Chapter 5
Access to Gatekeepers

Once *viral lobbying* is set in motion through successful issue mobilisation (Chapter 3) and the choice of specific strategies to advocate different interests (Chapter 4), a crucial question is whether and when active interest groups can secure actual *political access*. As we described in Chapter 1, *access* can be seen as a third step in the influence production process on a (new) set of issues – in our case policies related to the spread of COVID-19. Similarly, Binderkrantz and Pedersen (2017, 307) argue that there is ‘potential in studying interest group access as a crucial step towards gaining influence’ (also see: Truman 1951, 264).

One of the advantages of studying political access is that it captures whether and how interest groups actually manage to become involved in the political and media system. Halpin and Fraussen (2017, 725) define access as a situation ‘where a group is granted contact with policymakers or institutions’. They add that access ‘is something that not all groups have and it must in some real sense be ‘won’ or ‘granted’. Put differently, access is a measure of whether interest groups passed a ‘threshold controlled by relevant gatekeepers’ (Binderkrantz and Pedersen 2017, 307). Gatekeepers here include a number of decision makers in different *arenas* or *venues* of public policy, including governments, parliaments, the bureaucracy, but also the media, as an important and exclusive forum of public policy debate (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015; Binderkrantz, Bonafont, and Halpin 2016; Junk 2019).

Practically, such access is a first *desired outcome* for interest groups that use different lobbying strategies on an issue: Active groups compete for the time and attention of political gatekeepers both inside and outside political institutions. Securing that a group’s interests receive due attention from target audiences is, in that sense, a typical lobbying goal.

At the same time, aggregate patterns in lobbying access give important insights into whether there are *biases* in the interest group system (Lowery et al. 2015; Rasmussen and Gross 2015), such as inequalities in how much attention different types of interests receive from political gatekeepers. Normatively, one can argue that the policy process should ideally give different social and economic groups similar opportunities to voice their needs and concerns. Moreover, the failure to include some societal interests in policy debates can produce inefficient policy outputs (Olson 1982) and can, for instance, lead to an upper-class bias (Schattschneider 1960) in political involvement and decision-making, where economic interests and wealthy organisations are overrepresented.
In this chapter, we therefore analyse patterns in lobbying access after the outbreak of the pandemic. Existing studies suggest that political access often favours more resourceful and business interests in society (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015; Eising 2007; Danielian and Page 1994). Our first aim is to evaluate whether this is the case at different stages of the pandemic, such as its early months, characterised by urgency and uncertainty, and the successive period of adaptation that many governments have labelled as ‘living with COVID’. Secondly, we add the perspective of whether patterns in access are responsive to the underlying interests in society after a focussing event, in our case the spread of COVID-19, that has affected organisations to varying degrees (cf. Junk et al. 2021a). Finally, the interest group literature usually presents access as a combination of the use of strategies by interest groups, i.e. the supply of lobbying, and the decisions of political gatekeepers, i.e. their demand for input by lobbyists (cf. Binderkrantz and Pedersen 2017; Halpin and Fraussen 2017). Given the previous chapter has shed light on patterns in interest group strategies, we here pay special attention to the demand-driven side of access by looking at factors that explain which interest groups are more likely to be contacted by gatekeepers with requests to give input on Coronavirus-related policies. Since the behaviour of gatekeepers potentially varies depending on contextual factors, such as the parties that are in government or the capacities of the different political and media systems after the outbreak of the pandemic, we also assess the patterns in each of the seven countries and at the EU-level separately.

In a nutshell, three main findings stand out based on our data on political and media access at the start of the pandemic (March to June 2020) and in its later phase (June 2020 to June 2021). First, there is some evidence for a bias in favour of business organisations and other economic interest groups. Access advantages for business organisations have only been temporary and venue-specific (applying to the bureaucracy at the start of the pandemic), but gatekeeper’s demand for group input has partly favoured economic groups. Second, there is strong evidence that better resourced groups had access advantages: Organisations with higher resources had more frequent access to all venues (the media, government, parliament, the bureaucracy), were more likely to be invited to comment on COVID-19 related issues by both policymakers and media gatekeepers, and were more frequently included in exclusive talks on such issues. Third, higher affectedness by the pandemic is strongly related to the frequency of access to

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22 Our theoretical arguments build on work published elsewhere which explores changes in access patterns since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Europe (Junk et al. 2021a). To this, we here add further measures of the demand side of access (i.e. contact that is initiated by policymakers and journalists), as well as a more refined analysis of country-level differences.
all venues, as well as to demand-driven access in form of contact initiated by gatekeepers.

This chapter reconstructs access dynamics during the pandemic starting with a theoretical account of lobbying access dynamics after the focusing event of the spread of COVID-19. Building on classical interest group scholarship, the section presents both ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’ expectations about drivers of lobbying access during the pandemic. The following section tests such expectations and presents the results of the analyses of access patterns to key venues of public debate and policymaking in two phases of the Coronavirus pandemic (2020 and 2021). Particular attention is given to the processes which explain when gatekeepers grant access to interest groups. The final section summarises the results and reflects on their implications for the literature on lobbying access in general and, more specifically, for the next chapter on interest group influence on COVID-19 policy.

**Lobbying Access after a Focusing Event**

The existing interest group literature has pointed to both organisation-level and contextual factors that explain who gets a voice in different venues or arenas of public policy, (e.g. Beyers 2004; Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015; Chalmers 2013; Dür and Mateo 2013; Eising 2007; Danielian and Page 1994; Hanegraaff, van der Ploeg, and Berkhout 2020; Junk 2019). These studies provide evidence that access to political discussions is distributed unequally among interest groups active in a given community (cf. Baumgartner and Leech 2001; De Bruycker and Beyers 2015; Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015). A small share of groups generally receives most access, while a large share of groups is only rarely involved in the policy process (Berkhout and Lowery 2010). This finding holds across policy venues, including the media (Binderkrantz, Bonafont, and Halpin 2016), and there is evidence that the same interest groups persistently secure access across venues (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015), potentially because they can act as central ‘bridges’ between venues in complex policy networks (LaPira, Thomas, and Baumgartner 2014; Ackland and Halpin 2019).

