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ARTICLE

Persuasive lobbying and the value of connections

Emiel Awad[1] | **Clement Minaudier**[2]

[1]Oxera Consulting LLP, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

[2]Department of Economics, City St George's, University of London, London, UK

Correspondence Clement Minaudier, Department of Economics, City St George's, University of London, London EC1V 0HB, UK.
Email: clement.minaudier@city.ac.uk

Abstract

The inflow of money into politics and the influence of interest groups on policies are well-documented, but the monetary value of accessing policymakers is less well-understood. As a result, it is unclear what inferences researchers can draw from lobbying expenditures about interest groups' strategies and their ideological alignment with policymakers. We study a model of informational lobbying with a collective decision-making body and endogenous reforms to investigate the determinants of the value of access. We show that the funds flowing to a given policymaker depend not only on this policymaker's ideology and procedural power but also on the overall distribution of preferences and power among other policymakers. Two policymakers with the same ideology and procedural power might therefore attract different amounts of contributions, depending on the preferences of fellow policymakers. Our results help clarify empirical research linking lobbying expenditures by interest groups to politicians' ideologies and power.

A long tradition in political science has sought to understand which groups in society exert more influence on policies (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Dahl, 1961; Gilens & Page, 2014; Schattschneider, 1960). A common finding is that upper class and business interests are better represented in the policymaking process (Gilens, 2012; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012; Bonica, 2013; Crosson, Furnas, & Lorenz, 2020), suggesting that money can bias the representation of interests. Yet, to understand how money biases this representation, it is important to understand how interest groups strategically allocate funds across policymakers.

Money allows interest groups to both support the election of favorable policymakers and obtain access to them (Barber, 2016; Kalla & Broockman, 2016; Kim, Stuckatz, & Wolters, 2024; Liu, 2022; Milyo, Primo, & Groseclose, 2000; Tripathi, Ansolabehere, & Snyder, 2002; Wright, 1990). Numerous studies have shown that interest groups contribute and seek access to ideologically aligned policymakers and those with more procedural power (see, e.g., Haugsgjerd Allern et al., 2022; Hojnacki & Kimball, 1998; Miller, 2022). The view that there is a positive relationship between the value of access, ideological alignment, and procedural power has, in turn, led scholars to use campaign contributions data to draw inferences about both the strategic choices of interest groups (Fouirnaies, 2018; Holyoke, 2009; Langbein, 1993; Powell & Grimmer, 2016) and their ideological position (Bonica, 2013). This view has an intuitive appeal: if money helps elect candidates who can further an interest group's agenda, then more resources should be exchanged with policymakers who are more ideologically aligned and hold more procedural power.

However, the ultimate goal of interest groups is typically to use this access to share information and influence policies (Awad, 2020; Ainsworth & Sened, 1993; Bouwen, 2004; Chalmers, 2013; Levine, 2009; Schnakenberg, 2017). The informational nature of lobbying complicates the link between resource exchange, power, and ideology: policymakers with little procedural power can be very valuable if they can influence the views of key veto players, while powerful policymakers, such as committee chairs, themselves

play the role of information intermediaries by relaying information shared by interest groups. The nature of the relationship between the value of access, ideological preferences, and procedural power, when access is used to provide information, therefore remains an open question.

We propose a theory of interest group's willingness to pay for private access to policymakers. While many studies focus on the decision of *whether* to form a connection with a policymaker, we study *how valuable* these connections are. This approach, combined with a rich environment in which policy proposals are endogenous, allows us to show that more closely aligned policymakers are not necessarily more valuable. This is particularly the case for powerful policymakers, for whom the relationship between ideology and value is especially complex. Moreover, we show that the entire distribution of ideological preferences and procedural power across policymakers matters for the value of access.[1] Focusing solely on dyadic relationships between interest groups and individual legislators can therefore be misleading. We show that these two results have important implications for the relationship between money and influence and the inferences that can be drawn from campaign contributions when contributions also serve to gain access.

We analyze a model in which a group of policymakers chooses between a reform and the status quo. The reform's value is uncertain and varies across policymakers. An agenda setter (e.g., the chair of a committee or the speaker in a legislature) first chooses whether or not to put the reform to a vote. If the reform is put to a vote, policymakers vote for or against it. An interest group, which prefers the reform to the status quo, privately observes information about the reform's value. It can disclose that information either to the agenda setter before the reform is proposed or to other policymakers once the reform has been proposed. The interest group can provide information to policymakers either publicly—so that all policymakers observe the same information—or privately—so that only a selected policymaker observes it. If a policymaker privately receives that information, she can publicly endorse her preferred policy.

Privately sharing information is more valuable to the interest group when the targeted policymaker is easier to persuade, that is, when she and the interest group are more aligned. However, to be valuable, the targeted policymaker's endorsement must also persuade a majority of policymakers. The targeted policymaker must not only be *persuadable* but also *persuasive*. This requires that the targeted policymaker is sufficiently aligned with the median policymaker. Finally, the agenda setter must also be willing to propose a reform, anticipating the targeted policymaker's endorsement and its effect on votes. This requires that the median and agenda setter are sufficiently aligned.

Our theory departs from existing approaches in three important ways. First, while the existing literature has focused on which policymaker is the most beneficial to interest groups (De Bruycker, 2016), we derive the value of a connection to *every* policymaker in a collective decision-making body. Identifying the value of each policymaker is important for two reasons. First, it is insightful to understand why some policymakers are *not* valuable. While existing studies would suggest that this is because the policymakers are either too ideologically distant (Haugsgjerd Allern et al., 2022) or insufficiently powerful (Haugsgjerd Allern et al., 2022; Fouirnaies, 2018), we show that a policymaker can have no value to an interest group even when they are closely aligned or have procedural power. Second, the policymaker who is most valuable to the interest group might not be willing to grant access (e.g., for reputational reasons; see Crosson, Furnas, & Lorenz, 2023). Empirical studies will only observe links between interest groups, and policymakers who are willing to form such a connection. It is therefore important for theoretical work to depart from focusing solely on the most valuable connections.

Our second contribution is a novel conceptualization of the value of access. To assess the value of gaining private access, we compare the interest groups' expected gains when they have private access to a policymaker to their expected gains when they do not have private access. This comparison depends on the likelihood that the interest group's preferred policy is chosen in one scenario or the other. Importantly, not having private access does not mean that the interest group lacks policy influence. Indeed, interest groups routinely influence policies by participating in legislative hearings (Ban, Park, & You, 2023) and notice-and-comment procedures (Dwidar, 2022), or by taking a position publicly (Crosson, Furnas, & Lorenz, 2020), which do not require private access. Our model allows us to assess how an interest group's influence differs when it has private access compared to the counterfactual world in which it does not. Explicitly considering this counterfactual world paints a different picture. While private access can give the interest group influence over policies, that influence can be the same or even lower than the influence it would have by lobbying publicly.

Third, we consider a rich environment in which (i) policy proposals are endogenous, (ii) information can be verified, and (iii) voting rules can vary. The model's richness allows us to explore how a wide range of institutional characteristics affects the value of private access. When policy proposals are controlled by an agenda setter, the value of access to a given policy-

[1] Judd (2023) draws similar conclusions in the context of quid pro quo lobbying and legislative bargaining. We discuss the differences between the two papers below.

maker depends on the ideological alignment between the policymaker and the agenda setter and between the agenda setter and the median policymaker. We also show that, when policies are more complex, and the interest group's information is less reliable, the range of valuable connections shrinks but the value of connections within that narrower range increases. Finally, we show that introducing stricter decision rules can have non-monotonic effects on the value of a connection.

