Chapter 7
Interest Groups’ Experiences with Lobbying during the Pandemic

The previous chapters of this book relied on two cross-national surveys among interest representatives to analyse lobbying processes after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a focus on interest groups’ issue mobilisation (Chapter 3), the use of strategies (Chapter 4), access to venues of political decision-making and public debate (Chapter 5), and, ultimately, influence on government policies (Chapter 6), the chapters analysed patterns in viral lobbying quantitatively. The results portray a mixed picture of lobbying during the pandemic. On the one hand, they highlight an optimistic account of the role of interest groups in modern democratic societies. Quite consistently, we found that more affected organisations, meaning groups which needed political support the most during the pandemic, were able to politically mobilise (intensely and quickly), used a broad range of influence-seeking strategies more frequently, gained frequent access to policymakers and journalists, and saw themselves as more influential in government decision-making on viral policies, compared to less affected groups. On the other hand, we found similarly consistent advantages for groups with higher lobbying resources, as well as business organisations compared to NGOs and citizen groups, throughout the stages of the influence production process.

Ultimately, these broad patterns arise from the daily activities of the people active in interest group politics. Their considerations and activities jointly create the mechanisms through which the observed patterns come about. For this reason, their experiences are of great importance when the aim is to assess these mechanisms. Additionally, they help identify potential alternative explanations that our quantitative analyses might have overlooked. In this chapter, we therefore focus on the experience of professionals that lead and work for interest groups. We draw on a rich series of qualitative interviews covering approximately 50 interest group leaders. More specifically, we rely on twelve focus group interviews with four interest group representatives each to get insights into their experiences with seeking (and gaining) lobbying influence during the crisis.

The aim of the chapter is to provide illustrative examples of challenges and opportunities that arose when interest groups lobbied during the pandemic. By qualitatively analysing the perspectives of organisations on their lobbying practices (cf. Leech 2014), we hope to lift the lid on the lobbying processes during the crisis, especially with regards to the impact of resources and affectedness on viral lobbying. While the previous chapters provided an aggregate and statistical ac-
count of trends in the influence production process, this chapter complements the analysis with narratives offered by organisations as to what, in their view, characterised viral lobbying practices. Jointly, we think these accounts will help readers gain a more lively, concrete and nuanced view of viral lobbying.

Our focus group interviews with 50 interest group leaders were distributed equally across three countries: Denmark, Ireland, and the Netherlands. We decided to focus on these countries given our high level of familiarity with their interest group systems, as well as their comparability in terms of size and the practices in policymaking. Importantly, the selection of focus group participants was identical in all three countries and included different types of interest groups (NGOs, business associations, profession organisations and labour unions), as well as different policy fields of activity (such as health and social policy, education, development policy, retail/trade, environment). This selection ensured that a diverse set of interest groups were included in the focus groups, which were designed to give groups the opportunity to share their lobbying experiences, successes and failures during the Coronavirus crisis with each other. At the same time, our composition of focus groups oversampled organisations from the health sector in order to cover this key area during the health crisis adequately. Additionally, we oversampled NGOs to improve the level of comparability of the experiences shared by interest group representatives (see for more details: Berkhout et al. 2021). Therefore, this chapter is less suited to compare the experiences of different group types, such as comparing business organisations to NGOs. That said, given that nearly 40% of our focus group participants represented business associations, profession associations or labour unions\(^3\), we still include rich accounts of their perspectives in this chapter, without, however, putting analytical focus on group type differences.

In what follows, we first briefly introduce focus groups as a research method in interest group research. Second, we discuss key insights, which we gathered from the rich qualitative data related to the lobbying practices of organisations during the pandemic. Several main patterns stand out based on these interviews, which help reinforce and nuance our quantitative findings: First, the interviews shed light on how the use of resources impacts the influence production process. More precisely, we discuss evidence that shows that resources improve an interest group’s ability to maintain long-term contacts and provide information to gatekeepers. In addition, the interview material added that, as a potential coun-

\(^3\) We decided not to include individual firms in the focus groups, given the other group types were expected to have more in common, for instance when discussing membership activities during the crisis.
terforce to these tendencies, *viral policies* allocated new resources to selected (new) organisations. Second, the focus groups helped reflect on the *nature of affectedness*, which simultaneously affects the ability to provide valuable information in an ‘upwards’-way to gatekeepers, as well as ‘downwards’, to affected (member) groups. Furthermore, interviewees indicate that some groups experienced actual cascades of attention, and that affectedness by COVID-19 also played a role in the organisations’ strategic framing of issues. Finally, the focus group interviews added important perspectives on the role of *solidarity* during the crisis, which meant that some groups down-prioritised their own causes – or even held back points of criticism – in light of more pressing medical, societal and economic challenges.

