of uncertainty.

The first hypothesis we test in this setting builds on the intuition of a demand-driven *flight* effect, as proposed in our Basic Expectation 1: When exposed to higher access restrictions (in the

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<sup>1</sup> The hypotheses have been pre-registered at [Aspredicted.org](https://aspredicted.org). An anonymous version of the pre-registration can be found at <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=5vy2s7>. Note that we have made minor changes to the wording of hypotheses and do not include all pre-registered hypotheses in this article.

treatment), an organisation is expected to *decrease* its lobbying activity, for example by decreasing resource investment in lobbying, or even putting its political work.

*H.1 (Flight): Difficulty in gaining insider access negatively affects the level of lobbying activity.*

Some might object, however, and argue that, rather than going into a fully-fledged flight mode, organisations that face access restrictions, might try to compensate for their lack of insider access<sup>2</sup> by shifting their activities to outside venues to draw public and media attention to their case. This argument relates to important discussions about whether there is *divergence* between the groups getting access to different arenas or whether the same organisations *persist* across venues (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015), and whether outside lobbying, such as (social) media or protest activity, can compensate as a ‘weapons of the weak’ (cf. Thrall 2006, Van der Graaf, Otjes, and Rasmussen 2016). In the context of COVID-19, there is initial evidence that shifts in access to media venues have developed differently from inside access (Eady and Rasmussen 2021, Omitted Citation). Yet, it remains to be tested whether the closing of an inside venue drives actors into outside lobbying.

Our next hypothesis therefore aims at testing this by focussing on how difficulties with attaining inside access affect the choice to use outside lobbying strategies. That is, we qualify or basic flight-expectation by adding that interest organisations might adjust their strategies by targeting alternative and more accessible venues, since these may have become the main accessible platforms for interest representation for some groups during the crisis.

*H.2 (Flight, venue shift): Difficulty in gaining insider access positively affects the use of outside strategies.*

Finally, a crucial question – in this ongoing pandemic and more broadly - is whether access barriers affect the perceived ability of interest groups to survive as organisations. From a population ecology perspective, lower energy of legislative or bureaucratic demand should decrease the carrying capacity and survival of groups (Messer, Berkhout, and Lowery 2011, Lowery and Gray 1995, Gray et al. 2005, Klüver 2020, Hanegraaff and Poletti 2019). In the absence of demand for lobbying, organisations representing their own or their members’ interests might lose the ability to engage in rent-seeking, secure policy goals, public funding or contracts, signal involvement in interest

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<sup>2</sup> Note that our pre-registered hypothesis 1 was formulated as two-sided. All other hypotheses were formulated as one sided in the preregistration.



representation to members and clients, and mobilise membership while securing new members (Witjas, Hanegraaff, and Vermeulen 2020, Gray and Lowery 1997, Lowery 2007). In context of the COVID-19 pandemic – which might have far reaching effects on organisational survival in the long run - we are interested in assessing causally, whether this holds at the level of individual groups: do organisations see their survival threatened when facing more severe problems to gain access to political decision-makers? Based on existing scholarship on the importance of the demand-side for interest group activity and survival, we expect access barriers to affect perceived organisational survival, as summarised in hypothesis H3. In the demand-driven view on lobbying, we see this as an implication of the *flight* response, to the extent to which lower access makes organisations more worried that they cannot continue their work at all.

*H.3 (Flight, survival): Organisations that have difficulties gaining access perceive themselves as less likely to survive.*

### **Disturbance-driven lobbying: "Fight" in response to Threats to Organisations' Interests?**

To test our second basic expectation about varying levels of 'disturbances' as a key driver of interest group activity, we here formulate hypotheses based on pluralist theory (Truman 1951) that can be tested across group populations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so, we investigate the effect of the *general* (rather than organisation-specific) threat that is posed by the spread of the Coronavirus across the globe and the resulting lock-down policies and restrictions to the core activities of individuals and organisations. The global health crisis, including the government restrictions introduced to stop the spread of the virus, have posed new and serious threats to the interests of various types of organisations (cf. Fraussen et al. 2020). The temporary suspension of business activities, schools and other public services and the development of rescue packages to temporarily make up for the economic losses have drawn the attention of firms, business groups and professional associations (cf. Rasmussen 2020). Restrictions to personal movement, and the development of health and safety protocols have had major impacts on (the members of) professional associations and labour unions, which are called upon to represent employees' interests in the transition to new working conditions. Lockdown policies have made it harder to address the causes represented by NGOs and charities, such as homelessness or mental health. Other public groups have struggled to focus policymakers' attention on (at the time of the crisis) less salient issues, such climate change or development aid (Omitted citation). In addition to the above, government restrictions have

forced every organisation to adapt political advocacy to the lockdown situation, required them to rethink the relationship with membership and their strategy of recruitment in a mostly online environment and uncertain future circumstances.

