

Explaining interest group access to parliamentary committees

Laura Chaqués-Bonafontⁱ
Political Science Department
Universitat de Barcelona and IBEI
Avinguda Diagonal 690
08034 Barcelona
laurachaques@ub.edu
[tel. 93 4021924](tel:934021924)

Luz M. Muñoz Márquez
Lecturer of Political Science
Political Science Department
Universitat de Barcelona
Avinguda Diagonal 690
08034 Barcelona
Luzmunozma@ub.edu

Abstract:

This article explains why parliamentary groups invite interest groups to the parliamentary arena. It argues, interest groups access to committees not only reflect policy-makers' needs for information, and expertise but also party preferences and institutional factors such as the type of government, parliamentary committees structure, and committee's agenda capacity. Results show interest groups access to the parliamentary arena increases under minority governments, in the case of highly conflictual issues, and when the number of permanent committees increases. Also, results demonstrate parliamentary groups invite interest organizations following different logics –problem-solving or confrontation logic— depending on the type of functions they have to perform –legislative and oversight activities—. The article uses a novel comprehensive database with information on the appearances of all interest groups in the Spanish parliament from 1996 to 2015.

Interest groups provide different types of goods of special interest for policy-makers. They are among the main suppliers of expertise and technical knowledge on specific issues; they channel and represent citizens' views and positions regarding economic, social and political problems, and on some occasions they become interested contributors to political campaigns (Austen-Smith 1996). Thus, there are significant incentives for parliamentary groups to grant access to interest groups as a way of improving the efficiency of legislation, increasing the correspondence between policy decisions and citizens' preferences as represented by interest groups, reaching consensus and minimising political conflict before and after the decision making process, or maximising their chances of re-election in the next parliament (see Allen 2001, Norton 1999, Pedersen, Binderkratz and Munk, 2014; Jensen, 2012, Baumgartner et al. 2009, Beyers 2002).

However, policy-makers' capacity to invite interest groups to the parliamentary arena is not unlimited. This article demonstrates that the likelihood that parliamentary groups invite interest groups to give evidence in parliamentary committees varies significantly –across time, issues and the kind of activities (legislative or oversight) performed by parliamentary committees— depending on the type of government, the division of labour across parliamentary committees, and the level of conflict associated with a particular issue. That is to say, the access of interest groups to the policy-making process should not be understood just as a rational response to policy-makers' needs for information, conflict resolution or political support, but is also likely to reflect party preferences and institutional factors such as the type of government and agenda capacity.

The results show that the greater the number of legislative committees, the more likely parliamentary groups will invite interest groups to discuss a broad range of issues. This is, as Döring and Hallerberg (2004) emphasise, the productivity of committees is directly linked to the division of labour in the lower house. The results also show that parliamentary

groups invite interest groups following different logics depending on the functions they have to perform. In the case of legislative activities, policy-makers invite interest groups following a *problem solving logic*. Parliamentary committees become arenas of conflict resolution, which increase the lawmakers' capacity to reach agreements between heterogeneous preferences and to solve policy problems in an effective way (Sartori 1987, Adler and Wilkerson 2013). In contrast, in the case of oversight activities, opposition parliamentary groups tend to invite interest groups following a confrontation logic, highlighting those governmental failures more rewarding in electoral terms. However, as argued in this paper, the capacity of opposition parliamentary groups to follow this confrontational *logic* depends to a large extent *on the veto-power capacity of the party in government*. This is, the appearances of interest groups regarding oversight activities decline significantly when the governing party has an absolute majority of seats in parliament. Finally, the results also show that the access of interest groups to the legislative process is greater in issues that generate an intense and conflictual debate between political parties.

To carry out our analysis, we created a novel comprehensive database containing detailed information on the appearances (N) of all interest groups before parliamentary committees from 1996 to 2015 in Spain. For the analysis of the bills and the structure of parliamentary committees, we used the databases created by the Spanish policy agendas project (www.ub.edu/spanishpolicyagendas). These databases are the starting point for theoretical and empirical studies of the interaction of policy-makers and interest groups in parliamentary committees, focusing on a political system in which research on these matters is practically non-existent. Most of the research about interest groups' access to the legislative arena has been carried out in the US (Hall and Deardorff, 2006; Baumgartner et al 2009) and the EU (Marshall, 2010, Chalmers, 2013; Klüver, 2013), with very few exceptionsⁱⁱ like the case of Denmark (Binderkratz 2002, Pedersen et al, 2014; Binderkratz et al., 2015). Also, in

contrast to most existing research this study explains parliamentary group's exchange relations vis-à-vis interest groups with regard not just to the legislative process but to oversight activities as well, using a quantitative approach. Finally, the analysis is unique in covering the access of interest groups over a long time period (1996-2015), in which two different political parties – the conservative Partido Popular (PP) (1996-2004 and again from 2011 to 2015) and the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) (2004-2011) were in government. The rest of the paper aims to explain why parliamentary groups decide to invite interest groups to the parliamentary arena, and more specifically, why there are variations across issues, time and type of activities (legislative and oversight).

