How democratic is the interest group process in the UK?

Between elections, the interest group process (along with media and social media coverage) is a key way in which citizens can seek to communicate with their MPs and other representatives, and to influence government policy-makers. For the 2018 Audit of UK Democracy, **Patrick Dunleavy** *considers how far different social groups can gain access and influence decision-makers. How democratically does this key form of input politics operate? And how effectively are all UK citizens' interests considered?*

Theresa May at the CBI's conference. Picture: The CBI, via a (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) licence

How should the interest group process operate in a liberal democracy?

- Elected representatives and politicians should recognise a need for continuous consultation and dialogue with different sections of the public over detailed policy choices. Procedures for involving interest groups in decisions affecting them should cover the full range of stakeholders.
- The resources for organising collective voices and political action in pressure groups, trade unions, trade associations, non-governmental organisations, charities, community groups and other forms should be readily available. In particular, decision-makers should recognise the legitimacy of autonomous collective actions and mobilisations by different groups of citizens.
- The costs of organising effectively should be low and within reach of any social group or interest. State or philanthropic assistance should be available to ensure that a balanced representation of all affected interests can be achieved in the policy process.
- Decision-makers should recognise inequalities in resources across interest groups, and discount for different levels of 'organisability' and resources.
- Policy-makers should also re-weight the inputs they receive so as to distinguish between shallow or even 'fake' harms being claimed by well-organised groups, and deeper harms potentially being suffered by hard-to-organise groups.
- Other aspects of liberal democratic processes, such as the 'manifesto doctrine' that elected governments should implement all components of their election programmes, do not over-ride the need to consult and listen in detail to affected groups, and to choose policy options that minimise harms and maximise public legitimacy and consensus support.
- Since policy-makers must sometimes make changes that impose new risks and costs across society, they should in general seek to allocate risks to those groups most easily or able to insure

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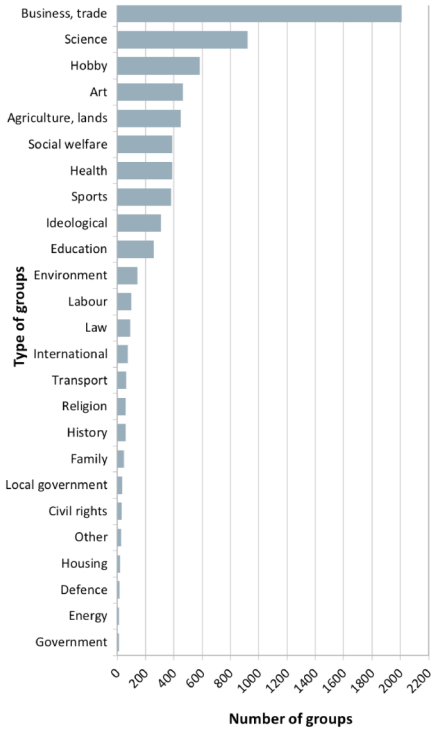
against them.

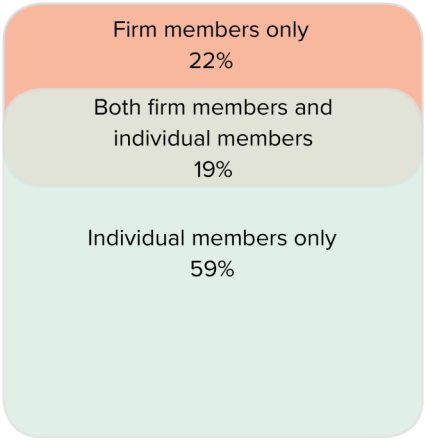
Between elections, the interest groups process generates a great deal of useful and perhaps relatively reliable information for policy-makers about preference intensities. By undertaking different levels of collective action along a continuum of participation opportunities, and incurring costs in doing so, ordinary citizens can accurately indicate how strongly they feel about issues to decision-makers.

