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Blessing or curse for advocacy?

How news media attention helps advocacy groups to achieve their policy goals

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Abstract. This article asks whether and under what circumstances a presence in news media debates helps advocacy groups to achieve their policy goals in EU legislative politics. Common wisdom holds that lobbyists eschew the public spotlight and prefer to influence policymaking from behind the scenes. This perception contrasts with the literature on media and interest groups which typically conceives of media attention as a crucial commodity for interest groups to influence policy decisions. This paper unites these seemingly contrasting stances by arguing that media attention can be both a blessing and a curse for advocacy. The central argument posited is that media attention may improve *or* reduce advocacy groups' chances of preference attainment depending on how advocacy groups frame their message in the news. The analyses draw from interviews with over 200 policy practitioners and content analysis of 3,557 media statements connected to a sample of 125 EU policy proposals. The findings demonstrate that an advocacy group's media presence may improve preference attainment, but only when the advocacy group manages to frame its objectives in the news as aligned with the public interest.

Keywords. Interest groups, media & politics, European Union politics, framing

I. Introduction

Media attention can be a crucial commodity for advocacy groups that wish to have their voices heard. The literatures on interest groups and political public relations widely acknowledge the value of media attention as a weapon of advocacy to impact political decision making (Binderkrantz et al., 2017; Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2011). The presumption that media presence matters for political influence has led to a number of empirical studies on interest groups' access to media coverage (Andrews and Caren, 2010; Binderkrantz, 2012; Danielian and Page, 1994; De Bruycker and Beyers, 2015; Thrall, 2006). Despite the attainment of important insights about which interest groups succeed in passing the media gates, no study to date has empirically addressed whether interested groups that receive media attention are also more likely to achieve their policy goals.

The image of news media attention as a blessing for advocacy stands in contrast with the common wisdom that lobbyists prefer to work behind the scenes and outside the purview of public scrutiny (Dür and Mateo, 2013; Hanegraaff et al., 2016; Milbrath, 1960). Indeed, some recent studies have argued that media attention can constrain interest-group influence, particularly for business interests (Dür and Mateo, 2014; Culpepper, 2010). While the news media can provide a platform upon which advocacy groups can draw attention to themselves, media presence can backfire, for instance when advocacy groups are scandalized or receive negative coverage (Danielian and Page, 1994). Drawing from these two seemingly contrasting perspectives, this paper argues that media attention can be both a blessing and a curse for advocacy groups, depending on the conditions under which they receive media attention. Identifying these conditions is the purpose of this study, which asks under which circumstances media attention constrains or facilitates interest groups in achieving their policy goals.

Identifying these circumstances aids in understanding the role of the news media and public scrutiny in advocacy processes. Former studies have identified a bias in media coverage

toward business interests and well-endowed organizations (Andrews and Caren, 2010; Binderkrantz et al., 2017; Danielian and Page, 1994; Thrall, 2006). More insights into the relationships between media attention and preference attainment help in evaluating the normative implications of these biases and their consequences for policy outputs. This study analyses how communication strategies and news media visibility impact power relationships and thus speaks to core themes in political communication research (Entman, 1993; Lasswell, 1950). This study aims at applying key concepts and insights from the political communication literature to the study of interest group politics. It expands knowledge on framing and media effects from the realms of party politics and public opinion to interest group research (see de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003; Halahan, 2011).

As a research case, this study focuses on EU legislative lobbying. In past decades, the EU has become increasingly politicized and salient in national electoral debates (Hutter and Grande, 2014; Hooghe and Marks, 2009). In contrast to other (national) political arenas, the EU is said to lack a coherent public sphere, a situation reinforced by its trans-national nature and complex decision-making procedures (Meyer, 1999). This situation could lead to the conclusion that EU legislative politics classifies as a least likely case for studying the impact of media attention on advocacy processes. Nonetheless, other scholars have highlighted the role of the news media as a crucial forum for connecting different EU policymakers, stakeholders, and citizens, precisely because the EU lacks alternative structural fora allowing for interaction and exchange (Koopmans, 2007; Trenz, 2004). Moreover, previous studies have demonstrated that advocacy groups are prominently present in media debates on EU legislative policymaking and make intensive use of media-oriented lobbying strategies (Chalmers, 2013; Dür and Mateo, 2013; Kriesi et al., 2007). All of this indicates that media attention for EU advocacy processes is highly relevant.

The analyses draw on datasets that were established in the context of the INTEREURO project. The study relies on 238 semi-structured interviews with advocacy groups and European Commission (EC) officials as well as an extensive content analysis of media articles from six European outlets. The results demonstrate that media attention can be a blessing for preference attainment, but only if an interest group manages to frame its main message in the news as being aligned with the public interest.

II. Media attention, pressure politics and expanded audiences

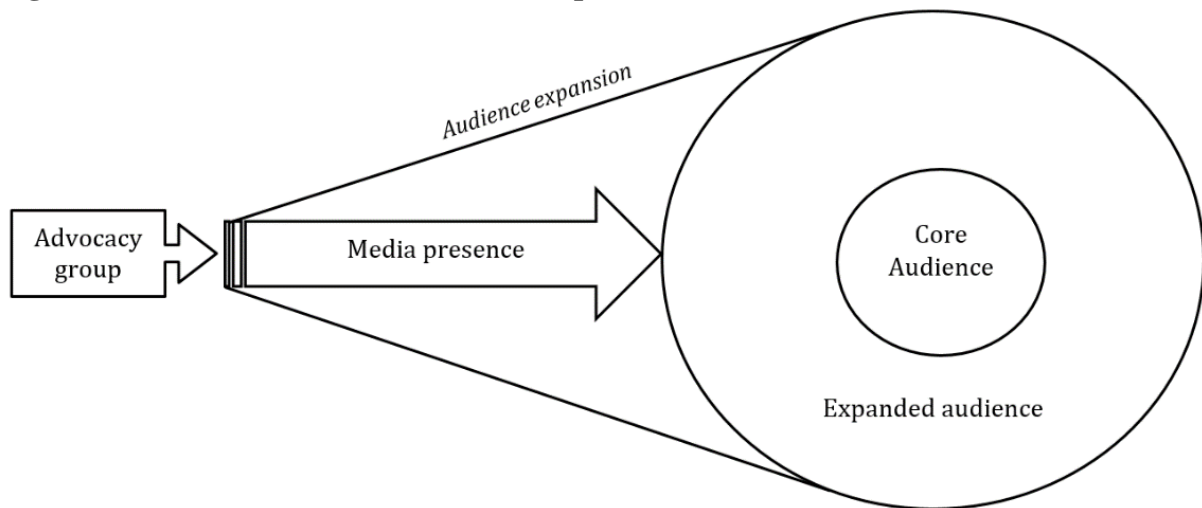
This paper's main objective lies in connecting media attention with preference attainment. Preference attainment is defined as the degree to which interest organizations succeed in achieving their policy goals on a specific issue (Bernhagen et al., 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2017; Mahoney, 2008). Media attention is conceptualized as the presence of an interest organization in the news media coverage on a specific issue. Seeking media attention is seen as part of an outside lobbying strategy geared at pressuring policymakers (Kollman, 1998; Tresch and Fischer, 2015; Schattschneider, 1960). The news media are a highly appropriate venue in which to direct the attention of policymakers and other relevant stakeholders and provide information about the expected political support (Beyers, 2004; Hanegraaff et al., 2016; Kollmann 1998). Not complying with broadly endorsed demands includes the risk of losing legitimacy or suffering electoral damage. Therefore, policymakers might submit to advocacy demands when they perceive these demands as broadly endorsed (Bentley, 1995; Kollmann 1998). The media provide a forum in which to signal the size and scope of support and opposition to elites or reframe an issue (Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2011; Halahan 1999). As such, gaining media attention is invaluable for advocacy groups that seek to impact policy outcomes.