Interest group access to the parliamentary arena

In a parliamentary democracy like Spain, the access of interest groups to the parliamentary arena is channelled through parliamentary committees. Overall, parliamentary committees reproduce the main features of the lower chamber in terms of composition – the seats on committees are distributed proportionally among parties to reflect the representation of the plenary – and type of function (legislative or oversight activities). Committees have a significant autonomy from the plenary and are able to re-draft bills, or pass a bill into law under special circumstances; in contrast to other countries, however, they cannot initiate the legislative process (see Döring et al, 2004, for a review Mattson and Strom 1995). On some occasions, interest groups are invited to provide evidence regarding a governmental or parliamentary bill, or to discuss problems related to policy implementation, focusing events, or political scandals concerning government members. In doing so, each committee focuses on specific policy areas following a similar division of labour as the ministerial structure of the executive, with minor variations. In addition, parliamentary groups may create non-permanent committees to discuss specific issues like climate change, pension reform or political corruption scandals (Döring et al. 2004). This is quite an efficient mechanism of

division of labour across policy areas that generate a significant degree of expertise, especially when there is some continuity among the members of the committees over time.

Division of labour

The division of labour across parliamentary committees is one of the main sources of the increasing productivity of parliaments (Mattson and Strom 1995). There are two main reasons for this. On the one hand, parliaments with an intense division of labour generate economies of scale, increasing the capacity of parliamentary groups to deal with several activities at the same time during the term (see Adler and Wilkerson 2013, Cox and McCubbins 2005). On the other hand, the division of labour fosters the legislator's specialisation across policy areas (Döring et al. 2004). Committee members are (or become) experts in the issues under their jurisdiction, thus reducing uncertainty and increasing the quality of policy outputs. In this line, the greater the division of labour across legislative committees, the greater the capacity of government and opposition parties to organise hearings in which interest groups participate regarding legislative activities such as the discussion of bills and/or oversight activities. Accordingly, all things being equal, we expect (H1) the number of interest group appearances to increase as the number of permanent committees increase.

Agenda capacity

The division of labour helps to increase the productivity of committees. However, parliamentary groups cannot debate all the executive bills introduced during the course of the parliamentary term with interest organisations; neither can they discuss all governmental policy failures and shortcomings, or the problems related to focusing events like immigration, economic crisis, corruption scandals and environmental disasters. As agenda capacity is limited, legislators have to choose whether or not to invite interest groups to advance their legislative goals and to perform their control function in the parliamentary arena (Fenno 1973,

Salisbury and Shepsle 1981, Baumgartner and Jones 1993). As Pedersen et al (2014) emphasise for the case of Denmark, variations in committees' agendas will influence the number of interest group appearances, as well as the composition and type of groups invited to parliament.

The workload that committees have to deal with varies from term to term depending on the preferences of legislators, flows of information, and especially, the legislative agenda of the executive. As an example, from 2004 to 2011 the social policy committee had to deal with 40 governmental bills, almost twice the number introduced by the PP government of José Maria Aznar from 1996-2004 – a clear indication of the prioritisation of social issues by the PSOE government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. By the same token, from 1996 to 2000, a large part of the oversight activities of the agriculture committee was related to focusing events like the scandal involving EU subventions for linen productionⁱⁱⁱ. Given that parliamentary committees do not have enough time or technical resources to organise hearings about all these bills and governmental shortcomings, one might expect (H2) parliamentary groups to be less likely to invite interest groups to testimony as the number of issues a committee has to deal with increases during the parliamentary term. Following on with the previous example, all things being equal, the chances an executive bill about social affairs will be discussed with interest groups were greater during the first PP government than in any of the following terms of office, simply because the committee of social affairs had fewer bills to deal with during the PP government than the PSOE governments.

Information versus confrontation

In a context of limited time and scarce economic and human resources, parliamentary groups will select which bills, policy problems and/or pressing events should be discussed with interest organisations, taking into account their need for information, and the level of conflict associated with them (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998; Dür and Mateo 2013; Chalmers 2013;

Klüver, 2012). Interest groups obtain access to the policy making process because they are key providers of expertise and technical knowledge, and represent the different perspectives on social, political and economic issues (Broscheid and Cohen, 2003, Beyers et al 2008, see Baumgartner et al. 2009 for a review). Interest groups will be eager to respond to this invitation and will see their expertise and information as a means to have an impact on policy decisions. In doing so, they also make a long-term investment trying to build up a reputation for providing trustworthy, high quality information (Berry, 1989).