This approach reveals two important implications. First, focusing on dyadic relationships (between individual interest groups and policymakers) is insufficient to understand interest groups' willingness to pay for access, and therefore the relationship between money and influence in politics. Instead, the value of a connection to a given policymaker depends on the distribution of ideological preferences and procedural power across the entire group of policymakers. Second, the relationship between the value of access, ideology, and power is non-monotonic. The value of a connection to a policymaker with no agenda-setting power increases in ideological alignment, but only up to a point, after which it drops to zero. The value of a connection to an agenda setter also increases with ideological alignment but can be positive for large ideological disagreements: When disagreement is important, the agenda setter would not trust any other policymaker's endorsements so lobbying the agenda setter is the interest group's only chance of obtaining its preferred policy.

Our focus on the value, rather than the existence, of connections allows us to apply these insights to two frequently used empirical strategies: using campaign contributions to learn about who interest groups want to get access to (Fouirnaies, 2018; Holyoke, 2009; Igan & Mishra, 2014; Langbein, 1993) and using campaign contributions to infer ideological preferences (Bonica, 2013). Our results provide a theoretical basis for the interpretation of findings in these studies. First, because the value of a connection depends on alternative means of lobbying, such as contributing to public consultations or making public statements, campaign contributions measure the value of access *relative* to the interest group's influence through these alternative means.[2] As a result, two policymakers with identical ideological alignment to an interest group might receive different campaign contributions depending on the distribution of ideological preferences among other policymakers. Moreover, these two policymakers might receive different campaign contributions depending on which *other* policymaker holds procedural power. This could lead an observer to incorrectly infer that these two policymakers have different preferences or that the interest group is using different targeting strategies. Finally, our results on the value of access to the agenda setter imply that this value is derived from the dual role of the agenda setter as a gatekeeper and as an information intermediary. While this does not contradict the findings that committee chairs (Fouirnaies, 2018) or powerful parties (Haugsgjerd Allern et al., 2022) are more valuable, it clarifies the interpretation of these findings.

[2] Consider, for instance, the case of technology firms that are actively lobbying the European Parliament to influence the Digital Markets Act (Bank et al., 2021) and have made donations to political parties to get private access to policymakers (Haeck, Wheaton, & Coi, 2024). The value of access for these firms is not simply based on the influence that these firms exert via this private access relative to no lobbying effort. Indeed, if these firms did not have private access to policymakers, they would still influence policies by contributing to public consultations, which they regularly do (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2024).

RELATION TO THE LITERATURE

Defining the value of access

Numerous studies have noted the importance of resources in obtaining access to policymakers (Miller, 2021). Hojnacki et al. (2012), Kim, Stuckatz, and Wolters (2024), and Kalla and Broockman (2016) show that campaign contributions allow interest groups to obtain access to legislators, while Allern et al. (2021) show that financial contributions strengthen the links between parties and labor unions. Yet, few studies formally define interest groups' *willingness to pay* for access. Binderkrantz, Pedersen, and Beyers (2017) define *access* as "passing a threshold, controlled by relevant gatekeepers" (Binderkrantz, Pedersen, & Beyers, 2017, p. 308). However, they do not define the *value* to interest group of passing this threshold. Miller (2021) instead emphasizes the importance of focusing on "direct contacts" as it allows interest group to share information and expertise. Our conceptualization of the value of access is close to Lowery (2013) who argues that an appropriate definition of *influence* needs to take into account both the different ways of exerting influence and the counterfactual policy choices in the absence of lobbying. Rather than equating the value of access and influence, we argue that an appropriate definition of the value of private access should compare influence with private access to influence in a counterfactual world without it. Importantly, the counterfactual is not necessarily the absence of lobbying, but alternative forms of lobbying, such as publicly sharing information in legislative hearings. This contrasts with Judd (2023), who studies the value of access in a legislative bargaining setting. In Judd (2023)'s model, access allows subsequent political influence via quid-pro-quo lobbying. Like Judd (2023), we find that the distribution of preferences and bargaining power across policymakers matters for the willingness to pay for access. However, as lobbying is *informational* in our model, the distribution of preferences and bargaining power

affects who trusts the interest group's information and therefore what information ultimately feeds into policy decisions. While Judd (2023)'s model is particularly useful to understand political influence in the context of quid-pro-quo lobbying, our findings refine our understanding when money is used to buy access and information to influence policies.

Who do interest groups target?

Interest group scholars have extensively studied which policymakers get lobbied and receive campaign contributions and shown that both the ideological proximity (Gullberg, 2008; Hall & Miler, 2008; Holyoke, 2009; Igan & Mishra, 2014; Kollman, 1997; Langbein, 1993; Marshall, 2010; Mian, Sufi, & Trebbi, 2013) and the political power of policymakers (Haugsgjerd Allern et al., 2022; Fouirnaies, 2018; Hall & Wayman, 1990; Powell & Grimmer, 2016) make them more likely to be targeted by interest groups. In their seminal contribution, Hojnacki and Kimball (1998) argue that the decision to target ideologically close legislators is determined by the legislator's capacity to influence a bill's content and its fate in the legislature. Our theory extends this idea by explicitly considering the possibility that agenda setters can also be information intermediaries. This innovation implies that the relationship between ideology and procedural power is non-monotonic. This contrasts with Haugsgjerd Allern et al. (2022) who posit a monotonic interaction between ideological proximity and power.[3] The non-monotonicity has important consequences for empirical inferences and arises for two reasons. First, because our theory accounts for the influence interest groups can have even when they lack private access. Second, because the relationship between ideology and procedural power depends on the entire distribution of ideology across policymakers. The second reason implies that the literature should move away from studying dyadic relationships between interest groups and policymakers. This is in line with Crosson, Furnas, and Lorenz (2023) who study the effect of competition and polarization between parties on interest groups' partisan alignment. However, our argument differs from theirs. They propose that interest groups diversify the set of issues they support to strengthen their partisan alignment. Instead, our mechanism depends on the possibility of transmitting information through a network of policymakers rather than the interest group's desire to signal partisanship.

Institutions and the value of connections

Finally, we build on the literature studying how institutions shape interest group influence. The importance of intervening early, while policies are being drafted, has long been recognized in the literature (Hall & Wayman, 1990; Schattschneider, 1960). However, few studies explicitly consider how the agenda-setting process affects the value of access in the context of informational lobbying. An exception is Dellis (2023), who studies who interest groups target when they sequentially search for information. In equilibrium, the interest group does not provide information to the agenda setter who is always included in the winning coalition. In our model, the agenda setter can strictly lose from proposing a policy once information is revealed to another policymaker. As a result, lobbying the agenda setter becomes valuable. Austen-Smith (1993) also studies whether a lobbyist wants to share information at the agenda-setting stage, at the voting stage, or both. As we allow the interest group to lobby any policymaker—not just the agenda setter or the median—we can analyze how interest groups value connections with those who are neither agenda setters nor pivotal policymakers.

