



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Revolving doors in Europe: does hiring from the public sector facilitate access?

Sharon S. Belli and Frederik Stevens 

Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, 2000 Belgium

**Corresponding author:** Frederik Stevens; Email: [frederik.stevens@uantwerpen.be](mailto:frederik.stevens@uantwerpen.be)

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## Abstract

In recent years, the movement of personnel from the public sector to interest groups has garnered considerable attention throughout Europe. Consequently, there has been an increased focus on the phenomenon of revolving door lobbyists within academic literature. This research contributes to this scholarly discussion by examining how the employment of such lobbyists facilitates access. We argue that interest groups gain advantages by recruiting individuals from the public sector in policy domains with limited mobilization, but this benefit decreases as more interest groups mobilize. Our analysis of survey data from seven European political systems supports these expectations, indicating that recruiting professionals with experience in the public sector enhances access, especially in policy areas with minimal lobbying activity. This highlights the potential for interest mobilization to counterbalance the advantages of hiring revolving door lobbyists.

**Keywords:** access; interest groups; interest mobilization; lobbying; revolving door

## Introduction

In recent times, Europe has witnessed increased scrutiny regarding the movement of individuals from the public sector to interest groups. Notable examples include the move of Dutch Minister Cora van Nieuwenhuizen to an energy company association<sup>1</sup> and a senior French official, previously involved in international ocean governance, joining a fishing-industry lobby group<sup>2</sup>. These high-profile examples of ‘revolving doors’ have sparked significant societal discussion. Indeed, journalists and transparency advocates increasingly investigate whether former public officials transitioning into lobbying positions receive privileged access to decision-making processes that wield considerable influence over the industries they now advocate

<sup>1</sup>See <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/de-minister-schond-geen-regels-toen-ze-lobbyist-werd-maar-dat-is-precies-het-probleem~b92dfb86/>

<sup>2</sup>See [www.euobserver.com/eu-political/156436](http://www.euobserver.com/eu-political/156436)

for. Still, academic empirical research exploring the recruitment of public sector personnel and its influence on interest groups' access to policymaking remains scarce. While the existing scholarly literature extensively covers the revolving door phenomenon in the USA (USA) (McCrain 2018; McKay and Lazarus 2023; Strickland 2020), there are only few studies in Europe focused on identifying groups actively hiring former public officials (Belli and Bursens 2023; Coen and Vannoni 2018, 2020). Yet, they have largely neglected the potential effects on access opportunities. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to unravel how the propensity to recruit revolving door lobbyists influences the level of access obtained by interest groups.

Generally, USA scholars studying revolving doors presume that recruiting personnel from the public sector positively impacts access. Two analytical perspectives have been put forward in the existing literature. One explanation highlights the significance of *relational capital*, positing that interest groups employing individuals from the public sector tend to gain enhanced access due to their staff's ability to leverage prior political connections and relationships with policymakers (Blanes i Vidal et al. 2012; McCrain 2018). The second perspective emphasizes the value of *human capital*, which suggests that interest groups seek personnel to reinforce their organizational capacities (Bertrand et al. 2014; Salisbury et al. 1989); LaPira and Thomas 2017. Specifically, by recruiting former public officials, organizations acquire *process-oriented knowledge*, referring to political intelligence and a deep understanding of the inner workings of public institutions (Ban et al. 2019).

Although both approaches are not mutually exclusive, our account fits more into the human capital perspective. Current studies indicate that personal connections and networks are relatively less important for interest representation in Europe (Belli and Bursens 2023; Coen and Vannoni 2018, 2020). Instead, the relationship between interest groups and European policymakers is often characterized as a resource exchange process, wherein valuable policy assets – such as *policy expertise* – are traded for access to the decision-making process (Bouwen 2002; Braun 2012; Berkhout 2013). Connecting resource exchange approaches with the human capital perspective, we argue that process-oriented knowledge, acquired through the recruitment of revolving door lobbyists, is a critical organizational capacity that helps interest groups to elevate the value of their policy expertise. Specifically, it enables groups to transform complex and technical know-how into tangible policy alternatives. Therefore, we anticipate that organizations employing professionals with prior experience in the public sector will gain more frequent access in contrast to those that do not.

Furthermore, this paper contributes to the evolving body of literature on revolving doors by exploring the role of the policy environment. Current interest group studies have demonstrated that access opportunities not only rely on the hiring practices of individual organizations and the relative value of their exchange goods but are also significantly influenced by specific characteristics of policy areas (Klüver et al. 2015). Therefore, we posit that the advantages derived from recruiting revolving door lobbyists are contingent upon the degree of interest mobilization within a policy domain (Hanegraaff et al. 2020; Willems 2020). More precisely, we posit that within policy areas characterized by limited interest mobilization, the

employment of individuals with a public sector background results in more frequent access. In such settings, policymakers are inclined to be more open to external organizations that can offer them feasible legislative opportunities grounded in evidence-based information (Culpepper 2011; Stevens and De Bruycker 2020). In contrast, in policy areas with a high level of lobbying activity and active engagement from a plurality of different interest groups, the benefits associated with recruiting from the public sector are anticipated to diminish. In such settings, policymakers prioritize acquiring *political information* – related to information about public preferences – over actionable policy expertise (Rasmussen et al. 2018; Flöthe 2019a). Although former public officials may have a competitive advantage in clearly articulating the technical facets of policy issues, they may not necessarily possess superior abilities in precisely gauging and transmitting public sentiments (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019; Kalla and Porter 2021; Walgrave et al. 2023).