Actions like sending back a pre-devised public feedback form, writing to an MP, supporting an online petition to the government, or tweeting support for something, are cheap to do and so only indicate a low level of commitment. Joining (and paying membership fees to) an interest group or going to meetings shows more commitment, and gives the group legitimacy and weight with politicians. Going on strike or marching in a demonstration indicates a higher level of commitments still. A well-organised interest group process will allow for a huge variety of ways in which citizens can indicate their views.

From a somewhat elderly 2006 study, we know that in the UK there were over 7,800 interest groups registered by group directories for the field. Jordan and Greenan demonstrate that business trade associations (many very small) were by far the greatest number, followed in numerical terms by professional groups and learned societies. Campaigning and pressure groups ranked only fifth of their category types. Some individual groups have grown very large memberships in the millions of hundreds of thousands – such as the UK's few trade unions, which have coalesced into a few very large membership bodies, or the National Trust or Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

Figure 1: The distribution of UK interest groups in 2006





Type of non-trade group	1970	2006	% change
Professional	606	1,167	93
General interest	259	565	118
Campaigning	191	414	117
Total	1,056	2,146	103

Source: Jordan et al, 2012, Table 7.2, p. 151, & Jordan & Greenan, 2012 Figure 4.1 p.82 & p.92.

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As Figure 1 shows, four out of five interest groups recruited individual members, and three out of five *only* recruited individuals – so their significance for elected politicians was based quite heavily on their size. Those that can engage the participation of almost all the people in a given occupation or role will carry especial weight, as with the well-organised medical professions. Over time the numbers of non-business groups (with individual memberships) grew substantially from 1970 to 2006, as the table part of Figure 1 shows. Campaigning groups grew slightly more in numbers than the general trend.

The remaining fifth of interest groups (all of them business or trade associations) only recruited firms as members, and a further fifth recruited both firms and individual members. Here legitimacy may be based on what proportion of a given industry or type of business are engaged with bodies claiming to represent them. Often rather divergent voices have claimed to represent business interests – as in the long-run rivalry between the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) (which represents big firms and operates in a politically neutral, corporatist way) and the Institute of Directors (which is more eclectic and more right wing). Some industries are dominated by a single interest group, like the National Farmers' Union, which in the past achieved enormous insider influence with the relevant Whitehall department. Other looser coalitions of different interests (like the 'roads lobby' of transport operators, construction companies and motorist organisations) can achieve a similar dominance, however.

At any given time, an 'ecology' of interest groups operates, with different organisations competing for attention, and encouraging their members to commit more resources or time to the group. Trade unions have been the biggest and most continuous losers since the 1980s. Their membership numbers radically reduced with the decline of manufacturing industry and large firms. Numbers and unionisation rates held up better in the public sector, but even there, members became markedly less willing to go on strike in recent years. Meanwhile environmentally aligned groups and NGOs (non-governmental organisations) have flourished. Some big groups that shifted away from restrictive 'legacy' modes of recruiting members to digital approaches have increased their size radically, notably the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn. But in the interest group world at large, such effects have generally been smaller.

Recent developments

This area of policy-making has been stable for many years, with occasional fringe scandals – a succession of which lead to the 2014 Lobbying Act. This introduced an official register of paid lobbyists contacting MPs in Westminster and in touch with Whitehall departments, affecting commercial lobbying firms most, together with some groups with developed governmental or parliamentary liaison operations. The lobbying industry in the UK is estimated by some sources to be worth £2bn a year, but still remains mostly self-regulated, especially perhaps in the new 'digital influencing' areas.

The large data analysis and lobbyist firm Cambridge Analytica became a focus of controversy in 2018 in the USA and Britain, after it emerged that it had extracted a large amount of users' personal data from Facebook without their knowledge, and used the information to construct sophisticated psychological profiles used to target voters in the Trump campaign, and used by a closely allied company to help the Brexit Leave campaign. The firm fought a rearguard action against its critics. But it had to close down when its UK chair was caught on video in a 'sting' by a UK TV programme, boasting of using illicit influence techniques to ruin the reputations of rivals to its clients. With business clients drying up the firm shut its doors within a few days. The chief executive attended two grillings by a House of Commons select committee, and official investigations continued at the time of writing. Critics argued that the incident shone a light on lax regulation of new influence technologies, a conclusion that a Commons select committee shared in a critical mid 2018 report on fake news and social media.