Some advocacy groups may not actively or intentionally seek media attention but may appear in media debates nevertheless. Journalists are incentivized to include stakeholders that are not yet present in public debates in an effort to provide balanced coverage (Donsbach and

Klett, 1993; Entman, 2007; Hopmann et al., 2012). Consequently, some lobby groups may unintentionally be drawn into media debates, for instance, to react to opponents that receive much attention, or when journalists confront advocacy groups with accusations from opponents. Under these circumstances, interested organizations may end up participating in media debates without having a direct policy incentive or the political leverage to pressure policymakers.

Moreover, not all interest groups are able to acquire access to news media debates, even if they want to. Journalists and news editors will select the media claims from interest groups which comply with news values (such as conflict, power, unexpectedness and proximity) and which fit their own editorial goals and journalistic routines (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; Van Aelst et al., 2008). As a result, some interest groups will have a competitive advantage over others in passing the media gates. For instance the protests, demonstrations, and other such activities which civil society often exercise are particularly apt to draw media attention as they comply with the journalistic interest upon the conflictual (Danielian and Page, 1994: 1060). While groups may develop some 'media savvy' to comply with news values and routines, it will still involve a substantial investment to acquire the necessary in-house journalistic expertise. As such, mostly affluent organizations manage to secure access to news media debates (Thrall, 2006). This paper will be able to assess whether biased media access as observed in previous studies (Andrews and Caren, 2010; Binderkrantz, 2012; Danielian and Page, 1994; Thrall, 2006) exacerbates in biased preference attainment.

Figure 1. Media attention and audience expansion



To explain the role of media presence for preference attainment, I assume that media attention leads to an expansion of the audiences advocacy groups can address. This logic is visually illustrated in Figure 1. In this function, the news media serve as a megaphone for advocacy groups that enables them to communicate to a broader array and a more diverse range of stakeholders, elites and citizens. Audience expansion implies that the message of an advocacy group reaches beyond its core audience of directly involved parties toward a wider set of stakeholders, non-expert elites, and the broader public. Audience expansion comes with both opportunities and threats. On the one hand, a presence in the news media can amplify the political support an interest group seeks to convey via outside lobbying (Froehlich and Rüdiger, 2006). The causal mechanism here, is not that the public is persuaded by interest groups' media claims per se, but rather that an advocacy group's signal of support is perceived by policymakers as broadly approved. It is more difficult for policymakers to neglect widely endorsed demands if they are openly articulated in the news. Therefore, the advocacy camp that manages to (rhetorically) connect its own goals and interests with those of the expanded audience, increases the political leverage of its policy demands and consequently increases the chances of realizing its policy goals (Hallahan, 1999, p. 207; 2011). On the other hand, the political signals of groups whose objectives seemingly contrast with the interests of the

expanded audience will more easily be recognized by policymakers as peripheral. Those groups will therefore see their political leverage diminished and would fare better by remaining completely under the radar of public scrutiny.

Audience expansion also has consequences for the relationship between advocacy groups and their constituents. When participating in media debates, an advocacy group's constituencies or benefactors can more easily monitor the organizations' activities (Vliegthart et al., 2005). They can evaluate whether their interests are addressed and actively promoted in the media. The increased scrutiny of constituents may constrain advocacy organizations as they should not only anticipate the consequences of their media presence on preference attainment, but also its impact on the relationship with constituencies (Hanegraaff et al., 2016; Streeck and Schmitter, 1981). The media tactics of advocacy groups will therefore always involve a balancing act between satisfying constituents on the one hand and maximizing impact on policy outcomes on the other hand.

III. Hypotheses

When lobbying behind the scenes, advocacy groups relate to a narrow set of policy elites, and lobbying efforts can be meticulously targeted to a single person (Beyers, 2004). When entering the media realm, in contrast, advocacy groups engage with a much broader audience. Other stakeholders, citizens, and a wider range of (non-expert) elites are exposed to the groups' claims (Kollman, 1998; Tresch and Fischer, 2015). The signal of pressure an advocacy group articulates in the media will be perceived by policymakers as more credible and as widely endorsed when the interests of the advocacy group are aligned with the interests of the expanded audience. In the following I argue that this alignment with the broader public is signaled by the (1) substantive interests and goals an advocacy group represents, but also by (2) how these interests are framed in the news.

First, business groups that represent a narrow or specific interest face greater risk when they participate in media debates (Kollman, 1998; Smith, 2000). Their specific interests may contrast with the interests of the broader public and the media are often skeptical towards their cause. The lobbying scandals that make it to the news headlines mostly involve business lobbyists who bribe or corrupt EU elites. Business interests are less likely to seek out media attention and often defend particularistic or economic interests that do not lend themselves for public advocacy (Culpepper, 2010; Dür and Mateo, 2013; Hanegraaff et al., 2016). Civil society groups, in contrast, often have a broad support base among citizens and represent diffuse constituencies and therefore have an advantage over business lobbyists when participating in media debates (Binderkrantz & Krøyer, 2012; Rasmussen et al., 2017). Consequently, business groups can more easily become subject to critique in media debates and policy elites are more likely to recognize their position as peripheral. Media attention can amplify the limited political support business organizations receive. Therefore, these groups fare better by staying outside of the public spotlight and concentrate their efforts on direct lobbying strategies (Culpepper, 2010).