MODEL

An odd number n of policymakers collectively decides between the status quo $x = 0$ and a reform $x = 1$. We let $X = \{0, 1\}$ denote the policy space and N the set of policymakers. An interest group (IG) observes the *state of the world* $\theta \in \Theta := [0, 1]$, which represents technical information about the quality of the reform $x = 1$. The policymakers do not observe θ and have a common prior belief that θ is distributed uniformly on [0,1]. We denote the prior density of θ by $\mu_0(\theta) = 1$. One of the policymakers, the agenda setter (denoted $A \in N$), has gatekeeping power: she can decide whether to put the reform $x = 1$ to a vote or maintain the status quo. We let $\tilde{x} \in X$ denote the agenda setter's decision. If the reform is proposed, the policymakers hold a majority vote where each policymaker i votes either for the reform ($x_i = 1$) or against it ($x_i = 0$).

The IG can disclose information about the state θ in two ways. First, the IG can disclose the state *publicly* to every policymaker. We let r_P denote this report. Public disclosure does not require access to a policymaker and takes place once the agenda setter has proposed the reform.[4] Second, the IG can *privately* provide a report r_j to a specific policymaker $j \in N$ (possibly including the agenda setter). In both cases, the

[3] Berkhout, Hanegraaff, and Statsch (2021) further refine this finding by showing that the populist nature of a party reduces the importance of power and proximity.

[4] In many institutions, proposing a policy opens a range of venues for interest groups to share information publicly with policymakers such as public consultations, notice-and-comments periods, or legislative hearings.

report is verifiable, so the IG cannot lie but it can withhold evidence. Given the state θ, the group can therefore disclose the state $r = \theta$ or disclose nothing: $r = \emptyset$.

The policymaker who received a private report can make a public endorsement for or against the reform. Endorsing a policy means sending a cheap talk recommendation to all other policymakers before they vote, denoted by $e_j \in \{0, 1\}$.

Finally, every policymaker i observes the agenda setter's proposal $\tilde{x}$, the public report r_P, which policymaker j received the information privately, and this policymaker's endorsement e_j, before choosing whether to vote for or against the reform, $x_i \in X$.

We start from the premise that the IG has gained access to a policymaker j before the start of the game. The IG can only share information privately with the policymaker to whom it has access.[5] This allows us to derive the value to the IG of having access to policymaker j for every $j \in N$.

The timing of the game depends on whether the IG has access to the agenda setter or to another policymaker. If the IG has access to a policymaker other than the agenda setter, $j \neq A$, the timing is as follows:

1. The IG observes the state θ.
2. The agenda setter observes to which policymaker j the IG has access and proposes a policy $\tilde{x} \in X$.
3. If the agenda setter maintains the status quo $\tilde{x} = 0$, the game ends. Otherwise, if $\tilde{x} = 1$, the IG shares a report $r_j \in \{\theta, \emptyset\}$ privately with policymaker j.
4. Policymaker j observes r_j and either publicly endorses the reform, $e_j = 1$, or not, $e_j = 0$.
5. The IG shares a public report $r_P \in \{\theta, \emptyset\}$.
6. All policymakers observe who has been lobbied (j), whether the reform is proposed ($\tilde{x}$), the public report r_P, and the endorsement (e_j), and vote.

If the IG has access to the agenda setter, $j = A$, then it can share a report $r_A \in \{\theta, \emptyset\}$ with the agenda setter before stage 2. However, it no longer shares a private report with another policymaker $j \neq A$ in stage 3 and no policymaker makes an endorsement in stage 4.

Payoffs. The IG's payoff is state-independent but depends on whether the reform passes: $v(x) = x$, $x \in X = \{0, 1\}$. Let $x^*(\theta)$ be the equilibrium reform in state θ, and let

$$V(x^*) = \int_{\theta \in \Theta} x^*(\theta)\mu_0(\theta)\, d\theta$$

be the IG's ex ante equilibrium payoff.

[5] Awad (2020) shows that when preferences are "nested," as is the case here, interest groups do not benefit from sharing information with multiple policymakers.

Each policymaker i is identified by a threshold $c_i \in (0, 1)$ and receives the following payoff for policy $x \in \{0, 1\}$ and state θ:

$$u_i(x, \theta) = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } x = 0 \\ \theta - c_i & \text{if } x = 1. \end{cases}$$

The parameter $c_i \in (0, 1)$ captures policymaker i's *status quo bias*. The higher c_i is, the higher the state needs to be to convince policymaker i to support the reform. Since the IG prefers the reform, we say that the lower c_i is, the more *ideologically aligned* policymaker i is to the IG.

Equilibrium. Our solution concept is perfect Bayesian equilibrium in pure strategies. When multiple equilibria exist, we focus on the IG-preferred equilibrium. We show in the Supporting Information (SI; pp. 43–45) that our results remain robust to selecting the agenda setter-preferred equilibrium for some range of parameters, but that these equilibria are not necessarily the most informative equilibria. We also make two standard assumptions to rule out other unintuitive equilibria: *sincere voting* (policymakers vote for the policy that maximizes their expected payoff) and *sincere endorsements* (policymakers endorse the policy that maximizes their expected payoff).[6] The SI (pp. 1–2) formally describes the players' strategies, the equilibrium concept, and contains all proofs.

Parametric assumptions. To rule out the uninteresting case in which policymakers implement the IG's favorite policy absent any information, we assume that the median policymaker and the agenda setter, whose thresholds are denoted c_M and c_A, respectively, are sufficiently status quo biased: $c_A > \frac{1}{2}$ and $c_M > \frac{1}{2}$. The expected value of the reform $x = 1$ absent any information is $\mathbb{E}[\theta] = \frac{1}{2}$, given the uniform prior μ_0 over [0,1]. Therefore, without further information, the agenda setter is unwilling to propose the reform and the median (and thus a legislative majority) is unwilling to approve it.[7]

Model interpretation and scope

Our stylized model cannot capture all aspects of the interaction between interest groups and policymakers. It is most applicable to situations in which (1) there is a well-defined policy issue, (2) choosing the cor-

[6] Assuming sincere endorsements is not necessary for the strategy profile, we characterize to be an equilibrium. However, babbling equilibria also exist without this assumption.

[7] If both $c_A < \frac{1}{2}$ and $c_M < \frac{1}{2}$, the IG-preferred equilibrium would be for the IG to provide no information in any state, and the reform would pass in every state.

rect policy requires some expertise which the IG has but policymakers do not, and (3) policymakers can be divided even after seeing some evidence. An example would be the regulation of complex financial products (Mian, Sufi, & Trebbi, 2013). However, our model is not as well-suited to capture policy issues whose salience differs across policymakers, which involve some broad policy agenda, and where ideology matters more than expertise, such as civil rights or abortion policies. Within this scope, however, our model captures a wide range of possible scenarios.

Lobbying networks. While we assume that the intermediary j is herself a policymaker, this assumption is not necessary for our results: j could be part of the wider network of influential agents in the policymaking process to whom the IG has access. The value of access could therefore correspond to the IG's willingness to pay for hiring a former politician or staffer who is trusted by current policy makers (see, e.g., Bertrand, Bombardini, & Trebbi, 2014; Hirsch et al., 2023).

Nature of the interest group's information. We model the IG's information as a private signal that can be withheld from policymakers. We interpret this signal as capturing the IG's *expertise*: the IG is better equipped to find information about the effects of the policy than policymakers. While a single piece of information might not sway a policymaker's decision, the IG's signal is a shorthand for the various pieces of evidence (about either the policy itself or constituents' views) that the IG could share to influence policymakers. The possibility of concealing information from a connection is not necessary for the results. We show in the SI (pp. 43–45) that the equilibrium we characterize is outcome-equivalent to an equilibrium in which the IG always discloses the state when reporting privately to its connection. What matters is that the IG can choose whether to provide this information publicly or not.