Digital technologies could also play a role in allowing decision-makers to elicit and cheaply incorporate mass public views. The UK government re-established an official online petitions site in 2015, where citizens can lodge proposals for issues to be reviewed by Parliament. Any petition gaining 100,000 verified electronic signatures goes to the House of Commons and supposedly gets a debate, followed by a response. Very large numbers of petitions are started, but most quickly fail to attract public attention. Only those that can generate around 10,000 supporters in the first couple of days have any effective chance of reaching the 100,000 target in the time allowed. In 2016 thousands of petitions were started but only 10 reached the 100,000 threshold, and four of these were denied a parliamentary debate.

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However, these initiatives can be influential. In spring 2017 Theresa May invited newly elected US President Donald Trump on a state visit to the UK. A petition to ban him quickly attracted 1.86 million supporters. Although ministers said that they would ignore this, the idea of a visit receded into the long grass until the summer of 2018. And when it did take place it was carefully organised to keep the famously touchy US President completely away from London and other UK cities where mass protests occurred.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
British government ministers, MPs, politicians and civil servants recognise the importance and legitimacy of a vigorous interest group process. An open consultation process operates for all new legislation, and government policy White Papers, and sometimes for statutory instruments.	Where interest groups are battling against party A's manifesto commitments, and especially where they are aligned with a rival party B, they will face an uphill struggle to make any changes in the incumbent government's policies. Governing parties in the UK have a strong record of pushing through partisan commitments, and just over-riding the opposition of groups who do not support them. The UK has no equivalent of the European Union's formal reporting back of consultation outcomes. Ministers and civil servants commonly 'talk up' any support their proposals secure, while ignoring or belittling unfavourable feedback.
Parliamentary processes, including the consideration of legislation, questions to ministers, and select committee hearings, connect strongly with the interest group process. Most legitimate or established groups can find MPs to represent their interests or cause, or to help from their position in the legislature. However, select committee inquiries access quite a restricted and biased range of 'recognised' interests. Public involvement processes in the devolved Scottish, Welsh, Northern Ireland and London legislatures are generally far more systematic and inclusive.	There are sharp inequalities in the capabilities of different social groups to monitor policy proposals and to get effectively involved in official consultation and legislative processes. The poorest and least socially resourced groups in British society rely chiefly on NGOs, charities and altruistic philanthropists to secure any research or campaigning on issues that concern them. By contrast, business interests have well-developed government and parliamentary liaison units, and ready access to professional lobbyists, public relations consultants, marketers and media experts – giving corporations and well-off elites inherent advantages that are hard to counteract.
UK decision-makers are alert to the potentially excessive power of lobbyists and of well-resourced groups best able to afford lobbyists and other organised and commoditised means of influence. Most (if not all) politicians discount heavily for the 'industrialised' lobby power of business and other wealthy groups. Lobbying is regulated and any excesses in attempting to secure influence are frowned upon and quickly stamped out – as the Cambridge Analytica case demonstrates.	Lobbying in the UK has historically focused most attention on creating private links with civil servants and ministers, exercised at early stages of the policy process, and often carried out without transparency. Concertation of ministerial decisions and business interests have been fuelled by incidents like the hundreds of emails between News International and the private office of the responsible minister, Jeremy Hunt during a take-over battle he had to adjudicate in 2010–12. As the powers of the House of Commons committees have slowly grown, and coalition governments operated in hung Parliaments in 2010–15 and 2017–present, so more lobbying has focused on the legislature. Because MPs and peers can work for outside jobs and take money from well-funded interests, there have been a succession of scandals around MPs, peers and even ministers not declaring interests.