To test our expectations, we rely on the Comparative Interest Group survey (CIG hereafter), which provides expert data from interest groups representatives in seven European political systems (Beyers et al. 2020). Our results highlight that interest groups that hire from the public sector gain more frequent access than organizations that do not employ revolving door lobbyists. Nonetheless, this competitive edge diminishes and eventually fades away in policy areas that attract heightened levels of interest mobilization. Our findings thus reveal that increased lobbying activity within a policy area counteracts the biases towards groups hiring revolving door lobbyists.

### ***From the public sector to lobbying: revolving doors and interest groups' access***

The revolving door phenomenon is commonly defined as the movement of individuals from the public sector to interest groups (Gormley 1979). This definition has been sourced from a body of literature emphasizing the importance of individual lobbyists' career trajectories, highlighting their personal incentives and motivations to enter the revolving door (Shepherd and You 2020; Bolton and McCrain 2023; Halpin and Lotric 2023; Lee and You 2023). For instance, scholars have demonstrated that these individuals can leverage their public sector experience to increase their earnings, receiving higher salaries compared to regular lobbyists (Blanes i Vidal et al. 2012). Moreover, through the analysis of data on lobbyists' career trajectories, studies have shown that revolving door lobbyists tend to secure more prestigious roles in the private sector (Thomas and LaPira 2017). In essence, it is evident that prior experience in the public sector yields tangible benefits in terms of career advancements within the private sector.

While it is ultimately the decision of the former public officials as to whether they turnover into lobbying, revolving door practices also depend substantially on the needs of interest groups seeking to hire staff with a public sector background. Consequently, several studies aim to understand the rationale behind interest groups hiring lobbyists with backgrounds in the public sector (Belli and Bursens 2023; McCrain 2018; Coen and Vannoni 2020; McKay and Lazarus 2023; Strickland 2020). These studies put the focus on the recruitment process as a systematic undertaking in which the agency lies with the organizational leadership of interest groups. This body of research has presented various explanations regarding why

interest groups, as organizations with political objectives, perceive revolving door lobbyists as valuable assets in advancing their interests.

The first explanation, centered on *relational capital*, emphasizing the significance of networks and personal relationships held by former public officials who transition into roles as lobbyists (Blanes i Vidal et al. 2012; McCrain 2018). These individuals maintain connections with their former colleagues who continue to work within government circles (Cain and Drutman 2014). Through this analytical lens, scholars have shown that lucrative positions in the lobbying industry are often assigned to former public officials with networks in the public sector, as long as their political connections remain intact (Bertrand et al. 2014). From this perspective, revolving door lobbyists leverage their prior experience in the public sector to harness their network and political connections to secure access. By capitalizing on these established relationships and networks forged during their tenure in public sector positions, these lobbyists navigate political circles more effectively compared to lobbyists lacking such experience. Additionally, personal relationships can play a pivotal role in fostering trust between lobbyists and their targets (Bolton and McCrain 2023).

The second theoretical perspective explaining the rationale behind interest organizations hiring lobbyists from the public sector focuses on the value of *human capital* (LaPira and Thomas 2017). Contrary to the emphasis on relational capital, this viewpoint underscores the value of revolving door lobbyists beyond their mere networks or political connections, highlighting their comprehensive understanding of the functioning of policy processes (Salisbury et al. 1989). Their grasp of complex policy procedures, familiarity with internal institutional workings, and insider insights into power dynamics make hiring staff with public sector backgrounds advantageous for groups that need to effectively navigate policy processes. This *process-oriented knowledge* enables organizations to identify crucial moments for initiating lobbying efforts and targeting influential decision-makers (Ban et al. 2019). Moreover, by enlisting revolving door lobbyists, interest groups gain exclusive insights into the factors influencing political decision-making.

An important gap in this existing literature pertains to the insufficient consideration given to the impact of the revolving door phenomenon on organizational effectiveness. Despite the presumption in several studies that hiring individuals with a public sector background positively influences access, there remains a scarcity of research assessing this relationship empirically. Although a few recent studies have commenced investigating the impact of revolving doors for organizational effectiveness (Belli and Beyers 2023; McKay and Lazarus 2023), they have not considered how the policy environment might shape the link between recruiting from the public sector and accessing policymaking. To address this gap, the following section integrates insights from the revolving door literature with resource exchange theory, a widely employed framework for elucidating access dynamics among interest groups in Europe.