**Focus Groups as Opportunities for Sharing Experiences**

As we argued in Chapter 1, the COVID-19 pandemic has been an unexpected and highly impactful focussing event, which hit organisations as a major shock to which they had to adapt. In order to learn about whether, how, and to what effect lobbying practices adapted to this shock, we conducted twelve focus group interviews with four interest group representatives each. Focus groups are interviews taking place in small groups where the moderator takes a less intrusive role compared to a classical interview (Cyr 2019). This provided a setting for *actual experience sharing* between organisations, all of which were at the time impacted by the pandemic (in different ways and to a varying degree). We held the focus group interviews online in the spring of 2021, that is, approximately one year after the first wave of the virus in Europe.

The main content and communicated goal of the interviews was to exchange ‘best practices’ during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations were easily recruited to participate with a recruitment rate after first contact of approximately 70 percent. In the interviews, group representatives tended to interact frequently with each other and shared detailed information about their experiences. As moderators, we could witness the dynamics that unfolded between group representatives with regards to the willingness of sharing advocacy knowledge with different organisations (see: Berkhout et al. 2021, which also provide further details on our focus group design)\(^3\). In addition, the focus

\(^3\) The focus group interviews lasted for 45 to 60 minutes. We moderated our focus groups based on the same interview guide in all countries. For details on the focus group composition and interview guide, consult the book’s Online Appendix (Chapter 7).
group interviews provided rich informational content when it comes to which lobbying practices worked well for interest groups during the pandemic.

In this chapter, we use transcriptions and verbatims from the interviews. In particular, we analysed the parts of the transcribed meetings where participants reflected on their experiences with lobbying, their success and failures during the pandemic, and assess how the shared experiences help reflect on our findings regarding the importance of resources and affectedness for viral lobbying. First, we summarise how these shared experiences speak to the importance of resources. Next, we describe accounts that revolve around the role of more affected interests and organisations. Finally, we add a third account that arose from the interviews and has partly been missing in the quantitative findings: the role of solidarity and community in lobbying during the pandemic.

**Resources and Viral Lobbying**

A main finding from Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 was that better-resourced groups (and business groups and firms) enjoyed advantages throughout the influence production process. The focus groups provide some interesting insights into the potential reasons for this finding in terms of 1) the ability of resourceful groups to provide information, and 2) the tendency of well-endowed organisations to benefit from previous ties with policymakers and insiderness in policy networks. At the same time, the interviews illustrate that, 3) in reaction to the crisis, large inflows of new resources were distributed to some organisations, changing the lobbying landscape. In the following subsections, we present selected examples of verbatims from the interviews that illustrate these tendencies.

**Resources and Information Provision**

A common observation throughout the focus groups was that public authorities tended to be overwhelmed by the complexity and severity of the crisis and lacked the necessary knowledge and information to respond to different societal and economic needs and, therefore, to develop effective policies. Interest groups with the capacity to collect, select and supply relevant information were thus in a good position to secure lobbying advantages.

One respondent representing an NGO in the health sector observed that the health authorities “first had to build everything up (...) they did not know what they should answer to questions, because they did not know the answers”. A respondent working for an organisation in the same sector added to this logic:
“Politicians do not have time to delve into all issues by themselves. They look for input on the issues that dominate the agenda. The moment you can give them something relevant, something which they can use to profile themselves... then that is very good. In this case, it is easy to get a member of parliament to listen to you”. Being able to supply meaningful policy input requires an adequately staffed organisation, even when the policy doors are wide open. One respondent from a volunteer-run organisation representing parents pointed to the implications of this requirement: “In terms of organisation, it is difficult and I have to do many activities without [financial] compensation. We are at the point where we need to professionalise [to be able to meet the information demands of policy makers]”.