According to this information logic, parliamentary groups will invite interest organisations to participate in the process of drafting a bill about moral issues, labour reform, or immigration in order to mitigate their information failures, generate political consensus among heterogeneous interest, and to avoid political conflict during the process of policy implementation with independence of which political party is governing, or the type of government (Krehbiel 1991; Bouwen, 2004; Hall and Deardorff, 2006; Adler and Wilkerson 2013). Both governing and opposition parties will be especially keen to enlist business and professional associations to give evidence on highly technical issues such as the transposition of EU regulations on the banking system reform or alternative investment funds. Similarly, governing and opposition parties will invite trade unions and NGOs to discuss the new regulation of the pensions system as a way to avoid mass demonstrations, general strikes, boycotts or the like.

This information approach characterises the functioning of committees with regard to legislative activities. Yet, since agenda capacity is limited, parliamentary groups will select which bills will be discussed with interest groups, taking into account party preferences and the level of conflict associated with these bills. In the case of highly conflictual issues like abortion, water policy or labour market reform, parliamentary groups may be especially keen to listen to different interest organisations and experts in order to hear their views on policy

issues, reach political consensus and avoid political conflict during the implementation process (see Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Lowery, 2005; Baumgartner et al. 2009). To organise hearings on the issues that citizens consider to be the most important for the country may also be an opportunity for political parties to show their concern with citizens' priorities. In contrast, parliamentary groups may regard it as a waste of time and resources to invite interest groups to discuss issues on which political parties and social forces are already in broad agreement. Thus, all things being equal, we expect (H3) more interest groups to give evidence in parliamentary committees with regard to bills on highly contested issues.

In the case of oversight activities, providing access to interest groups may be understood as an opportunity to erode the position of the party in government. Opposition parliamentary groups may organise hearings with interest groups on labour reform or on the privatisation of health services as a means to attract media attention, and to raise concern among citizens regarding government policy failures. In this case, parliamentary committees become arenas of political confrontation which are not necessarily oriented to solve policy problems and promote consensus between heterogeneous preferences, but mainly to advance party priorities (Cox and McCubbins 2005, Damgaard and Mattson 2004).

If this confrontation logic is correct, then we would expect the number of interest organisations giving evidence in parliamentary committees to vary over time depending on the veto-power capacity of the governing party. In a parliamentary democracy like Spain, majority governments have a veto on all the activities performed by any committee regardless of its size or the issues under its jurisdiction, with very few exceptions. In so far as *parliamentary committees* are a microcosm of the larger assembly (Mattson and Strom 1995), when the governing party has the majority of seats, opposition parliamentary groups face major barriers for inviting interest groups to give evidence on controversial governmental decisions (for instance, on the consequences of labour reform for income inequality) policy

failures or political scandals like Bankia or the Prestige. With a majority, the governing party will veto any interest group hearings organised by opposition parties that might put its credibility at risk or magnify what citizens identify as the most urgent problems, like political corruption, immigration, or the mismanagement of focusing events. Hence, we expect (H4) the number of interest groups participating in parliamentary committees to decline under governments with an absolute majority for the case of oversight activities, but not for the case of legislative activities.

In short, the above discussion suggests that interest groups will have most access to the parliamentary arena under minority governments, in the case of conflictual issues, and when the number of permanent committees increases. Also, the chances that parliamentary groups will grant access to interest organisations to discuss a certain issue are inversely proportional to the number of issues that the committee has to deal with. The following section provides details on the data and operationalisation of variables. Next, we develop two different models to test our four hypotheses and provide a detailed explanation of why interest groups are invited to parliament.

Data

We constructed a comprehensive database recording the appearances of interest organisations in all the parliamentary committees of the *Congreso de los Diputados* (Spanish lower chamber) from 1996 to 2015^{iv}. Over this period, parliamentary groups decided to organise 3,551 interest group appearances, of which 54% were related to oversight activities and the rest to legislative activities. For each interest group appearance we have identified the name of the organisation, the person representing the organisation, the issue to be discussed, the type of activity: (a) legislative (executive and parliamentary bills), or (b) oversight (discussion of the implementation of policy decisions or about dramatic events), the parliamentary committee where the hearing was held, the type of committee (permanent, non-permanent),

the result (whether the hearing was held or not), and the date of the hearing. The period covers five parliamentary terms of office (1996-2015), three governed by the conservative *Partido Popular (PP)*, led by J.M. Aznar from 1996 to 2004 and by Mariano Rajoy from 2011 to 2015, and two governed by the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)* led by J.L. Rodríguez Zapatero between 2004 and 2011. On two occasions, the governing party had an outright majority (from 2000 to 2004 and from 2011 to 2015). In addition, all interest group appearances dealing with the same issue during the parliamentary term are classified in the same hearing (for example, all appearances related to the regulation of abortion are considered part of the same hearing). Finally, each interest group appearance has been classified according to issue, following the coding methodology of the comparative agendas project as defined in table 2 in the annex. In all, we have identified eight macrocodes: economy, welfare, crime and rights, transportation, research and development, environment, labour, EU and foreign affairs, and others.