Nature of the issue. Our model focuses on a single policy issue. However, the model's parameters can capture various dimensions of this issue. First, the distribution of preferences across policymakers captures the conflictual nature of the issue. When more policymakers are located at the extremes (i.e., with very low or very high thresholds c_j), they are more polarized than when they are all concentrated around the midpoint. Second, our extension in the Policy Complexity and Expertise section captures issue complexity: a more complex issue is one on which the IG is less likely to have accurate information. We show that this affects the value of connections.

Uncertainty about connections. We assume that the agenda setter knows which policymaker the IG has access to. If she did not, she would decide whether to propose the reform based on her expected payoff given her beliefs over the IG's connection. We show in the SI (pp. 46–48) that the logic of our results continues to hold in this case. The value of connections is generally unchanged, but for some parameter values the value of a connection can be positively or negatively affected by the agenda setter's uncertainty over the IG's connection.

ANALYSIS

Public lobbying

We start by deriving the IG's disclosure strategies and expected payoff when it can only disclose information publicly. The IG can only provide information if the agenda setter has proposed the reform ($\tilde{x} = 1$). Given that the agenda setter is ex ante opposed to the reform ($c_A > \frac{1}{2}$), it is seemingly impossible for public information alone to help the IG. However, we show that, if the agenda setter is sufficiently aligned with the median policymaker, the agenda setter is happy to propose the reform and "delegate" the decision to the legislature.

Suppose that the agenda setter has proposed the reform. After the reform is proposed, the agenda setter de facto loses her bargaining power, and the median policymaker becomes decisive.[8] Each policymaker supports the reform if, given the publicly available information, they believe that the state is above their threshold: they vote $x_i = 1$ if and only if $\mathbb{E}[\theta|r_P] \geq c_i$. When the IG discloses the state, $r_P = \theta$, a majority of policymakers therefore support the reform if and only if the state exceeds the median's threshold: $\theta \geq c_M$. When the IG withholds information $r_P = \emptyset$, the policymakers' beliefs depend on the IG's disclosure strategy. We show that an equilibrium exists in which the IG discloses any $\theta \geq c_M$ and withholds any $\theta < c_M$, and policymakers infer that the state must be less than c_M absent disclosure ($r_P = \emptyset$).[9]

Lemma 1. *Suppose that the IG lacks private access to any policymaker. If the agenda setter has proposed the reform, $\tilde{x} = 1$, the reform passes if and only if the state is above the median's threshold: $\theta \geq c_M$.*

How does the agenda setter decide whether to propose the reform? The agenda setter anticipates that, if proposed, the reform will be approved whenever $\theta \geq c_M$. The agenda setter's decision therefore depends on her preferences relative to the median's preferences. If the median is harder to persuade than the agenda setter, $c_A < c_M$, then the agenda setter anticipates that a majority only approves the reform when the agenda setter would have approved it too (i.e., when $\theta \geq$

[8] In our setting, Duggan (2014) implies that the median policymaker is decisive over policies.
[9] Following a standard unraveling argument (e.g., Grossman, 1981), the IG can never persuade a majority of policymakers by withholding the report.

$c_M > c_A$). Therefore, the agenda setter "trusts" that the reform will pass only when she would have approved it herself and is happy to propose it.

If the median is easier to persuade than the agenda setter ($c_M < c_A$), the agenda setter may still be willing to propose the reform. In this case, the agenda setter would not always agree with the median's vote. However, since the median approves the reform $x = 1$ whenever she observes evidence $\theta \geq c_M$, the agenda setter believes that the expected value of a reform accepted by the median equals $\mathbb{E}[\theta|\theta \geq c_M] = \frac{1+c_M}{2}$.[10] She therefore "trusts" the median to make the right decision on average whenever $\frac{1+c_M}{2} \geq c_A$, or, equivalently, if $c_M \geq 2c_A - 1$.

Thus, the agenda setter is only willing to propose policy $x = 1$ if the median is sufficiently aligned with her or more status quo biased. In this case, the IG obtains its preferred policy whenever it can convince the median, that is, when $\theta \geq c_M$.

Proposition 1. *When the IG lacks private access to any policymaker, the agenda setter is willing to propose policy $x = 1$ if and only if $c_M \geq 2c_A - 1$. The IG's ex ante payoff is*

$$V^{Pu} = \begin{cases} 1 - c_M & \text{if } c_M \geq 2c_A - 1 \\ 0 & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases}$$

Private lobbying

We now turn to the possibility of sharing information privately with a policymaker. We evaluate the IG's value of having private access to a policymaker relative to lobbying publicly.

We first analyze the endorsement decision of a policymaker who privately receives information from the IG and the impact of that endorsement on other policymakers' voting decision. Private access is valuable because it allows the IG to use a policymaker as an *information intermediary*: a middleman who can observe the IG's information and transmit it to other policymakers in the form of a coarser recommendation. If that policymaker is more aligned with the IG than the median or the agenda setter, she can be more easily persuaded to support the IG's preferred policy while still making a persuasive endorsement.

An intermediary j endorses policy $x = 1$ whenever the IG discloses to her that the state is $\theta \geq c_j$. Given this strategy, other policymakers infer that the expected value of the state, following a favorable endorsement, is $\mathbb{E}[\theta|\theta \geq c_j] = \frac{1+c_j}{2}$. Policymaker i therefore supports policy $x = 1$, following a favorable endorsement by intermediary j, if $\frac{1+c_j}{2} \geq c_i$, or, equivalently, if $2c_i - 1 \leq c_j$.

[10] This expression follows from the uniform distribution of θ on [0,1].

Lobbying a policymaker with no agenda-setting power

While private lobbying can be valuable, it is only effective if two conditions are met. First, the median policymaker must be persuaded by policymaker j's endorsement. Second, conditional on knowing that the median policymaker follows j's endorsement, the agenda setter must be willing to propose the reform.

We first define situations in which private lobbying can be valuable to the IG, that is, where private lobbying affects the policy choice in a way that cannot be replicated with public lobbying.

Definition 1. A favorable endorsement from j, $e_j = 1$, *induces* policy $x = 1$ if, in equilibrium,

1. the IG only shares information privately,
2. the agenda setter proposes the reform, and
3. a majority of policymakers vote for the reform if and only if policymaker j endorses it, $e_j = 1$.

The following proposition formally establishes the conditions under which such a situation occurs in equilibrium.

Proposition 2. *If the IG has access to policymaker $j \neq A$, an equilibrium exists in which a favorable endorsement from j, $e_j = 1$, induces policy $x = 1$ if and only if:*

1. *The agenda setter trusts j: $c_j \geq 2c_A - 1$,*
2. *j can persuade the median: $c_j \geq 2c_M - 1$, and*
3. *j is less status quo biased than the median: $c_j \leq c_M$.*

If these conditions are satisfied, the IG's ex ante payoff from private access to $j \neq A$ is

$$V_j^{Pr} = 1 - c_j.$$

The first constraint ensures that the agenda setter, anticipating how the intermediary will endorse the reform, is willing to propose policy $\tilde{x} = 1$. This requires that $\mathbb{E}[\theta|\theta \geq c_j] = \frac{1+c_j}{2} \geq c_A$ or, equivalently, that $c_j \geq 2c_A - 1$. The second constraint ensures that the median follows the intermediary's endorsement. If this is not satisfied, the agenda setter might be willing to propose the policy but it would not receive majority support.

