Lobbies on the Campaign Trail: What Happens and How

Dr. Guillaume COURTY
Professor in Politics, Lille Political Science Institute, CERAPS Centre for Research (CNRS)

Dr. Julie GERVAISS
Lecturer in Politics, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, CESSP Centre for Research (CNRS)

CONTACTS:
guillaume.courty@sciencespo-lille.eu
gervais_julie@yahoo.fr
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Dr. Guillaume Courty (Professor of political science, Political Science Institute, Lille)
Dr. Julie Gervais (Lecturer in political science, Paris 1-Sorbonne University)

1. Introduction

This paper stems from a collective research on interest groups which point of departure is to analyze interest groups’ participation in electoral and governmental agenda-setting in France. Our first line of questioning deals with whether elections are strategic moments for interest groups or not. Are electoral campaigns specific moments during which they have to face an increased professional activity? Do electoral periods represent an opportunity that lobbies actually seize in order to ‘shake up the public sphere’, as put by one of our interviewees? Do they issue statements to the press? Do they lobby public institutions? Do they try and organize meetings, conferences or seminars in order to intervene in the campaign? In other words, do lobbies assert their will to participate in bringing about change in administration, regulatory frameworks and public policies during electoral campaigns and if so, how? Up to now, these questions have barely received any academic attention.

This collective research aims at explaining the interactions between the staff of political parties and interest groups, how the latter exert political pressure, the concrete day-to-day activities of the actors involved, as well as a sociological analysis of their education/training, careers, and background. The emphasis will be put on the outcomes of such encounters in terms of gaining access to the forthcoming government and congressional majority or acquiring a political resale right about their proposals. The fieldwork was conducted during the campaign of the recent French presidential election (May 2012) and is still ongoing as French parliamentary elections take place in mid-June 2012, as the present paper is being written. In this paper, we will focus on interest groups and give an overview of their activities as political staffs are too busy with the ongoing elections to accept interviews with academics.

The various interest groups we study include think tanks which have participated in the electoral campaign. But can a think tank really be considered as an interest group? And what, after all, is an interest group? If authors agree on one of their characteristics regarding electoral campaigns and the fact that they do not run directly for elections, they disagree on the terms of their definition.
As far as think tanks are concerned, definitions are variable and more or less self-legitimizing. Authors nevertheless seem to agree that think tanks try to promote ideas related to public policies; they carry out applied research that they want to see implemented through governmental reforms. In order to do so, they communicate in the media, try to popularize their work among politicians and officials and are in search of a political impact. But does this make them an “interest” group? Do they advocate their proposals and ideas the way lobbyists do by devoting individuals and structures to this very task? What about research units in McKinsey or Accenture which seem to be increasingly consulted by the government? How far are they from a think tank? What, if anything, really is distinctive about a think tank?

These questions related to the definition of the term are not preliminary ones which will be solved in a few sentences at the beginning of this paper: they lie at the very heart of our enquiry. Being named a think tank or a lobby isn’t random, there are labeling strategies at stake, using one term for the other can be done to regain prestige or, on the contrary, to bring discredit on an organization. As we consider the definitional question as a challenge for our collective research, at this early stage of our investigation we will use the term “interest groups” in a very broad sense, before making distinctions between the varieties it includes. We will first present a state of the art and the main findings from the literature related to interest groups and electoral campaigns. After having presented the main questions raised or dealt with by academics, we will describe our own approach and main hypothesis, as well as our research design. We will then expound our very first findings and conclusions.

2. Political science and interest groups: what do we know about elections campaigning?

The available literature on this theme is overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon and has mainly focused on four major themes. First, the question of interest groups’ financial participation in electoral campaigns. What are the rules in this regard in different countries and how have they been adapted, redrafted or worked out by political parties? As far as this first question is concerned, studying interest groups in France represents an interesting challenge for political scientists. Indeed, the very question of interest groups’ financial support to political parties cannot be explored in this country. Since 1995, they are not allowed to fund elections or political parties there (Abel, Sauger, 2006), which rules out the possibility of studying hard and soft money in order to understand exchanges during political elections. If one compares the French situation to that of other pluralist democracies, it is clear that in this country interest groups are not in a
position to support candidates in the same way as they do where money can legally proceed from civil society.

