

# The contextual nature of lobbying: Explaining lobbying success in the European Union

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## Abstract

Why are some interest groups able to lobby political decisions successfully whereas others are not? This article suggests that the issue context is an important source of variation because it can facilitate or hamper the ability of interest groups to lobby decision-makers successfully. In order to test the effect of issue characteristics, this article draws on a new, unprecedented data set of interest group lobbying in the European Union. Using quantitative text analysis to analyse Commission consultations, this article studies lobbying success across 2696 interest groups and 56 policy issues. The findings indicate that lobbying success indeed varies with the issue context, depending on the relative size of lobbying coalitions and the salience of policy issues, whereas individual group characteristics do not exhibit any systematic effect.

## Keywords

European Union, influence and success, interest groups, lobbying, lobbying coalitions, quantitative text analysis, salience, Wordfish

## Introduction

The major objective of interest groups is to influence political decisions. Interest groups engage in lobbying decision-makers in order to achieve policy outcomes that are close to their ideal points. However, not all interest groups are successful in their lobbying attempts. Whereas some groups manage to feed their ideas into the policy-making process, others fail to have an impact on the design of legislative acts. What is more, the same interest groups can be successful in influencing

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decision-makers on one given policy issue, but fail to do so concerning another legislative initiative. For instance, Warleigh (2000) showed that environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were successful in shaping the outcome of the legislative debate on the Auto Oil package adopted in 1998 that set fuel quality and vehicle emission standards to reduce air pollution. By contrast, Klüver (2009) demonstrated that environmental NGOs largely failed to influence the legislative proposal on the reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from passenger cars adopted in 2007. How can this be explained? Why do some interest groups win whereas others lose and, even more puzzling, why do the same interest groups successfully lobby some legislative debates while failing to influence others?

Despite the central importance that is attached to interest group lobbying with regard to policy-making processes, we still know little about the factors that explain what makes an interest group a winner or a loser. In order to explain lobbying success, scholars have largely focused on the characteristics of individual interest groups such as actor type and resource endowment (for example, Austen-Smith, 1993; Dür and de Bièvre, 2007a; Hall and Deardorff, 2006; Olson, 1965). In terms of actor type, it has been reasoned that interest groups representing diffuse interests find it much more difficult to lobby decision-makers successfully than do interest groups representing concentrated interests. The empirical evidence is, however, inconclusive; whereas Dür and de Bièvre (2007a) find that diffuse interests largely fail in shifting policy outcomes to their ideal points, Pollack (1997) comes to the opposite conclusion – that diffuse interests are in fact quite successful in their lobbying efforts. With regard to resources, it has been argued that interest groups with a large resource endowment should find it much easier to succeed in their lobbying activities than interest groups that are only poorly equipped with resources. However, the empirical evidence concerning this hypothesis is also mixed: whereas Eising (2007) and Klüver (2010) find a positive association between resource endowment and interest group access to the European institutions, Baumgartner et al. (2009) question the seemingly simple story.

Recent literature therefore points to the issue context as an important source of variation in lobbying success (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Mahoney, 2007, 2008; Smith, 2000). It has been argued that the ability of interest groups to shape policy outcomes can be explained to a large extent by the characteristics of the policy issue at stake. Policy issues differ considerably in a variety of features that create an environment that can be favourable, but also unfavourable, for interest groups. Thus, groups that lobby decision-makers in a favourable issue context should find it much easier to succeed in their lobbying activities than interest groups that are confronted with a disadvantageous issue environment.

In line with this new body of literature, I argue that lobbying success systematically varies with the issue context. Bringing together explanatory factors suggested by several scholars, I hypothesize more specifically that the relative size of lobbying coalitions, the salience, the complexity and the degree of conflict largely shape the ability of interest groups to succeed in shifting policy outcomes towards their ideal points (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Dür, 2008a; Dür and de Bièvre, 2007b;

Mahoney, 2007; Smith, 2000). Going beyond previous literature, I additionally argue that the effect of salience is not constant, but that it is moderated by the relative size of lobbying coalitions understood as a group of actors fighting for the same policy objective (Baumgartner et al., 2009: 6). If interest groups belong to the relatively larger coalition, salience is expected to have a positive effect, whereas it is expected to have a negative effect if interest groups belong to the relatively smaller coalition. This has important implications because we cannot simply focus on the individual characteristics of the policy issues, but instead have to consider the interaction between different issue characteristics. This relationship has so far been overlooked in the study of interest group politics.

Despite the increasing attention that is paid to the importance of issue characteristics, there are hardly any empirical studies that test the effect of issue features on the ability of interest groups to lobby decision-makers successfully. Previous studies have mostly relied on process-tracing, which limited their focus to one or just a few policy issues (Dür and de Bièvre, 2007a; Dür and de Bièvre, 2007b; Woll, 2007). The issue context was therefore largely held constant, so that the effect of issue features could not be tested in the vast majority of interest group studies. An important exception is the work by Mahoney (2007), who has presented the most elaborate study investigating the effect of issue characteristics on lobbying success in the European Union (EU) so far. However, her empirical results have to be treated with caution because she does not take into account the clustering of interest groups into policy issues, so that predictors may seem to have a significant effect even though they do not (Steenbergen and Jones, 2002: 219–20).

By drawing on a new measurement approach to lobbying success that uses quantitative text analysis to analyse Commission consultations, this article aims to overcome the shortcomings of the literature by drawing on a unique and unprecedented data set on the lobbying activities of interest groups in the EU. Using multilevel modelling to take into account the hierarchical structure of lobbying data so far largely ignored in interest group research, this article systematically tests the effect of issue characteristics on lobbying success across 56 policy issues and 2696 interest groups. This study hereby concentrates on the policy formulation phase, and thus interest group influence on a policy proposal of the European Commission is analysed. Since the Commission's proposal is the basis for further debate between the Council and the European Parliament (EP), it is more difficult for the other institutions to modify than to accept the policy proposal, and the policy formulation phase is therefore the most fertile stage to exert influence (Austen-Smith, 1993: 813; Bouwen, 2009: 25; Thomson et al., 2006: 14–15).