The third condition captures an important constraint faced by the IG. The agenda setter might be willing to propose the reform because she expects the

IG to share information with a policymaker whom the agenda setter trusts ($c_j \geq 2c_A - 1$). However, proposing the reform also opens venues for the IG to share information publicly. If the IG does so, the relevant threshold for persuasion becomes that of the median policymaker. Therefore, when the median is sufficiently less status quo biased than the agenda setter ($c_M < 2c_A - 1$), the IG faces a commitment problem. The IG would like to commit to sharing the information with a policymaker that the agenda setter trusts ($c_j \geq 2c_A - 1$). However, if it observes information that would fail to persuade that intermediary but would successfully persuade the median, $\theta \in [c_M, c_j)$, it would deviate to sharing the information publicly once the reform is proposed, $r_P = \theta$. Anticipating this, the agenda setter would refuse to propose the reform. Condition 3 ensures that the IG has no incentives to deviate to public lobbying after the reform is proposed.

If at least one condition is violated for a given c_j, then either policy $x = 1$ cannot pass when j is the information intermediary (because the median cannot be persuaded to approve the reform or the agenda setter is unwilling to propose it), or it has the same chances of passing as under public lobbying. The proposition therefore reveals that an intermediary other than the agenda setter is effective only when c_A is not too large relative to c_M ($c_M \geq 2c_A - 1$).

The IG benefits from privately sharing information because it allows the reform to be proposed and passed even given some states which would have led the agenda setter or the median to reject it. Specifically, when $\theta \in [c_j, c_M]$ or $\theta \in [c_j, c_A]$, the reform would have been rejected by the legislature or not proposed at all if all policymakers knew the state. Instead, the reform can be successfully endorsed by the intermediary and the endorsement can persuade a majority to vote for the reform. The IG's expected gain from privately sharing information with policymaker j is then the probability that the state is above j's threshold, that is $V_j^{Pr} = 1 - c_j$.

Lobbying the agenda setter

If there is no j such that c_j satisfies all three conditions in Proposition 2, then the only intermediary who could potentially influence the policy choice in favor of the IG is the agenda setter. This is the case whenever $2c_A - 1 > c_M$.

Sharing information with the agenda setter potentially serves two roles. First, the agenda setter can be used as an information intermediary. If the agenda setter received information from the IG, then proposing the reform signals that she observed a state $\theta \geq c_A$ and therefore implicitly serves as an endorsement. If $c_A \geq 2c_M - 1$, the median is happy to support the proposed reform even without seeing the information provided by the IG.[11]

Second, privately sharing information with the agenda setter means that the IG does not face the commitment problem described in the previous section. If the agenda setter observes the information privately, she will only propose a reform if the IG has disclosed evidence above her threshold. The agenda setter is therefore no longer concerned about what information the IG might publicly disclose. Lobbying the agenda setter only works if the median is also willing to approve the reform, conditional on knowing that the agenda setter supports it. That is, provided that $c_A \geq 2c_M - 1$. This condition holds whenever the IG faces the commitment problem.[12] The following proposition summarizes when the IG values access to the agenda setter.

Proposition 3. *When the agenda setter is sufficiently more status quo biased than the median ($2c_A - 1 \geq c_M$), the IG can induce the reform $x = 1$ if and only if it has access to the agenda setter directly. The IG's ex ante payoff from private access to the agenda setter is $V_A^{Pr} = 1 - c_A$.*

Proposition 3 describes a sufficient condition for the IG to successfully influence the policy choice by sharing information with the agenda setter. However, it is not the only case where the agenda setter is valuable. Since the agenda setter can also play the role of an information intermediary, obtaining access to the agenda setter can also be valuable when that condition is not satisfied. This is the case as long as the median can be persuaded to support policy $x = 1$ when the agenda setter proposes it, that is whenever $c_A \geq 2c_M - 1$.

The value of connections

We can now derive the value of access to policymaker $j \in N$. We introduce two definitions to formally state the results.

Definition 2. A policymaker is an *effective* intermediary if either she is the agenda setter and can persuade the median ($c_A \geq 2c_M - 1$) or she is not the agenda setter but her threshold satisfies all three conditions in Proposition 2.

Using this definition, we define the value of a connection to policymaker j as the difference between the

[11] This first role is reminiscent of the agenda setter's proposal reflecting private information about the underlying state in Gilligan and Krehbiel (1987).
[12] Since $c_i \geq 2c_i - 1$ for all $c_i \leq 1$, then $2c_A - 1 \geq c_M$ (the condition under which the commitment problem arises) implies that $c_A \geq c_M \geq 2c_M - 1$.

ex ante probability of successfully inducing policy $x = 1$ when sharing information privately with j and that probability when sharing information publicly. We set the value to zero if that difference is negative as the IG would always prefer to share information publicly in this case.

Definition 3. The value of a connection is

$$V(j) := \begin{cases} \max\{0, V_j^{Pr} - V^{Pu}\} & \text{if } j \text{ is effective.} \\ 0 & \text{otherwise.} \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

Value of a connection to a policymaker with no agenda-setting power

The following proposition characterizes the value of a connection to some $j \neq A$ as a function of the preferences of the agenda setter and those of the median policymaker.

Proposition 4.

1. *If the median is closely aligned with the IG and insufficiently aligned with the agenda setter,* $c_M \in \left(\frac{1}{2}, 2c_A - 1\right)$*, the value of a connection to policymaker* j *is* $V(j) = 0$*,* $\forall j \neq A$*.*
2. *If the median has intermediate preferences,* $c_M \in [2c_A - 1, c_A)$*, the value of a connection to policymaker* $j \neq A$ *is*
   - $V(j) = c_M - c_j$ *if* j *is sufficiently status quo biased* relative to the agenda setter *(*$c_j \geq 2c_A - 1$*) but not more than the median (*$c_j < c_M$*),*
   - $V(j) = 0$ *otherwise.*
3. *If the median is more status quo biased than the agenda setter* $c_M \in [c_A, 1)$*, the value of a connection to policymaker* $j \neq A$ *is*
   - $V(j) = c_M - c_j$ *if* j *is sufficiently status quo biased* relative to the median *(*$c_j \geq 2c_M - 1$*) but not more so than her (*$c_j \leq c_M$*),*
   - $V(j) = 0$ *otherwise.*

In the first case, there is no policymaker whose recommendation would be trusted by the agenda setter and who would prevent the IG from deviating to public disclosure (Proposition 2). Private lobbying is therefore only effective with a connection to the agenda setter. Moreover, publicly sharing information is impossible in this case as the agenda setter would not trust the median. The payoff from privately lobbying a policymaker other than the agenda setter and the payoff from public lobbying are therefore both zero.

In the second and third cases, both sharing information privately and sharing information publicly can be effective. The value of publicly sharing information is $1 - c_M$ (Proposition 1). For each effective policymaker j, we can therefore simply compute the difference between V_j^{Pr} from Proposition 2 and V^{Pu} from Proposition 1. Figure 1 illustrates the value of a connection to j in these two cases. When the status quo bias of the connected policymaker, c_j, is low, the value of private lobbying (the solid line) is zero as the connected policymaker is not trusted by other policymakers. When c_j is moderately large, the policymaker is trusted by others and easier to persuade than the median and the value of private lobbying is therefore positive and larger than the value of public lobbying. However, this value decreases as the policymaker becomes more status quo biased and eventually drops to zero. The value of access, captured by the difference between the solid and the dashed line, depends not only on the connected policymaker's preferences (c_j) but also on the median's preferences (c_M) and those of the agenda setter (c_A).