With this in mind, we focus especially on how the *duration* of COVID-related restrictions, which should represent a system-wide ‘disturbance’ for all types of organisations, affects the activities of organisations. Where restrictions are in place for longer times, we expect the day-to-day business and political work of organisations to be affected more negatively (i.e. a higher level of ‘disturbance’) than with shorter restrictions. Following Truman (1951), we expect organisations to react to these different levels of disturbance, namely by increasing their lobbying activity more when the disturbance to their interests is more pressing. As we see it, the duration of restrictions here is an adequate, and quite universally applicable dimension of variation in the level of disturbance to organisations’ interests. The duration of lock-downs and safety measures in the second wave of COVID-19 should intensify the ‘disturbances’ to all kinds of interests, since longer restrictions will be limiting and economically and/or socially painful for basically all politically active organisations, their day-to-day work, and potentially their constituents or operations<sup>3</sup>. We therefore expect the length of restrictions to have a mobilisation effect (cf. Truman 1951, Hansen 1985, Drutman 2015) that translates into an increase in the level of lobbying activity. At the same time, we expect this disturbance to increase the level of outside strategies, as these can help to draw attention to the organisation’s grievances. Outside lobbying may here be used to try to signal salience of the group’s position to policy makers and member constituencies (Kollman 1998) and can be an attempt to affect both public opinion and political decisions (hence here classified as a fight response). Our next hypotheses summarise these expectations.

*H.4 (Fight): The duration of the restrictions positively affects the level of lobbying activity.*

*H.5 (Fight, outside venue): The duration restrictions positively affects the use of outside strategies.*

Ultimately, it is also crucial to ask how the duration of restrictions affects fears about organisational survival (cf. Hanegraaff and Poletti 2019). In the disturbance-driven (pluralist) view on lobbying, we see these fears about survival primarily as a potential driver of *fight* responses, since worries about

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<sup>3</sup> While some organisations might also have advantages in the (longer) lockdown context, we expect longer Covid-19 related restrictions to have negative effects for the vast majority of organisations. Moreover, since our treatments are randomly assigned, we are not worried that potential exceptions will bias results.

the threat and organisational survival might motivate additional lobbying efforts. In this view on ‘disturbances’, fears and grievances drive group mobilisation, activity and, ultimately, continued existence (Truman 1951). Regarding the restrictions during the Coronavirus crisis, in particular, it is likely that many groups perceive these as a *threat* to continued survival, given the far-reaching external shock of the crisis and the already mentioned system-wide consequences the pandemic had for all types of interest organisations. In this sense, the restrictions can be expected to decrease *stability* in the interest group system (Messer, Berkhout, and Lowery 2011, Lowery and Gray 1995, Gray et al. 2005). From the disturbance perspective, it is interesting to look at whether survival fears result from more severe disruptions (in our case: longer restrictions), as hypothesis H6 summarises.

*H.6 (Fight, survival motivation): Organisations that are exposed to longer restrictions perceive themselves as less likely to survive.*

The next section presents the survey experimental research design we employed to test these six hypotheses.

### **Data and methods: A cross-country elite survey experiment in context of the COVID-19 crisis**

To disentangle the causal relationship between access barriers, disturbances and choice of strategies, experimental research has clear advantages. Experimental settings are well-suited to isolate causal effects by randomly assigning key variable(s) of interests. Nevertheless, given the challenges involved in developing experimental designs to address key research questions in studies of interest groups, they are relatively rare in research on lobbying and public policy (exceptions are: Dür 2018, Kalla and Broockman 2016, McEntire, Leiby, and Krain 2015, Weber, Dunaway, and Johnson 2012, Leeper 2013, La Pira 2008). It is especially rare that an experiment is employed to understand the *behaviour of interest organisations*, rather than legislators (e.g. Kalla and Broockman 2016, La Pira 2008) or the public (Dür 2018, McEntire, Leiby, and Krain 2015, Leeper 2013, Hartman and Weber 2009). To our knowledge, our experiment is, in fact, the first survey experiment conducted across a large, cross-country sample of interest organisations.