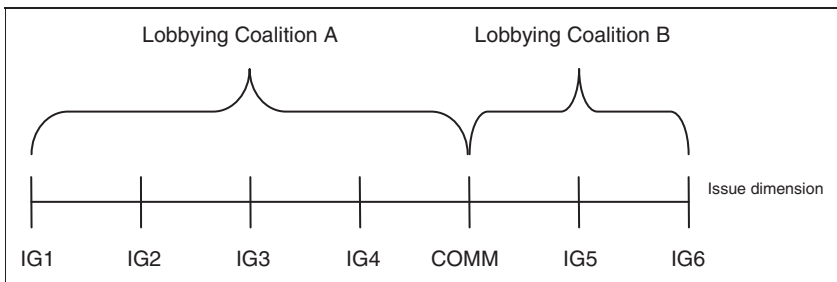
## **Lobbying in context: The effect of issue characteristics on lobbying success**

Every policy issue is distinct: policy issues differ extensively in a variety of characteristics such as the attention they raise among the public, their complexity and the conflict they cause among stakeholders. Some issues might be highly technical and

only few interest groups might lobby policy-makers, so that the decision-making process might be largely isolated from public scrutiny. However, other issues might be of interest to a large number of interest groups and public attention might be extremely high, so that it is difficult for decision-makers to listen to the demands of interest groups that oppose public opinion. Hence, lobbying does not take place in a vacuum, but interest groups are embedded in a complex environment within which they have to interact. The characteristics of the policy issue at hand considerably affect their ability to succeed in their lobbying attempts. The issue context defines the environment in which interest groups compete for influence, and it can facilitate or hamper their ability to lobby decision-makers successfully. In order to understand why interest groups sometimes win and sometimes lose, it is therefore important to take into account the characteristics of the policy issue at hand. I expect that the following issue-related factors in particular play an important role in understanding lobbying success: the relative size of issue-specific lobbying coalitions, the complexity of policy issues, the salience of policy issues and the degree of conflict over policy issues.

Recent work on lobbying in the United States (US) has identified the size of issue-specific lobbying coalitions, understood as a group of actors trying to achieve the same policy outcome, as an important variable affecting lobbying success (Baumgartner et al., 2009). If we look only at the characteristics of individual interest groups, we ignore the fact that lobbying is a complex collective process: on any given policy issue, a multitude of interest groups are trying to shift the policy output towards their ideal point. Hence, interest groups are not lobbying individually, they are lobbying together (Hula, 1999). Decision-makers are therefore confronted with a plurality of interest groups that are simultaneously trying to pull the policy outcome towards their ideal point. These lobbying coalitions are by definition issue specific since the policy preferences of interest groups on specific policy issues determine whether they are located on the same side of the policy space.

Figure 1 illustrates the concept of lobbying coalitions. Six interest groups as well as the European Commission are represented in a unidimensional policy space. The crucial reference point for the identification of lobbying coalitions is the



**Figure 1.** Lobbying coalitions.  
 Note: IG: interest group; COMM: Commission.

Commission position. All groups located on the left side of the Commission position (IG1, IG2, IG3, IG4) pull the European Commission towards the left side of the policy space and therefore form lobbying coalition A. By contrast, all interest groups located on the right side of the Commission position (IG5, IG6) pull the Commission towards the right side of the policy scale and therefore form lobbying coalition B. I thus assume that all interest groups placed on the same side of the initial Commission position form a lobbying coalition that advocates a common policy objective. Correspondingly, I do not expect that IG5 would engage in a lobbying coalition with IG4 in order to oppose the lobbying efforts of the other interest groups that hold more extreme positions. Hence, I do not consider the possibility of counteractive lobbying in which interest groups from both sides of the policy space deliberately build a lobbying coalition in order to counteract the lobbying efforts of others (Austen-Smith and Wright, 1994).

I argue that the probability of interest groups succeeding in their lobbying attempts is considerably affected by the relative size of these lobbying coalitions. If a large number of interest groups pushes for the same policy objective and only a marginal number of groups lobbies for the opposite, decision-makers most likely listen to the larger number of groups. In the example illustrated in Figure 1, it is therefore more likely that interest groups that belong to lobbying coalition A will succeed in their lobbying attempts since lobbying coalition A is larger than its opposing coalition B. Thus, the likelihood that interest groups successfully lobby policy-making increases with the number of interest groups that are fighting for the same policy goal. It does not matter whether these groups formally cooperate by exchanging information or coordinating strategies. As long as they have the same policy objective, they push the legislator into the same direction and can thus be considered as one lobbying team. However, what is decisive is not the absolute number of interest groups forming one coalition, but the size of a lobbying coalition relative to its opposing coalition on any given issue.

**H1:** The probability of lobbying success of an interest group increases with the relative size of the lobbying coalition that an interest group belongs to.

Another prominent hypothesis in interest group research is that lobbying success varies according to the complexity of policy issues (Dür, 2008a; Dür and de Bièvre, 2007b; Smith, 2000; Woll, 2007). Complexity denotes the degree to which a given policy problem is difficult to analyse, understand or solve. Policy-making is a very challenging task and decision-makers increasingly lack sufficient information about the impact of specific policy measures. Legislators are therefore gathering external information by widely consulting among interest groups to compensate for their lack of information (Bouwen, 2009: 22; Majone, 1996: 72–4). Hence, decision-makers demand information from private actors and, by supplying this information, interest groups are able to influence the outcome of policy-making processes. However, the need for external expertise varies depending on the policy proposal: some proposals may be highly technical and difficult to understand whereas other issues are of a

relatively simple nature and therefore easily comprehensible. If policy proposals are highly complex, the need for external expert knowledge is very high and legislators are particularly open to an exchange with interest groups. However, if a policy issue is of a very simple nature, the decision-maker's demand for information should be very low and interest groups should find it more difficult to lobby policy-making successfully. The probability of successfully lobbying legislators should accordingly be particularly high if policy proposals are very complex because, in those cases, policy-makers are highly dependent on external information.