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Current strengths	Current weaknesses
For elected politicians, what matters most is the vote-power of groups, which is a function of their *size* (large membership groups are more influential than small ones), the *intensity* of their preferences (groups that care a lot outweigh apathetic ones), and their *pivotality* (giving more importance to potential 'swing' groups who might shift support between parties, shaping who wins). There are inherent influence inequalities between groups, but because they derive essentially from their role in the electoral process, they are generally democratically defensible.	For politicians the *realpolitik* of the interest group process is that they appease groups whose support they rely on. But they will cheerfully impose costs on groups normally opposed to them, or too small or poorly organised to do them electoral damage.
Saturation media coverage, and now social media coverage as well, means that the risks for politicians in lightly or overtly deferring to powerfully organised interests have increased. Modern policy-making has shifted more into cognitive modes of competition between rival coalitions of interests. Here the quality of evidence you can produce to back a case, and sustain effective participation in policy debates, counts for more than simple voting power or financial might. A more *deliberative* interest group process has emerged, which has evened up access to the policy terrain.	Both ministers and civil servants also routinely extract a 'good behaviour' price for conceding influence to any 'insider' group. To remain influential the group must only express critical views 'moderately' and privately, at early stages of policy development before proposals go public. They must normally mute any public criticisms altogether, or tone them down to be non-confrontational or expressed 'responsibly'. Cognitive competition remains heavily influenced by resources and money. Wealthy interests can better afford to fund research and information gathering than groups representing the poor and powerless. Wealthy interests can also trigger more law cases in areas favourable to them and thus ensure that legal knowledge differentially develops in helpful ways.

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Future opportunities	Future threats
The growth of social media and internet-based modes of organising has radically lowered the information and transaction costs of organising collective actions in the last two decades, and promises to continue doing so. In particular, large-scale citizen mobilisations by spatially dispersed or 'functional' groups (for example, patients affected by a particular disease, or citizens with a shared specialist interest) have become far more feasible and influential.	Lobbying and public relations professionals have extended the techniques and services they use for commercial and other well-funded interests so as to increasingly manipulate social media in expert ways. A new and powerful 'data-industrial complex' has recently emerged, as the Leave campaign for the Brexit referendum aptly demonstrated.
The mass emergence of 'clicktivism' allows individuals to spontaneously signal their position on public issues on Twitter, Facebook and other social media. These 'micro-donations' of time and support mean that people get instant feedback on the popularity of their views and potentially linkages to like-minded people. This radically enhances the speed and granularity of the public's collective vigilance over policy-making in liberal democracies. However, more critical citizen activist campaigners like Alberto Alemmano, stress that clicktivism cannot be an end in itself, but must be part of a wide armoury of modernised citizen engagement leading to 'real world' engagement.	By increasingly 'delegating' the job of representing diverse relatively powerless societal interests to NGOs and charities, and restricting their own participation to digital means, well-educated and altruistic middle class people have created another spiral in the further 'professionalisation' of democratic politics. Groups that slip between the gaps of NGOs concerns (for example, perhaps 'Fathers for Justice') can lose out badly from this system. Their inexpert autonomous efforts to organise become ever more marginalised in the political world.
Crowdfunding via the internet has increasingly emerged as a way that large and dispersed groups can fund previously difficult mobilisations. The anti-Brexit lobbyist Gina Miller used this technique to back anti-Brexit candidates in the 2017 general election, as did other satellite campaigns. (However, her more famous Supreme Court legal case against the government was privately funded.) Similarly, 'open source' techniques of organising can often help otherwise disadvantaged groups to operate more effectively in competition with business hierarchies.	The virulent tone of the Brexit referendum campaign upset many charities. The chief executive of the National Council of Voluntary Organisations said he regretted they had not spoken out enough because of fear of running foul of the 2014 lobbying regulations, plus being pilloried in the media. In Brexit policy development up to summer 2018, ministers and Whitehall have seemed reluctant to bring in outside voices, and groups have felt excluded, despite their EU expertise, according to Jeremy Richardson.
Interest groups were keen to get involved in the Brexit negotiations, not least because they know a lot about the EU policy process – but pro-Remain industry interventions were fiercely attacked by Brexiteer politicians.	