A potential weakness of survey experiments might, however, be that the chosen scenarios are too unrealistic or far removed from the respondents’ real experiences. This can result in low *ecological validity* (cf. Cicourel 1982) and imply that the responses might only partially be able to capture trends outside the survey setting. Arguably, this danger is especially high when designing a

survey experiment for a sample of the interest group population, given this will include considerable diversity in terms of types of groups, sectors etc. Designing survey scenarios that are *credible* and *applicable* to all of them is, therefore, very difficult but paramount.

In this regard, our research design has the advantage of being conducted under the first wave of the global COVID-19 crisis (June/July 2020), where a number of extraordinary circumstances were in place, which affected participating organisations homogeneously in at least two ways. First, given the extraordinary global *salience* of this pandemic, few to no organisations can be expected to have been unaffected by the pandemic, and most organisations will actively have addressed potential action plans to deal with the pandemic. Second, a high and wide-spread level of *uncertainty* was connected to the unfolding of the pandemic. In June/July 2020, when our survey was in the field, infection numbers were stabilising in many European countries, but it was seen as likely that a second wave of the pandemic would break out in the fall. The precise form and consequences of the potential second wave, were, however, very uncertain. In this context, we argue that the scenarios presented in our survey experiment on a – at that point hypothetical – second wave of COVID-19 in the fall 2020 were credible and extremely close to the actual experiences and concerns of all respondents at the time. In the following sections, we outline how we designed our survey experiment in this extraordinary situation to understand how organisational strategies vary in different scenarios.

### Data and sample

Our survey experiment was integrated at the end of a larger survey to address interest representation during the Coronavirus crisis (*project name*). We took a behavioural approach to the identification of interest groups (Baroni et al. 2014) and distributed the survey to stratified samples of the interest organisation population, as well as large companies in 10 polities in Europe (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the EU-level).

To select these samples, existing lists of organisations, such as lobby registers and existing lists of interest group populations, were employed, as described in detail in Appendix A<sup>4</sup>. The sample was stratified to ensure that we included comparable samples of different types of organised interests, as well as in the different polities. This means that the survey was sent to roughly equal samples of business associations, corporations, associations of professionals, unions and non-governmental

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix available upon request

organisations (NGOs). For an overview of the sample in each polity, as well as response rates see Appendix B.

In total ca. 6,000 representatives from organised interests received the survey. An effort was made to target respondents that were responsible for public affairs, communication and interest representation within their respective organisation. The survey was in the field from the beginning of June to mid-July in 2020 and ca. 1,400 organisations completed the questions pertaining to the survey experiment. Overall, the survey had a response rate of 22.6%, but these varied markedly between countries, with the Scandinavian countries scoring high, and France, Italy and the UK scoring low (for details see Appendix B, Table B1).

In the pooled sample, we do not see considerable response bias regarding group type, as Table B2 in Appendix B summarises. While we cannot rule out non-response bias, Tables B3 and B4 further address the distribution of responses across 1) lobbying staff resources and 2) perceived affectedness by this crisis, both of which could impact non-response. This means that we can test the average effect of our treatment in sample, which includes different group types, levels of resources, and affectedness (cf. Morton and Williams 2010, Druckman et al. 2011). If we find significant average effects in this diverse set of actors, this is strong evidence for a causal effect of our treatments on the behaviour of interest organisations.

Non-response in the actual experiment (drop out in the post-treatment questions) is extremely low: under 1% of those who started the survey dropped out in the questions pertaining to the experiment. Table D2 in the appendix gives an overview of the observations in each treatment group. To make sure randomisation was successful, we check balance in our four treatment groups in Tables D2 and D3 in the Appendix. Table D2 shows that we have similar numbers of observations (between 337 and 357) in each of the treatment conditions. The table also summarises mean values for different relevant background characteristics (organisation type, organisation age, staff resources, country), for which differences are small in all four categories. Moreover, Table D3 tests whether any of these factors are significant predictors of the treatment allocation and shows three weakly significant effects ( $p < 0.1$ ), one for medium resources, one for medium age, and one for NGOs. These imbalances are likely to have arisen due to chance, cannot be addressed with post-stratification and are addressed with robustness checks in the Appendix E (Table E2 and E4), which runs the analysis including covariates. Based on the results, we do not find reasons to believe that our analysis suffers from covariate imbalance and we therefore conclude that randomisation was successful (Hansen and Bowers 2008).