**H2:** The probability of lobbying success of an interest group increases with the complexity of policy issues.

The salience of policy issues is the attention that issues raise among interest groups.<sup>1</sup> Policy issues attract a varying amount of attention. Some issues are of interest only to a highly specialized and well-circumscribed sector. However, other policy issues may attract an enormous amount of attention among several interest groups. If policy issues are salient, a wide variety of interest groups will be working on these issues, such as business groups, trade unions and NGOs. Following Mahoney (2007), I argue that salience has an important impact on the ability of interest groups to lobby policy-making successfully. In contrast to Mahoney (2007), however, I expect that the effect of salience is not constant, but that it is moderated by the relative size of lobbying coalitions. Depending on the relative size of their lobbying coalitions, salience has a positive or negative impact on the probability of interest groups being successful in their lobbying attempts. As I explain in further detail below, policy issues are assumed to be unidimensional, so that two lobbying coalitions are fighting each other on any given issue. Even though the number of interest groups in both coalitions is affected by the overall salience of an issue, it is expected that the larger coalition benefits more than the smaller coalition from additional interest groups active on an issue. On average, interest groups that newly enter a legislative debate would rather join the dominant than the lesser lobbying coalition and thereby increase the relative strength of the dominant coalition. Thus, if interest groups belong to the larger lobbying coalition on a given policy issue, salience is expected to have a positive effect on lobbying success. By contrast, if interest groups belong to the smaller lobbying coalition, an increase in salience is expected to have a negative impact on lobbying success since the number of competitors is on average higher than on issues of low salience. In conclusion, I can formulate the following two conditional hypotheses:

**H3:** (a) The probability of lobbying success of an interest group increases as the salience of a policy issue grows if it belongs to the larger lobbying coalition on a given policy issue.

(b) The probability of lobbying success of an interest group decreases as the salience of a policy issue grows if it belongs to the smaller lobbying coalition on a given policy issue.

However, not only the salience of an issue, but also the degree of conflict over an issue strongly affects the ability of interest groups to lobby policy-making successfully (Mahoney, 2007, 2008; Salisbury et al., 1987). The degree of conflict is represented by the dispersion of actors' policy preferences over an issue. Highly conflictual policy issues create a difficult environment for interest groups. If many groups contest a policy issue, decision-makers are confronted with countervailing forces that attempt to push the policy output in opposing directions. Interest groups should therefore find it very difficult to lobby policy-making successfully because they are fighting against a strong opposition. By contrast, if the majority of interest groups shares the same policy goal, it should be relatively easy for an interest group to be successful in its lobbying attempts because all actors are pushing the legislator in the same direction. It is important to note the difference between salience and the conflictuality of an issue. A policy issue can be highly salient but all actors can have similar policy preferences, so that it is easy for interest groups to shift the policy output towards their ideal point. However, if a policy issue is characterized by a high degree of conflict, actors with opposing policy preferences are trying to push decision-makers in different directions, which makes lobbying success unlikely. Hence, the higher the degree of conflict over an issue, the more opposing interest groups lobby decision-makers and thus the harder it is to shift the policy output in one particular direction.

**H4:** The probability of lobbying success of an interest group decreases with the degree of conflict over a policy issue.

## Research design

In the following, I first explain the operationalization of the dependent variable: lobbying success. I then discuss the selection of policy issues and interest groups before illustrating the measurement of the explanatory and control variables.

### *Measuring lobbying success*

Measuring lobbying success is closely related to the debate on how to measure interest group influence. So far, three different approaches to measuring interest group influence can be identified: process-tracing, assessing attributed influence and gauging the degree of preference attainment (Dür, 2008b). Process-tracing denotes the qualitative assessment of interest group influence that is based on detailed knowledge of a case to uncover the causes that lead to interest group influence (for example, Dür and de Bièvre, 2007b; Woll, 2007). The attributed influence method draws either on the self-evaluation of interest groups or on the assessment of experts to measure interest group influence (for example, Dür and de Bièvre, 2007a; Pappi and Henning, 1999). Finally, the preference attainment approach compares the policy preferences of interest groups with the policy output in order to draw conclusions about the winners and the losers of the decision-making process

(Bailer, 2004; Mahoney, 2007, 2008; Schneider et al., 2007; Selck and Steunenberg, 2004).<sup>2</sup> It therefore measures lobbying success understood as the convergence of policy outcomes with the policy preferences of an actor rather than interest group influence directly.

In order to measure lobbying success, I draw on the preference attainment approach because it offers several advantages over process-tracing and the attributed influence technique. First, the preference attainment approach is not biased by subjective perceptions. Comparing the policy preferences of interest groups with the policy output allows us to objectively assess who was successful in lobbying political decision-makers. This is a major advantage over the attributed influence approach, which uses self-evaluation of interest groups or expert judgement to assess interest group influence and therefore measures *perceived* rather than *actual* influence (Dür, 2008b: 566). Second, the preference attainment approach captures interest group influence that has been exercised through various channels, because influence should by definition be observed in the convergence of the policy outcome with an interest group's ideal point. This is a major advantage over process-tracing, which largely relies on observable interest group activity, so that influence owing to structural power might be overlooked (Dür, 2008b: 564). Finally, the preference attainment method can be applied to a large number of cases, unlike process-tracing which typically focuses on one or just a few policy issues. Process-tracing is therefore not able to test the effect of the issue context as contextual features are held constant. By contrast, the large-scale applicability of the preference attainment approach makes it possible to study the effect of issue characteristics and to draw general conclusions about the determinants of lobbying success.

However, the preference attainment approach also suffers from several problems, namely the black-boxing of the processes through which influence is exercised, alternative explanatory factors accounting for the coincidence between policy output and preferences, and the measurement of policy positions (Dür, 2008b). First, it is not clear through which processes influence is in fact exerted. Interest groups can exert influence through various channels, such as formal or informal contacts with decision-makers, the selection of decision-makers or outside lobbying. However, this article does not intend to investigate whether certain channels are more likely than others to lead to lobbying success. Drawing on a comparison of interest group preferences with the policy output, the aim of this article is to test whether certain issue characteristics have an effect on overall lobbying success, no matter which channel this success was achieved through.

Second, if the policy output converges with the policy preference of an interest group, it does not necessarily mean that the convergence can be attributed to the lobbying activities of this particular interest group. The objectives of interest groups and the policy preferences of decision-makers could, for instance, just coincide and an interest group would then just be lucky (Barry, 1980a, 1980b). Hence, lobbying success can be a result of interest group influence or it can simply be owing to luck. However, being aware of this limitation, this method can still bring us a great deal further in influence measurement: it allows us to determine which interest groups



were successful in shifting the policy proposal towards their ideal point. So, even though one might not be able to identify which particular interest group caused the policy shift, one can determine the degree of *lobbying success* of an interest group (see also, Mahoney, 2007: 37). Studying lobbying success and analysing its causes can therefore provide us with a better understanding of the determinants of interest group influence.