H1: A presence in media debates facilitates preference attainment for civil society groups, while it hinders preference attainment for business lobby groups.

Second, substantive interests are also subject to interpretation and can be communicated through strategic framing (Klüver et al., 2015; Boräng and Naurin, 2015; De Bruycker 2017a). An advocacy group may pursue economic or specific interests, but it can still try to *frame* its objectives as aligned with those of the expanded audience (Baumgartner and Mahoney, 2008; Hallahan, 1999). Framing is defined as a process in which an advocacy group selects some aspects of a perceived reality and makes them more salient in a communicating message, in such a way as to promote their particular problem definition (de Vreese, 2005; Entman, 1993). On the one hand, framing is a strategic and deliberative process, while on the other hand,

political actors are bound by the interests they represent and their policy context when framing an issue in a particular way (De Bruycker 2017a; Klüver et al., 2015; Cacciatore et al., 2016).

Strategic media framing is a crucial aspect of an advocacy group's political public relations and can determine the outcome of an outside lobbying strategy (Hallahan, 1999; Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2011). An important condition for successful outside lobbying is that the advocacy group enjoys the support of the expanded audience (Kollman, 1998; Froehlich and Rüdiger, 2006). Advocacy groups can garner support by establishing "common frames of reference" with the expanded audience (Hallahan, 1999, p. 207). To resonate with the broader public, frames need to reflect the values and norms of society and seek to advance various publics' interests (Hallahan, 1999). When engaging in outside lobbying strategies, an advocacy group can frame its goals as aligned with the public interest, so that it can signal to policymakers that its goals enjoy broad endorsement. When gaining access to media debates, an organization's audience expands, and the organization cannot justify or defend its position solely by referring to its own self-interest. Rather, the organization should relate to the interests of citizens or broad and diffuse constituencies (Naurin, 2007; Schattschneider, 1960). When an advocacy group manages to frame its demands in the news as aligned with the public interest, policymakers will more easily perceive these demands as widely supported, which will benefit the advocacy groups' chances of preference attainment.

H2: Media presence will facilitate an advocacy group in achieving its policy goals if the advocacy group manages to frame its objectives as aligned with the public interest.

A public interest frame pertains to the welfare or well-being of a broad and diffuse collection of individual citizens for a specific policy. It is broader than the interests of parties, minority groups, territorial entities, or any other well-delineated or formalized group of citizens. It refers to a diffuse array of individual citizens or the general public, such as

“taxpayers,” “the people”, “the public”, “consumers,” or European citizens in general (De Bruycker, 2017b; Boräng and Naurin, 2015; Naurin, 2007). While addressing public interests in the news can help an organization to realize its policy objectives, it will not always benefit the relationship with constituents. When advocacy organizations promote public interests while neglecting its core beliefs and unique identity, members or supporters may feel forsaken (Heaney, 2004). Lobbyists that address the wider public on the basis of openly self-seeking claims alone may satisfy constituents, but will not enjoy the sympathy of the broader public (Naurin, 2007; Schattschneider, 1960). Framing in the news is thus a balancing act between addressing the interests of the broader public on the one hand, while staying true to the specific goals and concerns of constituents on the other hand.

Importantly, the eventual framing of a statement in the news is not only the result of an advocacy strategy; it is also shaped by journalists and news editors through selection and editing processes (Tresch and Fischer, 2015). Advocacy groups can thus try to frame their interests as aligned with the public, but they can never fully control the statements that end up in the newspapers (Froehlich and Rüdiger, 2006). It is therefore crucial to control for whether the frames which advocacy groups articulated in the news media are a result of the outside lobbying strategies that they developed or a rephrasing of journalists to make the story more newsworthy.

Research Design

The data used to test these hypotheses are part of a larger project on EU legislative lobbying. The goal of this project is to analyze lobbying strategies and interest-group influence for a sample of 125 European legislative proposals (directives and regulations) that were submitted between 2008 and 2010 (see online appendix). The sample procedure is equivalent to the procedure Thomson (2011) used in his research on EU legislative politics. Details about the

precise procedure are described elsewhere (Beyers et al., 2014a; Beyers et al., 2014b). In this paper, I draw on evidence collected through 143 interviews with 111 different interest organizations active on one of the 125 sampled proposals. Interviews were not conducted for all 125 sampled proposals. Forty proposals were dropped because a systematic analysis of EU-level media, interviews conducted with EC experts and a range of brief telephone interviews demonstrated that these cases did not stimulate lobbying activity. Seven proposals were not included in the analysis because no interest groups could be convinced to participate in an interview or no one within the contacted organization remembered enough about the specific proposal.

As described elsewhere, the main goal was to interview EU-level interest organizations on each side of the issues identified for the legislative proposals (Beyers et al., 2014a). Of the 111 interviewed interest organizations, 86 percent were EU-level interest organizations. In cases in which no EU-level organizations were active, national or international organizations were interviewed. The largest part (64 percent) of the respondents represented business associations; another 29 percent were NGOs; and the remaining 8 percent were officials from professional organizations, firms or labor unions. These numbers correspond to the overall population of interest groups active in EU politics (Wonka et al., 2010).

The analyses rely on two measures of preference attainment. One measure is based on the judgement of the interviewed EC-officials and the other is based on the self-perception of the interviewed lobbyists. The first measure of preference attainment, based on the judgement of EC-officials, was developed by Bernhagen et al. (2014). This measure is based on 95 interviews with EC officials and was measured at the issue level: issues are specific aspects of a legislative proposal in which stakeholders adopted conflicting positions and disagreed on the preferred policy outcome. Based on interviews with interest organizations and EC officials, 292 distinct issues were identified in relation to 78 proposals. The EC officials were asked for

several issues which organized interests sought policy influence. Then, they were asked to position these organizations on a one-dimensional scale vis-à-vis each other by giving them a score ranging from 0 to 100. Next, the EC-official had to situate the initial proposal of the EC, the eventual outcome and the reversion point of the issue on this scale. For this paper, we use the *distance-to-outcome* measure, which presumes that the proximity of an actor's position vis-à-vis the final outcome indicates the extent to which its preferences were achieved. Formally, the preference attainment of actor i with regard to issue j (s_{ij}) equals $s_{ij} = Q - |x_{ij} - O_j|$, where Q is the distance between the minimum and the maximum of the scale, x_{ij} is the position or ideal point of actor i , and O_j is the outcome on the issue.¹ In the analyses, this measure was inverted so that positive values denote higher levels of preference attainment.

