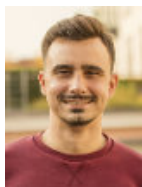


# Why lobbying in Brussels is not always an obscure activity



*Lobbying in Brussels is often envisioned as an activity that takes place behind closed doors, away from the spotlight of public scrutiny. Yet at the same time, some lobbyists intentionally seek media attention to win their policy battles. Drawing on a recent study, [Iskander De Bruycker](#) explains that media attention can help EU lobbyists attain their policy objectives, but only if they manage to frame their position as being in the public interest.*

Brussels currently houses some 15,000 lobby organisations, employing over 30,000 lobbyists. All try to affect EU policy decisions on a daily basis. While this lobbying is often considered to be an obscure activity, conducted outside of public scrutiny, some lobbyists intentionally seek the mass media's attention to try and further their policy goals.

But what determines the success of these interventions through the media? In a [recent study](#) of 125 different EU legislative cases (2008-2010), I have analysed whether appeals to the public interest in the media support lobby groups in realising their policy objectives. My findings indicate that participating in news media debates does not significantly affect lobbying success.

What matters for lobby groups in realising their policy goals is whether their goals are framed as being in the public interest, i.e. the interests of 'the people', 'citizens', 'consumers', or 'the European public'. About 19% of the lobby groups in my study managed through the media to connect their own goals with the interests of European citizens. This was true not only of citizen action groups, but also corporate lobby organisations, who saw their lobbying success improved when addressing public interests in the news.

## Media strategies matter

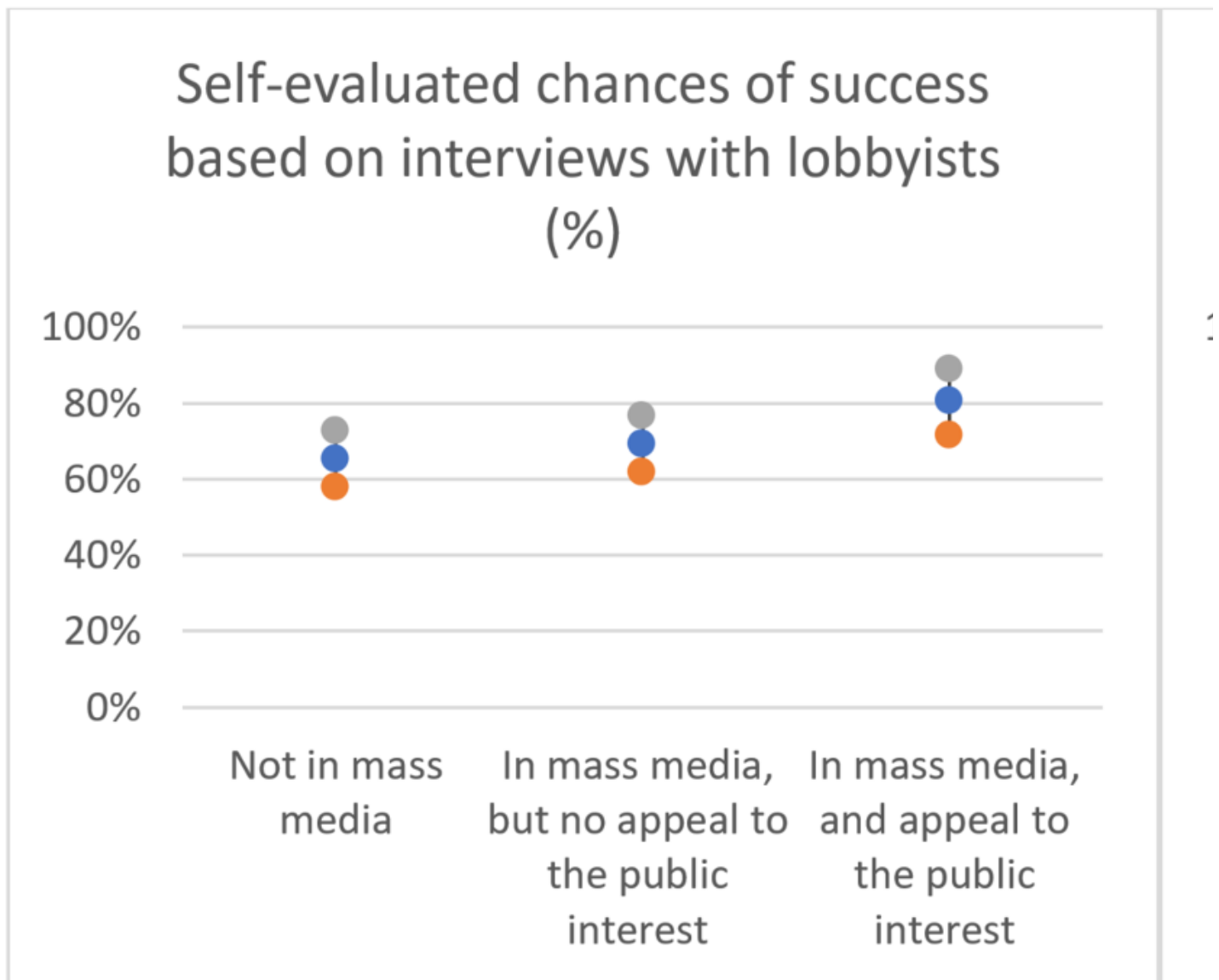
Before lobby groups can present themselves as the people's protectors in the mass media, journalists first need to include the groups' claims in news stories. Journalists seem to have, however, no decisive impact on interest groups' influence via the mass media. The data in my study shows that the impact of public interest frames on lobbying success is mostly triggered by lobbying strategies geared at attracting media attention. Lobby groups that develop a full-fledged publicly oriented strategy (organising press conferences, media campaigns, protest events, etc.) and manage to appeal to public interests in the news, will see their policy success improved.