Funding being so salient in research analyzing electoral campaigns (Franz, 2008 and Clyde, Rentaro 2010) does the practical impossibility of carrying fieldwork on this theme in France means nothing else can be said on the subject? Is funding the only role interest groups can play in such configurations? Why Trade unions contribute less than business organizations (Grier & Munger, 1986)? This is what we aim at exploring by considering interest groups as electoral actors and by enquiring on the part they possibly play during French electoral campaigns, in spite of these funding rules.

The two next lines of questioning one can find in the literature are closer to what we aim at in our own research. The second main question dealt with in the literature is related to agenda building during electoral campaigns. On the one hand, publications analyze the use of media by interest groups in order to set specific issues on the campaign’s agenda and, on the other, they broach the way political platforms are written in order to gain support from the most powerful NGOs. Most of the research in this field concerns the situation in the US and insists on the fact that organizations may support a specific theme or issue without necessarily supporting one candidate in particular (Herrnson, 1996, p.45).

The third way political scientists deal with interest groups’ types of commitment during electoral campaigns is by showing that they participate in the selection of candidates (Norris, 1997; Rozell Mark, Wilcox 1999). They can do so in various ways. They can openly support a candidate by calling to vote for him/her; they can help a candidate by providing him/her with additional resources; or they can mobilize and rally support for a candidate through buzz marketing and “dirty works” as they themselves call it, i.e. when they promote themes over which political staffs are reluctant to communicate (Bigelow, Herrnson, 2008). Once the selection is effective, when the final list of candidates is published, interest groups pursue their job by advocating solutions to the problems they consider most urgent. During the French recent presidential elections, interest groups tried to endorse a similar role to the one they took on during the primary elections except that, on this occasion, they had to change their strategy. Not only did they have to wait for quite a long time for the short list of candidates to be published –including Nicolas Sarkozy’s own decision to run– but they were still waiting for the former President’s platform 17 days before the elections’ first round. Whereas the Socialist candidate François Hollande published his in late January, N. Sarkozy’s strategy was to wait until very late before he eventually revealed “one
proposal a day”. Hence, during interviews, representatives of some of the most active interest groups admitted having felt quite disturbed and ill at ease with the recent presidential campaign.

The available literature on interest groups provides us with very useful information as far as the formula of interest groups’ intervention is concerned. It basically shows that they participate in the campaign’s agenda building and in the selection of who is going to run for election. But the “how” question is the main contribution we would like to explore. European political scientists do take a look at interest groups in European political systems — mostly German, Danish, British and Norwegian one (see Farrell, Schmitt-Beck, 2008 and Allern, Saglie 2008). They describe how interest groups write drafts for political parties, how they collect votes and how they “use the election campaign period as an additional arena for lobbying” (Allern, Saglie, 2008, p.94).

These descriptions are useful but we think that the “how” question needs a more comprehensive framework. An organization does not act at random during elections. Of course they develop strategies. Of course they are dependent on the political system’s rules. But we want to explore what they cannot be aware of given how recent lobbying activities are in France and because professional lobbyists do not usually know what the other players of the field do. In fact, we want to use the analytical framework called “outside campaign” (Magleby, 2003) in order to understand to which extent an election can be understood as a field where different groups intervene, interact, contradict or reinforce one another. In other words, we would like to explore how politicians’ performances, citizens’ votes and interest groups’ contributions interact during these periods. Thus, if the how question has most of the time been put aside in the literature, we insist on taking it seriously. What are the components of their participation? How do they actually advocate their themes? How do they effectively participate in the selection of candidates? These are the questions our research project aims at dealing with.