For the second preference attainment measure, interest group officials were asked whether the different aspects of a legislative proposal corresponded with their initial preferences.² These answers can be connected to the same issues that were raised in the interviews with EC officials. This measure is more vulnerable to strategic responses by the respondent. Nonetheless, self-perceived measures of preference attainment are commonly used and including this measure provides a useful robustness check to cross-validate the empirical findings (Binderkrantz & Pedersen, 2018; Dür, 2008). As with all other measures of preference attainment, measures of perception or self-assessment come with advantages and drawbacks (Dür, 2008; Pedersen, 2013). Although not all the drawbacks can be avoided, I tried to cope with them as best as possible by triangulating multiple data sources (suggested in Dür, 2008).

¹ Berhagen et al. (2014) propose two alternative measures based on the spatial positioning of interest organizations and policy outcomes by EC officials. From the three proposed measures the distance-to-outcome measure is the most comparable with the measure based on self-assessment (to what extent the outcome is consistent with the initial position of an interest group) and was therefore included in the analysis. In the annex, two models are presented in which the two alternative measures are taken as the dependent variable. The models corroborate the findings presented in the paper.

² With regard to each relevant issue, respondents were asked: To what extent is the outcome on the different issues consistent with your organization's initial preferences? Is this outcome the exact opposite of your initial preferences (1), a long way from your initial preferences (2), close to, but not identical to your initial preferences (3), or identical to your initial preferences (4)?

Using multiple preference attainment measures provides for a unique opportunity to assess the robustness of the findings as well as to understand how different measures of preference attainment (dis)agree.

As an independent variable, I first include whether an interest organization made one or more statements on one of the sampled proposals in one of the six selected media outlets (Agence Europe, Euractiv, European Voice, Financial Times, Le Monde and Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung). A statement is a quote or a paraphrase by an advocacy group linked to a specific issue (see also Koopmans and Statham, 1999). The media outlets were selected because they are known to extensively cover EU-related matters and give an audience to a diverse set of actors active in EU legislative processes. Moreover, these outlets have been studied in former prominent projects on stakeholder representation in the EU (Mahoney, 2008; Thomson, 2011). To account for some national variation, a mix of both national and EU outlets were selected.

A second key independent variable gauges whether an interest organization is a business or civil society organization. This variable was coded by the researcher who interviewed the interest organization. Business organizations represent a certain industry or economic activity and have firms or professionals as members, while civil society groups advocate for certain norms, values or ideals in society and typically have individuals as members or supporters (directly or indirectly via lower level associations). This variable mainly serves to assess H1, but at the same it is an important control variable for assessing H2. Namely, one could argue civil society groups experience more freedom to frame their goals in terms of the public interest and that they more easily gain access to news media debates compared to business groups (Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Danielian and Page, 1994: 1060). The effect of public interest frames should therefore be estimated *ceteris paribus* the group type of the organization.

To measure whether an interest group managed to frame its position in terms of the public interest, the third key independent variable, the statements advocacy groups made in the news were coded based on whether they referred to the interests of a diffuse array of citizens or broad segments of public opinion, such as “citizens,” “consumers,” “the people,” or “taxpayers”. This frame was not coded when a reference was made to specific sub-groups in society such as “transport workers”, “weapon owners” or “refugees”. For instance, one media statement in the dataset that appeals to public interests was made by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Euractiv [29-09-2010] on a directive proposal about the energy performance of buildings [COM (2008) 780]: "Unfortunately there is no provision at all which ensures that laggard member states will improve their building regulations. As a consequence, citizens will continue to spend a lot of money to warm the climate instead of their homes". In the appendix I included a more detailed description of the coding and ten more examples.

To account for alternative explanations, I added a number of control variables which are known to impact preference attainment. First, some advocacy groups actively *push* for media attention, while others are unintentionally *pulled* into media debates by journalists. Evidently, media attention can be expected to be more beneficial to those who actively seek it as part of some outside lobbying strategy. Therefore, I control for the extent interest organizations relied on outside lobbying relative to inside lobbying strategies. Lobbyists were asked in the interviews what percentage of their efforts consisted of activities that were addressed to the public and media and what percentage concerned efforts to gain direct access to policymakers. In the regression analyses, I interact the relative investment in outside lobbying with the use of public interest frames to assess whether this type of framing has value-added for a group’s outside lobbying strategy. Moreover, this interaction allows to distinguish whether the effect of public interest frames is a result of advocacy strategies or rather caused by exogenous factors.

Second, next to highlighting public interests, advocacy groups may address the wider public on the basis of openly self-seeking claims. This may not provoke the sympathy of the wider public, but it informs policymakers of the specific interests at stake. Moreover, this fits in a strategy to satisfy the members as it showcases that their specific interests are advocated for. From the interviewed organizations 30% addressed their constituencies' self-interest in media claims, of which about 50% did not refer to public interests. To clearly delineate the effect of public interest frames from the effect of self-interest frames, the latter is taken as a control variable. Self-seeking claims are claims that refer to the specific members, constituents or supporters of an advocacy group, such as transport workers, the automobile industry, hunters or translators. Third, the endorsement an advocacy group enjoys from other political actors in media debates can be consequential for its political influence. To grasp this endorsement, I use the content analysis of media claims. All articles discussing the 125 sampled legislative proposals in the six abovementioned media outlets were archived and 4,258 statements made by any actor (such as MEPs, European Commission officials, Council executives, firms, journalists, regulatory agencies, etc.) about a specific proposal were identified. For each statement we coded whether the statement sought to (1) support the proposal, (2) shape small parts or (3) change the proposal radically or block it (De Bruycker and Beyers, 2015). To determine the most widely supported position, I rely on the modal position or simply the position that gained the most media prominence. Then, I compared the policy position an advocacy group adopted on an issue with the most popular position on that policy in the media. Based on this method, I established a dummy variable measuring whether the advocacy group aligned with the most popular position in the media (1) or not (0).

Fourth, the frames advocacy groups emphasize in the media can take many different forms. Earlier research in communication studies and social psychology drawing from prospect theory has pointed at the prevailing effects of negative frames over positive frames (Druckman,

2004; Schuck and de Vreese, 2006; de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003). These findings may also be applicable to how advocacy groups frame their message. Namely, negative news frames are more beneficial to achieve preference attainment (De Bruycker 2017a; Baumgartner et al., 2009). Therefore, I controlled for whether advocacy groups emphasized negative frames (emphasizing risks, losses or negative consequences) and/or positive frames (emphasizing opportunities, gains or positive consequences) when appearing in the news.