Third, the measurement of policy positions has been a long-standing problem for the preference attainment approach. In order to overcome this problem, I introduced quantitative text analysis to the study of interest group preferences (Klüver, 2009). More specifically, I used the recently developed quantitative text analysis technique *Wordfish* to extract policy positions from texts (Proksch and Slapin, 2008; Slapin and Proksch, 2008). Drawing on the relative frequency of words and based on the assumption that words are distributed according to a Poisson distribution, *Wordfish* estimates the policy position of texts on a unidimensional policy scale. This should not constitute a problem for the analysis because the structure of conflict over a policy proposal is largely unidimensional. Once a draft proposal is on the table, the general outline of the legislative initiative is defined. Interest groups therefore operate within a clear framework in which they attempt to make the final legislative proposal even more aggressive or to dilute it.<sup>4</sup> This unidimensional structure of conflict is empirically supported by the findings of Baumgartner et al. (2009: 7), who discovered that two lobbying coalitions were in opposition to each other on the same policy dimension on most of the 98 policy issues they studied in the United States.

I extracted the policy positions of interest groups from their submissions in online consultations by the European Commission (Klüver, 2009). Based on a consultation paper that sets out the preliminary Commission position, interest groups have the opportunity to submit comments during an eight-week consultation period before the final policy proposal is decided upon. Even though it is possible that these submissions reflect 'strategic' rather than 'true' policy positions, this should not be problematic because it is plausible to assume that there is no systematic variation in strategically over- or understating preferences across all interest groups, so that the revealed policy position can be taken as a proxy for the true policy position. Being aware that there are other channels for exerting influence, most interest groups trying to influence the proposal should be covered by the analysis since online consultations constitute the easiest form of access, and a wide variety of actors indeed participate in online consultations (Quittkat, 2011).

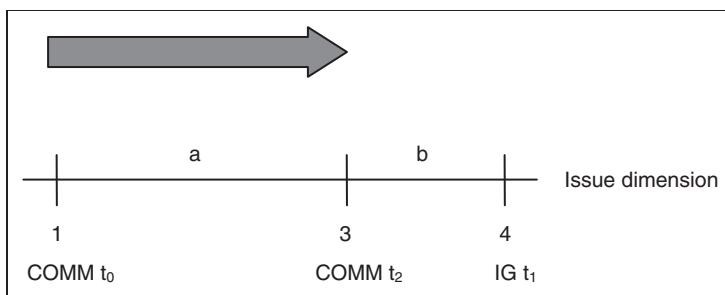
The Commission position before the consultation was extracted from the consultation paper and the Commission position after the consultation, as reflected in the final policy proposal, was extracted from a summary of the proposal issued by the EP.<sup>3</sup> Since the measurement of Commission positions is crucial for the operationalization of lobbying success, several types of documents were tested for the *Wordfish* analysis of the Commission preferences. Based on an in-depth case study of one single policy issue, as well as a comparison of policy positions across all 56 policy issues, it turned out that the summary of the policy proposal issued by the EP

provides the most accurate policy position measurement. Since it is important that documents that are analysed with *Wordfish* have similar text corpora, I compared the vocabulary used in the interest group texts and in the Commission texts. On average, 91.62 percent of the words that are used in the Commission texts also appear in the interest group documents, so that the two document types can be easily compared.

In order to employ *Wordfish*, the documents had to be preprocessed. The texts were converted into plain text (*txt*) files and, using a *PHP* computer script, symbols were removed, UK and US spellings were unified and all words were transformed to lowercase. In addition, I manually removed all contact details, interest group names and their self-descriptions, as well as all word-by-word citations of the Commission texts. Using the computer programme *jfreq* (Lowe, 2009), stop words, numbers and currencies were eliminated and the words were stemmed (reduced to their root) before producing 56 issue-specific word frequency matrices required as input for the *Wordfish* analysis. Finally, all stems that were mentioned in only 15 percent or less of the texts per policy issue were removed from the word frequency matrices, as recommended by Proksch and Slapin (2009).

I tested the validity of the *Wordfish* analysis in two steps. I first conducted a case study in which I compared the policy position estimates obtained by *Wordfish* with policy position estimates obtained by manual hand-coding and *Wordscores* (Klüver, 2009). The results correlate highly and therefore largely cross-validate each other. In a second step, I cross-checked the *Wordfish* estimation with information about the opponents and the cooperation partners of interest groups gathered by a survey among the interest groups. If the *Wordfish* estimation is correct, the cooperation partners should be located on the same side of the European Commission's initial policy position whereas the opponents should be located on the opposing side. Out of 347 cases in which opponents and cooperation partners were reported, 79.54 percent were estimated correctly, which strongly supports the validity of the *Wordfish* measurement.

Since identification in *Wordfish* is guaranteed by setting the mean of all policy positions to 0 and the standard deviation to 1, the total variance of policy positions is



**Figure 2.** Success measurement.

Note: IG: interest group; COMM: Commission.

fixed, so that absolute distances cannot be compared across different issues. I circumvented this problem by using a dichotomous success coding. In line with the preference attainment approach, lobbying success is measured by assessing whether the distance between the policy position of interest groups and that of the Commission is smaller at  $t_2$  than at  $t_1$ . Following this approach, the interest group in Figure 2 would be considered successful since  $b$  is smaller than  $a + b$ . Interest groups are thus coded as successful if the final policy proposal (COMM  $t_2$ ) is closer to their ideal point than the preliminary draft proposal (COMM  $t_0$ ).

### *Interest groups and policy issues*

In order to examine the effect of the issue context on lobbying success, this study analyses a large number of policy issues from different policy fields. The selection of policy issues is based on five criteria. First, I selected only policy issues that fall within the scope of the first EU pillar, which consists of most common policies where decisions are taken by the community method involving the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament. Second, in order to control for the impact of policy proposals, I focused on general binding legislation and therefore only directives and regulations were selected. Third, in order to control for the mode of decision-making, I chose proposals that are subject to the Codecision or Consultation procedure, since these are the most important legislative procedures in the EU. Fourth, I selected proposals that were adopted between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2008. Finally, the sample includes only legislative proposals that were preceded by a non-standardized publicly accessible consultation, which offers two major advantages: first, the Commission consults only on major policy initiatives (European Commission, 2002) and one can therefore focus on policy issues that are politically important (see also Thomson et al., 2006); second, consultations guarantee the availability of textual data for the measurement of lobbying success.