'Managing' decision-making consultations

Elections inherently give policymakers only a crude and infrequent idea of public opinion. Parties must aggregate issues together into programmes and manifestos. Citizens can only cast a single vote, with no capacity to indicate which issues or policy commitment counts most with them. Nor can they express the different strength of their preferences on multiple issues. So even politicians with a clear manifesto commitment to implement have just a direction of travel, not a detailed route map for getting anywhere that works.

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Public consultation processes (some linked to legislation or executive orders) generate huge volumes of very specific information about how and why different interests are affected by proposed policy changes, which will bear costs and which see benefits in them. Often the detailed information needed for effective policy implementation rests with trade associations, firms, trade unions, professions, NGOs, sub-national governments, or academia rather than in Whitehall. Hence in any policy area there will either be a 'policy community' that is strongly networked, regularly influential and perhaps closed to outsider groups. Alternatively there may be a looser 'policy network', linking the main groups that regularly comment on policy issues, but with more weakly tied or changeable sets of participants.

A well-organised civil society may seem to leave Whitehall and ministers in a weak position, and in the past some political scientists rather fancifully described a 'hollow Crown' that has resulted in the UK. However, ministers and civil servants do not assign equal weight to all actors in networks, but instead demand 'responsible' behaviours from those to whom they will listen, such as think tanks, business lobbies, professions or expert academics. 'Insider' groups have the ear of policymakers, while more strident, public and 'extreme' voices are routinely discounted.

Finally, sophisticated opinion polling now allows both politicians and the public to regularly learn how different types of citizen feel about issues – so the policy influence of public opinion as a whole has improved and magnified. A lot of media and social media coverage and commentary also ensures that policy-makers continuously 'get the message' about which bits of their proposals are popular and with whom.

Corporate power in the interest group process

Yet is the apparent diversity and pluralism of the consultation process just a misleading façade? Vladimir Lenin famously argued that the liberal democratic state was 'tied by a thousand threads' into doing things that owners of capital want. And a concern about the 'privileged position of business' in dealing with government extends widely amongst liberal authors too, such as Charles Lindblom. Since businesses generate economic growth and taxes, they have special salience in making demands on politicians and officials. And as the journalist Robert Peston argued:

> 'The wealthy will [always] find a way to buy political power – whether through the direct sponsorship of politicians and parties, or through the acquisition of media businesses, or through the financing of think tanks. The voices of the super-wealthy are heard by politicians well above the babble of the crowd…. We are more vulnerable than perhaps we have been since the nineteenth century to the advent of rule by an unelected oligarchy'. (p.346).

In a discussion for Democratic Audit, David Beetham drew attention to how dominant financial corporate sectors in the UK economy first caused the 2008 economic crash by forcing through rash financial deregulation. But these same interests were then differentially rescued by unprecedented state bailouts by the biggest banks. And to stop a wider decline, 'quantitative easing' by the Bank of England propped up the asset values of the wealthiest groups in society. Via transfer pricing, debt loading and shifting domicile the largest global companies have also effectively evaded corporation taxes and undermined the UK fiscal regime. Public disquiet and tax shaming' mobilisations by online activists have dented this regime (e.g. a consumer boycott forced Starbucks into 'voluntarily' paying nominal amounts of UK corporation tax), and forced a rethink of previous pro-multi-national tax policies across the OECD.

Competition between 'advocacy coalitions'

A more benign view of changes in the interest group process is given by the 'advocacy coalition framework' (ACF). This modern pluralist view argues that the key influences on public policies now are cognitive ones, turning on empirical evidence, research and cognitions. Old-style, 'big battalion' groups – like big corporations, media barons and mass ranks of trade unions – sought influence on the basis that they could mobilise adverse votes at the ballot box or unfavourable coverage by media commentators. But most policy-level influence now comes from a different process of cognitive competition where rational arguments and evidence chiefly sway policy makers, not political self-interest alone.

