

Big money buys influence in Brussels. Or does it?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*In Brussels, big corporations can buy influence – and the VW emissions scandal proved it. Or at least that's the received opinion about lobbying. But **Bas Redert** looks at the relative success of big and small lobbyists and finds that public opinion, not the size of their budgets, is the salient factor when it comes to influencing EU and Commission policy. Because of this, interest groups may be more democratic than they first appear.*



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Lobbyists have a bad reputation. If you ask ordinary people their opinion on lobbying, they invariably say that industries and big companies have too much power. Most assume that the corporate world, with its big financial resources, can 'buy' European policies.

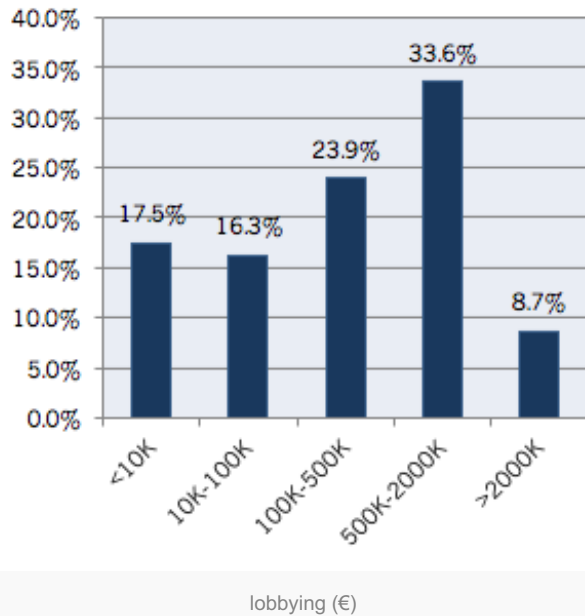
'Dieselgate', the Volkswagen emission violation scandal, painfully bore out this assumption. In September 2015 the United States Environmental Protection Agency found that some VW vehicles possessed software that could detect test situations, and change the level of CO2 emissions accordingly. One of the reasons this could happen, according to MEP Bas Eickhout, is the significant influence the German car industry has on the European decision-making process, with Volkswagen alone having an annual lobbying budget of €2.8m. The German car lobby was able to stall negotiations about new and better types of emission tests for about seven years.

Examples like these stir up the discussion about the impact lobby groups have on the EU's democratic credentials. Interest groups constantly try to influence the democratic process by inserting themselves into the debate, bypassing the public's voice. Of course, citizens can organise themselves to do the same, but companies and industries with big wallets seem to overrule these initiatives. At least, that is what popular notions about lobbying tells us.

In [my research](#) I demonstrate that money and staffing levels do not make interest groups more successful. Public opinion, on the other hand, turns out to be very important. Whether public opinion opposes or supports an interest group can break or make its lobbying strategy. This is particularly crucial in dossiers with a high public salience, meaning that European citizens are involved and informed regularly via (social) media. In highly salient dossiers, politicians are extra sensitive to the opinions of voters. After all, politicians want to reassure their constituents that

they are acting in their best interests. In this way, public opinion makes itself felt in the opinions of politicians.

Figure 1: Distribution of proportion of financial resources spent on



In my research, I focused on the [General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\)](#), an extensive dossier on the protection of personal data. This piece of legislation is seen as an essential step towards the strengthening of citizens' fundamental rights in the digital age and the facilitation of business by simplifying rules for companies in the EU. Furthermore, the regulation eliminates the fragmentation of laws on personal data across European member states and administrative burdens that constrain businesses. I compared the initial plans of the European Commission, described in the [Comprehensive Approach \(COM\(2010\)609 final\)](#), with the final [proposal of the Commission \(COM/2012/011 final\)](#). These two documents differ as a result of a public consultation, meaning that the Commission asked for input of stakeholders in the form of position papers. Comparing the 120 written position papers to the final proposal resulted in an overview of the successes of interest

groups. After the successes were determined, various factors – like annual budgets and the number of full time jobs (FTE) – were mapped.

The identification and categorisation of the different interest groups give a good insight of the arena of the GDPR.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the distribution of the financial resources and manpower. Looking at Figure 1, one can conclude that a rather large portion of interest groups have low to moderate resources, ranging from less than €10,000 to €500,000. Of course, a number of interest groups, including Facebook and Google, had enormous budgets of over €2m. But they amount to a mere 8.7 percent of the total sample. A remarkable finding emerges when looking at the total FTE of involved interest groups. A rather large group of stakeholders spend 0.2 of their FTE on lobbying activities – meaning that in a five-day working week, a single employee can spend a full day on these activities. Furthermore, a fifth of interest groups have small 'armies' of lobbyists, ranging from 6 to more than 40 FTE. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the success rates of the lobby groups. Out of all the stakeholders, about two thirds had a positive score, meaning that their tactics worked or were more or less successful.