### ***The argument: access, revolving doors, and interest mobilization***

Access is commonly defined as the point at which a group enters a political arena, whether it is a parliamentary or governmental setting, by surpassing a threshold controlled by relevant gatekeepers such as politicians or civil servants

(Binderkrantz et al. 2017). In the extant European interest group literature, this interaction is typically conceptualized as a resource exchange relation (Bouwen 2002); Berkhout 2013; Beyers and Braun 2014. Within exchange approaches, resources are not synonymous with *organizational capacities*; rather, they denote exchange goods like *policy expertise*, encompassing information about technical aspects, policy effectiveness, legal dimensions, and the economic implications of a policy. Policymakers rely on intermediary organizations to obtain such valuable policy goods, as they might not always be capable to gather these themselves due to limited time and resources (Braun 2012; Stevens 2022). Interest groups emerge as interesting exchange partners in this regard: through their interactions with their constituencies and daily engagement within specific policy issues, they can collect the resources policymakers require (Albareda and Braun 2019; Flöthe 2019b); Albareda 2020. Indeed, interest groups can play a crucial role in assisting policymakers in recognizing market failures, formulating measures to address these failures, and evaluating the potential impacts of proposed regulatory actions (Arras and Braun 2018; Beyers and Arras 2020). In return for sharing their valuable policy goods, they hope to gain access to the decision-making process – an invaluable asset for these organizations as it is often seen as essential for exerting political influence (Eising 2007). In sum, mutual resource dependencies trigger reciprocal exchanges between interest groups and policymakers (Berkhout 2013).

Bridging insights from the human capital perspective with resource exchange approaches, we argue that enlisting individuals with public sector experience significantly reinforces the organizational capacity of interest groups, enabling them to function more effectively as providers of policy expertise. Specifically, we anticipate that policymakers attach greater value to policy expertise when it is translated into coherent and suitable policy alternatives. Conventional applications of the resource exchange perspective in interest group studies tend to overlook the importance of effectively communicating complex and technocratic information. Hence, we propose that the focus should not solely rest on which organizations can offer policy expertise. After all, *all* interest groups are expected to embed their input in evidence-based information while participating in the policymaking process. Instead, the emphasis should move toward assessing the differences among organizations in whether they can present their policy expertise clearly and understandably, effectively resonating within a policymaking setting.

Process-oriented knowledge plays a vital role in this regard by enhancing a group's ability to aid policymakers in discerning between actionable and unhelpful policy expertise (Salisbury et al. 1989). groups that employ revolving door lobbyists, from a human capital perspective, possess a unique advantage within the lobbying community due to their comprehensive understanding of opportune moments for exerting influence and the key decision-makers to target for effective influence strategies (Thomas and LaPira 2017). This comprehension of policy processes not only enables them to recognize legislative prospects but also enables them to translate scientific expertise into actionable policy initiatives (Ban et al. 2019). In contrast to interest groups armed solely with specialized knowledge but lacking insights into the workings of policy processes, groups with process-oriented knowledge are better equipped to support policymakers in navigating policy uncertainties (Belli and Bursens 2023). This ability to present politically feasible

policy options embedded in evidence-based information is critical in contexts where policy complexities often breed uncertainty, hampering efficient decision-making processes (LaPira and Thomas 2017). So, by recruiting individuals with public sector experience interest groups substantially increases their prospects of gaining heightened access to policymakers.

Hypothesis 1: Organizations that hire staff with a public sector background gain more frequent access than groups that do not.

However, recruiting personnel from the public sector does not invariably grant increased access. Recent research suggests that the beneficial role of engaging in revolving door practices is contingent upon the organizational characteristics of interest groups (Belli and Beyers 2023). Following up on this, we argue that the relationship between hiring practices and access opportunities is also profoundly influenced by the broader policy environment (Klüver et al. 2015). One of the key conclusions within the interest group literature to date is that interactions between interest groups and policymakers do not occur in a political vacuum. From a resource dependency perspective, interest groups and policymakers rely on their environment to acquire the resources necessary for survival (Bouwen 2002). When this environment changes, mutual dependencies shift and tilt (Stevens and De Bruycker 2020).

In the existing literature, several scholars have claimed that the level of interest mobilization – pertaining to the number of mobilized groups in a policy domain that are potentially seeking access and challenging the composition of political-administrative venues – crucially affects interest groups' level of access (Willems 2020). Indeed, policy domains differ extensively in the number of interest groups competing for access (Wonka et al. 2018). In this regard, we can differentiate between *niche* policy domains and *bandwagon* areas (Baumgartner and Leech 1998). On the one hand, niche policy domains are characterized by a limited scope of interests, where only a handful of actors actively engage in lobbying. For example, consider financial regulation, a policy area dominated by a concentrated group of business interests (Berkhout et al. 2018; Coen and Katsaitis 2013). On the other hand, bandwagon policy areas attract a large multitude of actors, often having conflicting agendas, and encompassing diverse segments of society. For instance, environmental or healthcare policies illustrate this scenario well, involving a broad array of stakeholders with differing perspectives and interests. In general terms, this distinction is important because it directly affects the access opportunities for interest groups: the more interest groups mobilize in a policy area, the more competitors an individual organization faces and the more difficult it becomes to gain access (Hanegraaff et al. 2020).