To develop our analysis, we recorded information on the functioning of parliamentary committees in Spain over the last five decades (summarised in Table 1 in the annex). From 1996 to 2015 the number of permanent committees varied from 14 (from 1996 to 2004) to 19 (from 2008 to 2011). In accordance with the rules of the Congreso de los Diputados, each of these committees decides whether to invite an interest group, when it should be invited, and what matters should be discussed. More precisely, article 54 states that parliamentary groups may invite individuals and organisations to participate in committee meetings to perform several functions: to contribute to developing the tasks of oversight policy implementation; to provide information about specific issues; and/or to explain specific policy positions on an issue. Article 54 also states that parliamentary groups may grant access to interest groups to participate in research commissions, created *ad hoc* for the discussion of specific issues like

corruption scandals, or focusing events. In all cases, the committee board (*mesa de la comisión*) acts as a gatekeeper, setting the agenda for each session.

Finally, we rely on the databases created by the Spanish policy agendas project to analyse executive bills. Legislative bills are not included in the analysis, mainly because hardly any hearings with interest groups regarding the bills introduced by parliamentary groups are held^v. That is, legislators decide not to devote their time and resources to organise hearings on bills that have almost no chance of becoming law (in Spain, fewer than 10% of parliamentary bills eventually passed). As in the case of appearances, we classify bills according to the comparative agendas project methodology (table 2 in the annex).

From 1996 to 2015, 821 executive bills were presented, of which 703 followed the standard procedure^{vi}. For each bill we have created several categorical variables. First, we classify all bills in two different groups depending on whether or not parliamentary groups decide to arrange a hearing with interest groups (1 if an interest group was invited, 0 otherwise). Second, in order to measure the level of political conflict associated with each bill, we take into account the number of return amendments introduced to an executive bill by parliamentary groups^{vii}. In this way, we measure a parliamentary group's position regarding the legislative proposals of the executive (0 return amendments means total agreement among political forces, scores of 1, 2 etc., mean that one or more parliamentary groups consider that bill should be rejected). The maximum number of return amendments received by an executive bill is 11. Other indicators of political conflict like final voting are not considered in the analysis because they only apply in the case of decree-laws and organic laws (in Spain there is no final voting on all other types of law, see Palau, Muñoz and Chaqués-Bonafont, 2015).

Note that to test how agenda capacity and issue characteristics affect interest groups' access to the parliamentary arena, we focus only on legislative activities. There are two main

reasons for this. First, in the case of oversight activities one can identify which policy failures or governmental shortcomings were discussed with interest groups in each committee, but there is no way of measuring what this represents in relation to the whole list of policy problems and governmental shortcomings during the parliamentary term. Second, there is no indicator to discriminate between conflictual and non-conflictual issues regarding oversight activities.

Explaining interest groups' access

To test whether institutional factors have a statistically significant impact on the number of interest groups giving evidence in the parliamentary arena, we run an OLS regression in which the independent variables are: (1) the type of government (defined by a dummy variable with value 0 when the party in government is governing with a minority of seats, and 1 otherwise); and (2) the number of permanent legislative committees. As we explained in the previous sections, we expect the number of interest group appearances to be affected by the structure of parliamentary committees – the higher the number of committees the greater the capacity of parliamentary groups to carry out different activities such as the organisation of hearings with interest groups. We also introduce the election year as a control variable (1 if election year, 0: otherwise). During election years, the number of parliamentary sessions falls, and this may affect the parliamentary group's capacity to organise interest group appearances. Note that for the whole period elections were held in March (with the exception of 2011, when they were held in November). We run separate models for the case of the number of interest group appearances scheduled and held for legislative and oversight activities. The explanatory capacity of the model is very high –adjusted R squared is high for all cases, but especially for oversight activities (.496). Table 1 summarises the results.

Table 1 about here

First, the results indicate that variations in the number of permanent committees have a significant impact on interest group access to the parliamentary arena. That is to say, the increasing division of labour across parliamentary committees (which range in number from 14 to 19, over the five parliamentary terms under analysis) has a positive and significant impact on the number of groups gaining access to the parliamentary arena. Overall, the number of interest group appearances scheduled by parliamentary groups rose by 17.5 as the number of committees increased, and by 15.8 with respect to the number of appearances that finally took place. In the case of oversight activities, the coefficients were also positive and significant (appearances increased by 7.76 as the number of committees increased) while in the case of legislative activities the coefficients were positive, but not significant.

Second, these results also illustrate the major differences between the number of interest groups parliamentary groups would like to invite (appearances scheduled), and those that finally give evidence in a committee (appearances held), especially for the case of oversight activities. As figure 1 illustrates for the case of legislative activities, 86% of the appearances scheduled finally take place, compared with 70% in the case of oversight activities. This decline is especially acute during majority governments, when fewer than 60% of the oversight appearances scheduled finally take place. In contrast, the number of interest groups going to parliament to discuss executive bills seems to increase during majority governments. The results of the OLS regression corroborate this pattern.