Fifth, resources, in particular staff resources, are expected to lead to higher levels of media professionalization and to have a positive impact on preference attainment. Gaining access to media debates requires resources, expertise and networks (Thrall, 2006). Affluent advocacy groups can more easily meet the requirements to pass the media gates, as they can hire the necessary journalistic expertise, develop the required networks and implement newsworthy media campaigns. Hence, I take staff size as a control variable (logged because of its skewed distribution) as it may be a confounding factor of media attention. Sixth, earlier research has demonstrated that preference attainment can be explained by the policy position an interest organization adopted. Namely, those interests that seek policy change or that oppose the status quo are less likely to achieve their goals (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Moreover, previous studies have showed that groups that oppose policy initiatives can more easily gain access to news media debates as supportive statements on how good things are less newsworthy than critical and juicy attacks on the policy initiatives taken by policymakers (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2015). Consequently, I control for whether an interest organization supported a proposal (1), sought to shape some parts (2) or sought to block or change most of the proposal (3). Seventh, interest groups could be more or less free to frame their goals along the public interest depending on whether they cooperate with other organizations in an advocacy coalition. An advocacy coalition can send a more encompassing signal of political support than a single organization can. Being part of a coalition may thus be a confounding factor of public

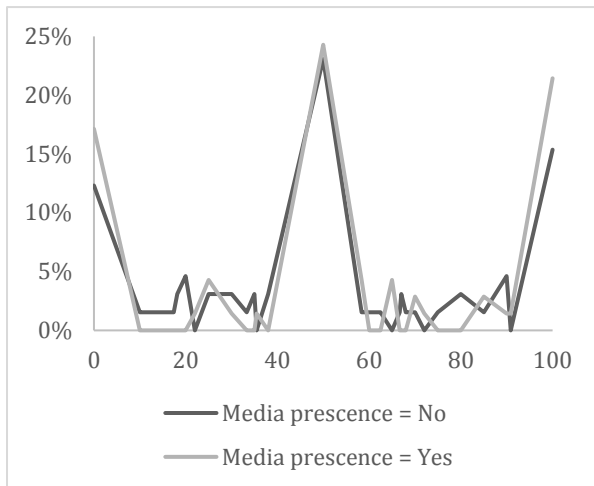
interest framing and is therefore included in the analysis as a control variable. Eight, I controlled for whether the advocacy group is an EU-level organization or not. This because advocacy groups that are specialized in dealing with EU politics and have an EU-wide constituency can be expected to more likely achieve their preferences than national or international organizations. Finally, to avoid having the results of media presence of a single interest group be produced by the overall media salience of the issue on which the group is active, I include the media attention an issue receives as an additional control variable. To estimate the media salience of a legislative proposal, I counted the total number of articles that reported on the 78 proposals in the selected media outlets.

IV. Results

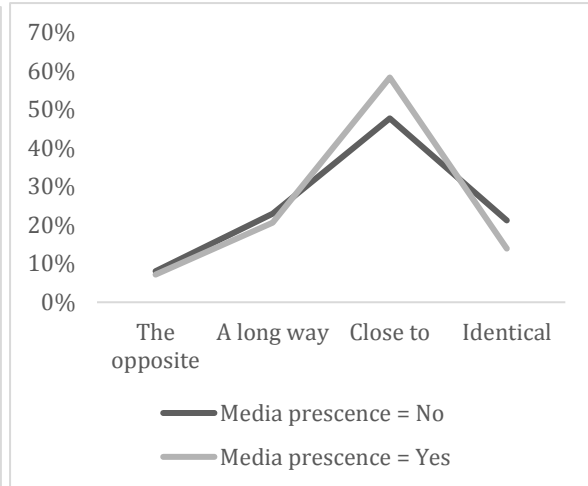
Before presenting the regression analyses, I briefly explore the distribution of the key independent and dependent variables. First, more than half of the interviewed advocacy groups (55 percent) made statements in the selected news outlets, while 45 percent did not. Advocacy groups figure more prominently in EU-level outlets (52 percent) compared to national outlets (9 percent). The dependent variables of the study gauging preference attainment are presented in Figures 1a and 1b. For 135 of the 446 issues (30 percent), I can compare self-perceived preference attainment with the preference attainment the EC-experts attributed to them. Figure 1a presents the proximity-to-outcome measure and Figure 1b the measure based on self-perceived preference attainment. Both figures distinguish between groups that appeared in media debates (black lines) and groups that did not (gray lines).

Figure 2. Media presence and self-perceived preference attainment (left; n=397); proximity to outcome (right; n=135)

(a) proximity to outcome



(b) self-perceived preference attainment



The figures do not show stark differences between groups in- and outside media coverage. This finding is exemplified by the insignificant correlations between media presence and self-perceived preference attainment (Spearman's $Rho=0.02$; $P=0.78$) or media presence and the proximity-to-outcome measure (Pearson's $r=-0.08$; $P=0.36$). The preference attainment distribution of advocacy groups that received media attention is very similar to groups that did not. When looking at the simple bivariate relationship between media presence and preference attainment, media attention is thus neither a blessing nor a curse.³

The two measures of preference attainment portrayed in Figure 2 are positively and significantly related (Spearman's $Rho=0.28$; $P=0.00$). Nonetheless, the measures do not perfectly correspond and show different distributions. One source of inconsistency could be the obtrusive nature of the self-perceived measure. The self-estimation is likely to be more biased by motivated reasoning and strategic considerations. Furthermore, the proximity-to-outcome measure is very demanding for policy experts to produce; they are not always aware

³ Also when relying on other operationalizations of media presence (number of statements, distinguishing between media presence in EU and national outlets, looking at media prominence in the outlets individually), the overall insignificant and/or inconsistent relationship holds true.

of or cannot remember all the advocacy groups involved on an issue. Notwithstanding these important limitations, both measures are positively and significantly related, which indicates that they refer to a similar underlying construct. However, since both variables still differ considerably, I use them in separate models to explain the impact of media presence.

More precisely, I ran one regression model with the proximity-to-outcome measure as the dependent variable and a second model using the self-perceived measure (see Table 1 and 2). Because observations are nested in issues, I estimate a random effect for issues or proposals.⁴ Proximity-to-outcome is modeled with a mixed effects ordinary least squares regression. Self-perceived preference attainment is modeled with an ordered logistic regression. Because the Brant-test demonstrated a violation of the parallel slopes assumption for a model with four ordinal categories, I recoded the ordinal scale by collapsing the first two categories.⁵ More specifically, I model the likelihood that the outcomes were perceived to be ‘close/identical to’, ‘a long way from’ or ‘opposite to’ the advocacy group’s position.