In this vein, we argue that the favorable impact of employing lobbyists with prior public sector experience on the level of access is conditioned by the degree of interest mobilization within a policy area. Starting with niche policy areas, we expect that the propensity to hire revolving door lobbyists continues to be advantageous for gaining access for three main reasons. First, when only a limited number of interest groups are mobilized, the spectrum of conflicting policy positions is narrowed, reducing the likelihood of widespread conflicts escalating (Schattschneider 1960); Hutter and Grande 2014. In this scenario, limited societal support suffices for practical and viable policy outcomes, fostering interactions between policymakers and interest



groups primarily characterized by exchanges based on actionable policy expertise (Beyers and Kerremans 2004; De Bruycker 2016). Consequently, the recruitment of revolving door lobbyists becomes indispensable in efficiently engaging with policymakers. Second, issues deliberated within a confined set of interest groups often elude widespread public attention (Kollman 1998); Agnone 2007; De Wilde 2011. The lack of public scrutiny and awareness regarding these niche policy domains enables policymakers to operate with less oversight and external pressure. Under such conditions, they are less susceptible to the level of societal support and more inclined to rely on groups capable of effectively converting their policy expertise in viable policy alternatives (Stevens and De Bruycker 2020; Willems 2020). Consequently, interest groups employing revolving door lobbyists from the public sector can leverage their process-oriented knowledge to gain enhanced access to decision-makers (Culpepper 2011). Lastly, niche policy domains often involve highly complex and largely technocratic issues discussions that require an in-depth understanding of the subject matter (Klüver et al. 2015). In such cases, organizations that recruit lobbyists with prior public sector experience hold a distinct advantage due to their ability to articulate the necessary evidence-based input in a clear, concise, and understandable manner.

However, the dynamics of resource exchange relationships can significantly change when once policy domains attract increased levels of interest mobilization. First, high level of lobbying activity increases the likelihood that multiple and contrasting policy demands will be voiced and that policy conflicts expand (Schattschneider 1960). This puts significant pressure on policymakers to heed the demands of diverse stakeholders involved (De Bruycker 2017, 2020). Hence, within bandwagon policy domains, policymakers show decreased receptiveness to actionable policy expertise. Instead, they aim to acquire insights into public preferences (Rasmussen et al. 2018; Flöthe 2019a). Second, densely populated policy areas often draw heightened public attention due to the diverse range of stakeholders engaged in the discussions (Dür and Mateo 2014). The plurality of groups involved in such areas utilize a range of tactics, including public campaigns, media engagement, and grassroots mobilization, to garner attention for their respective causes (Rasmussen et al. 2018; De Bruycker and Beyers 2019). This increases public attention and leads to greater scrutiny and media coverage, simplifying discussions for broader public understanding and amplifying the significance of political information (De Bruycker and Beyers 2019; Stevens and De Bruycker 2020). Finally, because of increased interest mobilization and the concentrated efforts to secure political support and build coalitions, discussions within bandwagon policy areas may experience simplification. Even though the topics remain inherently complex, the shift in discourse towards seeking support and creating alliances – instead of deeply exploring the complex technical facets of policy issues – might reduce the perceived complexity, thereby reinforcing the aforementioned mechanisms.

Former public officials, while adept at providing actionable policy expertise, may not necessarily demonstrate exceptional proficiency in supplying the required political information. Although their experience in the public sector equips them with a deep understanding of political decision-making, enabling them to translate complex technical details into clear policy recommendations, it may not necessarily

grant them direct insight into public preferences. Indeed, recent empirical research indicates that former public officials' understanding of public preferences does not surpass that of the average citizen (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2019; Kalla and Porter 2021; Walgrave et al. 2023). In fact, they frequently misinterpret the preferences of both the general public and their own specific sub-constituency. Consequently, we expect that organizations that prioritize building process-oriented expertise through the recruitment of staff with a public sector background may find that while they maintain a competitive advantage in niche policy areas, their relative edge diminishes in bandwagon domains. Instead, we expect that other organizational capacities such as the ability to represent the public, serve as an intermediary between citizens and policymakers, and mobilize public support may be more crucial for gaining access in such areas (Flöthe 2019b); Albareda 2020.

Hypothesis 2: The more interest mobilization a policy domain attracts, the less likely it is that hiring from the public sector will lead to more access.

### **Research design**

This paper relies on the data from the CIG-survey, a tool designed to examine organizational characteristics and policy activities of interest groups in a comparative setting (for details see Beyers et al. 2020, [www.cigsurvey.eu](http://www.cigsurvey.eu)). The survey spanned from March 2015 to June 2020 and targeted senior leaders within interest groups. Our analyses draw from evidence from a diverse range of countries, encompassing Western (Belgium and the Netherlands), Eastern (Czech Republic, Lithuania, and Poland), Southern (Portugal), and Northern (Sweden) European regions. This selection resulted in a heterogeneous mix of political systems characterized by variations in economic size, state-society relations, and democratic maturity. We are confident that this diversity among the countries examined enhances the generalizability of our findings, extending their relevance to a broader array of European systems.