Using the EU database *Prelex*, I identified 70 policy proposals that meet the above-mentioned selection criteria. However, not all of these could be used for the analysis. I excluded two policy issues where fewer than 10 submissions were received during the consultations because these issues hardly raised any response or controversy among interest groups and since the reliability of *Wordfish* estimates is relatively low for such a small number of texts (Proksch and Slapin, 2009). Furthermore, six policy proposals had to be excluded because the Commission did not release any prior position paper and five policy issues had to be excluded for other reasons.<sup>5</sup> Thus, 57 policy proposals remain for the analysis. One of the issues, the policy proposal on 'Registration, Evaluation, and Authorization of Chemicals' (REACH), elicited about 6000 submissions. Since the analysis of this single issue would have consumed more resources than all the other 56 issues together, it was excluded from the analysis. Hence, the empirical analysis is based on 56 policy issues.

The selected sample is composed of a wide variety of policy issues from different policy areas. It contains 13 policy proposals directed by Directorate-General (DG) Enterprise and Industry, 9 proposals prepared by DG Environment and by

DG Energy and Transport, 6 proposals developed by DG Internal Market and by DG Health and Consumer protection, 5 initiatives directed by DG Justice, Freedom and Security, 4 proposals elaborated by DG Information Society and Media, 2 by DG Agriculture and Rural Development and 1 each prepared by DG Competition and by DG Taxation. For instance, one environmental initiative is the Commission proposal for a regulation on setting emission performance standards for new passenger cars, and one initiative prepared by DG Internal Market is the Commission proposal for a directive on payment services.

The European Commission received 4871 submissions from a wide variety of stakeholders during the consultations preceding the adoption of the 56 proposals. I follow the interest group definition of Beyers, Eising and Maloney (2008: 1106–9), who enumerate three properties of interest groups: they must have an organization, they must pursue a political interest and they do not seek public office or compete in elections. Drawing on this definition, I concentrated on associations (2643) and companies (775) because they are the only actors that fulfil all three criteria. In addition, they are the most active lobbying actors at the European level and they also constitute the biggest groups participating in online consultations (Quitkat, 2011; Wonka et al., 2010). Since quantitative text analysis works only with texts in the same language and with a minimum number of words, non-English submissions and submissions with fewer than 100 words were furthermore excluded, so that 2696 documents remain for the analysis. The interest group sample includes a wide variety of actors such as companies, business associations, professional associations, trade unions and NGOs and I therefore go beyond the usual focus on one specific group type.

### *Operationalization of explanatory and control variables*

Explanatory variables have been operationalized as follows. The *relative size of lobbying coalitions* was measured by dividing the number of interest groups left and right of the initial Commission position by the total number of interest groups lobbying on an issue. Because this is a relative measure, the values for relative coalition size of both lobbying coalitions working on the same issue always adds up to 100, which has to be taken into account when interpreting the regression coefficients in the data analysis. The *complexity* of a policy issue was measured relying on three indicators: the number of words, the number of recitals and the number of articles in a policy proposal (Franchino, 2000; Kaeding, 2006; Steunenbergh and Kaeding, 2009). In order to arrive at one single measure for complexity, I conducted a principal component factor analysis and used factor scores to measure complexity.<sup>6</sup> The *salience* of policy issues was measured by the number of submissions received during the online consultation preceding the adoption of the policy proposal. The degree of *conflict* was measured by dividing the number of interest groups forming the smaller lobbying coalition by the number of interest groups constituting the bigger coalition on an issue. This measure ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 indicating no conflict at all and 1 indicating maximum conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Based on previous interest group and legislative politics research, I included several control variables at the issue and the interest group level (for example, Bernhagen et al., 2009; Dür, 2008a; Dür and de Bièvre, 2007b; Mahoney, 2007; Schneider et al., 2010; Thomson et al., 2006). At the issue level, I controlled for member state support and the existence of a European-level status quo. In order to test whether member states might have influenced the content of the policy proposal, I tested for *member state support*. In addition to the 2696 consultation submissions by interest groups, I therefore also extracted preferences from 506 comments that were submitted by member states. I measured member state support by the number of member states supporting the policy objective of each lobbying coalition weighted by their voting power in the Council in relation to the opposing coalition on any given issue. The existence of a *European-level status quo* was coded according to information gathered from the Prelex and EurLex databases.

At the interest group level, I controlled for the type of actor and the resources at the disposal of interest groups. *Actor type* was coded based on information gathered on interest group websites and on information provided in consultation submissions. I classified interest groups as companies, sectional groups or cause groups. Sectional groups represent a section of society such as farmers or chemical corporations and their membership is usually limited to that section (Stewart, 1958: 25). Cause groups, by contrast, represent individuals that pursue a common belief or principle, and anyone in favour of the principle can become a member of this group (Stewart, 1958: 25). *Resources* were operationalized by the number of employees of an interest group that are concerned with lobbying. This variable was measured on a five-point ordinal scale drawing on a web survey that I conducted among all the interest groups that participated in the consultations. The survey was launched in June 2009 and it

**Table 1.** Summary statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
<b>Dependent variable</b>					
Lobbying success	2696	Successful: 52.30%		Not successful: 47.70%	
<b>Explanatory variables</b>					
Complexity	56	0.000	1.000	-0.962	3.154
Relative size of lobbying coalitions	107	51.993	25.604	6.670	100.000
Saliency	56	86.982	55.205	14.000	307.000
Conflict	56	0.433	0.289	0.000	0.971
<b>Control variables</b>					
Member state support	107	50.467	35.800	0.000	100.00
Existence of EU status quo	56	Yes: 67.86%		No: 32.14%	
Actor type	2696	Companies: 24.22%, Sectional: 55.68%, Cause: 20.10%			
Resources	1024	1.766	1.104	1.000	5.000

was online until January 2010. The response rate was 38.67 percent. Table 1 presents summary statistics of all variables in the analysis. Note that issue characteristics can vary only across the 56 policy issues whereas relative coalition size and member state support vary with the number of lobbying coalitions.