I estimate three models with each of the two preference attainment measures as dependent variables. The first set of models (Model 1 and 4) includes only the main effects of all explanatory and control variables. The second set of models (Model 2 and 5) includes an interaction effect between media presence and group type in order to evaluate H1. The third set of models (Model 3 and 6) includes a three-way interaction among media presence, the public interest frame and outside lobbying.⁶ This positioning permits me to assess whether the

⁴ In the model with self-perceived preference attainment only the inclusion of random effects for proposals (and not issues) lead to a significant improvement of the model fit. In the model based on proximity-to-outcome only the inclusion of random effects for issues (and not proposals) leads to a significant improvement of model fit. Therefore the models with self-perceived preference attainment and proximity to outcome as dependent variables were estimated with random effects for proposals and issues respectively.

⁵ Models in which I recoded the ordinal dependent variable in a different manner (or dichotomous) produce largely similar outcomes, but the parallel odds assumption is violated.

⁶ I am well-aware that coefficients may be unstable and/or inflated when running three-way interactions with small-n samples that also include a number of additional control variables. Since the results of this interaction are consistent across the models with different dependent variables and not significantly affected by the inclusion of different control variables and VIF scores for multicollinearity are satisfactory (<5), I consider the results robust.

hypothesized effect (H2) of public interest frames in the media on preference attainment (reported in Models 2 and 5) is a result of outside lobbying activities of interest groups or the consequence of exogenous factors, such as journalistic selection processes. Namely, if the effect of a public interest frame in the media is contingent on the propensity of interest groups to seek media attention (a significant three-way interaction), then we can assume interest groups can elicit this effect themselves. If the interaction is not significant, this effect is rather a result of factors exogenous to the lobbying strategy.

Table 1 presents the regression analyses with proximity to outcome as the dependent variable and Table 2 the regression analyses with self-perceived preference attainment as the dependent variable. The measures are organized so that positive values indicate higher levels of preference attainment. All models confirm the non-significant relationship between media attention and preference attainment. Also if I would include a continuous measure for media attention in the models this non-significant finding holds true. Advocacy groups are not significantly more or less likely to achieve their policy goals if they figure prominently in the news. While the theoretical discussion did not so much focus on the main effect of media attention, it concentrated more on the conditions under which media attention can benefit or reduce preference attainment. This brings the analysis to assessing the *conditional effects* of media presence on preference attainment.

Table 1. Mixed effects ordinary least squares regression with proximity to outcome (n=116)⁷

		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
		β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Intercept		53.90**	(14.40)	53.50**	(14.76)	57.08**	(14.80)
Media presence	Yes	-2.86	(8.91)	-2.55	(9.18)	-8.64	(11.16)
	No (ref.)						
	Yes	29.19**	(9.11)				
Public interest frame	No (ref.)						
Self-interest frame	Yes	14.95	(7.89)	14.92	(7.90)	15.96*	(7.59)
	No (ref.)						
Negative frame	Yes	1.97	(7.60)	2.17	(7.78)	5.27	(7.57)
	No (ref.)						
Positive frame	Yes	-18.25*	(8.40)	-18.26*	(8.41)	-20.71*	(8.12)
	No (ref.)						
	Yes	-1.26	(6.30)	-1.44	(6.41)	0.57	(6.18)
Media endorsement	No (ref.)						
Group type	Civil society	-2.70	(6.02)	-1.81	(8.92)	-4.26	(5.82)
	Business (ref.)						
Outside lobbying (%)		0.28	(0.17)	0.28	(0.17)	-0.01	(0.25)
Staff (logged)		4.49	(2.57)	4.57	(2.62)	4.26	(2.49)
Advocacy coalition	Yes	-18.99**	(5.66)	-19.12**	(5.77)	-19.19**	(5.62)
	No (ref.)						
EU level organization	Yes	4.87	(10.53)	5.03	(10.62)	8.10	(10.41)
	No (ref.)						
Media hits issue (logged)		-0.78	(4.06)	-0.72	(4.09)	-0.78	(4.12)
Goal	Block or change most	-11.65	(7.03)	-13.82	(6.86)	-12.57	(6.81)
	Shape small parts	-13.67*	(6.75)	-11.77*	(7.12)	-14.67*	(6.69)
	Support (ref.)						
Media presence x Group type				-1.58	(11.98)		
Media presence x Public interest frame				26.84*	(12.06)	10.97	(13.27)
Media presence x Outside lobbying						0.24	(0.39)
Media presence x Public interest frame x outside lobbying						0.80*	(0.37)
Issue (random effect)		410.17	(163.52)	405.92	(166.06)	481.39	(160.82)
AIC		1137.70		1139.68		1137.39	
Wald Chi2		35.04		34.87		45.74	
Df		17.00		18.00		19.00	
Prop>chi2		0.00		0.00		0.00	

Note: Coefficients are presented with robust standard errors in parentheses and significance level indicated by ** $\alpha \leq 0.01$; * $\alpha \leq 0.05$

⁷ Please note that the coefficient of the public interest frame variable is not reported in Models 2, 3, 5 and 6 because it represents a combination of values (an interaction) that does not occur in the dataset and estimation of their respective coefficient is impossible. Namely, a public interest frame cannot be communicated in the media if the advocacy group did not appear in the media in the first place; thus, the interaction of communicating a public interest frame in the media and *not* appearing in the media cannot be estimated.