A major benefit for well-resourced organisations with higher numbers of staff working on lobbying and public affairs was that they were better positioned to respond to policymakers’ needs and fill this informational vacuum. This observation resonates well with existing interest group literature, which emphasises the link between (human or monetary) resources and information, which is a key exchange good in lobbying (e.g. Bernhagen 2013; Chalmers 2013; De Bruycker 2016; Flöthe 2019; Hanegraaff and De Bruycker 2020; Klüver 2012).

Resources and Insiderness

At the same time, the respondents in our focus group interviews suggested that some groups enjoyed special advantages in lobbying, because they already enjoyed close ties to political gatekeepers before the crisis. The nurturing of such long-term contacts takes substantial investment in organisational staff. Informational exchanges were particularly beneficial for interest groups with prior ties to civil servants and politicians. As existing literature suggests, these tend to be better-resourced (or economic) organisations (cf. Dür and Mateo 2016; Fraussen, Beyers, and Donas 2015; Fraussen and Beyers 2016).

Evidence from the focus group interviews illustrates this point, for instance, with the contrast between the following statements made by two NGOs working in the health sector. The first is a large and professionalised organisation and indicates that it was not difficult to access policymakers during the crisis: “Together with [other organisation] we have had structural meetings with the Ministry of Health – long before Corona. And yes, our contacts with the Ministry are tight.” In contrast, the second NGO, who lacked these ties, explained why they could not get access to the policymaking process: “We could not get any contact with civil servants and politicians. Again, we were at the end of the line. There are umbrella organisations (...) who talk to them. This is a big problem, because these (...) are
controlled by patient organisations with paid staff. These are all in the same building or are closely located, they lunch together, it’s a network where volunteer organisations cannot enter.”

Across focus group interviews, and irrespective of the sector of activity, we found evidence for the importance of previous networks for securing access and influence on government policies during the pandemic. Such networks exist to the extent that organisations have the resources to build and sustain them. A representative of a union, for instance, shared that their organisation “had the advantage of being used to it”, that is a close cooperation with relevant ministries. “We knew each other really well in advance, and had all the secret, private phone numbers of everyone, so we could talk with each other”, the respondent said. An NGO in the health sector that did not have previous strong ties, frustrated with lack of access, commented: “All the listed numbers are for offices that are empty, and not everyone redirected their phones, so if you don’t have a list of personal contacts, you’re very much restricted to email and emails are not appropriate for everything”.

Even organisations without previous ties, but that managed to access policymaking during the pandemic seem to have faced difficulties to connect to decision makers, especially given that physical meetings were so rare (if not entirely absent). As a representative of a profession association active in the health sector with only few years of experience in the job put it: “Those with a lot of experience and a big network have noticed this less, but (...) political interest representation has been hard, because one only had these (online) meetings, which are easy to set up, but lack the real and informal aspects”.

In short, the focus group interviews suggest that previous contacts were important, not least given the online format of lobbying during the pandemic. It seems that organisations which had existing ties to politicians were clearly in the drivers’ seat of viral lobbying; and we know from previous research that such insider organisations tend to be better resourced groups (Crepaz, Hangegraaff, and Salgado 2021; Dür and Mateo 2016; Rasmussen and Gross 2015). In addition to the advantages when it comes to collecting and communicating information, this might be a second mechanism that explains our central finding on resources.

At the same time, however, the focus group interviews pointed to a blind spot of our analysis of resources: It hardly took new resources into account that were allocated after the outbreak of the pandemic.
New Resource Provision during the Pandemic

Several of our focus group respondents also highlighted that the pandemic had changed the rules of the game, because large amounts of new resources were made available to interest groups to tackle the challenges posed by the pandemic. This opened new doors for otherwise more peripheral interest groups. An NGO in the health sector, for instance, shared that it “had never before been invited to so many meetings, so in that sense (they) came much closer (to decision-making)”.

At the same time, the organisation was able to secure money through different channels for some of its (new) activities.

Two other organisations, the first an NGO in the health sector, the second a membership association in the sport and culture sector said that “there was really, really a lot of money spit out” and there was “a level of funding to distribute that would be way above anything that [they] had had before”. Both observations signal that it had been much harder to secure financial support before the pandemic. As another respondent representing a health-related NGO put it: “Before this, we could come with ideas regarding some (problem) that should be solved, which almost did not cost anything, compared to the astronomical amounts, that are sent out into society now”.