## Data analysis

In this section, I test the specified hypotheses based on the collected data. I proceed in three steps. I first present the results of the multilevel analysis testing the hypothesized relationships. In order to demonstrate the findings in a more reader-friendly manner, I then illustrate the detected effects drawing on simulated predicted probabilities and first differences. Finally, I further examine the nature of the coalition effects.

### *Multilevel analysis*

In order to test the theoretical expectations, the hierarchical structure of the data has to be taken into account, which has so far largely been overlooked in studies of interest group lobbying. Interest groups that lobby decision-makers on the same policy issues are subject to the same contextual characteristics and are therefore not completely independent as is assumed by ordinary regression analysis. Ignoring the clustering of the data may result in deflated standard errors and inflated type I error rates, so that predictors seem to have a significant effect even though they do not (Steenbergen and Jones, 2002: 219–20). I therefore draw on multilevel modelling to analyse the data by distinguishing between the interest group (first) level and the issue (second) level. I present random intercept models that allow for variation of the intercept across the 56 policy issues. Because the dependent variable is of a binary nature, I estimate multilevel logistic regression models. I proceed in two steps. I first examine the hypothesized relationships while controlling for other variables located at the issue level. Since none of these variables includes any missing values, I can perform the analysis for the entire 2696 interest groups. In the second step, I test the robustness of the results by additionally controlling for interest group characteristics, which reduces the sample to 1024 interest groups owing to missing values caused by survey non-response.

Table 2 presents the results of the multilevel analysis. The models in column 1 and column 3 analyse the main effects of the explanatory variables while controlling for issue and interest group characteristics. Contrary to the theoretical expectations, complexity and conflictuality of policy issues do not have a statistically significant effect on lobbying success in any of the model specifications. Thus, lobbying success during the policy formulation stage does not vary systematically with the complexity or the degree of conflict of policy issues. However, the relative size of lobbying coalitions has a statistically significant positive effect on lobbying success. More specifically, if the relative size of a lobbying coalition *A* increases by one unit, which at the same time implies a one unit decrease in the size of its opposing lobbying

**Table 2.** Multilevel logistic regression results

Variables	M1	M2	M3	M4
<b>Fixed effects</b>				
<i>Explanatory variables</i>				
Complexity	1.084 (0.226)	1.189 (0.241)	1.136 (0.234)	1.234 (0.254)
Relative size of lobbying coalition	1.037*** (0.004)	0.967*** (0.007)	1.035*** (0.006)	0.973** (0.011)
Salience	1.001 (0.004)	0.959*** (0.006)	1.000 (0.004)	0.964*** (0.007)
Conflict	2.271 (1.740)	1.570 (1.172)	2.013 (1.589)	1.406 (1.114)
Salience * Relative size of lobbying coalition		1.001*** (0.000)		1.001*** (0.000)
<i>Control variables: issue level</i>				
Member state support	1.003 (0.002)	1.004** (0.002)	1.003 (0.003)	1.005 (0.003)
Existence of EU status quo	0.876 (0.396)	0.860 (0.376)	1.014 (0.465)	0.999 (0.454)
<i>Control variables: interest group level</i>				
Actor type: Sectional groups			1.234 (0.294)	1.175 (0.282)
Actor type: Cause groups			1.038 (0.294)	0.883 (0.254)
Resources			0.995 (0.069)	1.026 (0.073)
<b>Random effects</b>				
Issue-level variance	2.057	1.920	1.787	1.769
<b>Model fit</b>				
N / Issues	2696 / 56	2696 / 56	1024 / 56	1024 / 56
Log likelihood	-1532	-1478	-592	-573
AIC	3081	2974	1206	1170
BIC	3128	3027	1260	1229
LR test Prob > $\chi^2$	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Notes: \*\*\* $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \* $p \leq 0.10$ . Coefficients represent odds ratios, standard errors in parentheses. Sectional and cause groups are compared to with companies. The reference model for the likelihood ratio test is the empty model for models M1 and M3 and the model left of the model in question for models M2 and M4. Likelihood ratio test vs. logistic regression Prob >  $\chi^2 = 0.000$ .

coalition B, the chance of interest groups belonging to lobbying coalition A of successfully lobbying policy formulation increases on average by 3.7 percent in model 1 or 3.5 percent in model 3. The three measures of model fit – the Akaike information criterion (AIC), the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) and the likelihood ratio test – accordingly indicate a considerable increase in model fit as compared with the empty model.<sup>8</sup> Two examples illustrate the importance of lobbying coalitions. First, anti-smoking NGOs were able to successfully shape the content of the legislative proposal for a directive on excise duty applied to manufactured tobacco because they were part of a large lobbying coalition consisting of anti-smoking groups, health NGOs and medical associations. By contrast, three NGOs advocating legislative measures to enhance the safety of pedestrians and cyclists were faced with an extensive coalition of automobile manufacturers from Europe, Asia and the US that opposed the introduction of further safety measures. Against this extensive opposition, these NGOs were not able to influence the Commission proposal for a regulation on pedestrian protection.

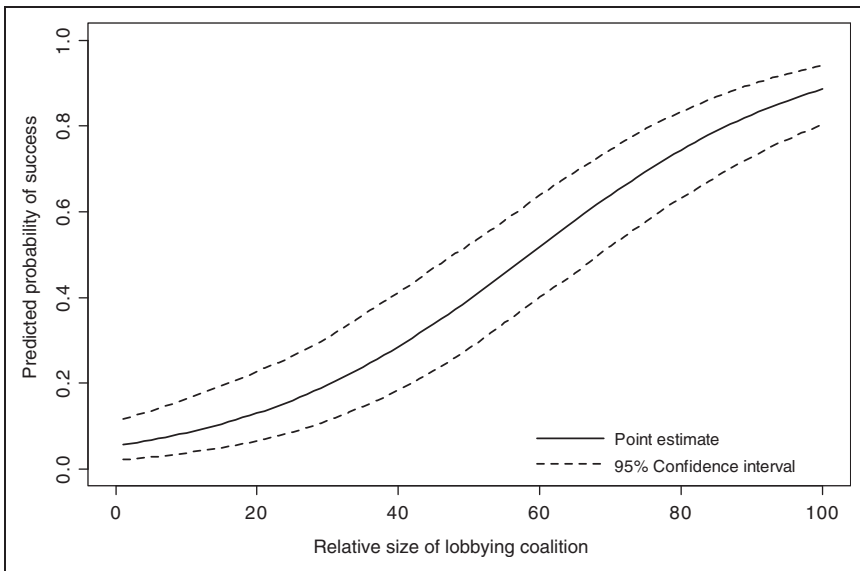
In order to test whether the effect of salience on lobbying success varies with the relative size of lobbying coalitions, as suggested by hypothesis 3, I included an interaction between salience and coalition size in models 2 and 4 that allows this hypothesis to be empirically evaluated. The multilevel analysis confirms that there is indeed a statistically significant interaction between salience and the relative size of lobbying coalitions. The AIC, the BIC and the likelihood ratio test correspondingly indicate that the inclusion of the interaction effect has considerably improved the fit of the model. In model 2, member state support also has a statistically significant positive effect on lobbying success. Thus, the probability of successfully lobbying the European Commission increases with the number of member states supporting the lobbying objective of an interest group. However, even though member state support increases the probability of lobbying success, the relative size of lobbying coalitions still has a statistically significant positive effect, which indicates that interest group lobbying has an impact on policy formulation independent of member state support.