### Experimental Design and Stimulus Material

Our survey experiment was designed to test whether the difficulty in gaining inside access (*access barriers*) and the duration of government restrictions (*level of disturbance*) have an effect on the level of lobbying activity (H1, H4), the level of outside strategies (H2, H5), and the perceived likelihood of survival of the organisation (H3, H6). The study was pre-registered at Aspredicted.org, and the terms and conditions for our online survey were approved by the Ethics board of (University).<sup>5</sup>

We used vignettes that describe different scenarios during the (at that point hypothetical) second wave of COVID-19. These scenarios followed a 2x2 between-subjects design, manipulating two characteristics in the situation: the level of access barriers the organisation faces (access: difficult and easy) and the duration of government restrictions during the second wave (disturbance: long and short). The participants were exposed to the same scenario but were randomly assigned to one of each of these conditions describing access barriers and the duration of the restrictions.

Specifically, respondents were instructed that a hypothetical scenario was about to be presented, and they were asked to read through the scenario carefully and to imagine the situation as if they were actually experiencing it. The scenario described a second wave of the Coronavirus that occurred in the polity in which the organisation was sampled (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, United Kingdom, or the EU-level). The vignette then continued to describe that the national government (or: EU) announces to reimpose the same restrictions as were implemented nationally during the first wave of the pandemic. Subsequently, the scenario presented the duration conditions by indicating either that the restrictions are imposed for a period of **one year** (*longer duration of restrictions*) or **two months** (*shorter duration of restrictions*). Moreover, the vignette described how hard it is for the organisation in this situation to come into contact with politicians to express the organisation's interest. The participants were either exposed to a situation where it is **not particularly hard** for the organisation to come into contact with politicians (*easy access*) or where it is **extremely hard** (*difficult access*)<sup>6</sup>.

The stimulus material was pre-tested by means of a pilot to assess it in terms of comprehensibility and credibility<sup>7</sup>. All surveys were conducted in the respective national language and in English in

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<sup>5</sup> See: <https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=5vy2s7>

<sup>6</sup> The treatment condition was also bolded in the survey.

<sup>7</sup> In addition, as an attention check, respondents were asked, after the treatment, to select among all the elements that applied to the hypothetical scenario they were just presented with. Results for this are moderate: For the individual treatments, 45-58% tick the duration of restrictions correctly (among other answers), whereas 39-47% tick the access condition correctly (among other answers). Yet, we argue that the consistency in our results suggests that respondents

the EU sample. The English version of the stimulus material can be found in Appendix C. Given the baseline for the experimental setting varies somewhat between polities, as did the exposure to the virus, government decisions and restrictions in the first wave varied, we account for varying baselines by running our main analyses with fixed effects for polity.

### Dependent Variables

After reading the vignette, respondents were asked a series of post-treatment questions, which we use for the construction of the dependent variables. Questions asked the respondents to indicate how likely it was for their organisation in the given scenario to employ different strategies, as well as how likely they thought it was that their organisation would cease to exist. In particular, seven questions were asked after the vignette, five of which we use as dependent variables to indicate *flight* or *flight* responses, as formulated in our six pre-registered hypotheses.

To operationalise *the level of lobbying activity* (H1, H4), we use 1) the measure of the likelihood that the organisation puts its political work on hold and 2) the likelihood that it invests additional resources in political work, according to the respondent. To operationalise *the employment of outside strategies* (H2, H5), we use the likelihood that the respondent's organisation is rated to 3) run public and/or media campaigns, and 4) engage in protest activities. Finally, to operationalise the likelihood of *organisational survival*, we use the respondent's rating of 5) the perceived likelihood that the organisation will cease to exist (H3 and H6). All these were assessed on a scale from 0 *not likely at all* to 10 *almost certain to happen*. Appendix C shows all answer categories in the English translation.

These measures serve as dependent variables to assess the effects of access restrictions and the duration of the disturbance to the organisations' interest on advocacy strategies and survival anxiety. We will measure whether our treatments have significant effects on these five dependent variables that capture our respondents' expert rating of the likelihood of different fight-or-flight responses in the respective scenarios. Table D1 in Appendix D shows descriptive overviews of these five dependent variables. It gives evidence for skewedness, which is why we conduct additional robustness tests in Appendix D (Table D3) and G (Table G1-2).

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have understood the treatment, and we think that problems are likely to stem from the wording in the follow-up question (which was very short and only added after pre-testing).

## Analysis

In this section, we present the main results regarding the effects of each of our independent variables on our five dependent variables, which operationalise the level of lobbying activity, the use of outside strategies and the perceived likelihood of organisational survival. Notably, given our 2 x 2 design, where we randomly vary both independent variables, which are therefore not correlated, we can look at the average effect of each characteristic individually (Gerber and Green 2000, Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008).