Interestingly, some respondents suggested that this funding was not always exclusively Coronavirus-project related, but also structural in nature. An NGO working on poverty relief, for example, noted a “breakthrough in structural funding due to the Corona crisis”. In contrast, a couple of other NGOs without an explicit pandemic-related cause noted that government support programs overlooked them. An NGO working on (international) human rights noted that 2020 was “the year of rejected subsidy proposals”. And a patient NGO told us that they could not apply for usual subsidies for (self-help) meetings, because they could not organise these meetings.

It is interesting to ask how the allocation of such new resources during the pandemic fits in with our findings. Notably, our focus group interviews suggest that especially groups in the health and social sector enjoyed new inflows of resources to fund their activities, such as channelling information to their members, as well as to decision makers. Assumedly, these are organisations and constituencies that were highly affected by the pandemic, which means that policymakers might partly have tried to counter resource shortages for affected organisations. In the next section, we reflect more on what the evidence from the focus group meetings suggests when it comes to the effects of affectedness on viral lobbying.
Affectedness and Viral Lobbying

The experiences shared in the focus group interviews also provided insights that speak to our other finding, namely that higher affectedness by the pandemic entailed advantages throughout the influence production process. The focus group responses highlighted especially 1) the role of affected organisations in information provision, 2) demand-side forces whereby gatekeepers pull in (some) affected organisations into public policy, leading to cascades of attention, which also include the new funding inflows discussed previously. Moreover, the material from the focus groups illustrates that 3) the importance given by policymakers to the levels of affectedness by the pandemic led some interest groups to reframe issues in terms of COVID-19 in order to gain access to policymaking and influence. We now discuss these insights in turn.

Affectedness and Information

Notably, the importance of information in viral lobbying not only favoured the inclusion of better-resourced organisations, but also more affected groups. As a respondent representing an NGO in the health sector put it: “The government was simply dependent on that [we were] out there and could support and contribute by passing information on to the people that were affected”. Several affected organisations conveyed in the interviews how they played an important role in processing, channelling and legitimising information to and for their members in this way. As another NGO in the health sector explained: “[We showed the health authorities] in relationship to the Corona situation, that we acted reasonably and, in many ways, saved their asses, if I am to use an ugly term, because their communication has been miserable in many contexts (...). We had to translate, interpret and present it”.

At the same time, other affected interest groups experienced a clear demand for their input on ‘expert panels’. A leader of a health-related association of professionals, for example, shared that “in relationship to interest representation one can say that people became fond of ‘experts’ again [...] and we thought it is great that we can cover that”. As an NGO active in the health sector declared, the prominence of expertise also incentivised organisations to allocate resources to internal research: “We were constantly trying to keep up with the research and trying to keep up with what policy was, and the constantly evolving situation”.

Like well-resourced organisations, it seems that affected groups were equipped to meet the information demands of policymakers. They contributed with information ‘upwards’ by seeking access to political and media gatekeepers. In ad-
dition, they seem to have had an advantage when it came to ensuring that information was processed and passed on ‘downwards’ to affected constituents, such as vulnerable patients, health professionals and other stakeholders. In some cases, the role of these organisations as key information providers (both upwards and downwards) meant they were extremely busy, located in the ‘eye of the storm’, so to speak.

**Affectedness and Cascades of Attention**

There was ample evidence in the interviews that affected organisations in sectors such as health, social policy and education experienced heightened and at times extreme levels of attention. For example, an organisation, which represents parents in the education sector and whose members were highly affected by the crisis, highlighted how they became much more active as a result of it: “There is much more attention to our issues and we have much more work. Our say in debates has become much larger and we get more subsidies. [...] And we didn’t even have to work hard for it. I’m asked for [input in] many different discussions and events on a diversity of issues. Totally awesome”. Similarly, an NGO in the health and social sector emphasised major changes in the relationship with politicians: “We have more effective meetings, we have more frequent meetings, and our role has changed. So now we almost have a form of sparring partner-like function, where we can sit and play ball around these topics and say what are the real solutions, rather than before, where we came in with the hat in hand and presented a message and a problem”.