### *Illustrating the effects*

In order to further illustrate the effect of relative coalition size on lobbying success, I simulated predicted probabilities and first differences (King et al., 2000). Figure 3 displays the predicted probabilities of lobbying success as the relative size of lobbying coalitions changes from its minimum (0) to its maximum value (100) while holding all other variables constant. The solid line represents the point estimate of the predicted probability and the dashed lines indicate the 95 percent confidence interval. The probability of successfully lobbying the development of the policy proposal steadily increases with a rise in the relative size of lobbying coalitions.

I then simulated first differences to demonstrate how the probability of lobbying success changes when the relative size of lobbying coalitions is altered while holding other variables constant. Table 3 shows the differences in relative coalition size in the first column and the associated estimated difference in the lobbying success





**Figure 3.** The effect of the relative size of lobbying coalitions.

**Table 3.** First differences: the effect of the relative size of lobbying coalitions

Change: Coalition size	Change: Success probability	95% Confidence Interval	
0–25%	0.107	0.067	0.158
25–50%	0.237	0.181	0.298
50–75%	0.299	0.228	0.366
75–100%	0.191	0.136	0.244

Notes: Only relative size of lobbying coalitions is changed; all other variables are held constant.

probability in column 2, together with the 95 percent confidence interval in column 3. For instance, a rise in relative coalition size from 0 to 25 increases the probability of its member groups successfully lobbying policy formulation on average by 10.7 percentage points. Similarly, when comparing two lobbying coalitions where the relative size of lobbying coalition A is 25 and the relative size of lobbying coalition C is 50, the probability of interest groups that belong to coalition C successfully shaping the content of the policy proposal is approximately 23.7 percentage points higher than the probability for groups belonging to coalition A.

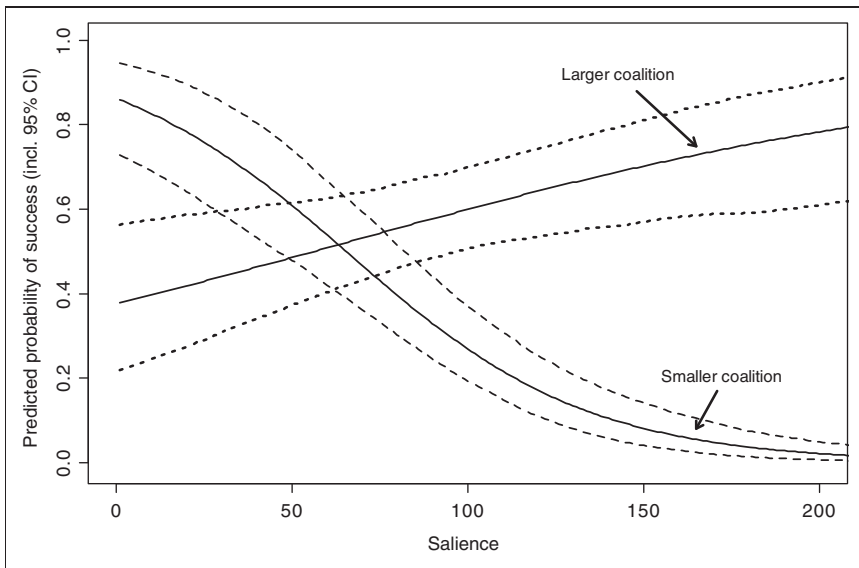
The findings suggest that lobbying success cannot be understood by solely looking at individual group characteristics. Whereas neither actor type nor the resources of individual interest groups have a statistically significant effect on lobbying success, the relative size of lobbying coalitions has a robust positive effect. Thus, in order to understand what makes an interest group a winner or a loser, we cannot simply refer to group characteristics, but we have to acknowledge the issue-specific grouping of

interest groups into a lobbying coalition. More specifically, we have to take into account the aggregated efforts of likeminded interest groups that are fight for the same policy objective on any given policy issue.

In order to illustrate the interaction between salience and the relative size of lobbying coalitions, I divided the sample of interest groups according to the relative size of their lobbying coalition into groups that belong to the larger coalition and into groups that belong to the relatively smaller coalition on a given issue. I then simulated predicted probabilities of lobbying success as salience increases for the two interest group subsamples (see Figure 4). The solid lines represent the point estimates of the predicted probabilities and the dashed lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. The figure demonstrates that there is indeed a differential effect of salience on lobbying success. If interest groups are a member of the relatively smaller coalition on a given policy issue, the probability of successfully lobbying policy formulation decreases as the salience of a policy issue increases. By contrast, if interest groups belong to the larger lobbying coalition, the probability of successfully lobbying the European Commission in fact increases with the degree of salience. Thus, the effect of salience is not constant for all interest groups, but depends on the relative size of their lobbying coalition.