Table 2. Mixed effects ordered logistic regression with the self-perceived preference attainment measure (n=345)

		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
		β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Intercept i		-4.95**	(0.86)	-4.93**	(0.90)	-5.01**	(0.92)
Intercept ii		-2.96**	(0.83)	-2.93**	(0.87)	-2.94**	(0.88)
Media presence	Yes	-0.01	(0.50)	0.01	(0.55)	0.09	(0.64)
	No (ref.)						
Public interest frame	Yes	1.39**	(0.55)				
	No (ref.)						
Self-interest frame	Yes	0.45	(0.47)	0.44	(0.48)	0.34	(0.49)
	No (ref.)						
Negative frame	Yes	0.08	(0.43)	0.09	(0.43)	0.43	(0.47)
	No (ref.)						
Positive frame	Yes	-0.18	(0.46)	-0.18	(0.46)	-0.21	(0.48)
	No (ref.)						
Media endorsement	Yes	-0.88**	(0.36)	-0.88**	(0.36)	-0.91*	(0.37)
	No (ref.)						
Group type	Civil society	-0.04	(0.34)	-0.01	(0.49)	0.04	(0.35)
	Business (ref.)						
Outside lobbying (%)		-0.01	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.03	(0.02)
Staff (logged)		0.12	(0.14)	0.12	(0.14)	0.10	(0.14)
Advocacy coalition	Yes	-0.80*	(0.35)	-0.80*	(0.35)	-0.86*	(0.36)
	No (ref.)						
EU level organization	Yes	-0.49	(0.54)	-0.48	(0.55)	-0.30	(0.58)
	No (ref.)						
Media hits issue (logged)		0.07**	(0.22)	0.08**	(0.22)	0.12**	(0.23)
Goal	Block or change most	-2.47**	(0.45)	-2.46**	(0.45)	-2.45**	(0.47)
	Shape small parts Support (ref.)	-1.33	(0.42)	-1.33	(0.42)	-1.29	(0.43)
Media presence x Group type				-0.07	(0.66)		
Media presence x Public interest frame				1.40*	(0.72)	0.09	(0.86)
Media presence x Outside lobbying						-0.01	(0.02)
Media presence x Public interest frame x outside lobbying						0.06*	(0.03)
Policy proposal (random effect)		0.63	(0.45)	0.51	(0.36)	0.88	(0.52)
AIC		501.00		502.99		489.14	
Wald Chi2		41.01		41.04		43.25	
df		17.00		18.00		19.00	
Prop>chi2		0.00		0.00		0.00	

Note: Coefficients are presented with standard errors in parentheses and significance level indicated by ** $\alpha \leq 0.01$; * $\alpha \leq 0.05$

First, I anticipated that group type conditions the effect of media presence on preference attainment. More specifically, I expected media presence to be beneficial to civil society groups and damaging to business lobby groups (H1). This expectation is not confirmed in the models. This result can be derived from the insignificant interaction term between media presence and

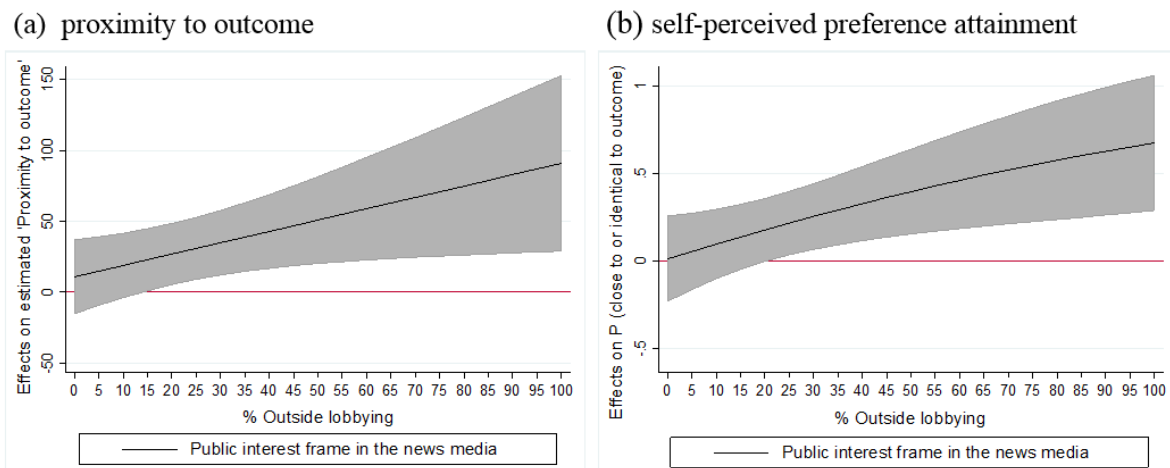
group type in Models 2 and 5. I find that group type has no significant impact on preference attainment; namely, business groups are not substantially more or less likely to achieve their policy goals than civil society organizations when appearing in the news. This finding speaks against the commonly held presumption that media attention serves as a leverage for civil society groups to counterbalance the influence of business groups (Danielian and Page, 1994).

Second, I expected that advocacy groups can benefit from media presence if they are able to frame their objectives in the news as aligned with the public interest (H2). This expectation is confirmed in all the models. Models II and V show that advocacy groups that voice public interest frames in the news are more likely to achieve their policy goals compared to advocacy groups that do not (the interaction term between media access and the public interest frame). Interest organizations estimate their preference attainment higher if they manage to appear in the news *and* frame their message in terms of public interests and the distance between their position and the eventual outcome as estimated by EC officials is smaller under such conditions. When entering the public arena, different rules apply, and policy objectives should be justified according to the interests of a broader and diffuse set of citizens and stakeholders (Naurin 2007; Schattschneider 1960). Advocacy groups that seek to pressure policymakers by means of media appearances should do so by linking their own interests and objectives to those of the broader public. If they refrain from doing so, media attention has no significant advantage for preference attainment.

The question remains, however, whether public interest framing has value added to the outside lobbying strategies interest groups develop. To further assess whether this framing effect is triggered by the strategic actions of advocacy groups and not by journalistic practices, I compared the use of outside lobbying strategies with the articulation of public interest frames in the news (Models 3 and 6). This interaction is positive and significant. The marginal effects are shown in Figure 3, which shows the predicted change in preference attainment when

interest groups express public interest frames in the news for different levels of outside lobbying. This interaction reveals that the impact of the public interest frame on preference attainment is mostly due to strategic actions by lobbyists. If advocacy groups frame their positions in the news in terms of public interests and intensively deploy outside lobbying strategies, they are more likely to see their goals attained. In contrast, when advocacy groups do not actively seek media exposure, but end up articulating public interest frames in the news nonetheless, their preference attainment is not significantly impacted. This interaction demonstrates that the impact of public interest frames on preference attainment is conditional on the lobbying strategies interest groups develop. The impact of public interest frames in the media is negligible as long as it is not part of a full-fledged outside lobbying strategy.