(Figure 1 about here)

Third, the type of government has a direct impact on the number of interest groups going to parliament, with major differences depending on the type of activity. In the case of legislative activities, the coefficient is positive but not significant, indicating that the number of interest groups going to parliament to discuss executive bills increases under majority governments. In contrast, the number of interest group appearances that take place regarding

oversight activities fell significantly by 38.3 a year under majority governments .The coefficient is also negative for the case of oversight appearances scheduled, though not significant.

As predicted in the previous sections, these results indicate that a majority government can impose its power of veto to avoid the hearings that might draw attention to policy failures and shortcomings. As an example, from 2011 to 2015, only 25% of the interest group appearances scheduled to oversee the implementation of financial policy finally took place. Similarly, under the majority government of José M^a Aznar, no interest groups were invited to give evidence about the Prestige oil spill (November 2002), even though this event was one of the most important environmental catastrophes in Spain in recent decades^{viii}. It was only in 2005, when the PSOE was in power that a commission was set up to study the consequences of the oil spill.

In contrast, the results indicate that the type of government has no significant impact on the number of interest groups giving evidence regarding legislative activities. Actually, the coefficients are positive, which indicates that parliamentary groups tend to invite interest groups with more frequency to discuss executive bills during majority governments. These results give support to the initial hypothesis. Figure 2 illustrates these findings across issues. Overall, the mean number of interest group appearances per year tends to decrease under majority governments for all issues without exception with regard to oversight activities, while the opposite occurs with regard to the discussion of bills. In the following section, we explain why the capacity and willingness of policy-makers to debate legislative proposals with private actors depends to a large extent on agenda capacity and the level of conflict associated with a particular issue.

(Figure 2 about here)

Issue conflict, agenda capacity and type of government

The next question is to determine how far agenda capacity and political conflict explain parliamentary groups' decisions to invite interest groups to participate in the discussion of an executive bill. To do so, we run a binomial regression, where the dependent variable is a dummy variable, which identifies whether an executive bill was discussed (value 1) or not (value 0) with interest groups. Following the previous discussion, the independent variables are (1) the level of conflict associated with a particular bill (the number of return amendments for each of the bills introduced from 1996 to 2015), (2) agenda capacity (the number of bills a committee has to deal with during the parliamentary term) and (3) the type of government (1 majority, 0 otherwise). We also control for an additional variable (4) the type of law (dummy variable: 1 if an organic bill, 0 if an ordinary bill). Since agenda capacity is limited, one might expect parliamentary groups to be especially keen to organise interest group hearings for bills that require a higher level of consensus among parliamentary groups (organic bills need the support of the absolute majority of deputies in the lower chamber to be passed into law, while ordinary bills require only a majority of the votes cast by those present). Following the above discussion we do not expect the type of government to have a significant impact on the decision to organise interest group hearings; we expect most decisions to be driven by conflict and agenda capacity. The results are summarised in table 2.

Table 2

As expected, parliamentary groups are especially keen to invite private groups to discuss bills that generate higher degrees of confrontation in the parliamentary arena. Positive B coefficients show that the probability that interest groups give evidence and participate in the discussion of an executive bill increases by 1.5 (Exp B) as the number of total amendments increases. The results also indicate that interest groups are more likely to

participate in the discussion of bills that require a greater consensus to be passed into law; organic laws are 2.1 times more likely to be discussed with private actors than ordinary laws. These results corroborate the problem-solving approach for assessing the functioning of parliamentary committees. Parliamentary groups will invite interest organisations to participate in the process of drafting a bill as a way to generate political consensus between heterogeneous interests, and gain political support regardless of the type of government (Adler and Wilkerson 2013).

In fact, results indicate that the type of government is not a significant variable for explaining why parliamentary groups invite private actors to debate bills. A majority government may be keen to organise hearings even for the case of highly conflictual bills, like abortion regulation under the PSOE government (2008-2011) as a way of legitimising their legislative proposals, and to gather support for some of the more controversial aspects. As we explain in the next section this is especially so for certain issues. Finally, the results also illustrate that parliamentary groups' capacity to invite interest groups depends on the amount of work a committee has to deal with during the parliamentary term. Negative coefficients indicate that agenda capacity matters: the more bills a parliamentary committee has to deal with during the parliamentary term, the less likely it is to organise a hearing with interest groups to discuss a bill under its jurisdiction. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate these findings. The mean number of bills parliamentary committees deal with along the term is 32% lower for the case of bills discussed with interest groups. By the same token, figure 3 highlights that twice as many return amendments are made in the case of bills discussed with interest groups than in the rest. We now discuss whether these results can be applied to all types of issue.