The next sections present the effects of access barriers and the duration of the restrictions, respectively. We use OLS regressions with fixed effects for country in all models to control for the fact that lockdown conditions and exposure to the virus were not the same in the 10 polities.

### *Testing Hypotheses 1-3: “Flight” in response to access barriers?*

To test hypotheses H1-H3, Figure 1 plots the coefficients comparing the scenario where it is *extremely hard* for the respondents’ organisation to come into contact with politicians to express the organisation’s interest to the situation in which this is *not particularly hard*.

Results do not suggest that organisations that face higher access barriers are more or less likely to invest additional resources in lobbying. However, there is clear evidence that they are significantly more likely to put their work on hold ( $p=0.000$ ), thus supporting *Flight* hypothesis H1. Moreover, organisations facing higher access barriers are not more likely to engage in media strategies, but are more likely to use protest strategies ( $p=0.038$ ). This means that the *Venue Shift* hypothesis H2 only finds support when it comes to protest activities. Finally, organisations that encounter greater access difficulties see themselves as more likely to stop existing as organisations ( $p=0.032$ ), supporting the third *Flight* hypothesis H3, that lower demand by gatekeepers threatens organisational survival.



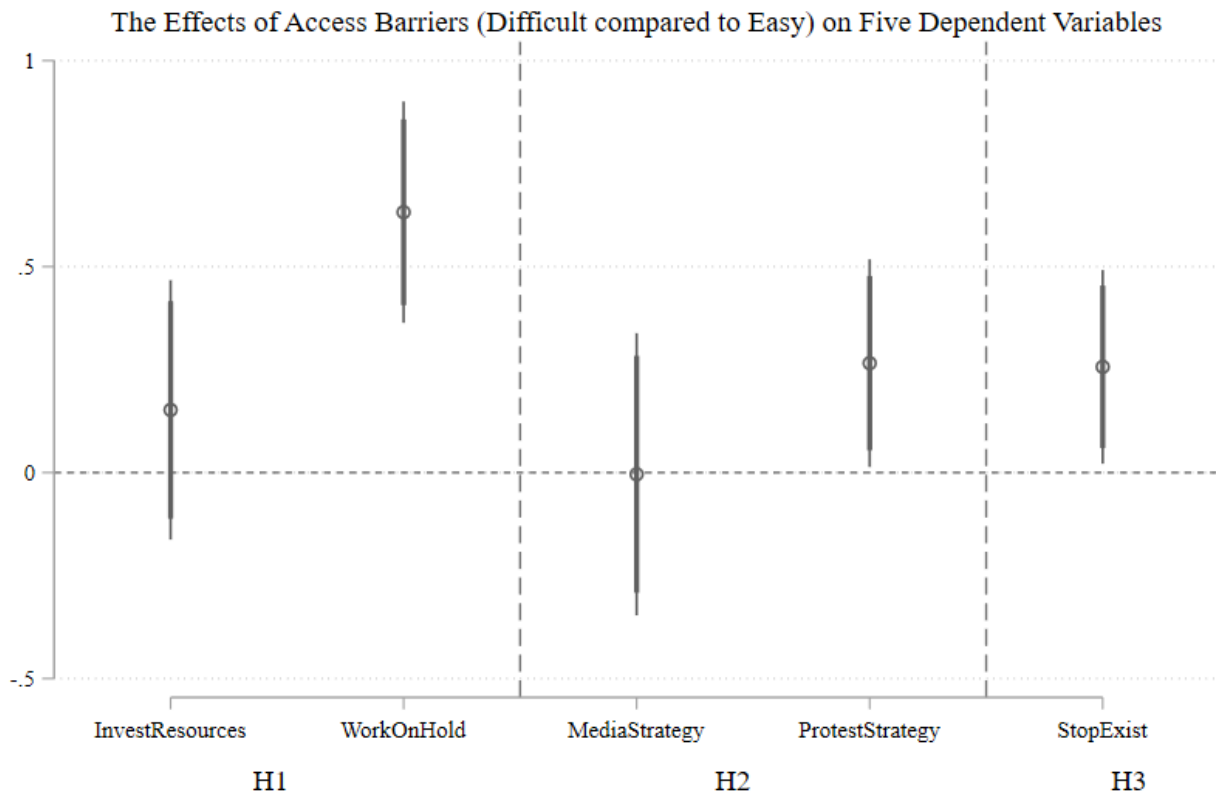


Figure 1: Coefficient plots based on analyses of the access treatment (baseline easy) on five dependent variables, fixed effects for polity included. Robust standard errors for WorkOnHold, Protest, StopExist, due to evidence for heteroscedasticity. Showing 95 and 90 percent confidence intervals (CIs). Full models displayed in Table E.1 in the Appendix