Furthermore, several studies suggest that political insiders (i.e. those that gain more regular access to policymakers and journalists), tend to be actors with higher resources, while less resourceful actors are more likely to remain political outsiders (cf. Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015; Dür and Mateo 2013; Rasmussen and Gross 2015; Maloney, Jordan, and Andrew 1994; Fraussen, Beyers, and Donas 2015). When it comes to access to policymakers,
some studies also highlight that these interact more frequently with business actors than citizen groups (e.g. Baumgartner et al. 2009; Berkhout and Lowery 2010; Beyers 2004).

The first open question we raise against the backdrop of this literature is whether these potential biases also characterise viral lobbying access, i.e. access to different gatekeepers after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as specifically on COVID-19 related policies. Different strands of theory on lobbying and interest groups lead to different expectations in this regard, which we can, broadly speaking, classify as a pessimistic, and an optimistic account of drivers of political access in response to a focussing event.

The pessimistic account builds on theories that characterise lobbying access as elitist and biased in favour of better-resourced actors. These theories would expect that, even under changing circumstances, the same economically powerful groups should enjoy systematic access benefits and be favoured by political gatekeepers. In contrast, the more optimistic account is rooted in pluralist theories of interest group politics, which expect that the nature and scope of the underlying interests in society drive lobbying activities, as well as the levels of political access granted by decision makers. When interest group systems are faced with a far-reaching focussing event like the pandemic, these theories would expect that highly affected interest groups lobby more (see also Chapter 3 and 4) and that gatekeepers have incentives to pay special attention to affected groups.

In the next sections, we outline these two strands of theory in more detail and with a focus on the role of political gatekeepers (i.e. the demand side), which complements the supply-side focus on mobilisation and strategies in the previous chapters.

‘Pessimistic’ Accounts of Biases in Political Access after a Focussing Event

Famously, Olson (1965) and Schattschneider (1960) were very critical of the ability of diverse sets of interest groups to seek political access, for instance due to free rider problems and upper-class biases in the ability to lobby. These arguments lead to the expectation that there are major differences at the supply side when it comes to seeking access after a focussing event (see also Chapter 3 and 4), especially based on the type of organisation and its resources. Like in previous chapters, we expect that business interests are best equipped to act effectively, and NGOs and citizen groups to face the largest mobilisation problems and strategy constraints. Similarly, interest groups that have higher organisational resources should be best equipped to re-align their advocacy efforts after the focussing event and seek access.
These advantages at the supply side might further be aggravated at the demand side. First, business groups and better resourced actors may be favoured by gatekeepers, because they tend to be highly professionalised (Hanegraaff, van der Ploeg, and Berkhout 2020; Heylen, Willems, and Beyers 2020). Kriesi (1996, 158) notes that organisations ‘with formalised and professionalised structures tend to have easier access to public authorities, because government bureaucracies prefer to deal with organisations with working procedures similar to their own’.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, they may be in a better position to provide gatekeepers with what they want. Lobbying access is often described as an exchange relationship, where interest groups supply ‘access goods’ that are valued by gatekeepers (Bouwen 2004). A common assumption in exchange theories of lobbying is that political actors exchange policy-relevant information for access and influence in political arenas (see, e.g. Klüver 2013; Berkhout 2013) or a voice in the media (De Bruycker and Beyers 2015; Junk 2019). Policy-relevant information that organisations can provide spans several types (De Bruycker 2016; Flöthe 2019; Hall and Deardorff 2006), including political and technical information, impact assessments and research studies. These are resource-intensive to conduct and can support the work of policymakers and media gatekeepers in important ways.

Especially under new and uncertain circumstances, which arise after a far-reaching focussing event like the spread of the Coronavirus, gatekeepers face challenges when it comes to in-house resources to gather, systematise and verify information. Organisations with high levels of resources might here have special advantages because they can meet an urgent need for input and assistance in information collection. As an example, the consultancy McKinsey & Company offered free of charge support to Danish authorities to inform calculations for the 10 billion Danish Kroner’s worth Crisis Fund for Danish companies in 2020. This has prompted civil society organisations to criticise the government for having given an unfair advantage to McKinsey & Company (DR 2020). Without entering into the merits of the case, this is an illustration of how informational resources can help secure a unique access position that would, otherwise, have been impossible to obtain.

Furthermore, gatekeepers arguably have incentives to favour economic groups (spanning business organisations, as well as associations of professionals and unions), especially in times of crisis. We expect this effect because economic downturns and high unemployment can have overwhelming effects on voters (Bloom and Price 1975), and (local) economic growth and well-being are issues that are prioritised in media debates (Andrews and Caren 2010). Different gatekeepers therefore have incentives to give access to economic groups. This is par-
ticularly evident in circumstances of economic crisis, where the threat of economic downturn provides incentives to gatekeepers to grant a voice to representatives of economic interests (Blau, Brough, and Thomas 2013; Adelino and Dinc 2014).

In the case of the pandemic, the economic consequences of lockdown policies were highly feared, and difficult to balance with health-related concerns. Policy design regarding the length of the lockdown, the timing of the easing of restrictions, the size of rescue packages, as well as the proportion of out-of-work benefits entailed high levels of uncertainty for policymakers. Special taskforces to evaluate crisis management and economic recovery were, therefore, created by all western governments to face unprecedented levels of uncertainty in the direction of crisis policy. This includes general task forces, such as the COVID-19 Task Force in Italy, or more specialised ones, such as the Tourism Recovery Task Force in Ireland. This anxiety about the scope and impact of crisis policies during the pandemic is likely to have increased the demand by political gatekeepers for input from economic groups (i.e. business actors, firms, trade unions and profession associations), for instance to gauge consequences of a lockdown and inform the design of economic rescue packages.