This beneficial effect does not hold true for lobbyists who never actively sought media attention themselves, but nevertheless ended up in media debates. The positive effect of public interest frames are thus mostly a result of lobbyists' strategies, rather than journalistic routines and selection processes. At the same time, journalists should always be critical when lobbyists present their own goals as beneficial to the greater good and whether or not such a statement is relevant to their news story.

## The quest for the Holy Grail

What is unique about my analysis is that I adopt two different measures of lobbying success: one based on interviews with lobbyists and the other based on interviews with spokespersons of the European Commission. Both measures are shown in the figure below.

## Figure: Lobbying success and participation in media debates



**Note:** For more information, see the author's accompanying [journal article](#).

The figure shows the predicted chances of lobbying success for groups that did and did not appeal to public interests in the news. Both measures support the research findings. Public affairs practitioners and academics face many hurdles in estimating political influence. Measuring political influence is much like a quest for the Holy Grail. But by combining different measures of success, we can arrive at reliable, evidence-based estimates. Incorporating complementary measures should be the next golden standard in studies on political influence as such measures can capture how successful lobbyists perceive themselves, but also how successful others perceive them to be.

Finally, my findings indicate that a lobby group's resources and the types of constituencies it represents are not consequential for success. What matters are the strategies lobbyists develop and how these fit in the overall public affairs context. Of course, developing a sophisticated lobbying strategy takes resources and expertise. But how resources are spent is more important than the resources themselves. For instance, in debates over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), it was not the more resourceful business corporations which prevailed, but the civil society groups that were able to articulate a pervasive signal of public support.

These findings are important in evaluating the EU's vulnerability to non-democratic forms of political influence and biases towards the corporate world. The findings point to a potential loophole in EU democratic decision making: lobbyists may cloak their self-interests and impact EU policy by falsely presenting themselves as the people's voice. We need more research to clarify whether lobbyists who present their goals in the media as being aligned with public interests are genuinely representing the views of the broader public. At the same time, citizens, journalists and politicians should remain vigilant of lobbyists who portray their goals as being in the public interest.

**For more information, see the author's accompanying journal article in [Political Communication](#). The data used in the study are the result of a large-scale [collaborative research project](#), funded by the [European Science Foundation](#).**

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [© European Union 2017 – European Parliament \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)*

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## About the author



**Iskander De Bruycker** – *University of Antwerp*

[Iskander De Bruycker](#) is a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Antwerp. He has previously been affiliated with the European University Institute in Florence, the University of Aarhus and the University of Amsterdam. His research activities lie in the fields of European public policy, political communication and interest group politics, and he teaches classes on European integration, EU public affairs, interest group politics and research methods.