Proposition 4 has three takeaways. First, the value of a connection depends on the preferences of the policymaker relative to those of the IG (i.e., c_j) but also on the policymaker's preferences relative to those of the median and agenda setter. Second, connections can have no value, that is, private access is not always valuable. This holds when the agenda setter and the median are too misaligned. Third, the value of a connection to a policymaker is non-monotonic in the alignment between that policymaker and the IG (captured by c_j). The intermediary's value increases in the level of alignment with the IG (i.e., decreases in c_j) as long as she can persuade the median and be trusted by the agenda setter. However, when she is too aligned with the IG, her value drops back to zero.

Value of access to the agenda setter

We now turn to the value of access to the agenda setter, which we can derive using the results from Proposition 3.

Proposition 5. *The value of a connection to the agenda setter is*

1. $V(A) = 0$ *if the agenda setter is not sufficiently status quo biased relative to the median,* $c_A < 2c_M - 1$*.*
2. $V(A) = c_M - c_A$ *if the agenda setter has intermediate preferences,* $2c_M - 1 \leq c_A \leq c_M$*.*
3. $V(A) = 0$ *if* $c_M < c_A \leq \frac{1+c_M}{2}$*.*
4. $V(A) = 1 - c_A$ *if the agenda setter is very status quo biased* $c_A > \frac{1+c_M}{2}$*.*

When the agenda setter is not sufficiently status quo biased, the act of proposing the reform does not persuade the median. As a result, the IG would need to reveal information publicly after disclosing

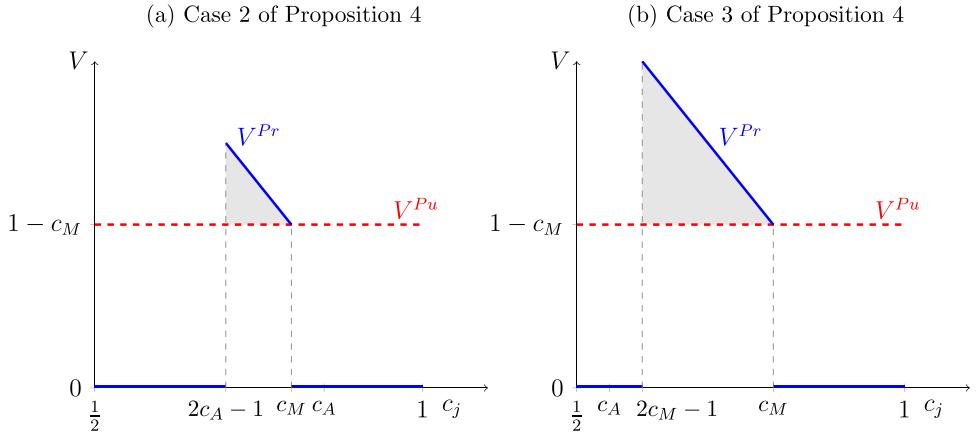

FIGURE 1 The value of public and private lobbying.
Note: The figure depicts the value of public lobbying and of privately lobbying some policymaker $j \neq A$, fixing the values of c_M and c_A. The two panels display different cases of Proposition 4. For a given c_j, the gray-shaded area displays the value of a connection with j, $V(j)$.

information to the agenda setter, so the probability of getting its preferred policy is $1 - c_M$. If, instead, the IG only discloses information publicly, the agenda setter would still propose the policy since she trusts the median to make the right decision ($2c_A - 1 < c_M$), and the value of doing so would also be $1 - c_M$. Therefore, there is no value of privately accessing the agenda setter.

When the agenda setter is sufficiently status quo biased relative to the median ($2c_M - 1 \leq c_A$), the median is persuaded to support the reform when the agenda setter proposes it. The agenda setter would also be willing to propose the reform under public lobbying as long as c_A is not too high ($c_A \leq \frac{1+c_M}{2}$). The value of access to the agenda setter is therefore the difference between the probability of persuading the agenda setter and the probability of persuading the median. This value is only positive if the agenda setter is less status quo biased than the median ($c_A < c_M$). Otherwise, if $c_A \geq c_M$, the median is easier to persuade than the agenda setter *and* the agenda setter trusts the median to make the right decision so the IG would be better off by only disclosing information publicly.

When $c_A > \frac{1+c_M}{2}$, the agenda setter no longer trusts the median and the IG cannot commit not to disclose the information publicly once the reform is proposed. The only way to ensure the reform is approved with private lobbying is to have a connection with the agenda setter. The value of public lobbying is zero in this case as the agenda setter would not be willing to propose the reform. The value of a connection with the agenda setter is therefore $V_A^{Pr} - V^{Pu} = (1 - c_A) - 0 = 1 - c_A$.

Proposition 5 has two interesting implications. First, a connection with the agenda setter can be valuable for different reasons. When the agenda setter is sufficiently aligned with the IG ($c_A \in [2c_M - 1, c_M]$), she can be used as an *information intermediary*. Instead, when the agenda setter is sufficiently misaligned with the IG, the agenda setter is valuable because of her role as *gatekeeper*. She does not trust that a majority of policymakers would make the right decision once she proposes the reform and opens avenues for public lobbying, so the only way to persuade her is to lobby her directly.

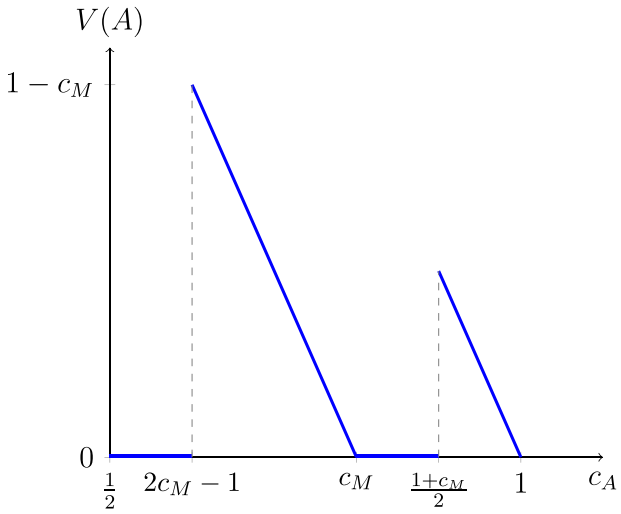

FIGURE 2 The value of access to the agenda setter (Proposition 5).

Note: The figure plots the value of a connection to the agenda setter, $V(A)$, as a function of her preferences c_A.

A second implication of Proposition 5 is that the value of a connection to the agenda setter is non-monotonic in its alignment with the IG, as illustrated in Figure 2. As alignment decreases, the value first becomes positive when the agenda setter's proposal

can persuade the median (at $c_A = 2c_M - 1$) and then decreases back to zero as the agenda setter becomes more difficult to persuade. However, when the alignment becomes sufficiently low that the agenda setter no longer trusts the median (at $c_A = \frac{1+c_M}{2}$), that value jumps again to a positive number before decreasing.

Policy complexity and expertise

In the baseline model, the IG observes the true state, θ, with certainty. This assumption captures an environment with low policy complexity: the IG has readily available and accurate information. When policies are complex, however, the IG might need to gather evidence within a limited time frame, introducing the possibility that the IG's information may be imperfect. Relaxing this assumption has two implications. First, imperfect information makes policymakers more skeptical about the information shared by the IG, and thus of the endorsement made by other policymakers. Second, policymakers may want to use their own research capabilities to verify the information shared by the IG.