In short, based on the literature on lobbying access and gatekeeper demand in crisis situations, we expect business groups and other economic groups, as well as groups with higher resources to enjoy higher access during the COVID-19 pandemic than other groups. Moreover, we expect this to be partly driven by the demand of gatekeepers. Hypotheses 1 and 2 summarise these expectations.

**H1** ‘group type hypothesis’: Economic groups i) had higher access to political venues during the pandemic than NGOs and citizen groups, and ii) were more likely to be contacted (more often) by political gatekeepers than NGOs and citizen groups.

**H2** ‘resources hypothesis’: The more lobbying resources interest groups had, i) the more frequent was their access to political venues during the pandemic, and ii) the more likely they were to be contacted (more often) by political gatekeepers.

**‘Optimistic’ Accounts of Inclusive Political Access after a Focussing Event**

Alternatively, and perhaps more optimistically, one might argue that there are reasons to expect that access after a focussing event will favour other actors than just better resourced organisations and economic groups. When a focussing event poses new policy problems and changes the information needs of gatekeepers, as well as the preferences and concerns of interest groups, one might...
expect access patterns to favour those groups that are *highly affected* by these policy problems.

Quite intuitively, after an event or shock that requires policy change, gatekeepers such as policymakers and journalists should grant access to those organisations hit by the consequences of said event. In circumstances of financial and economic crises, studies have observed this for associations representing the financial and banking sector or business associations representing firms in economic distress (Blau, Brough, and Thomas 2013; Adelino and Dinc 2014; Kastner 2018; Keller 2018). Rather than evidence for a general business bias, these access advantages could also be explained by the nature of these crises.

Given the global pandemic has had far-reaching effects across many different sectors, it might arguably be seen (at the least) as a simultaneous health, economic, educational, cultural and care-taking crisis. Highly affected organisations, therefore, span many different types of groups and sectors, which had high stakes in policy. Such highly affected interest groups have reasons to seek access (see Chapters 3 and 4). At the same time, the input of affected groups is likely to be critical for understanding and solving the arising policy problems, so gatekeepers should have incentives to grant them access.

Such arguments echo pluralist theories of interest group politics. Most famously, Truman (1951, 511) argues that changes in society are a main driver for people to organise themselves. Any ‘disturbance’, as he calls it, ‘in established relationships anywhere in society may produce new patterns of interaction aimed at restricting or eliminating the disturbance’ (also see discussion by: Lowery and Brasher 2004). While such ‘disturbances’ are traditionally seen as drivers of the initial formation of groups, pluralist theory also applies to the activities of existing interest groups, i.e. the *supply-side* of access (see discussion in: Rasmussen, Carroll, and Lowery 2014). As we showed in Chapters 3 and 4, affectedness by a focussing event is a main driver of the decision of groups to mobilise and affects the frequency of their strategy employment. These patterns at the *supply* side are in line with pluralist theory.

The next question is, however, whether these supply-side patterns also translate into actual access of affected interests. This depends on whether there are access barriers at the *demand* side that block access even when groups are highly affected by a ‘disturbance’. Pluralist theory is optimistic in the sense that it does not typically expect policymakers’ attention to be (very) scarce. Salisbury (1990, 214) even holds that ‘interest groups are virtually awash with access’. Still, it remains important to ask which groups manage to ‘win’ (most) access (Halpin and Fraussen 2017, 725).

Truman (1951, 511) arguably implies that policymakers have incentives to anticipate the effects of the disturbance on different social and economic groups by
seeking to include these in the policy debate. Newer interpretations of pluralist theory (Junk et al. 2021a, 5; Rasmussen and Gross 2015, 349) assume that these incentives result in a demand-pull for input from affected interests, perhaps through the creation of new fora for interest representation (e.g. Broscheid and Coen 2007). Put differently, policymakers, as well as media actors interested in ‘news value’ (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Binderkrantz, Bonafont, and Halpin 2016), can be expected to seek to consult groups whose interests are most affected by a focussing event.

This argument also resonates with seeing lobbying access as an exchange-relationship, subject to the value of the ‘exchange goods’ (Bouwen 2004), as mentioned above. While higher lobbying resources can help gather policy-relevant information, high affectedness by a focussing event might in itself mean that an interest group can offer relevant information for addressing a policy problem. In case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this could apply to associations of teachers and healthcare professionals, patient groups, and organisations in the tourism industry, which held policy-relevant information, irrespective of their resources.

In short, based on pluralist theories and a more optimistic interpretation of exchange theory, we expect access patterns, including the demand by political gatekeepers, to favour more affected groups after a focussing event, here the COVID-19 pandemic. We therefore formulate our next hypothesis as follows:

**H3 ‘affectedness hypothesis’:** The more affected interest groups were by the pandemic i) the higher was their access to political venues, and ii) the more likely they were to be contacted (more often) by political gatekeepers.

In the next section, we test these expectations based on our cross-country survey data that allows us to assess whether lobbying access varied between different types of organisations, as well as between different venues of policymaking, different countries and/or at different stages of the pandemic.