Figures 3 and 4

Variation across issues

To explain why certain bills are discussed with interest groups while others are not, we computed mean differences across issues^{ix} (see table 2 in the annex for a description). The results are summarised in table 3. First, political conflict is a significant variable for explaining interest group access to the parliamentary arena – the number of return amendments is significantly larger for bills discussed with interest groups than for the rest, but the results are only significant for the case of welfare, labour, foreign affairs and governmental issues. In the case of welfare, interest groups are especially active regarding the welfare system reform^x led by the PSOE government of Rodríguez Zapatero. This reform aimed to consolidate a universal long term care system covering the needs of the dependent population, to reduce the reliance on the family (especially women) for the provision of widely needed social welfare benefits, and to promote a better balance between work and family life (Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau and Baumgartner 2015).

Table 3

Interest groups also participate actively in the discussion of three of the most controversial executive bills in recent decades, all related to education policy. In all, the parliamentary groups posed 11 return amendments to the *Proyecto de Ley Orgánica para la mejora de la calidad educativa* (Organic bill for the improvement of the education quality) introduced by the PP government headed by Mariano Rajoy – the highest number of return amendments any bill received from 1996 to 2015. Two other bills related to education policy, the *Proyecto de Ley Orgánica de Calidad de la Educación* (Organic bill of education quality) and the *Proyecto de Ley Orgánica de las Cualificaciones y de la Formación Profesional* (Organic bill of vocational training), both introduced by the PP government between 2000 and 2004 also received a large number of return amendments (eight and six respectively). Interest groups were also invited to discuss two of the most controversial labour reforms during the economic crisis: the pension system reform (2013) and the social security law (2014), with

respect to which the parliamentary groups introduced eight and seven total return amendments respectively.

In contrast, political conflict is not significant in the case of rights, transportation and economic issues. In the case of rights-related issues, interest organisations have participated in the discussion of some of the most controversial regulatory changes of recent decades in Spain such as the regulation of abortion, but also in the discussion of issues like gender discrimination for which there is a broad consensus between political parties. The same applies to economic issues. On some occasions interest groups were invited to give evidence on highly conflictual issues, like the bill of sustainable development introduced by the PSOE government of Rodríguez Zapatero, while on others they participated in the debate on bills for which there is a broad consensus such as the law on patents (with no return amendments).

These results corroborate our hypothesis regarding the conflictive nature of the issue. On many occasions parliamentary groups invite interest groups to deal with highly controversial issues, especially when a committee has to deal with a low number of bills. With the exception of labour reform, the mean number of bills dealt with by a committee is lower for the case of bills discussed with interest groups – significantly so in the case of the economy, rights and justice, foreign affairs and government. However, the results also indicate that interest groups on some occasions gain access to the parliamentary arena to deal with issues for which there is a broad consensus. In these cases, one might expect parliamentary groups to invite private actors in order to obtain information and technical knowledge. The problem is that there is no single indicator that makes it possible to test the impact of “complexity” in a comprehensive way. The need for delegates’ expertise and information on an issue, for example stem-cell research or renewable energy, will depend to a large extent on their academic and professional background. So far, these results do not neglect the importance of complexity associated with some issues; they simply demonstrate

that political conflict is a relevant factor to explain interest groups' access to the parliamentary arena.

Conclusion

Political parties invite interest groups to participate in parliamentary committees following different logics depending on the type of function they have to perform. In the case of legislative activities, parliamentary groups grant access to private groups as a means to capitalise on their expertise and to minimise political conflict, regardless of which party is in power and the type of government. Parliamentary committees become problem-solving institutions through which interest groups and policy-makers exchange resources and information in order to promote effective legislation. In contrast, in the case of oversight activities, opposition parliamentary groups invite private actors in an attempt to erode the position of the governing party, drawing attention to policy failures and governmental shortcomings. In this case, parliamentary committees are arenas of political confrontation through which opposition parties try to advance their priorities. One of the main consequences of this confrontation logic is the significant decline in the number of interest groups giving evidence in parliamentary committees when the governing party has the majority of seats. That is to say, governments with an absolute majority impose their power of veto to avoid the organisation of hearings that may negatively affect their chances of re-election.

This article also demonstrates that interest groups' access to the parliamentary arena depends not only on policy-makers' needs for information or on the willingness of opposition parties to magnify governmental failures, but also on institutional factors, agenda capacity, and the level of conflict associated with certain issues. The results show that the structure of parliamentary committees matter – the greater the division of labour across parliamentary committees, the higher the number of interest groups going to parliament to give evidence. By the same token, parliamentary groups decide whether to invite interest groups to give

evidence about specific issues taking into account the amount of work they have to deal with over the parliamentary term (their agenda capacity) and the political conflict associated with the issue in question. More specifically, the article illustrates that the likelihood that a bill will be debated with interest groups depends on the number of bills the committee has to deal with, and the level of political confrontation associated with the particular bill.