To capture this possibility, suppose that the IG's signal is the true state with some probability $q \in (0, 1)$ and a noisy signal, uncorrelated with the true state, with probability $1 - q$. Neither the IG nor the policymakers know whether the signal is the true state.[13] We first show that, when the information is noisy but cannot be verified, the value of connections to some policymakers drops to zero. However, the value of access to the policymakers who remain valuable increases relative to the case of perfect information.

Proposition 6. *Suppose that $c_M \geq 2c_A - 1$. When information is noisy ($q < 1$), the range of policymakers with strictly positive values to the IG shrinks to $c_j \in \left[\max\{2c_A - 1 + \frac{1-q}{2}, 2c_M - 1 + \frac{1-q}{2}\}, c_M\right)$. The value of a connection to a policymaker with a threshold in this range increases from $V(j) = c_M - c_j$ to $V(j) = \frac{c_M - c_j}{q}$.*

Policy complexity, in the form of noisy information, makes all policymakers more skeptical of the information they observe and more skeptical of another policymaker's endorsement. As a result, a policymaker needs to be more status quo biased for her endorsement to be effective, which reduces the range of valuable policymakers. The information's noisiness also reduces the probability of successfully influencing the policy, but that reduction is larger for public lobbying than private lobbying, so the value of private access increases.

When policies are complex, policymakers may also want to invest in gathering information themselves. We now show that, if policymakers can verify the information provided by the IG, the value of a connection can increase or decrease depending on the costs of verification.

Proposition 7. *If verification costs are sufficiently low, verification can decrease the value of a connection. If verification costs are intermediate, verification can increase the value of a connection.*

As verification allows the IG to persuade some policymakers who would not have been persuaded without it, it can be valuable to the IG. However, it can also reveal that evidence turned out to be incorrect, which can be harmful to the IG. Since the information is more likely to be verified under public lobbying, the value of private access increases with verification if verification is more likely to be harmful and decreases with verification if it is more likely to be beneficial.

These results have implications for the relationship between the value of connections and the information capacity of the legislature (Fong, Lowande, & Rauh, 2025; Minaudier, 2022). When the legislature has strong research capabilities, the cost of verification is low which can reduce the value of private connections. However, stronger research capabilities can also increase the value of private connections if the cost of verification does not fall sufficiently.

Varying majority requirements

In our baseline model, the reform requires a simple majority to pass. In some institutions, such as the Council of the EU, reforms require a supermajority (strictly more than 50% of the votes) to pass. Our model can be extended to allow for these alternative institutions: increasing the majority requirement simply corresponds to increasing the threshold of the pivotal policymaker. Interestingly, increasing the majority requirement can both increase and decrease the value of a connection to a given policymaker. Indeed, we show in the SI (pp. 33–35) that a small increase can solve the IG's commitment problem, by making it less tempting to deviate to public lobbying. However, a larger increase can reduce that value if it means the connected policymaker can no longer persuade the new pivotal policymaker.

[13] An alternative assumption is that the IG observes the true state with some probability $q \in (0, 1)$ and no information with probability $1 - q$. In this case, the IG knows that the information is unavailable. When the IG discloses no information, $r = \emptyset$, policymakers do not know whether the policymaker is concealing information or genuinely did not observe any information. We show in the SI (pp. 27–33) that this assumption does not alter our main results. The IG can only persuade a policymaker with threshold $c_i \geq \frac{1}{2}$ if it observed and disclosed a state $\theta \geq c_i$ and the same logic as in the baseline model applies.

The value of a connection for policymakers

Our main analysis focuses on the value of a connection for the IG. Another interesting object is the value of a connection for policymakers. Being connected to an IG, and thus serving as the IG's intermediary, gives a policymaker some additional influence, which is valuable. We define the value of a connection to policymaker i as the expected payoff of i when she is connected to the IG minus her expected payoff when she is not connected to the IG (who is therefore restricted to public lobbying).[14] We show in the SI (pp. 36–42) that the IG is valuable to the policymaker whenever the policymaker is valuable to the IG and vice versa.

This result has two implications. First, it indicates that the IG and the policymaker it is connected to always jointly value their connection. Second, how the policymaker values that connection depends on the preferences of other policymakers. A connection to an interest group is only valuable to a policymaker if the policymaker has some policy influence, which requires being sufficiently aligned with the median and agenda setter.

EMPIRICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this section, we discuss several implications of our model for the empirical analysis of interest groups' preferences and strategies.

Public versus private lobbying

Our results reveal that private lobbying often significantly increases the chances of persuading a majority of policymakers. This is consistent with empirical evidence showing that private meetings between interest groups and policymakers help interest groups obtain favorable policies (Ainsworth, 1997; Biguri & Stahl, 2024; Grotteria, Miller, & Naaraayanan, 2022; Porter, 1974). However, Belloc (2015) also shows that interest groups exert influence through participation in public consultation meetings later in the legislative process, not just private meetings. Our results can also rationalize public lobbying. Indeed, Propositions 4 and 5 imply that public lobbying can be strictly more valuable than privately lobbying any policymaker. In particular, we should expect public lobbying to occur when all policymakers who are more closely aligned with the IG than the median ($c_j < c_M$) are too aligned with the IG ($c_j < 2c_A - 1$ or $c_j < 2c_M - 1$).[15] We can interpret this condition as capturing issues that are more conflictual or on which the legislature is sufficiently polarized: public lobbying is more valuable when all the policymakers to the left of the median are sufficiently far from the median: $c_j < 2c_M - 1$.

Ideological alignment and the value of access

Many studies have shown that ideological alignment determines which policymakers special interest groups choose to meet and donate to. Some studies show that interest groups tend to lobby allies or ideologically close policymakers (Haugsgjerd Allern et al., 2022; Hall & Miler, 2008; Kollman, 1997; Langbein, 1993; Liu, 2022), while others show that interest groups sometimes lobby both allied and opposed policymakers (Gullberg, 2008), undecided policymakers (Miller, 2022), or only opposed policymakers (Holyoke, 2009). Some of these studies employ different methods to identify who interest groups target: either using surveys of lobbyists or using campaign contributions data. Yet, some contradictory results appear even when using the same methods. For instance, Holyoke (2009) and Langbein (1993) both use contribution data but the former finds that interest groups target opposed policymakers, while the latter finds that they target allies. One reason these results can differ is that the two studies analyze different policy issues. Holyoke (2009) studies lobbying by casinos in the New York state legislature, while Langbein (1993) looks at lobbying over gun control at the federal level. Conversely, some studies look at the same issue area but also find opposite results. For instance, both Gopoian, Smith, and Smith (1984) and Gullberg (2008) examine lobbying on environmental issues. Yet, while Gopoian, Smith, and Smith (1984) find that interest groups target allies, Gullberg (2008) shows that interest groups also lobby opponents. In this case, findings could differ due to different methodologies: Gopoian, Smith, and Smith (1984) use campaign contribution data, while Gullberg (2008) uses interviews of lobbyists. Our results help clarify how both differences in the issue studied and the methodology can generate different findings.

In our model, both lobbying allied policymakers and opposed policymakers can be valuable. Defining a friendly policymaker as one who would prefer the reform absent information ($c_j \leq \frac{1}{2}$) and an enemy as a policymaker who would oppose the reform without information ($c_j > \frac{1}{2}$), we have the following result:

Implication 1. There can be friendly policymakers with whom a connection is valuable ($V(j) > 0$) if neither the median nor the agenda setter is too status quo biased: $\max\{2c_A - 1, 2c_M - 1\} \leq \frac{1}{2}$. Otherwise, only connections with enemies are valuable.