**Analysis: Lobbying Access during the Pandemic**

We use data from both waves of our cross-country survey (Junk et al. 2020; Junk et al. 2021b) to speak to these expectations. We first present data on the *frequency of access* after the outbreak of the crisis (March to June 2020) and in a later phase of the pandemic (June 2020 to June 2021). As we argued earlier in this chapter, these levels of access are a product of both the *supply* of strategies by interest groups and the *demand* of gatekeepers who grant access to the group (Halpin
and Fraussen 2017; Binderkrantz and Pedersen 2017). Based on our analyses of how groups seek access in the previous chapters, we can evaluate these access levels and infer whether practices of gatekeepers continued or changed patterns that stem from interest groups’ issue mobilisation and strategy use.

In addition, the second part of our analysis is dedicated solely to the demand side: Here we analyse to which extent group type, resources and affectedness explain whether and how often gatekeepers reached out to an interest group and asked the organisation for input on COVID-19 related policies. Jointly, these analyses provide rich evidence on patterns in viral lobbying access, and the role of gatekeepers in granting or denying access to some interest groups. For both total access and demand-driven access, we first give a descriptive overview, and then present results from multivariate regression models.

Overview of Access Patterns

Like in the previous chapter, our empirical analyses distinguish between different venues in which interest groups can seek and potentially gain access to give input to public policy (cf. Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015; Binderkrantz and Pedersen 2017). Specifically, we study ‘outside’ access to the mainstream media and ‘inside’ access to governments, parliaments, and the bureaucracy. Note that for social media use, which we analysed as a lobbying strategy in the previous chapter, there is ‘automatic’ access, given there is usually no control by gatekeepers. For this reason, social media are not included in our analyses of lobbying access. Figure 5.1 provides a descriptive overview of the frequency of access to the four venues as measured in our two waves of the survey in 2020 and 2021. Notably, the two measures vary in two respects.

First, the two measures cover different time periods and phases in the pandemic: The 2020 measure covers access in a three-months period (March 2020 to June 2020) right after the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe. As explained in Chapter 2, the survey was fielded in June 2020 shortly after many European countries had started easing lockdown restrictions after the first European wave of the virus. Arguably, this is a phase where interest groups and gatekeepers were most overwhelmed by the new policy problems connected to the virus and lockdown measures tended to be more restrictive than in successive periods. The 2021 measure, on the other hand, covers a longer period (June 2020–June

23 Except in rare cases, such as when Facebook and Twitter refused access to Donald Trump or other political personas.
2021), during which the intensity of the crisis varied, and both interest groups and gatekeepers have had more time to adapt to the new (and changing) reality of pandemic politics. This measure is more likely to represent interest groups’ resilience to crises circumstances as well as processes of adaptation that are more likely to carry a profound impact on *viral lobbying* also after the Coronavirus pandemic.

Moreover, the two measures vary in their policy focus: The 2020 survey asked respondents to rate the frequency of access since the outbreak of the pandemic to the different political venues. This measure is ‘general’ in that it did not distinguish whether the group received access on pandemic-related policies, or other policies. In contrast, the 2021 survey focused on access on COVID-related issues (*viral policies*: i.e. health and safety measures, closing or opening of sectors, securing of help and economic support packages, vaccination programs) in the 12 months period described above. Other than this, the question wording was the same.

Other than this, both survey items where phrased identically and asked respondents to rate how frequently they gained access to each venue, where answer categories ranged from Never (1); Less than once a month (2); Once a month (3); Once a week (4); to Almost on a daily basis (5).

As Figure 5.1 shows, both measures seem to be distributed relatively similarly, and indicate that a large share of respondents enjoyed (some) access. This is noteworthy, because it documents that intense and continuous interaction between the state and society happened during the pandemic. Nevertheless, in both measures we see a group of ‘outsiders’ for each venue that never attained access. Interestingly, the share of respondents that never had access is highest in the media in both waves of the survey (at 29 and 40 percent, respectively), and lowest in the bureaucracy (at 16 and 19 percent). This might tentatively suggest that media gatekeepers tended to systematically favour the same groups in their access provision – and more so than other gatekeepers in inside venues. In addition, we see that the share of ‘almost daily’ access is highest in the bureaucracy (at 19 and 9 percent of groups) in both periods, suggesting this venue has granted most frequent access to interest groups.

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24 However, considering the extraordinary circumstances of the first months of the crisis, we can safely assume that most groups lobbied on policy (closely) related to COVID-19 issues.

25 This is different from items we used in Chapter 4 to measure strategy use since these asked how often interest groups ‘sought contact’ (without guarantee of access). For exact question wording see Junk et al. (2020) and Junk et al. (2021a).

26 An alternative explanation is that bureaucratic access is less scarce than media access due to higher staff capacities in the bureaucracy.
When comparing the 2020 and 2021 distributions, we see that access frequencies are generally lower when looking only at viral policies and at the longer period. This makes sense, given that gaining daily access over a year’s period is harder, and given that the intensity of policy challenges caused by the pandemic varied over this period²⁷. Nevertheless, the patterns look relatively alike.

Still, this distribution does not provide any insights on whether the same (types of) organisations gained access in these different periods. The strength of correlations between access measured in the two waves of the survey speaks to this question. It is high: spearman’s rank correlation lies between 0.60 and 0.65 in the different venues for those groups that responded to both waves of the survey. This indicates that higher access early in the pandemic is strongly related to higher access later on – but by no means a perfect predictor. Similarly, correlations between access frequencies to different venues are relatively high for

²⁷ Many European countries had, for example, experienced a drop in the number of cases in late 2020 before the outbreak of the much more contagious Delta variant in early 2021.
both waves of the survey, suggesting that access (to a certain extent) is cumulative (Binderkrantz et al. 2015).^{28}

Next, we are interested in whether there are systematic patterns in these access levels, especially related to the expectations we started out with on the effects of group type, resources and affectedness by the pandemic. We therefore test to what extent these interest group characteristics explain the variation in access in each venue and at the different time intervals.