The dependent variable in our analysis is *the level of access*. In line with previous research (Albareda 2020; Binderkrantz et al. 2017), we do not conceive of access as a binary phenomenon but instead focus on gradations of access. For this reason, access is operationalized measuring the frequency of contact within both governmental and parliamentary arenas. Specifically, we rely on the following survey question: “During the last 12 months, how often has your group been in contact with the following political institutions and agencies in order to influence public policies?”. The following institutional answer-categories were offered: (1) national ministers and their assistants, (2) national civil servants working in departmental ministries, (3) elected members from the majority or governing parties of the national parliament and (4) elected members from minority or opposition parties of the national parliament. Respondents were asked to indicate for whether on a yearly basis they had contact “never (= 1),” “at least once (= 2),” “at least quarterly (= 3),” “at least monthly (= 4)” and “at least weekly (= 5).” We calculated a mean score for each group by summing the numerical values across all categories and dividing it by four.

We are confident that the resultant scale is adequate to measure for several reasons. First, it captures exclusive contacts, as policymakers, acting as gatekeepers,



granted interest groups access to relevant venues (Binderkrantz et al. 2017). Secondly, it encompasses contacts within both governmental and parliamentary arenas. Lastly, our measure accounts for the non-linear nature of access within which there is a lower threshold and subsequent declining marginal returns on access to policymaking arenas (Hanegraaff et al. 2020). Nonetheless, we are aware of the limitations of this self-reported measure, which can trigger cognitive biases. However, it remains difficult to find uniform and comparable unobtrusive measures of access across different political systems. Nonetheless, evidence from the INTEREURO survey project confirms that a simple survey questions display considerable strength in predicting the number of meetings as indicated by publicly available government records (Belli and Beyers, 2020).

Our primary explanatory variable centers on the inclination to recruit individuals from the public sector, gauged through the survey question: “*What are the typical backgrounds of your paid staff members? Please tick all boxes that apply.*” Respondents were presented with a set of employees’ backgrounds (see Appendix A1). We constructed our revolving door measure by collapsing the items “experience in a government agency” and “experience in party politics.” This variable delineates organizations into two groups: those employing staff with backgrounds in the public sector and those that do not hire former public officials. Admittedly, this measure might be considered crude as it lacks specifics regarding the duration of public sector experience, or the proportion of an organization’s staff sourced from the public sector. However, despite its limitations, this measure aligns with our aim to assess whether groups employing individuals from the public sector achieve more frequent access compared to those that do not. Additionally, recognizing the potential differential impact of different types of public sector experiences on access, the Appendix A2 offers a supplementary robustness check<sup>3</sup>. This check examines the distinct effects of hiring former politicians versus hiring former government agency staff. Furthermore, Appendix A3 presents a more nuanced analysis, evaluating whether hiring former politicians facilitates parliamentary access while recruiting government agency staff leads to increased governmental access<sup>4</sup>.

We furthermore expected that the relationship between revolving doors and the level of access is contingent on the level of interest mobilization in a policy area. We constructed this measure by aggregating the responses of respondents in each system to the question: “*Looking at the list below: which areas is your organization involved in?*” For each of the 22 policy fields, we counted the number of organizations indicating that they are active in it. Appendix A4 provides an overview of the level of interest mobilization across policy fields and countries.

Various control variables were integrated in the models to account for alternative explanations. On the group-level, we first tested whether policymakers make a

<sup>3</sup>The linear regression models suggest that recruiting staff with governmental experience is more beneficial for gaining access than hiring professionals with a parliamentary background.

<sup>4</sup>The linear regression models suggest that employing that with experience in both governmental or parliamentary roles contributes to heightened access to governmental venues. Interestingly, while hiring staff with a parliamentary background does not significantly improve access to parliamentary areas, recruiting professionals with government experience proves beneficial for accessing parliament.

distinction between group types (Hanegraaff and Berkhout 2019). In the extant literature, scholars often point toward a business bias. Therefore, we tested whether “Business” interests (including business associations and professional organizations) gain more frequent access than “Other” interests (including identity and cause organizations, labor groups, leisure associations, associations representing public authorities and a rest category). Second, well-staffed groups are expected to enjoy more access because they have the necessary personnel to collect, process, and communicate expert knowledge to policymakers (Stevens and De Bruycker 2020). We subsequently control for the number of full-time equivalent lobbying staff working in an organization. Third, we control for functional differentiation as several scholars highlight that it helps to monitor the behavior of public officials and to notice the emergence of new policy initiatives at early stages, which enable groups to develop expert-based information demanded by policymakers (Albareda 2020). To gauge functional differentiation, we distinguish between groups that have established committees for specific tasks and those that do not. Fourth, we included a measure that captures the intensity of inside lobbying, specifically how frequently organizations themselves initiated contacts with policymakers, ranging from ‘never = (1)’ to ‘weekly (= 5)’. Indeed, not all organizations are equally interested in gaining access as some may prefer to remain “outsiders.” As such, the latter may gain less frequent contacts with policymakers compared to groups that actively seek to attain “insider” status (Dür and Mateo 2016). As one may argue that these organizational controls may affect the tendency of interest groups to hire revolving door lobbyists, we conducted a VIF test (see Appendix A5), which confirms that collinearity is not an issue in our empirical analysis.