Overall, this article provides a novel theoretical and empirical analysis of the pattern of interaction between interest organisations and parliamentary groups in a majority parliamentary democracy like Spain. In contrast to previous analyses, we use a new comprehensive database of interest group appearances in parliamentary committees which covers five different parliamentary terms over a period of 20 years, taking into account not only legislative activities but also the oversight function of parliamentary committees. In doing so, the goal was to contribute to the analysis of interest group activities across policy venues, and also to better understand the role of committees in parliamentary democracies. In general, the analysis illustrates that interest groups play a role in the parliamentary arena, regarding both legislative and oversight functions. The next step is to test whether these problem-solving and confrontation logics also apply to other political systems.

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Figures and tables

Explaining interest groups access to parliamentary committees

Table 1. Explaining the evolution of interest group access to parliamentary committees, 1996 to 2015

All activities	Appearances organised					Appearances scheduled				
	B	T	Sig	Adj. Rsq	Durbin-Watson	B	T	Sig	Adj. Rsq	Durbin-Watson
Cons	-78.8	-0.7	.489	.514	2.209	-68.2	-0.5	.634	.430	2.329
Type of government	-29.9	-1.1	.269			-16.4	-0.5	.626		
Permanent committees	15.8	2.3	.033			17.5	2.0	.058		
Election year	-94.7	-3.4	.003			-105.3	-3.0	.008		
Oversight activities										
Cons	-23.3	-0.4	.700	.496	2.004	-7.1	-0.1	.931	.400	2.041
Type of government	-38.3	-2.8	.013			-31.7	-1.7	.114		
Permanent committees	7.76	2.2	.045			8.36	1.7	.111		
Election year	-44.3	-3.1	.008			-45.6	-2.3	.037		
Legislative activities: executive bills										
Cons	-53.8	-0.6	.530	.254	2.137	-71.89	-0.74	.471	.310	2.217
Type of government	16.8	0.9	.390			27.547	1.269	.224		
Permanent committees	7.2	1.4	.180			8.707	1.472	.162		
Election year	-42.4	-2.0	.630			-48.94	-2.01	.063		

Note: The model shows an OLS regression predicting the number of interest organisations that participate in parliamentary committees scheduled and organised each year from 1996 to 2015 (N: 20). The independent variables are the type of government (dummy variable with value 0 during minority governments and 1 when the executive is governing with the absolute majority of seats); election year (dummy variable with value 1 the year of election and 0 otherwise); the number of permanent legislative committees.

Table 3. Explaining Interest groups access to the parliamentary arena across issues (Mean Differences, 1996-2015)

IG participation	issue	variable	Bills	Mean	Sig.	Issue	Bills	Mean	Sig.	Issue	Bills	Mean	Sig.
No hearing	Economy	Conflict	201	1.199	.668		36	.611	.000		38	1.368	,338
Hearing			20	1.400			4	4.000			11	2.000	
No hearing		Agenda capacity	232	28.99	.005	Labour	40	15.700	.069	Transport and R&D	42	12.643	,807
Hearing			20	19.05			4	20.750			12	13.417	
No hearing		Type of government	232	.427	.817		40	.350	.123		42	.381	,219
Hearing			20	.400			4	.750			12	.583	
No hearing		Type of law	232	.039	.200			none			42	.024	.345
Hearing			20	.100							12	.083	
No hearing	Rights and justice	Conflict	110	1.364	.771		39	.821	.055		48	1.167	,005
Hearing			24	1.500			5	2.400			6	4.333	
No hearing		Agenda capacity	116	22.966	.001	EU and foreign affairs	49	23.224	.041	Government	52	14.346	,014
Hearing			26	15.692			5	4.800			6	26.500	
No hearing		Type of government	116	.431	.130		49	.367	.465		53	.302	,076
Hearing			26	.269			5	.200			6	.667	
No hearing		Type of law	116	.440	.364		49	.327	.570		53	.170	,985
Hearing			26	.538			5	.200			6	.167	
No hearing		Conflict	30	1.067	.012		59	1.305	.137	All	561	1.180	,000
Hearing			14	2.929			10	2.200			94	2.160	
No hearing		Agenda capacity	32	11.531	.270	Environment	61	10.049	.980		622	21.474	,000
Hearing			14	8.071			11	10.000			98	14.684	
No hearing	Welfare	Type of government	32	.531	.532		61	.475	.500		625	.414	,907
Hearing			14	.429			11	.364			98	.408	
No hearing		Type of law	32	.125	.005		61	.000	.017		625	.144	,001
Hearing			14	.500			11	.091			98	.276	

Note: for some issues, the number of bills considered for the variable “conflict” is lower than for the rest of variables. This is because we are missing information on return amendments for 60 bills out of 722.