Taking the recent presidential and current parliamentary elections in France as a case-study to analyze interest groups opens opportunities as nothing has yet been published on the question but it also involves some drawbacks. The fact is we do not know what interest groups usually do during elections in France. There is no data available in the literature regarding previous French elections. One can only find scarce information such as a short list of campaign meetings between the 2002 and 2007 presidential elections’ three main candidates and the most well-known interest groups - such as those representing farmers or students (Ballet, 2010) and when more information is available on an election, the focus ends up being not on the interest groups

\[1\] With the exception of Baumgartner et al. (2009) publication which is a first attempt to pay attention to what is at stake for interest groups during electoral campaign outside of the sole question of funding.
themselves but on the media (Retier-Melleray, 2002). If one considers the three main French publications related to interest groups, the first one is written by a specialist of the vote and electoral history (Offerlé, 1994), while the two others do not deal with the electoral question (Grossman, Saurugger, 2012) or only marginally so (Courty, 2006). Only one piece of research is available on that very matter and it deals with interest groups’ use of the media at the end of the 50’s (Royer, 1956). As far as historical literature is concerned, some books describe some scandals regarding campaigns’ funding or deal with specific and exceptional events (such as when a business organization presented candidates for the French parliamentary elections in 1951). In order to explore interest groups’ participation in the electoral process, and to try and answer some of the questions which have been put aside in the literature, we would like to work on the following enigma: how do interest groups play the game of politics?

3. Toward a new understanding of the electoral exchange

3.1 Our research question

The first and probably most obvious way of dealing with the question of how interest groups play the game of politics would be to link it to the influence enigma\(^2\). Do interest groups’ battles succeed and do they manage to get the arguments they advocate used by political representatives? One could indeed attempt at finding the key which would open the black box of influence by tracing back ideas and interests from their drafting in legislator writings to their initial wording by interest groups. But this goal is quite hard, if not impossible, to achieve. If correlation links can potentially be highlighted, it is indeed very difficult to demonstrate a real causation link, all other things being equal. Moreover, we consider that this aim is not that relevant. If the question of influence is now often understood and studied in a wider perspective – spreading or obtaining information or gaining an institutional position also falls under this definition – many academics continue to assume that interest groups can only be considered as influential when they succeed in drafting laws. It appears to us as an inappropriate line of questioning insofar as during electoral campaigns, very few interest groups actually act as policy-advisors for the future government. Furthermore, the question seems a bit pointless as we know how much the political field is driven by the garbage can model. Even with the help of the best data base, we seriously doubt that one could find a solution to this formulation of the influence enigma. We suggest another approach in order to broach the question of how lobbies play the game of politics. Rather than

\(^2\) See all the interrogations and debates around influence since Andrew S. McFarland (2004) was hoping for a good theoretical bloom in the room of political science.
enquiring whether they are effective in their attempts to produce outputs in electoral campaigns
we focus on what lobbyists effectively do and how do they do it. In other words, our project is
focused on the practices of interest groups, “that which is done” and “that is done repeatedly”
(Keek, Sikking, 1998, p.35) during election campaigning.

3.2 Our approach

The once much criticized notion of influence has made a weird comeback in research on
European institutions. Not everybody agrees though. For some, carrying research on interest
groups entails being critical of the “legend” of corporate business’ influence (Leech, 2010, p.534).
For others, the question of influence is such a no-brainer that they ask it directly to their
interviewees instead of making it a research enigma to be solved by the researcher him/herself.
Asking interest groups’ representatives whether they were influent on such or such issue has
nearly become an academic tradition (Cammisa, 1995, p.120). Most of the time, the conclusions
these studies draw are rather counterintuitive. Monographs show that organizations which are
considered as the most influent during electoral campaigns are usually only “marginally” effective
(common cause in Rothenberg’s research, 1992, p.247) or weak (Wilcox, 2010). By focusing on
interest groups’ activities during campaigns one cannot really ignore “influence”. How could we
then contribute to this debate?