When it comes to the sizes of these effects, the effect of facing difficult access is largest on the likelihood of putting work on hold. In absolute terms, those treated with the scenario of difficult access score 0.63 points higher (on the 0-10 point scale) than organisations with easy access. While this might seem a substantially small effect, one can translate it to a ca. 6 percent increase in the likelihood rating of putting work on hold on the 11-point scale. The effects of more difficult access on the likelihood of using protest strategies and stopping to exist lie at 0.27 and 0.26 points respectively.

Although the effects we find are not very large in size, they show that facing access restrictions has significant effects on advocacy strategies. Importantly, our findings provide novel support for the expectation that the strategies of interest organisations are responsive to access provision by gatekeepers (Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew 1994). When doors suddenly close, organisations prefer to pause activity and wait rather than investing more resources in advocacy trying to break through a closed door. There is no indication in our results that organisations shift their advocacy to media

venues. However, we see that higher access restrictions make protest activity more likely. Additionally, the findings clearly suggest that organisations facing access difficulties see themselves as less likely to survive as organisations. Overall, this evidence suggests that organisations, when facing access barriers, chose a *flight strategy* and put work on hold, and see their existence challenged. At the same time, however, one might argue that the choice to engage in protest strategy represents an extreme and radical form of outside strategy, that signals that organisations are ready to take a fierce profile, if necessary.

In Appendix E, Table E.2, we show that these findings are robust to including background variables as controls. Only the significance of the likelihood of stopping to exist drops to  $p=0.062$ . In addition, Table G1 which uses Negative Binomial regression replicates our results almost perfectly. Moreover, Appendix F shows that treatment effects remain consistent (and become slightly larger) when testing with an interaction between our treatments.

#### *Testing Hypotheses 4-6: “Fight” in response to longer threats to organisations’ interests?*

To test the effects of the severity of the ‘disturbance’, which we operationalise as shorter as opposed to longer government restrictions in the second wave of COVID-19, Figure 2 plots the coefficients for the long (*twelve months*) wave, compared to the scenario where restrictions last shortly (*two months*). It is clear from Figure 2, that these differences have significant effects on strategies in line with the expectations based on pluralist theory and our *Fight* hypotheses H4-H6.

In support of the first *Fight* hypothesis H4, Figure 2 shows that longer restrictions increase the likelihood, according to the respondents’ rating, of investing additional resources into political work ( $p=0.030$ ). In addition, it looks like respondents are less willing to put advocacy on hold, when they are in the scenario where restrictions last for a year, but this effect is not significant ( $p=0.112$ ). Moreover, our findings strongly suggest that the longer disturbance leads to a fight reaction in outside lobbying venues. Fully in line with *Fight* hypothesis H5, Figure 2 shows that the likelihood of using both media and protest strategies increases ( $p=0.001$  and  $0.000$ , respectively) in the scenario where respondents face the longer (compared to shorter) government restrictions.

Finally, there is also support for hypothesis H6, which predicted higher mortality anxiety for organisations in the scenario with longer restrictions. As Figure 2 shows, respondents’ rating of the likelihood of ceasing to exist increases significantly in the scenario of long restrictions ( $p=0.001$ ). We argue that, from a pluralist perspective, the higher mortality anxiety is a plausible driver of *Fight* responses, as fears might motivate the higher investment in resources and activities in outside venues.