Another NGO in the education sector shared how the heightened attention for their input spanned all (inside and outside) venues: “The whole thing opened a channel for increased influence and increased networking, both with ministries, ministers and politicians”. At the same time, as the respondent added, the organisation also wrote “articles or Facebook-posts and had some completely crazy numbers of reads and users on some of [their] online media”. In other words, also “in relationship to media coverage [they] received huge access”.

Put differently, some organisations were in the “eye of the storm”, as another respondent from a business organisation in the health sector argued. Based on the focus group evidence, it seems that these organisations tended to represent interests that were highly affected by the pandemic, which resonates with our quantitative findings.
Affectedness, Issue-Linkage and Framing

An additional perspective that was raised in the focus group interviews was that the tendency to focus on affected interests crowded out other political issues, which according to one respondent “came to a standstill”. As a representative of an NGO in the health sector explained to us, “for a period of time during the pandemic nothing was allowed to be discussed during Parliament time and speaking time except for COVID related issues” and that, in order to be heard, questions needed to be addressed to the Minister of Health instead of other ministers. This also meant that organisations had incentives to link other issues to COVID-19, meaning that they (re-)framed them in ways that were related to the pandemic. As an NGO in the health sector explained: “There were some other agendas, that we already had difficulties [in raising], and then this did not get easier with Corona. But, well, easier in the way that as long as we talked ‘Corona’, then there was an open window”. Another NGO in the health sector stated that organisations in their sector quickly realised that “everything they were dealing with was COVID-related”. Interest groups therefore regularly reframed issues using COVID as ‘lever’ to ‘get in’, as NGOs in the health sector put it.

As a representative from a business group in the agricultural sector shared: “If one has had success with defining one’s tasks as critical for society, then it was easier to get some of the problems solved, which confronted one’s members. [...] If one can talk oneself into an agenda that one contributes to the greater good, [...] then one can solve some of the problems one confronts.” Another business group in the same sector stressed that the particular circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic opened up new possibilities: There were “certain policies [...] that were annoying us for years and that we were told couldn’t be changed under any circumstances. [Then] Covid hit and overnight the policies were changed”.

In short, the COVID-19 crisis pushed interest groups, which were less affected by the crisis to the periphery of the political system. Some were able link their concerns to COVID-related policies, but this could only reasonably be done by a limited set of actors. The evidence from the focus groups complements our findings in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 by showing that strategies by less affected groups also included framing the COVID-19 dimension of their causes. This is likely to have affected their access and influence beyond the patterns we traced in the quantitative analysis. In addition to this, the focus groups highlighted normative and community-based considerations in strategy choice that add in important ways to our previous chapters.
Another reoccurring theme in the interviews was the role of civil society and potential self-restraint of organisations. Indeed, several group representatives reflected on the limited importance of their own agenda during the COVID-19 crisis. An NGO in the education sector, for instance, stressed that part of their strategy was “an acceptance of, that all health-related issues have priority over everything else”. A spokesperson for an organisation in the financial sector said that their focus was “completely political, and that (they were) standing a little bit at the end of the line […], because there [were] many things that regulate themselves”. Other interest groups also indicated to have purposely taken a step back considering that some organisations were much more affected by the crisis. This was also illustrated by an NGO in the health sector, that indicated that, when the pandemic started, it “understood that the focus should be on Corona. You want this problem to be solved first”. As the respondent added: “We realised that if we pushed for our message, we would not be going in the right direction, but gain much resentment”. It is impossible to say to what extent such decisions were motivated by solidarity (cf. Halpin 2006), a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 2004), or the result of a rational calculation of the likely benefits from (not) lobbying.

In any case, the considerations nicely connect to our findings in Chapter 6 related to policy satisfaction, where organisations judge policies also based on contextual factors. Organisations, such as the above-quoted NGOs, which did not have much influence during the crisis, seemingly understood why governments acted the way they did. They understood that COVID-related issues had priority, and even took a deliberate step back from lobbying activity. Similarly, policy satisfaction, as we argued in Chapter 6, can exceed particularistic demands and weigh them against the general situation. In this sense, ‘losers’ in the interest group community (less affected groups, resource-poor organisations, and, to some degree NGOs) may, in some situations understand why governments take decisions which do not favour them. This might be why the lack of influence does not always translate into dissatisfaction, which is an important conclusion from our analysis in Chapter 6.