**Explanatory Models of Access**

Like in previous chapters, we distinguish between *business groups and firms*, *profession groups and unions*, and *NGOs and citizen groups*. In line with Hypothesis 1, we now use *NGOs and citizen groups* as reference category, in order to compare it with different types of economic groups (business organisations, profession groups and unions). We test Hypothesis 2 measuring resources for lobbying as the number of staff working on public affairs in the organisations in three categories (low (<1), medium (1–4) and high (≥5)). To test Hypothesis 3 on the effect of affectedness, we rely on the survey item that measures the extent to which an organisation, according to its own perception, was ‘more or less affected by the Coronavirus crisis, compared to other stakeholders’ in the polity on a 5-point scale (from (1) ‘much less affected’ to (5) ‘much more affected’). For more details on these variables, see Chapter 2.

In addition, the following controls are included in all models: The age of an organisation, which is likely to affect existing relationships to gatekeepers, as well as plausibly being related to lobbying resources and group type. For the same reason, we control for the extent to which an organisation is an umbrella organisation. In addition, we include fixed effects for countries to take contextual differences in access into account, and cluster standard errors by sector given lobbying access for groups in the same sector is likely to be interdependent. The full regression output in table form can be found in the Online Appendix of the book (Tables A5.1 and A5.2).

Figure 5.2 plots the coefficients of interest based on a sequence of ordered logistic regressions to attend to the ordinal structure of our outcome variables (the frequency of access). Where the confidence intervals (straight lines) of the

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^{28} The lowest correlation is found between access to the media and access to the bureaucracy (0.55 and 0.51 in 2020 and 2021, respectively). The highest is between access to government and parliament (0.78 and 0.71 in 2020 and 2021).
plotted coefficients (dot in the middle) do not overlap with 0 (the vertical dotted line), we can say with high certainty that there is a significant relationship between the factor and the frequency of use of the lobbying strategy. We will discuss what the figure reveals about access to the different outside and inside venues in turn.

![Figure 5.2: Ordered logistic regression on lobbying access to inside and outside venues for 2020 and 2021. Coefficients and 95/90% confidence intervals.](image)

Notes: The figure is based on eight ordered logistic regressions (one for each dependent variable: media access; government access; parliament access; bureaucracy access for our 2020 and 2021 survey waves respectively). For 2020, Model 1 (n=1094), Model 2 (n=1092), Model 3 (n=1092), Model 4 (n= 1095). For 2021, Model 1 (n=637), Model 2 (n=633), Model 3 (n=636), Model 4 (n= 633). Included controls in all these models were: organisation age, the group’s potential status as an umbrella organisation, and fixed effects for the country/polity. Moreover, we clustered standard errors by sector given that access for groups within a sector is likely to be related. For results in table form, see Tables A5.1 and A5.2 in the Online Appendix. Measures of goodness of fit (pseudo R-squared) lie between 0.10 and 0.13.

First, media access in both periods has favoured actors with medium and high resources (compared to the baseline of actors with low resources), as we expected based on the more pessimistic take on (resource exchange) theories. To illustrate the size of these effects, we calculate the predicted likelihood for different
groups (not) to attain access based on these models.²⁹ For 2020, the predicted probability for an organisation with low resources to receive *no access* to the media venue is 45 percent. In contrast, an organisation with high resources only has an 8 percent probability to never receive media access. Conversely, organisations with low resources only have a 6 percent predicted probability to attain *weekly* access to the media, whereas this is 30 percent for organisations with high resources. Similar gaps in the likelihood that low and highly resourced organisations receive media access are present in 2021.

Second, contrary to what we also expected based on more *pessimistic* theories, differences between types of interest groups are not pronounced when it comes to outside access. Based on our data from 2020, there is no significant difference in media access between *NGOs and citizen groups* and the other types of actors. Interestingly, our data from the second wave (2021) suggests that *business associations and firms* in fact enjoyed less frequent access compared to NGOs and citizen groups (the baseline in these models). This difference is most evident at very high levels of access (*almost daily access*) and at no access (*never*): NGOs and citizen groups have a 27 percent predicted probability to access the media very frequently, while business groups and firms are at only 19 percent. Similarly, NGOs and citizen groups have a 35 percent predicted probability to *never* access the media, while this probability is 45 percent for business groups and firms. And this in not because business groups did not try to get into the media: in the previous chapter, we showed that business interest groups indicate to use media outside strategies more frequently than other types of actors (Figure 4.2).

Finally, higher affectedness by the pandemic is clearly related to higher access to the media. For 2020, holding other characteristics constant, our models suggest that a least affected organisation had only a 7 percent probability of accessing this venue on a *weekly* basis. In contrast, the probability is 23 percent for most affected organisations. For 2021, this substantial effect of affectedness is somewhat smaller, but still remarkable: A least affected group has only a 3 percent chance of weekly accessing the media, whereas this increases to 12 percent for highly affected groups. At the same time, these numbers suggest that access to the media has been highly competitive during the pandemic – even for highly affected groups.

With the exception of group type patterns, these findings for *outside* access to the media strongly mirror access to the other three *inside* venues: government, parliament and the bureaucracy. In all three cases, we see parallel findings when

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²⁹ All predicted probabilities/values are based on the main models (see Figure 5.2) when holding all other variables at means.
it comes to groups with higher and medium resources enjoying more frequent access, compared to organisations with low resources. These effects are substantial. Taking government access in 2020 as an example, the predicted probability for organisations with low resources to have *weekly* access to this venue is 6 percent but increases to 34 percent for better-resourced interest groups. At the same time, higher affectedness significantly and substantially increases access to all three inside venues. With regards to access to parliament in 2021, for example, our model predicts an 18 percent probability that most affected groups had *weekly* access to this venue, while this is only 5 percent for least affected ones. These findings concerning inside venues hold both for the 2020 and 2021 measures, meaning that they hold at the beginning and throughout the pandemic, as well as for general policymaking and for specific Coronavirus-related policies.