[14] In the SI (pp. 38–40), we also study the case where an absence of connection to policymaker i implies a connection to another policymaker j.
[15] See Implication 3 in the SI (pp. 42–43) for a formal statement.

However, this result shows that friendly lobbying is only valuable on policy issues where both a majority of policymakers and the agenda setter (e.g., the party leadership or a committee chair) are sufficiently aligned with the IG (though not necessarily in favor of the IG's preferred policy without additional information). That is, on issues that are relatively less conflictual. Therefore, different policy issues, on which key policymakers have different preferences, could explain why interest groups assign different values to accessing policymakers, even when their ideological alignment with a given policymaker does not differ across these issues.

Proposition 4 also reveals that, when friendly policymakers are valuable, their value is higher than that of enemies. However, this does not imply that the set of friendly policymakers who are valuable is larger than the set of enemies who are valuable. Consider, for instance, the left panel of Figure 1 and suppose that $2c_A - 1$ is just to the left of $\frac{1}{2}$. In this case, the range of valuable friends is relatively small but their value is higher than any enemies. As a result, studies that evaluate how common it is for interest groups to contact friendly policymakers based on campaign contributions might find that it is a very valuable strategy, while studies based on interviews or surveys might find that it is relatively less common as few friendly policymakers fall within the set of valuable connections. This suggests that the method in these studies can also affect the conclusions and could explain the conflicting results in Gopoian, Smith, and Smith (1984) and Gullberg (2008).[16]

These implications highlight the importance of focusing on the value of connections, rather than the choice of which specific policymaker to target, in contrast with the existing theoretical literature (Awad, 2020; Awad & Minaudier, 2024; Cotton & Dellis, 2016; Dellis, 2023; Ellis & Groll, 2020).

Procedural power and the value of access

Several studies have shown that policymakers' agenda-setting power, such as their position in a legislative committee or as party leader, makes them more likely targets of interest groups and affects the contributions they receive from interest groups. Fouirnaies and Hall (2015, 2018), Powell and Grimmer (2016), and Fouirnaies (2018) show that interest groups selectively seek access to committees and that agenda setters are particularly valuable while Haugsgjerd Allern et al. (2022) show that interest groups are more likely to form "lobby routines" with powerful parties. Together, these studies provide strong evidence that targeting policymakers with procedural power is particularly valuable to interest groups. Our results indeed show that, under certain conditions, the agenda setter is the most valuable connection:

Implication 2. Holding the preferences of the median, c_M, fixed, the agenda setter is strictly more valuable than a policymaker with the same preferences, $c_j = c_A$, but no agenda-setting power, if and only if $c_A > \frac{1+c_M}{2}$.

The agenda setter is valuable not simply because she would block reforms in the absence of information. Indeed, she could be persuaded to propose the reform even without information when she trusts other policymakers. Nor is she valuable because of her role as an information intermediary, since other policymakers could be at least as effective in that role. Instead, she is valuable because the threat that the IG might share information in unpredictable ways once the reform is proposed leads her to block reforms (Proposition 3). This additional value only arises when the agenda setter is sufficiently more misaligned with the IG than the median of the legislature. Our model therefore predicts that the value of agenda setters should be higher on conflictual policies, where there is a significant ideological distance between the agenda setter and the median voter.

Proposition 5 also clarifies under which condition the value of the agenda setter measured empirically is driven by her gatekeeping power and under which condition it arises due to her role as an information intermediary. When the agenda setter is much more status quo biased than the median policymaker ($c_A > \frac{1+c_M}{2}$), the positive value of a connection to the agenda setter arises from her role as the gatekeeper. Otherwise, a positive value arises from her role as an information intermediary. Empirical estimates of the value of connections to agenda setters which use data from several legislatures and several policy issues (such as Fouirnaies, 2018, or Powell and Grimmer, 2016) effectively combine these different roles into one. While this does not affect their conclusion that agenda setters are valuable connections, it cautions against the interpretation that gatekeeping power alone generates this value. Empirically mapping the alignment of an agenda setter to its value to interest groups is not trivial. Two different agenda setters with different levels of alignment with the IG can have the same value. Extrapolating from these two data points could incorrectly lead one to infer that the value of an agenda setter with an intermediate level of alignment is positive when it is in fact zero.[17]

[16] Of course, the fact that these two studies were conducted at different times and in different contexts is likely to explain many differences. However, this example illustrates how our results can clarify which studies are comparable.

[17] Consider, for example, an agenda setter with threshold $c_A \in \left(\frac{3c_M-1}{2}, c_M\right)$. Since $\frac{3c_M-1}{2} > 2c_M - 1$, $\forall c_M < 1$, Proposition 5 implies that the value of that agenda setter is $c_M - c_A$. Consider now another hypothetical agenda set-

Inferring ideological preferences from campaign contributions

A series of influential papers (Bonica, 2013, 2018, 2019; McCarty & Poole, 1998) have demonstrated the value of using campaign contributions to infer the ideological preferences of both interest groups and legislators. This approach has a number of advantages relative to roll-call based approaches (e.g., Poole & Rosenthal, 1985): it can estimate the preferences of nonincumbent politicians and those of interest groups supporting issues not voted on. However, these estimates are based on a spatial voting model in which interest groups contribute larger amounts to legislators with closer ideological preferences to help elect them. While these studies very carefully incorporate a range of nonideological factors that could affect contributions, such as the procedural power of a legislator, her committee membership, or her party's strength (Bonica, 2013), our model suggests another dimension that may affect the interpretation of these inferred preferences. Indeed, our results show that, when contributions are used at least partly to gain access for informational lobbying, they do not just reflect the ideological distance between a policymaker and an interest groups or the policymaker's procedural power but also the ideological alignments between the policymaker and other key policymakers. In addition, our model reveals that the relationship between contributions, ideology, and procedural power can be non-monotonic. As a result, policymakers who receive the most contributions are not necessarily closely aligned and two policymakers with the same level of contributions could have very different ideological alignment with the interest group.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposes a theory of interest groups' willingness to pay for private access to a policymaker. We show that, in line with the empirical literature, both the ideological alignment between the policymaker and the interest group and the agenda-setting power of the policymaker affect this value. However, we show that, contrary to what the literature often assumes, this relationship can be non-monotonic and depends on the ideological alignment between a policymaker and other key policymakers.

Our results highlight that focusing on dyadic relationships between interest groups and individual policymakers can mask some important determinants of the value of connections and affects the inferences that scholars can draw from observing the exchange of resources between interest groups and policymakers. These implications suggest avenues for future empirical research that could evaluate how the ideological positions of policymakers relative to other key actors in the legislature affect the campaign contributions they receive, the meetings they hold with lobbyists, or their careers after politics.

These results confirm that forming connections with policymakers is valuable for interest groups, which can explain the tremendous inflows of money in politics. However, they also show that these funds, and their distribution across policymakers, have complex determinants. Future research could consider how the uneven distribution of money can, in turn, affect the behavior of policymakers, such as their decision to join committees.

ter with threshold $c'_A = 1 - (c_M - c_A) > c_A$. Since $1 - (c_M - c_A) > \frac{1+c_M}{2} \Leftrightarrow c_A > \frac{3c_M - 1}{2}$, then Proposition 5 implies that the value of that agenda setter is $1 - c_{A'} = 1 - (1 - (c_M - c_A)) = c_M - c_A$. So the two agenda setters have the same value to the IG.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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