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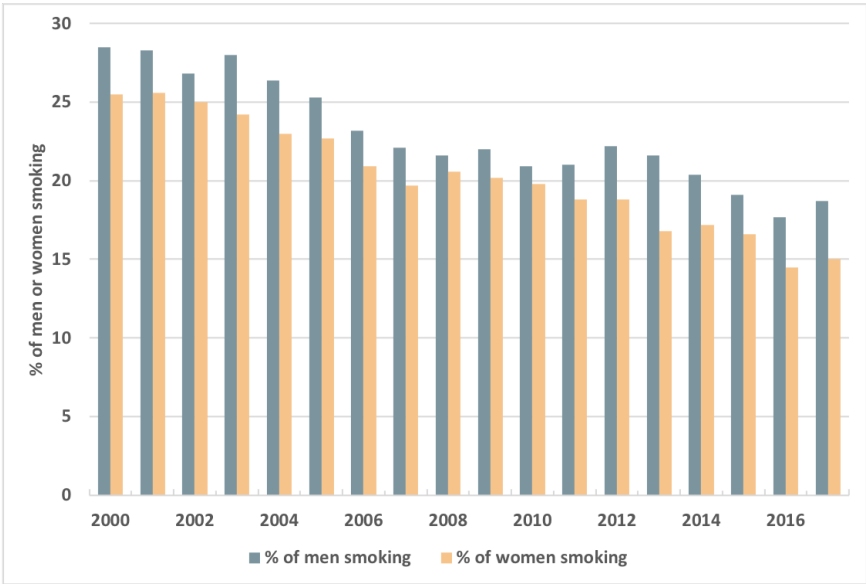
Nor are the battles that matter fought any longer by single interest groups, but rather by competing 'advocacy coalitions' that bring together diverse clusters or networks of groups aligned on each side of the policy debate. For example, on tobacco policy a succession of nudge interventions by government followed up periodically by regulatory restrictions and new legislation have progressively strengthened the disincentives for smoking and curtailed 'passive smoking' in the UK – and Figure 2 shows impacts in terms of falls in the number of smokers. The apparently ascendant coalition here includes anti-smoking charities, the medical professions, NHS authorities, the health department in Whitehall, progressive local authorities who forced the pace of implementation, many non-smokers (especially those adversely affected by 'passive smoking', and so on.

Figure 2: The proportion of men and women smoking in Great Britain, 2000–17



Source: Office of National Statistics Dataset, 2018.

The coalition fighting a rearguard action against smoking regulation includes of course the tobacco corporations front and centre, plus some other aligned businesses, pro-'freedom' or libertarian think tanks, Tories opposing a 'nanny state', and a diminishing minority of still enthusiastic smokers.

Yet has the progress achieved in reducing smoking incidence over recent decades been fast and furious (as defenders of the UK's policy apparatus might say), or slow and often stalled? How you assess the scale and speed of these changes will shape how effectively you think cognitive competition changes the dynamics of group competition.

Conclusions

Nobody now claims that the UK's interest group process is an equitable one (a position wrongly attributed to pluralists by their critics). Even common sense requires that we recognise there are big and powerful lobbies, medium influence groups and 'no hopers' battling against a hostile consensus. Democracy requires that each interest be able to effectively voice their case, and have it heard by policymakers on its merits, so that the group can in some way shape the things that matter most to them. On the whole, the first (voice) criterion is now easily met in Britain. But achieving any form of balanced, deliberative consideration of interests by policymakers remains an uphill struggle. Business dominance is perhaps reduced by restrictions on lobbying and extra transparency from social media. But it is still strong, despite some shifts towards cognitive competition over policy solutions and towards more deliberative and evidence-based policy-making.

About the author

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