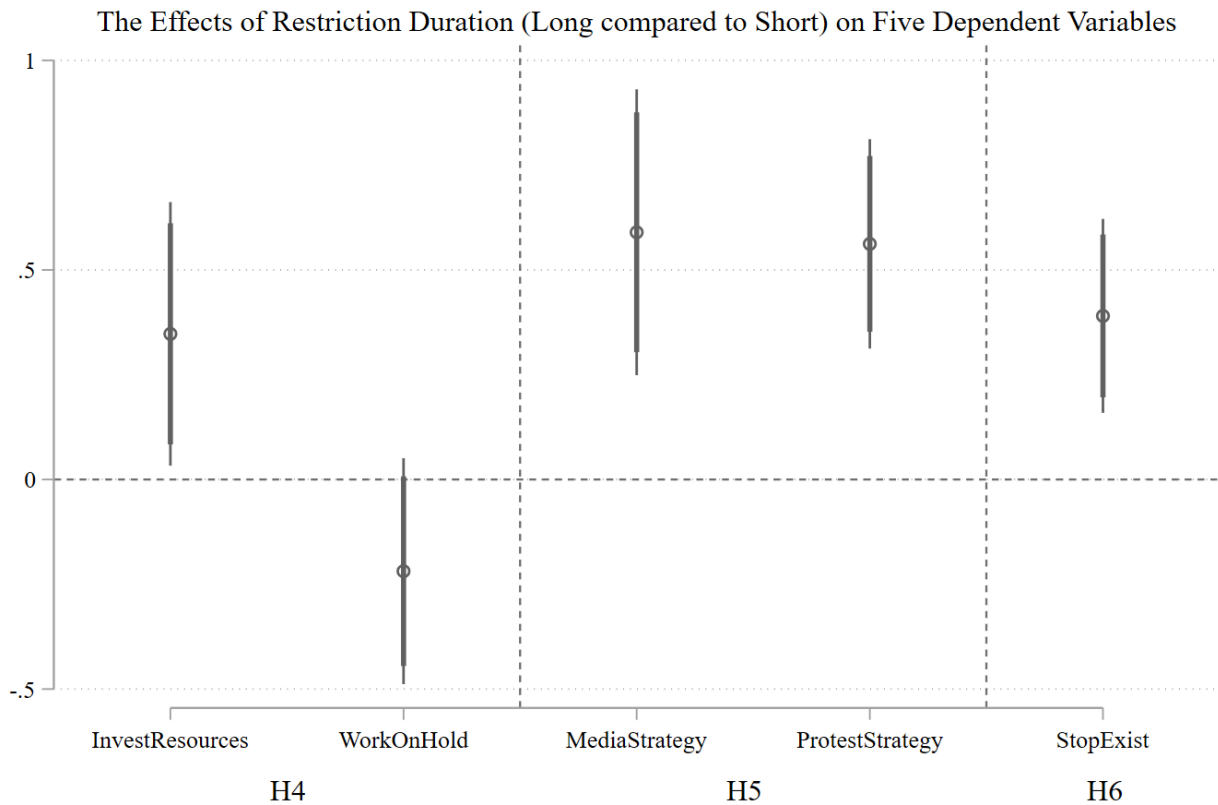


Figure 2: Coefficient plots in analyses of the restriction duration treatment (baseline short) on five dependent variables, fixed effects for polity included. Robust standard errors for Protest and StopExist, due to evidence for heteroscedasticity. Showing 95 and 90 percent confidence intervals (CIs). Full models displayed in Table E.1 in the Appendix

Notably, in terms of the size of the effects, the findings in Figure 2 are comparable to what was reported in relation to the access barriers treatment. In the scenario where restrictions in the second wave are longer, groups are 0.35 points more likely to invest additional resources in political work, compared to the shorter scenario. At the same time, the likelihood of using media and protest strategies is rated 0.59 and 0.56 points higher in the longer scenario. This can be translated to more than a 5 percent increase in the self-reported likelihood of using outside strategies on the 0-10 scale. Finally, the likelihood of stopping to exist is rated 0.39 points higher by respondents in the longer scenario. Jointly, these effects suggest that organised interests are responsive to changes in disturbances which affect interest representation, specifically, as far as tactics and perceived likelihood of survival is concerned.

In Appendix E, Table E4, we show that these findings are robust to including background variables as controls. All effects stay significant ( $p < 0.05$  or below). In addition, the negative effect

on the likelihood to put work on hold becomes weakly significant ( $p < 0.1$ ), which further backs up the already strong support for Hypothesis H4. Similar evidence is found in Table G2 which replicates the results using Negative Binomial regression, as well as Appendix F which explores treatment effects with an interaction between our treatments.

### Conclusion

Existing studies of interest groups and public policy have focused on the important division between insiders and outsiders, and made major leaps in the field by explaining when and why organisations use inside and outside *strategies* and gain insider/outsider *access* (e.g. Beyers 2002, Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015, Bouwen 2004, Eising 2007, Fraussen and Beyers 2016, Dür and Mateo 2016, Broscheid and Coen 2003, Weiler and Brändli 2015). In doing so, however, the mechanism that links ‘status’ to ‘strategy’ remained causally underexplored (cf. Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew 1994). In this article, we addressed this rather static view of the insider/outsider model and set out to test the expectation that political demand essentially drives interest group activities. At the same time, we contrasted this with an important alternative view of interest mobilisation as a response to disturbances or threats to organisations’ interests (Truman 1951). We put both these important stances to a test in a survey experiment, which we ran in 10 polities across Europe.