Table 2
 Binomial logistic regression. Explaining interest group access to legislative activities in parliamentary committees (1996-2015)

Dependent variable		B	Sig.	Exp(B)	% forecasted	R squared Nagelkerke
All bills (703)	Conflict	.416	.027	1,516	86,1	.084
	Agenda capacity	-.035	.000	.996		
Discussed with IG (95)	Type of law	.783	.003	2,189		
	Type of government	-.151	.509	.993		
	Cons	-1,376	.000	.253		

Annex

Table 1. General description of the activities of parliamentary committees in the *Congreso de los Diputados* (Lower House) of the Spanish parliament.

Type of activities	Subtype	Description of main functions	Type of committee	Decision to compel	Committee composition
Legislative		Discussion of bills Introduction of amendments. No authority to initiate bills. In exceptional cases, committees organise the final voting on certain bills (e.g., <i>lectura única</i> or single reading).	Permanent(1)	Majority vote, though most appearances of interest groups are decided by consensus (2).	Proportional. Composition reflects the share of seats in the plenary of the Lower House.
		Discussion of implementation process and policy orientation. Occasionally parliamentary committees investigate political scandals, although this task is generally carried out by an ad-hoc committee.	Permanent and non-permanent		
Oversight	Policy oversight				
	Investigation	Investigation of crime responsibilities in public affairs.	ad-hoc, non-permanent		
	Budgeting	Discussion of the annual budget.	Permanent		

Adapted from Matson and Ström Powers' (1995: pp 287-291) description of committee' functions.

(1) Exception: the Comisión de Igualdad (Equality Committee). From 1996 to 2008, this committee was a non-legislative permanent mixed committee (with representations of both the Congress and Senate). Since 2008 it has been a legislative permanent committee.

(2) This is why it is impossible to determine which parliamentary group has invited which interest group.

Table 2. Classification of hearings in which interest groups have participated across parliamentary committees

Macrocode	Code (CAP)	Hearing (example)
Economy	Economy	Consequences of EMU, economic recession and unemployment
	Agriculture	CAP reform
	Energy	Privatisation of public companies
	Housing	Mortgages and access to housing
	Commerce & Banking	Banking system reform, discussion about specific sectors: tourism, wine.
	Foreign trade	Promotion of the internationalisation of Spanish firms
Welfare	Health	Waiting lists, health system reform
	Education and culture	Use of Catalan at school, management of the Museo del Prado, PISA report
	Social Policy	Dependency, elderly welfare assistance, balance between family and work
Rights	Rights	Immigration, gender inequalities, gypsies, prostitution, abortion, rights of animals
	Crime and Justice	Violence against women, human trafficking
Transportation and R&D	Transportation	High-speed train
	R&D	Telecommunication market reform
Environment	Environment	Kyoto protocol
	Public lands	none
Labour	Labour	Pension systems (Pacto de Toledo)
EU and Foreign policy	Foreign affairs	EU enlargement, OSLO agreements
	Defense	full integration in NATO
Other		Government activities, transparency and fight against corruption

ⁱLaura Chaqués-Bonafont is the Corresponding author

ⁱⁱ For example, studies in Denmark indicate that groups use the parliamentary arena as a venue for voicing discontent and defending gains achieved in the administrative arena (Pedersen et al, 2014; Binderkratz, 2002)

ⁱⁱⁱ This relates to fraudulent behavior of recipients of EU agricultural subsidies.

^{iv} The source of the database is the Spanish Congress web page which contains data on the different types of appearances.

<http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Iniciativas>.

^v Only 11 bills were discussed with interest organizations from 1996 to 2011, less than 1.3% of the total (ten times fewer than executive bills), most of them related to crime and rights-related issues.

^{vi} A variety of parliamentary procedures may be applied to executive bills. Here we have excluded all bills passed following the procedure of *lectura única* (single reading) (57 of the total), and all bills aimed to modify the budget as a result of a dramatic event like a drought, fire, etc (43 of the total). In both cases bills are passed very rapidly in response to urgent matters.

^{vii} According to article 110 of the Rules of the *Congreso de los Diputados*, once a bill is posted, deputies and the parliamentary groups have a period of fifteen days to submit amendments. In doing so, they may submit a (a) return amendment with an alternative text proposal, (b) a return (or devolution) amendment without alternative text, or (c) single article amendments.

^{viii} In November 2002, an oil tanker called Prestige split in half, spilling more than 50,000 tons of crude oil near the Galicia coast. This is considered one of the worst environmental catastrophes in Spain.

^{ix} Note that we cannot run a binomial regression because of the low number of cases for some of these issues.

^x This welfare reform was regulated by two main laws, the *Ley 39/2006, de 14 de diciembre, de Promoción de la Autonomía Personal y Atención a las personas en situación de dependencia* (Law for the Promotion of Personal Freedom and Care for those in a Position of Dependency) and the *Ley Orgánica 3/2007, para la igualdad efectiva entre hombres y mujeres*, (Law for Effective Equality Between Women and Men).