On the system-level, we control for type of interest mediation system by drawing on the index of neo-corporatism of Jahn (2016). As part of neo-corporatist practices, policymakers may grant access exclusively to only a set of key players. Additionally, we accounted for the maturity of the democratic system. Old and more established democratic systems in countries like Belgium, the Netherlands, and Sweden have evolved to place more emphasis on accommodating diverse societal interests, resulting in policymakers feeling greater pressure to distribute their attention evenly among various groups. Conversely, in “New” democracies such as the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, and Portugal, the relatively shorter period of democratic development may mean policymakers face different pressures, potentially leading to differing patterns of attention allocation among interest groups (Stevens 2022).

### **Analysis**

Before examining the hypotheses, we first explore the distribution of the independent variable. On average, 74.5% of organizations refrain from involvement in revolving door practices, while 25.5% of these groups have staff members originating from the public sector. Further investigation into variations across political systems (see Figure 1) reveals that revolving door practices exist within both established and emerging democracies. Remarkably, Swedish organizations notably stand out by significantly recruiting from the public sector, exceeding the rate by over three times compared to groups in Belgium. Since the 1980s, Sweden’s transition from a corporatist model to a more pluralistic system has empowered new

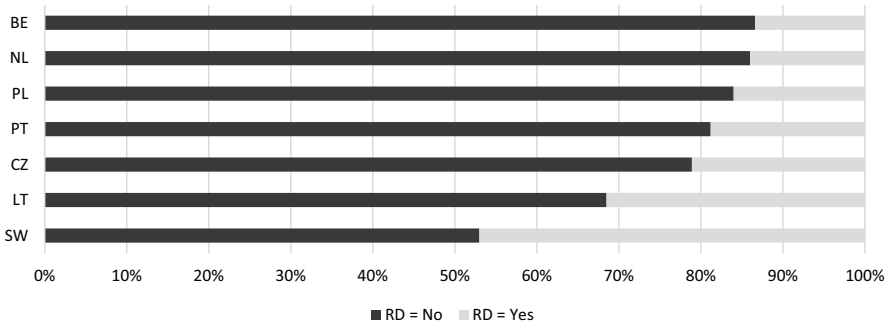


Figure 1. The propensity to hire revolving door lobbyists across political systems.

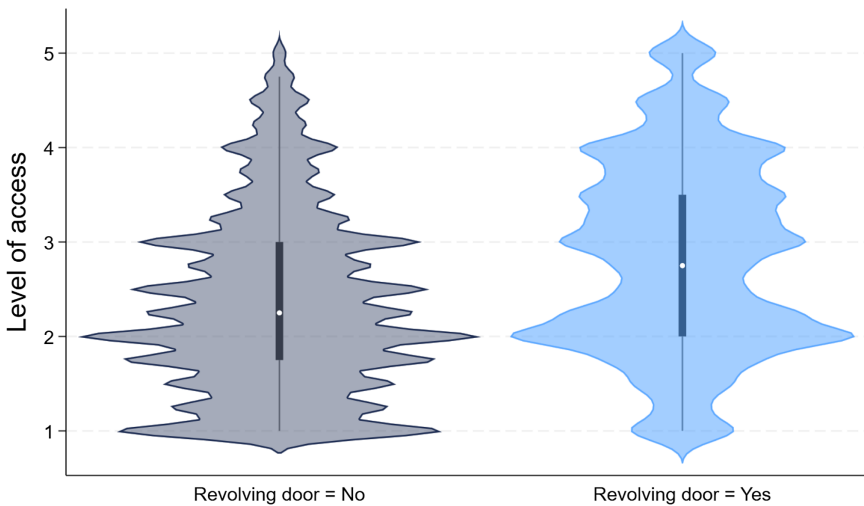


Figure 2. Degree of access by hiring from the public sector.

interest groups and expanded the scope of lobbying activities (Selling 2015). This shift has created a larger space for former public officials and political aides to transition into lobbying roles within the private sector. Additionally, the convergence between major political factions and the growing influence of interest groups have further facilitated the movement of individuals between the public and private sectors in Sweden.

Furthermore, we explore the bivariate relationship between revolving doors and access. Figure 2 shows the distribution of access by the propensity to hire from the public sector. It illustrates that groups that employ staff with public sector backgrounds gain more frequent access than groups that do not. A Spearman rank order correlation demonstrates that this positive relationship is significant ( $r = 0.21$   $n = 6,358$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ).

We utilize multi-level linear regression models to assess whether this finding holds in a multivariate setting. Due to the nested nature of interest groups within countries, these regressions incorporate random intercepts specific to the countries

**Table 1.** Multi-level linear regression on the level of access

Predictor	Model 1		Model 2	
Independent variables				
Revolving door (ref = no)	0.153***	(0.021)	0.254***	(0.043)
Interest mobilization	-0.001***	(0.000)	-0.001***	(0.000)
Interactions				
Revolving door × Interest mobilization			-0.001***	(0.000)
Control variables				
Group type (ref = Business)	0.077***	(0.019)	0.077***	(0.019)
Staff size	0.129***	(0.009)	0.129***	(0.009)
Functional differentiation (ref = no)	0.172***	(0.020)	0.172***	(0.020)
Inside lobbying	0.552***	(0.001)	0.553***	(0.001)
Corporatism	-0.011	(0.107)	-0.011	(0.107)
System maturity (ref = new)	-0.288	(0.194)	-0.288	(0.194)
Country-level intercept	0.035	(0.019)	0.035	(0.019)
Fit statistics				
n	6,206		6,206	
df	11		12	
AIC	13,314.57		13,109.14	
BIC	13,388.64		13,389.94	

Note: standard errors are shown in parentheses.