Another insight from Figure 5.2 is that differences between the venues seem limited to whether and how different types of groups enjoyed access advantages. There do not seem to be clear differences between economic groups (business groups and firms, as well as unions and profession groups) compared to non-economic groups (NGO and citizen groups) when it comes to access to parliaments and governments (in neither 2020 nor 2021). Bureaucratic access has, however, clearly favoured economic interest groups right after the outbreak of the pandemic. Nevertheless, such advantage disappears when access concerns Coronavirus-related policies in the period between June 2020 and June 2021. This could be related to the formulation and implementation of urgency legislation in the first part of the pandemic (e.g. definition of essential and not essential services, closure of economic activities and health and safety protocols for essential activities). Once defined, it may be that such access advantages disappeared, making economic interests as likely as others to access this venue.

To sum up, we find evidence for both optimistic and pessimistic accounts of lobbying access. While access is biased in the sense that better resourced groups clearly attained more access to all venues, we also see that more affected groups were granted more access across the board. Moreover, there is no consistent bias across venues in favour of some group types, and temporary advantages for economic groups in some arenas (the bureaucracy) might partly be offset by disadvantages in other venues (the media).

When comparing these patterns to the drivers of strategy use (Chapter 4), we find a high degree of consistency. Resource advantages and affectedness systematically predict the frequency of use of both inside and outside strategies to influence public policy. These then consistently translate into access to key venues of policymaking. Differences between group types in access patterns are, however, less pronounced than in the use of lobbying strategies. Chapter 4 showed that business associations and firms consistently used inside and outside strategies
more frequently than NGOs and citizens groups (with the exception of social media strategies). Combined with the results in this chapter, it seems that many of the lobbying efforts by business organisations fall short of actually gaining access, given these groups do not have significantly higher access patterns compared to NGOs and citizen groups (except when it comes to access to the bureaucracy in 2020).

A potential explanation for this is that gatekeepers actively counter these biases in lobbying supply through their consultation practises. To test the role of gatekeepers in this relationship more directly, the next sections look at patterns in contact that is initiated by political gatekeepers, for instance when they invite interest groups to comment on legislation or news stories.

**Overview of Gatekeeper Demand for Interest Group Input**

In both waves of our survey, we also addressed whether groups were contacted by gatekeepers in relation to Coronavirus-related policies. Such attempts by gatekeepers to initiate contact with interest groups are a direct measure of their demand for input by interest groups.

Figure 5.3 summarises descriptively what types of interest groups in each country and at the EU level were (not) contacted by gatekeepers based on the responses to the two waves of our surveys in 2020 (left) and 2021 (right).

As in previous analyses, the 2020 measure captures the shorter timeframe after the outbreak of the pandemic (March 2020 to June 2020), while the 2021 measure captures a one-year period during the pandemic (June 2020 to June 2021). In this case, both measures address COVID-19 related policies only. These were defined in the survey as topics directly related to COVID-19 (viral policies i.e. health and safety measures, closing or opening of sectors, securing of help and economic support packages, vaccination programs) and also instances where another agenda is explicitly linked to COVID-19 (i.e. climate-friendly COVID-19 policies). In 2020, we only asked about governmental gatekeepers, while we added media gatekeepers in the 2021 survey.

In particular, the 2020 survey captured whether different types of government actors reached out to the interest group in the following forms: invitation to a consultation or expert meeting, contact by a civil servant (from government departments and government agencies), elected officials, or other government actors (e.g. hired specialists from the government). We treat this as a binary variable, where such contact is coded as (1), whereas we code as (0) where respondents report that government actors did not reach out to them. In 2021, we measured the frequency of contact in more detail, namely in four categories: Never (1),
Only once (2), A few times (3), Frequently (4), and we distinguished between contact sought by policymakers and media gatekeepers. Moreover, we covered invitations to comment and invitations to exclusive discussions separately. For Figure 5.3, we transformed this into binary variables that measure whether a group was contacted by the respective gatekeeper (policymakers and media gatekeepers) in any form. In the multivariate analyses, which we present in the next section, we use the ordinal frequency of contact measures.

Given gatekeeper behaviour is likely to depend on contextual factors, such as the parties in government or the media system, we show patterns in each country and for the EU-level separately in Figure 5.3. For each country, the figure shows the share of different group types (business groups and firms, profession groups and unions, as well as NGOs and citizen groups) among respondents that were contacted by gatekeepers, as well as those that were not contacted by policymakers and/or the media. This gives a first impression of whether there are systematic group type differences in the extent to which interest groups were contacted by gatekeepers or not. Indeed, as Figure 5.3 suggests, there is country-level variation in the composition of which group types were contacted by gatekeepers or not.

**Figure 5.3:** Overview of groups reporting they have (not) been contacted by gatekeepers about COVID-19-related issues
In Denmark, Sweden, Ireland, and at EU level, for instance, the share of different group types among organisations that were contacted by government gatekeepers is very similar to that of groups that were not contacted. In case of the media (2021), however, there seem to be larger imbalances. As can be seen in the bottom-right section of the figure, in Denmark, 43 percent of the groups that reported that they were contacted by journalists were business organisations and firms, 34 percent were profession groups and unions, and 23 percent were NGO and citizen groups. In contrast, the share of the latter groups is considerably higher among groups that were not contacted (33 percent), while business groups and firms only account for 23 percent of the non-contacted groups. This tentatively suggests an imbalance favouring economic groups when journalists sought to speak to interest groups in Denmark. A similar trend in media access is observed also in Ireland.