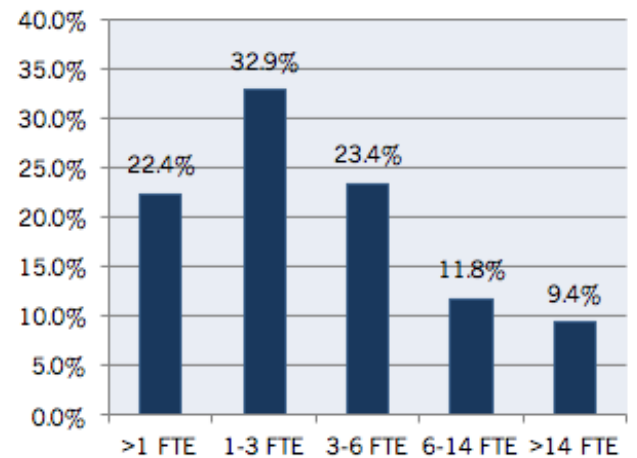
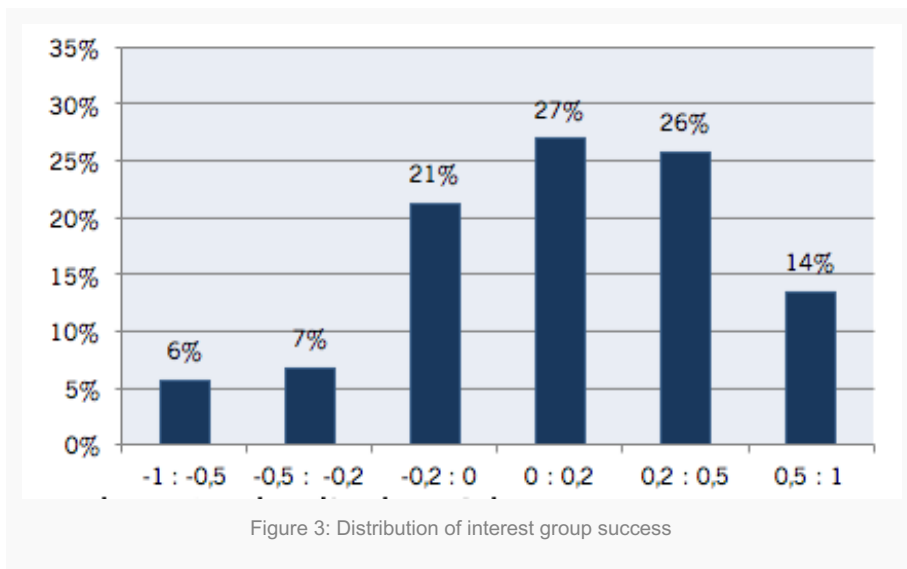


Figure 2: Distribution of proportion of time spent on lobbying (FTE)

The best-off interest groups did not have more success. On the contrary, a rather big portion of successful interest groups had only small budgets and limited staff time.

This does not mean that the size of a lobbyist's budget makes no difference. When I shared these results with various interest groups, they pointed out the Janus-like nature of financial resources. Although money cannot 'buy' policy, interest groups with sufficiently large budgets can simply lobby more and do so more easily. They can, for example, rent an office in Brussels, which increases their visibility and accessibility to politicians. Moreover, they can commission studies by well-known research institutions, adding more legitimacy to their case when they try to influence politicians and policymakers.



Yet the better-off groups are not necessarily more successful. For example, the European Privacy Association (EPA) – which lobbied for broader and deeper data protection for individuals in the EU – and the European Federation of Associations of Market Research Organisations (EFAMRO), which lobbied for the protection of anonymous data, were more successful than the large industries. Many of these small NGOs made their voices heard without expensive extras and were victorious in the end, all because of extensive media coverage and attentive politicians.

What does this mean for lobbying in general? It mainly shows that interest groups might be more democratic than one would expect at first glance. As long as interest groups can make their voices heard without the help of a big budget, lobbying can be a healthy part of the democratic process. So, instead of operating solely behind closed doors, lobby groups have to step into the light and face the European people.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

Bas Redert is studying for an MSc in Political Science at Antwerp University. His master's thesis analyses the use of lobbying strategies by the City of London in the context of Brexit.