\*p < 0.10.

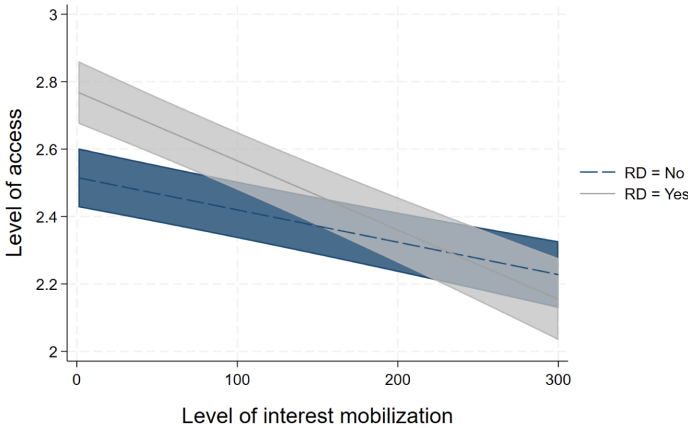
\*\*p < 0.05.

\*\*\*p < 0.01.

of origin for these organizations. Additionally, some organizations indicated activity across multiple policy fields in the survey. On average, respondents indicated organizational activity in approximately four policy fields. As such, the unit of analysis becomes the organization-policy field dyad.

In this regard, it is important to highlight that one of the drawbacks of our design is that, even though the units of observations are organization-policy field dyads, we can only observe access at the organization level (rather than measuring access to specific policy fields). Still, analyzing organization-policy field dyads remains valuable as it maximizes the available data and allows for a comprehensive examination of the overall engagement and activity of organizations across various policy areas (also discussed in Hanegraaff et al. 2020 following a similar approach). To account for this inherent mismatch in the research design, the Appendix displays multi-level linear regression models focusing exclusively on organizations that indicated being active on only one policy field. By narrowing our focus to organizations operating within a single policy field, we ensure that the measured level of interest mobilization and access pertains specifically to that field. Consequently, any observed relationships between organizational characteristics and access can be more confidently attributed to the dynamics within that particular policy domain. The results of these supplementary analyses remain consistent with the main findings, providing further support for the robustness of our conclusions. However, it must be noted that this set of groups differs considerably from the average organizations as they concentrate solely on a specific policy area whereas the majority of interest group is active in multiple policy fields.

The results of our regression analyses are presented in Table 1. In Model 1, we examine the direct impact of our main independent variable, the inclination to



**Figure 3.** Predicted values of gaining access to different levels of interest mobilization by hiring revolving door lobbyists.

employ revolving door lobbyists (H1). To investigate our second hypothesis, we assess the interaction between our revolving door measures and interest mobilization in Model 2. When interpreting the main effects in Model 1, we see that hiring from the public sector significantly increases the level of access, which supports *Hypothesis 1*. Whereas groups that do not employ professionals with public sector experience have a predicted access score of 2.42 (SE = 0.07), organizations that actively recruit former public officials have a significantly higher predicted value of 2.58 (SE = 0.07). In line with studies presuming a positive impact of hiring from the public sector on organizational effectiveness (e.g. LaPira and Thomas 2017; Belli and Bursens 2023), we find that groups that employ revolving door lobbyists enjoy significantly more frequent access to decision-making venues. In addition, increased interest mobilization in a policy domain leads to less access. Under low levels of interest mobilization ( $\mu - 1SD$ ), organizations have a predicted access value of 2.51 (SE = 0.07). In contrast, the predicted access score for high levels of interest mobilization ( $\mu + 1SD$ ) is significantly lower: 2.33 (SE = 0.08). This is not surprising as previous studies pointed out that when a larger number of advocates are active in a particular policy field, policymakers are more selective regarding whom to grant access (Hanegraaff et al. 2020).