We also see imbalances in government demand in some of the countries. This is evident in the Netherlands (2020 and 2021) and Germany (2020) where the share of contacted business groups and firms clearly outweighs the non-contacted ones. Still, it is important to note that some of the patterns may also be driven by the low number of responses in some of the countries, especially in the second wave of the survey (see Chapter 2 for details). Moreover, there might be confounders, that is, other factors than group type that drive the demand for access and are correlated with group type (such as lobbying resources).

Explanatory Models of Gatekeeper Demand for Interest Group Input

For that reason, it is important to probe whether there are statistically significant relationships between demand-driven access and organisational characteristics in multivariate regressions. Figure 5.4 summarises these results based on the 2020 data for both the pooled sample, which includes all countries and the EU-level, as well as the subsample of respondents in each of the eight polities. The included controls are the same as in the previous section. Given the binary outcome variable (being contacted (1) or not (0) by government actors), we here run logistic regressions.

The models summarised in Figure 5.4 bear several interesting insights. First, neither in the pooled sample, nor in most of the country samples, there is evidence that governments significantly favoured business groups and firms compared to NGOs and citizen groups. As far as business interests are concerned, Germany is the only exception, where this interest group type is significantly more likely to be contacted, compared to NGOs and citizen groups (the baseline in the models).
In the pooled sample, we see that profession groups and unions were significantly more likely to be contacted by government actors, compared to NGOs and citizen groups (the baseline). Yet, this relationship is not significant in the country subsamples, except in Austria and (more weakly) in Sweden.30

Figure 5.4: Logistic regression on demand-driven government access in 2020. Coefficients and 95/90% confidence intervals.

Notes: The figure is based on nine logistic regressions (one for each polity under investigation plus one for ‘all polities pooled’. All polities pooled (n= 1,077). Denmark (n=250), Sweden (n=179), Germany (n=77), Ireland (n= 135), Italy (n= 55), Netherlands (n= 130), Austria (n= 73), EU (n= 171). Included controls in all these models were: organisation age, the group’s potential status as an umbrella organisation, and fixed effects for the country/polity (in the model for ‘all polities pooled’ only). Moreover, we clustered standard errors by sector given that access for groups within a sector is likely to be related. For results in table form, see Table A5.3 in the Online Appendix. Measures of goodness of fit (pseudo R-squared in Table A5.3) lie between 0.07 and 0.28.

In the pooled sample, we see that profession groups and unions were significantly more likely to be contacted by government actors, compared to NGOs and citizen groups (the baseline). Yet, this relationship is not significant in the country subsamples, except in Austria and (more weakly) in Sweden.30

30 Note that a reason for this difference between the pooled sample and individual results is likely to be the number of observations. These are lower in the country samples, which decreases modelling power and makes it less likely to find effects in the sub-samples. Moreover, it is possible that the relationship is present on average among all respondents and when controlling for
The evidence is much clearer, however, when we move to our other predictors. In the pooled sample, *medium and highly resourced* groups are significantly more likely to be contacted by government actors compared to less resourced groups (the baseline). The finding for *highly resourced* groups, in fact, holds in each of the country subsamples (weakly so in Sweden and Austria). For medium (compared to low) resourced groups the relationship is significant in most countries (exceptions are the EU-level, Italy and Germany). This gives an important verdict about patterns in government demand for input: across all countries, government gatekeepers favoured better resourced groups at the beginning of the pandemic. We interpret this as evidence that gatekeepers select organisations based on their ability to provide and communicate information, which strongly depends on their lobbying resources.

At the same time, we also find support that *more affected groups* were more likely to be contacted, meaning that gatekeepers can successfully pinpoint stakeholders in a crowded lobbying environment. This holds in the pooled analysis that takes all countries and the EU-level into account, as well as in the majority of subsample analyses. Interestingly, exceptions are Ireland, Italy and the Netherlands, where the estimated coefficient of affectedness is very close to zero. This indicates that government gatekeepers in these countries did not reach out more to affected groups at the beginning of the crisis. This might be explained by these governments’ lack of capacity to do so because of the tough circumstances early in the crisis, when Italy, for instance, faced extreme challenges with a huge number of COVID-19 cases and overburdened hospitals. An alternative explanation could be that these countries’ approach to policymaking has followed more standard consultation patterns, rather than adapting these based on the impacts of the pandemic. In that sense, there seems to be important variation in gatekeeper behaviour between countries. Nevertheless, in the aggregate, as well as the other polities individually (Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Austria and the EU-level), we clearly see that more affected groups were significantly more likely to be contacted.

To probe whether similar patterns hold in the later phase of the pandemic, we use more granular data from our second survey. Instead of whether groups were contacted by government gatekeepers, we now capture *how frequently* groups were contacted in the 12-months period (June 2020 to June 2021) under study. Answers here include four categories: ‘never’, ‘only once’, ‘several times’ and ‘frequently’. Moreover, we capture different types of gatekeepers: pol-
icymakers and journalists, and distinguish between invitations to comment and more exclusive access in form of meetings or exclusive media stories, respectively.

Figure 5.5 shows the coefficient plots of our main predictors based on ordered logistic regression models in the pooled sample (all countries plus the EU level). These findings largely confirm what is seen in Figure 5.4.

![Figure 5.5](image)

**Figure 5.5**: Ordered logistic regression on demand-driven government and media access in 2021. Coefficients and 95/90% confidence intervals.