### *The nature of coalition effects*

I have so far demonstrated that interest groups whose lobbying efforts are supported by a large number of other interest groups find it much easier to successfully lobby decision-makers than do interest groups that are not accompanied by likeminded companions. There are two possible explanations for this effect: it could be the sum of the lobbying efforts of all groups forming a coalition that matters, or it could simply be one or a few strong groups within the coalition that are largely responsible for the policy shift. In order to test whether the coalition effect is solely driven by few strong groups whereas others are simply lucky to share their policy goals, I took a sample from the data set that includes only the strongest groups on each of the 56 policy issues in terms of their resources, which has often been taken as a measure of an interest group's strength (for an overview, see Dür, 2008a; Dür and de Bièvre, 2007b). By analysing these groups separately we should find a systematic association between lobbying success and the resource endowment of interest groups if the coalition effect is truly only driven by these strong groups.<sup>9</sup> Table 4 presents the results of a multilevel regression analysing the effect of resource endowment on lobbying success for the 10, 15, 20 and 25 percent strongest groups. None of these models provides any empirical support for the explanation that only a few strong groups within these lobbying coalitions drive the positive coalition effects because there is no statistically significant effect of resources in any of these models. Thus, the positive effect of relative coalition size cannot simply be attributed to the few strong groups within these coalitions. Lobbying success is therefore not determined by a few very powerful groups, but lobbying is indeed a collective enterprise in which the aggregated efforts of coalitions of likeminded groups have a considerable impact on policy-making.



**Figure 4.** The effect of salience depending on relative coalition size.

**Table 4.** Multilevel analysis focusing on the strongest interest groups

Variables	10% strongest	15% strongest	20% strongest	25% strongest
<b>Fixed effects</b>				
Resources	0.978 (0.189)	0.899 (0.150)	0.968 (0.131)	0.924 (0.110)
<b>Random effects</b>				
Issue-level variance	0.638	1.093	0.962	1.635
<b>Model fit</b>				
N / Issues	185 / 56	276 / 56	337 / 56	460 / 56
Log likelihood	-126	-181	-222	-292
AIC	259	369	451	590
BIC	268	380	462	602
LR test Prob > $\chi^2$	0.907	0.516	0.810	0.507

Notes: \*\*\* $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \* $p \leq 0.10$ . Coefficients represent odds ratios, standard errors in parentheses. The reference models for the likelihood ratio tests are the empty models.

## Conclusion

This article has studied the effect of issue characteristics on the lobbying success of interest groups. Although recent literature has stressed the importance of the issue context for understanding variation in lobbying success, empirical studies testing these suggested contextual effects have been lacking owing to methodological

difficulties in measuring lobbying success. Drawing on a new measurement approach that uses quantitative text analysis to analyse consultations by the European Commission, this article aimed at overcoming the shortcomings of the literature by providing a large-*N* analysis of the effect of issue characteristics on lobbying success in the European Union. This new measurement approach constitutes an important methodological innovation because it paves the way for the large-scale study of interest group policy preferences and the impact of interest group lobbying on the policy process.

The empirical analysis has confirmed that the issue context indeed accounts for variation in lobbying success. The findings suggest that lobbying has to be considered as a collective enterprise rather than as an individual endeavour. Interest groups that are located on the same side of the policy space are fighting for the same goal and therefore push decision-makers in the same direction. They can thus be regarded as one lobbying team whose aggregated efforts are decisive for the achievement of the common policy objective. In order to understand why interest groups sometimes succeed and sometimes fail in their lobbying attempts, it is therefore not sufficient to simply pay attention to individual group characteristics. Decision-makers are confronted with a wide variety of interest groups that simultaneously try to affect policy decisions. The likelihood that they will succeed in these attempts depends to a considerable extent on the strength of a coalition of interest groups that is fighting for the same policy goal. Thus, in order to understand why some interest groups win and others lose, one has to take into account the issue-specific grouping of interest groups into lobbying coalitions.

In addition, this article has demonstrated that the salience of policy issues matters for the lobbying success of interest groups. However, in contrast to previous arguments made in the literature, it has been demonstrated that salience does not have a constant effect, but has a differential effect depending on the relative size of lobbying coalitions. Salience has a negative effect if interest groups are members of a lobbying coalition that is smaller than the opposing coalition working on the same policy issue. By contrast, salience has a positive effect if interest groups belong to the larger coalition on a policy issue. This has important implications for the lobbying strategies of interest groups. As several scholars have shown, interest groups deliberately attempt to increase the salience of a policy issue in order to gather additional supporters for their cause and therefore increase their chances of successfully lobbying the outcome of political decision-making processes (Kollman, 1998). However, the empirical analysis in this article indicates that this strategy is promising only for interest groups that belong to the dominant lobbying coalition on a given policy issue. Interest groups belonging to the inferior coalition on average in fact decrease their chance of successfully lobbying policy outcomes.

## Notes

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1. Being aware that issue salience can also be triggered by interest group activity (Kollman, 1998), salience is conceptualized as an exogenous variable for the purpose of this study (see also Mahoney, 2007, 2008).
2. The policy output in this study is the policy proposal officially adopted by the European Commission.
3. These summaries can be downloaded from the EP Legislative Observatory database at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/>.
4. I thank an anonymous reviewer for clarifying the unidimensional structure of conflict.
5. One regulation was excluded because it constitutes a mere recodification of already existing legislation. One directive and one regulation were excluded because they only implement an already signed international convention into European law. Two further issues had to be excluded because the consultation was based not on one but on several consultation papers, so that it was not possible to determine one single policy dimension as required by the quantitative text analysis.
6. The factor analysis retained only one factor according to the Kaiser criterion, which suggests keeping only those factors with Eigenvalues equal to or higher than 1. This factor accounts for 83.6 percent of the variance and the factor loadings are all above 0.88.
7. Even though the measures for salience, relative size of lobbying coalitions and degree of conflict were constructed based on the number of submissions and the number of interest groups within the two opposing lobbying coalitions on a given issue, I could not detect any evidence of multicollinearity of these variables as all variance inflation factors are below 1.71 (see, for example, Fox, 1997: 337–66).
8. Models with smaller AIC and BIC should be preferred over models with larger AIC and BIC. Whereas the log likelihood can simply be improved by adding a new predictor to the model, the AIC and BIC penalize the addition of new predictors to the model, with the BIC being more conservative than the AIC (Gelman and Hill, 2007: 524–5).
9. This effect cannot be detected if the entire data set is analysed because weak interest groups would cancel out the positive effect of resource endowment since they also succeed in their lobbying attempts when sharing the policy objective of strong groups despite their low amount of resources.

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