Examining the interaction term *revolving door*  $\times$  *interest mobilization* in Model 2 reveals that the effect of hiring from the public sector is nuanced. The negative interaction coefficient suggests that within policy areas where interest mobilization is minimal, employing revolving door lobbyists enhances access. Furthermore, the positive coefficient associated with the revolving door variable in Model 2 illustrates how its effect intensifies in policy areas with no interest mobilization. Figure 3 visually illustrates this interaction by presenting variations in predicted values of access across different levels of interest mobilization and the inclination of interest groups to enlist revolving door lobbyists. For interest groups engaged in policy domains with low interest mobilization (involving 50 active organizations), those employing individuals from the public sector have a predicted access score

of 2.67 (SE = 0.08). Conversely, interest groups not employing revolving door lobbyists exhibit a significantly lower predicted access score of 2.47 (SE = 0.07). This means, interest groups employing individuals from the public sector tend to enjoy more frequent access in policy domains with low interest mobilization compared to those not employing revolving door lobbyists. On the other hand, in policy domains with high interest mobilization (involving 250 active organizations), interest groups hiring professionals with public sector experience show a predicted access score of 2.26 (SE = 0.07), while those not hiring revolving door lobbyists have a slightly higher predicted access score of 2.28 (SE = 0.08), although this difference is not statistically significant. In summary, our findings suggest that employing revolving door lobbyists might offer advantages in policy areas with low interest mobilization. However, their impact on access appears less significant in policy domains characterized by high interest mobilization. These results underscore the nuanced role of hiring former public officials as lobbyists in gaining access, contingent upon the specific policy environment.

Our control variables also yield interesting insights, confirming well-established findings in the interest groups' literature, showing robustness of the data we employed. First, we find evidence of a business bias regarding access to the policymaking (Hanegraaff and Berkhout 2019). Second, we find support for the positive relationship between staff size and access – one of the best-established effects in the interest group literature. Thirdly, functional differentiation into specialized committees seems to allow organization to interact more efficiently with policymakers, hence gain more access (Albareda 2020). Fourthly, groups that engage more in inside lobbying evidently are more likely to gain more contact with policymakers. Lastly, the lack of significant coefficients concerning country-level differences indicates the resilience of our argument across diverse political systems, irrespective of the type of interest mediation system and the level of democratic maturity.

### **Conclusion**

This paper was set out to explain under which conditions hiring revolving door lobbyists will lead to more frequent access. The main argument put forward was that the impact of recruiting from the public sector on gaining access depends on the level of interest mobilization in policy areas. Our main expectation was that employing former public officials would be more effective for interest groups active in policy domains with low levels of interest mobilization. Conversely, when policy domains attract intensive interest mobilization, the competitive advantage of groups hiring from the public sector disappears compared to those that do not employ former staff with public sector experience. To test these expectations, survey data from seven European political systems were utilized, and the analysis demonstrated that the revolving door phenomenon plays a crucial role in explaining interest group access to policymaking. Nonetheless, the beneficial role of recruiting from the public sector is contingent on the level of interest mobilization in policy domains.

Our study has clear normative implications. At first glance, our results paint a somewhat apolitical picture of policymaking where the understanding of complex political processes and the ability to convert complex and technical policy expertise



into tangible policy options hold significant sway (Belli and Bursens 2023; Thomas and LaPira 2017); McCrain 2018. In other words, revolving door lobbyists have substantial opportunities to leverage their process-oriented knowledge for political gains. However, the findings also suggest that interest mobilization and increased lobbying pressures can counterbalance the beneficial impact of hiring from the public sector in gaining access. This nuanced perspective challenges the widespread concern that hiring revolving door lobbyists grants organizations a golden key to political-administrative venues.

While this research makes valuable contributions to ongoing debates, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. One pitfall of the analyses presented in our paper is that there is a measurement problem with the dependent variable (access), which is not measured at the same level as our critical moderating variable (interest mobilization). For our units of observation, which are organization – policy field combinations, access is measured at the level of the organization, whereas the level of interest mobilization is measured at the level of the policy field. However, the access that organizations gain can be related to multiple policy fields. While we tried to account for this mismatch in the level at which both variables are measured, future studies should address this issue by adopting a more aligned measurement strategy that captures both variables at compatible levels of analysis. Moreover, our data does not allow us to account for the duration of public sector experience, or the proportion of an organization's staff sourced from the public sector. Subsequent research could address this limitation by integrating organizational data with information about the career backgrounds of group staff to gain a more detailed understanding of the relationship between revolving doors and access (Halpin and Lotric 2023). Lastly, it is important to note that our statistical analyses do allow us to establish the causal claims we propose, and it remains plausible that the causal direction of certain multivariate findings could be reversed. Still, the sequence of causation we present aligns with a substantial body of empirical research on the effects of revolving doors and interest group mobilization. In this vein, we suggest that future studies employ qualitative process-tracing methodologies to explore the underlying mechanisms more comprehensively and utilize experimental research designs to validate the suggested causal relationships.

Despite these potential avenues for future investigation, this study makes a substantial contribution by examining the conditional nature of the link between hiring revolving door lobbyists and accessing decision-making processes. While the transition of high-profile public figures into lobbying roles has captured heightened societal attention, comprehensive political science research investigating the *effects* of revolving doors in Europe remains limited. Specifically, the exploration of how the efficacy of revolving door practices in facilitating access and influence might vary across different policy dynamics has been rarely explored. This paper presents the first comparative analysis of the effect of the propensity to hire from the public sector on access. Its primary finding underscores the noteworthy impact of revolving door practices on shaping patterns of access for interest groups, particularly within policy domains characterized by limited interest mobilization.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X2400014X>

**Data availability statement.** Replication materials are available in the *Journal of Public Policy* Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/C5P51B>

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