*Notes: The figure is based on four ordered logistic regressions (one for each dependent variable of demand-driven access). Model 1: Invitation by government to comment (n=633); Model 2: Exclusive invitation by government (n=633); Model 3: Invitation by media to comment (n=633); Model 4: Exclusive invitation by media (n=634)). Included controls in all these models were: organisation age, the group’s potential status as an umbrella organisation, and fixed effects for the country/polity. Moreover, we clustered standard errors by sector given that access for groups within a sector is likely to be related. For results in table form, see Table A5.4 in the Online Appendix. Measures of goodness of fit (pseudo R-squared in Table A5.4) lie at 0.11 (Model 1), 0.10 (Model 2), 0.10 (Model 3), 0.08 (Model 4).*

Both when it comes to invitations to comment and more exclusive forms of access (meetings, exclusive newspaper stories), Figure 5.5 shows that better resourced organisations receive more frequent invitations from both policymakers
and media gatekeepers. At the same time, higher affectedness is consistently associated with higher demand-driven access. In addition, Figure 5.5 gives support for our group-type expectation. Especially if we look at exclusive inside access (Figure 5.5 bottom left), we see that the two types of economic groups (*business and firms*, as well as *profession groups and unions*) receive more frequent invitations compared to *NGOs and citizen groups*. This is the highest level of insider-ness as far as demand-side access is concerned. Interestingly, this also holds for invitations to comment in inside venues for *profession groups and unions* compared to *NGOs and citizen groups*.

In substantive terms, NGOs and citizens groups are predicted a 16 percent probability to be *frequently* invited to comment on policy issues by policymakers, while this compares to a predicted probability of 24 percent for profession groups and unions. The former are also less likely to be frequently invited to exclusive talks with policymakers (predicted probability equals 11 percent) while business groups and firms are more frequently invited to such talks with a 19 percent probability.

As far as the media is concerned, the advantage in favour of economic interests (namely *business and firms*) holds only for invitations to comment which represents a relatively lower level of insider-ness, and the result does not hold for exclusive access. The predicted probability of being *frequently* invited to comment in the media is 23 percent for *business groups and firms* and 19 percent for *NGOs and citizen groups*. In combination with our findings on total access (Figure 5.2) this is notable: while media actors reached out significantly more often to business groups in this phase of the pandemic, this has not translated to overall access advantages for economic groups.

Jointly with our results from Chapter 4, it remains inconclusive how much gatekeeper demand *actively counters* group type biases in strategy use: on the one hand, access patterns suggest supply is filtered in this way to balance out group type differences (Figure 5.2). On the other hand, the patterns we recorded in contact *initiated* by policymakers and media gatekeepers does not provide evidence for tendencies to favour NGOs and citizen groups in order to pull them into the policy process.

**Chapter Summary**

Our analysis of lobbying access during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights mixed trends. As pessimistic accounts of lobbying would predict, the availability of resources for lobbying substantially constrains an organisation’s ability to gain access to key venues of policymaking. This result holds across both inside (govern-
ment, parliament and bureaucracy) and outside venues (the media) of policy-making. We interpreted this based on both supply- and demand side explanations. Better-resourced organisations can produce more valuable information that, conversely, gatekeepers demand from interest groups. It may also be that better-resourced organisations can use such resources to become visible to gatekeepers and are, therefore, more likely to be drawn into policymaking down the line. As our analysis further shows, gatekeepers were more likely to pull better-resourced organisations into the policymaking process on COVID-19 related policy-issues. This finding is robust (at least weakly significant) across all eight polities under investigation, as well as at both moments in time for which we recorded respondents’ self-reported access frequencies.

Interestingly and somewhat in contrast to general expectations, our analysis does not show consistent evidence of an access bias in favour of economic groups. Looking at total access, business associations and firms, as well as profession groups and unions were found to dominate only the bureaucratic arena, while NGOs and citizen groups were found to have more frequent access to the media. These findings were, however, not consistent across periods of the pandemic. Economic groups, for example, had more frequent access to the bureaucracy during the early months of the pandemic, but lost such advantage in the long run. We argue that this may be driven by the specific policy issues that were discussed at the beginning of the pandemic, which required input from economic actors.

It is, however, important to underline that, when we considered access initiated by gatekeepers (demand-driven access), we found a more consistent advantage in favour of economic groups. According to our survey responses, policymakers (and journalists) invited business associations and firms, as well as profession groups and unions more frequently to comment on COVID-19 issues, compared to NGOs and citizen groups. Importantly, these groups were more frequently invited to exclusive discussions on COVID-19 policy with government actors, which we described as access of the highest level of insiderness.

Yet, there is also reason for optimism in our findings. More affected organisations (that is, those that felt worst hit by the pandemic) were more likely to gain frequent access to all venues of policymaking and were more frequently drawn into discussions – including exclusive ones – with policymakers and journalists. Affectedness was a significant predictor of demand-driven access in almost all polities in the analysis (exceptions were Italy, Ireland and the Netherlands). We interpret this as a form of responsiveness by the political systems under study to the effects of the pandemic on organisations, and as an attempt to integrate new organisational concerns in discussions over policy.
Overall, ‘viral access’, therefore, carries both positive and negative implications for the well-functioning of democratic political systems in crisis management mode: When a crisis or other focussing events hit the political system, gatekeepers seek input from interest groups, and they seem more likely to draw affected stakeholders into policymaking. Even though we found exceptions in some of the countries under study, this is a positive trend. At the same time, however, when selecting discussion partners, gatekeepers need to be careful about resource and economic biases. Our results suggest these biases are present in general access patterns and when access is initiated by gatekeepers. If inclusiveness and input legitimacy is an objective for the policy process, then gatekeepers arguably need to pay more attention to levelling the playing field for non-economic and less resourced organisations, who struggle to have their voice heard in policy debates.

Providing interest groups with access does, of course, not guarantee that their concerns will be reflected in policy outputs. In other words, access does not equal influence, although the rule of thumb is that influence is unlikely without access. Therefore, we keep following the influence production process and move on to the analysis of the factors which determined interest group influence in viral lobbying.

References


**Online Appendix**