The global COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency response policies introduced by governments in Europe offered a unique scenario for the test of hypotheses on whether and how interest groups are responsive to the threats posed to their access status and organisational interests by this catastrophic event. We relied on a 2x2 design to experimentally test the causal link between two external constrains, access barriers to policymakers and policy disturbances affecting the organisation’s interests, on five indicators of interest group activities.

Our findings suggest that, when facing high access barriers, organisations prefer to put their advocacy activities on hold, rather than insistently knocking at a closed door. We interpret this as a risk that groups with an outsider status go into *flight* mode. Moreover, we see that fears about organisational survival are higher, where facing more severe access barriers. The only sign that organisations *fight* – though in different venues - in the face of closed access opportunities, is that high access barriers seem to drive organisations into more radical strategies, such as protest. In other words, we find considerable support for the demand-driven account of lobbying: In our experiment,

organisations that found themselves in the scenario of having severe difficulties in gaining access rated themselves as more likely to put their work on hold and less likely to survive.

At the same time, our experiment also provided support for the disturbance-view of interest mobilisation (cf. Truman 1951). When faced with more severe disturbances, (in our case: with lockdown government restrictions in place for longer periods of time), organised interests show determination to *fight*, and are prone to invest more resources into lobbying, and use alternative strategies such as media and protest activities, rather than pausing their political work. In the case of the system-wide disturbance we studied, we also see that longer restrictions increase mortality anxiety, with organisations being concerned about their survival facing the longer policy disturbances. We interpret these survival fears as a potential driver of increased activity in the pluralist perspective. Future research could build on our findings and address how and when mortality anxiety motivates *fight* and *flight* responses (i.e. increases or decreases in activity) and how it relates to the actual death of organisations. Moreover, it could address whether and how our findings travel to organisation-specific disturbances, which could also have a positive effect on organisational survival, for instance if they help mobilise supporters or overcome collective action problems.

Other than pointing to these areas of future research, our results have clear practical and normative implications. Lobbying is a couple dance, that needs to involve both interest groups and policymakers. For interest groups to thrive and an interest group system to be stable and functional, policymaking needs to be open to participation. Our results suggest that, when facing closed doors, a likely organisational response is pausing the group's advocacy, go into protest, or cease activity for good. This finding might be of interest to advocacy groups and researchers who support the empowerment of instruments of participatory democracy and open government to ensure that no voices are systematically excluded from consultation processes. In addition, our results suggest that interest groups are responsive to disturbances. Our findings clearly show that organisations are triggered into activity and adaptation when their interests are more severely challenged. We believe this proves Truman right, and sheds a positive light on the ability of interest group systems to adapt their activities based on constituency interests. Together these findings give a picture of interest group activity as driven by both demand- and supply side factors, which echoes models of population ecology (Messer, Berkhout, and Lowery 2011, Lowery and Gray 1995, Gray et al. 2005) – though here tested at the micro (group) level. A joint effect might be that severely affected organisations tend to stay active and persistent in their advocacy work – even when facing resistance - such as closed

doors - but that organisations that face less imminent threats to their interest might be crowded out by a lack of political demand.

While external validity is a recognised limit of experiments in social science, we believe our results are highly relevant to interest groups outside our experimental setting. When we designed the experiment's treatments, we drew a hypothetical future scenario about the pandemic that only a few months later proved to be very close to reality. It is, therefore, plausible that our experimental setting strikes a rare balance between reality and testable experimental conditions. We, hence, believe that our findings could hold in different settings, as well. We would, for instance, expect individual organisations facing more targeted access barriers to have similar responses to external circumstances as the ones we report in this study. That said, as well as providing answers to some of the open questions in the interest group literature, our study raises new questions we entrust future researchers with. Can the spectrum of lobbying strategies used in this study be broadened to include an assessment of how external circumstances affect the choice of forming, for example, lobbying coalitions (Beyers and De Bruycker 2018, Heaney and Leifeld 2018, Junk 2020) or engaging in litigation (Hofmann and Naurin 2020)? Does the perceived threat to organisational survival in response to external circumstances lead to actual organisational death (Witjas, Hanegraaff, and Vermeulen 2020), or do *survival* strategies adopted as a result of increases in mortality anxiety help to overcome the threat? Finally, does adaptation and flexibility in strategy choice pay off in terms of access and influence? These and other similar questions are our suggested avenues for future research.

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