Furthermore, some respondents of our focus groups voiced that even when they were dissatisfied and critical of government policy, they were unsure how much public criticism would be appropriate during the pandemic. “Could we allow ourselves [to criticise]? Well, we felt there was the urgent need to show that […] the (government) strategy, […] has been right and has been good”. These examples shed light on how group representatives restrained from lobbying and potentially demonstrated an orientation towards the common good by
taking responsibility for supporting government policies in these unprecedented
times.

Chapter Summary

Through qualitative accounts of the experiences of lobbying practitioners, this
chapter added a number of nuances to the quantitative findings presented in
this book. In the spring of 2021, we conducted a series of focus group interviews
with approximately 50 representatives of interest groups in Denmark, Ireland
and the Netherlands. Their narratives point to some of the potential mechanisms
that link lobbying resources and affectedness to successes and failures in lobby-
ing during the pandemic.

Specifically, our analysis revealed at least three ways in which resources
mattered. First, they were linked to an interest group's ability to meet decision
makers' informational demands. The focus groups revealed that interest groups
were very aware of the information-needs of decision makers. With this in mind,
some of the participants declared to have spent resources on researching and
producing much-needed information. Second, resources appeared to matter in
building ties to decision makers before the pandemic. Such ties were relevant
for access during the pandemic. In other words, who was already an ‘insider',
had an easier time maintaining access during the pandemic (see also: Junk et
al. 2021). Third, we noticed an aspect, which potentially countered these tenden-
cies: The new resources distributed by governments in the form of crisis-related
funding and rescue packages. These arguably helped to level the playing field for
some organisations, which would otherwise have been at the periphery of the in-
terest group system. Additionally, some of these organisations were surprised to
experience that it was substantially easier to secure funding during the pandemic
compared to normal circumstances.

Our qualitative analysis also substantiated our findings on the effect of af-
fectedness. Again, we identify three trends: First, affectedness by the pandemic
appeared to be related to a dual role in information transmission: ‘upwards' to
policymakers, and ‘downwards' to affected constituencies. Second, some affect-
ed organisations perceived themselves as situated in the ‘eye of the storm' and
received ‘cascades of attention', which provided them with improved visibility
and voice, but also put them under strain in terms of workload. Third, the inter-
views revealed that interest groups often reframed or linked issues to COVID-pol-
icy, as a means to gain increased attention.

Overall, this qualitative evidence from the focus groups helps understand
how resources and affectedness empowered issue mobilisation, strategy use, ac-
cess and influence. In line with other findings discussed in this book, better-re-
sourced and affected organisations were the ‘winners’ of viral lobbying. At the
same time, however, the COVID-19 circumstances offered new opportunities for
less prominent interest groups. For example, new sources of income helped or-
ganisations conduct activities during the pandemic that would otherwise have
been difficult to conduct. Moreover, COVID-19 offered the opportunity to re-
frame issues or link them to the pandemic in a way to pursue otherwise difficult
policy change.

Finally, the focus groups offered a perspective that our statistical analyses of
the influence production process in previous chapters could not capture. In some
of the interviews, interest groups declared to have down-prioritised their lobby-
ing activity or criticism of government policy in recognition that public health
needed to be a key priority during the crisis. This points towards an aspect of
lobbying that is usually absent in the interest group literature. Interest group
representatives might consider the contextual importance of their own causes
relative to the overall circumstances and the public good and decide whether
to take political action based on an evaluation of what seems appropriate in
the given situation. While this may be more unusual in normal circumstances,
we believe it to be a plausible course of action in times of crises. This offers
an alternative reading of viral lobbying, even though it remains difficult to say
whether groups were motivated by solidarity with others, or by a rational and
strategic calculation because they believed that lobbying against the public
good could backfire. One way or the other, forces pulling organisations towards
self-restraint in lobbying might be a fruitful avenue of future research, both in cri-
sis circumstances and beyond.

This brings us to the end of the empirical chapters. We have provided a wide
range of evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, about the role and impact
of interest groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the final chapter, we tie the
different strands of evidence together, reflect on their implications and point to
other avenues for future research.

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**Online Appendix**