Figure 3. Marginal effects of preference attainment and public interest frames in the media for different degrees of investment in outside lobbying (with 95% Cis)



Regarding the remaining control variables, first, one of the few findings which are consistent across studies on preference attainment is that those who seek to change the policy status quo are less likely to achieve their goals (Baumgartner et al 2008; Mahoney 2008). Models I and IV confirm that interest groups which support EC legislative proposals are more likely to indicate a higher level of self-perceived preference attainment and the eventual

distance to their desired outcome is smaller.⁸ Second, the measure grasping the support of other actors in media debates is insignificant. Third, preference attainment is also unrelated to the amount of staff advocacy groups employ at their Brussels office. Fourth, coalition membership was included as a control variable. Interestingly, membership in a coalition has a negative impact on preference attainment (see also Mahoney and Baumgartner, 2004). Fifth, other types of media frames, such as positive, negative or self-regarding frames do not render a consistent significant impact on preference attainment across the models. Finally, whether an organization has an EU-level constituency has no significant consequences for preference attainment.

A note of caution is in order with respect to potential problems of endogeneity. First, public interest frames may be endogenous to other factors related to preference attainment such as group type, media salience, strategies or the political goals advocated for. A correlation matrix with potential endogenous variables are presented in the online appendix (Table A4). The matrix shows that groups which support an EC proposal are less likely to appeal to public interests in the news, while the use of outside lobbying and being a civil society group is positively related. To address concerns about spurious relationships caused by confounding factors, these variables were included as controls in the regression analysis. Second, because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, concerns about reversed causation are in place. Namely, advocacy groups may more likely appeal to public interests in the media *after* they achieve their preferences. This should, however, not be a problem with the data at hand as all groups that appealed to public interests in the news did so *before* the Council adopted the EC proposal as law (or before it was withdrawn). The observations of public interest frames in the news thus precede the measurement of preference attainment. Third, while observations of public interest frames precede measures of preference attainment, advocacy groups may still

⁸ In this study the policy status quo is considered a policy proposal adopted by the European Commission, because most EC proposals are adopted as law. This is different in the U.S. where most bills fail and the policy status quo is better reflected by the policy situation before a bill is proposed.

have *anticipated* preference attainment, which could have amplified their propensity to voice public interest frames. While this explanation cannot be ruled out completely, it is –based on both theory and the data– highly unlikely that the results are due to the anticipation of preference attainment. While it is difficult to measure the anticipation of preference attainment, the initial position of the advocacy group towards the EC’s policy proposal is a reasonable proxy. Namely, those who support the proposal are significantly more likely to anticipate preference attainment as most EC proposals are adopted as law (Beyers et al. 2014b). The data show that groups which supported an EC proposal (and were thus likely to anticipate preference attainment) were *less* prone to appeal to public interests in the news (see Table A4 in the appendix). Moreover, the models partially control for the anticipation of preference attainment by estimating the effect of public interest framing *ceteris paribus* the positions interest organizations adopted vis-à-vis the proposed regulation. Additionally, it is theoretically not conceivable that advocates who anticipate preference attainment will seek to expand the scope of conflict with public appealing claims, which directly runs counter to Schattschneider’s (1960) thesis that those who anticipate to prevail in political battles will seek to *contain* rather than expand the scope of conflict (see also Kollman 1998). Finally, future longitudinal or experimental research could further substantiate the causal relationship of the presented findings and further address concerns of endogeneity.

Conclusion

This study investigated the conditions under which media attention serves as a blessing or curse for advocacy groups active in EU legislative politics. It is the first study to empirically analyze how media attention facilitates or hinders advocacy groups in achieving their policy goals. Media attention was conceptualized as a means for advocacy groups to exert pressure on political elites (De Bruycker 2016; Schattschneider, 1960). Media attention allows advocacy

groups to expand their audiences to a broader set of stakeholders, citizens and elites and may, under specific conditions, increase or diminish the political leverage of their policy demands.

The analyses demonstrated that the relationship between media attention and preference attainment is generally insignificant. Media attention as such will not lead to higher or lower levels of preference attainment. This article's main finding is that media attention can aid advocacy groups in achieving their policy goals if they manage to frame their objectives in the news as aligned with the interests of broad segments of society. Moreover, civil society groups are not more likely than business groups to benefit from media attention, and endorsement of other actors in the media does not affect the impact of media attention on preference attainment.

This study contributes to the literature on media and interest groups as it gauges advocacy groups' sway over policy processes and the leverage of the news media as a weapon of political influence. The presented findings aid in evaluating the severity of media biases in favor of affluent business organizations as identified in previous studies (Binderkrantz, 2012; Danielian and Page, 1994; Thrall, 2006; Andrews and Caren, 2010). This study demonstrates that biased media attention does not necessarily exacerbate biased influence. Moreover, the evidence revealed that interest groups can themselves elicit the effects of media frames on preference attainment, rather than that these effects are due to journalistic selection processes or other exogenous factors. Furthermore, this study relied on two different and independent measures of preference attainment, which underscores the robustness of the findings and contributes to the empirical quest of measuring lobbying influence (Dür, 2008; Lowery, 2013; Pedersen, 2013; Klüver, 2009).

The paper expanded the role of media and framing effects beyond the realms of public opinion and party politics (Entman, 1993; de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003; Druckman, 2004). While media attention is of vital importance to parties and politicians (Strömbäck and

Kiousis, 2011; Thesen, 2017), it is beneficial to interest groups only under very specific circumstances. Several aspects of this study are relevant beyond interest group research. Future research could explore whether the beneficial effects of people-centered frames also hold true for other political elites or in other political arenas, i.e. whether this leads to a competitive advantage for political parties or candidates in electoral campaigns (see for instance Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Aalberg et al., 2017).

Since EU legislative politics can in many respects be considered a “least likely case” for studying the impact of media frames on preference attainment, we should be careful in generalizing the implications of the findings. While public interest frames likely have comparable or even stronger effects in national political systems, the null findings of this study cannot be generalized to national settings or other stages in policymaking without further empirical analysis. In systems where citizens are more politically vigilant and where the news media’s sway over public opinion and elites is more resilient, the impact of public endorsement and media attention is likely even stronger. Moreover, future studies drawing on longitudinal or experimental research designs could further substantiate the causal relationship of the presented results and further rule out concerns of endogeneity.

In sum, these findings point to a potential loophole for lobbyists in EU policymaking. While interest groups can prevail by presenting themselves as the *vox populi*, their policy positions may enjoy only little approval by the public at large. As such, lobby groups can cloak their narrow or economic interests by appealing to public interests in media debates (Kohler-Koch, 2010). This presumption seems plausible, as civil society groups nor groups that enjoy popular approval in media debates significantly benefit from media attention. Future research is therefore warranted to further disentangle the link between public interest frames and citizen preferences. Such a study would allow to further substantiate the normative implications of the findings for democratic responsiveness in and beyond the European Union.

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