Our first contribution consists in asking how some statements can circulate from people who
aren’t candidates to candidates’ speeches and proposals. It is indeed possible to show that part of
the texts elaborated by interest groups can be found in political products such as slogans,
platforms, speeches, etc.) but we do not know how these words actually circulate between these
fields (Klüver, 2008). What is at stake here is not whether some themes travel from one
institution to the other –as this is quite obvious— but what do individuals do when themes
circulate.
Exploring the “how” question is an attempt to reformulate the question in the same way as Katz
and Lazarsfeld did regarding the so-called media influence over people’s opinion. The two
sociologists are known to have improved their understanding of communication by studying
propaganda during war time (Cefaï, 2008). We would like to follow their example on another
level by studying influence during electoral campaigns. It is indeed an appropriate conjuncture to
use as a potential counter-example to the thesis of interest groups’ direct influence over
politicians. Thus our goal is to elaborate an analytical framework of institutional relations
managers and consultants’ personal influence (Katz, Lazarsfeld, 2008) instead of the thesis of
lobbies’ influence. Our hypothesis can be expressed as followed: as well as the media do not have a direct influence over our opinions, interest groups do not have a direct influence over politicians. In order to check it, we use the same question which the two sociologists tested on radio programs. They showed that citizens do not make up their mind by reading the papers or by listening to the radio but by speaking about the information they got from these media. Conversation is indeed the most common form of sociability.

Following their path, we would like to show that the circulation of a theme or of a phrase between different fields doesn’t depend on whether a written piece has been issued but is made possible thanks to all the activities which take place besides publishing. The famous triptych developed by the two sociologists (imitation, manipulation, contamination) needs to be tested and adapted to see whether and how politicians imitate, make theirs or spread phrases elaborated by others.

But before going any further on the “how” question, one has to pause for thought over the notion of influence itself and bring another contribution to the discussion. B. Leech’s writings on the question are important in this purpose. She says that the inference is not thought of in a satisfying way because researchers are mistaken on the variable they choose. On this matter, the three specialists of the influence theory agree. The citizen, the journalist and the political scientist always consider that influence can be explained by a dependent variable (e.g.: an organization’s influence depends on the number of seats it has in advisory committees). The difference between these three characters is that researchers are the only one to statistically check the relevance of the dependency even if it often means going on the wrong track (citizens and journalists rely on their intuition).

Researchers try to find out the themes over which an organization has had an influence. But here lies the problem as a theme is also a variable which depends on the activities of the people under observation (Courty, 2011). As suggested by B. Leech, research must therefore focus on three series of variable to explore what a lobbyist does during a campaign. The first one will enable us to find out what the modes of participation in the election are (buying votes will be a variable in certain political systems). The second variable will explore the forms of mobilization used by interest groups for a candidate. The third one will concern the different ways in which one can provide services to an elected person.

Our contribution to the debate on “how” influence occurs opens to a third important question: what is an electoral campaign from the interest groups’ point of view? Here again the question of
influence is ambiguous. By simply asking interviewees whether some interest groups were influent or not on such or such part of a candidate’s platform, political scientists assume that the former have an answer to give and that they did interact with political staffs. If one has to bear in mind that candidates and lobbyists may have more in common than one thinks, they might as well not have been in touch with one another at all. Our contribution aims at stressing that lobbyists and candidates do not systematically know where a proposal comes from or what use was made of it during the campaign. The notion of “outside campaigns” formulated by D. Magleby (2003) and used in research on elections in European countries (Farrell, Schmitt-Beck, 2008), is very relevant in such a context. Two election models are now available. The first one is the outside campaign model: organizations which have gradually developed since the 70s (mainly public interest groups such as environmentalist NGOs) have not looked for politicians’ attention nor have they created any links with political parties; they consider electoral campaigns as a favorable conjuncture to communicate, spread information and mobilize. The question of influence is irrelevant in this case as these organizations do not necessarily try to make the candidates act in any specific way. But nothing indicates that we should drop the “how do they act” question given how increasingly numerous and active these groups are during campaigns and how they try to place their issues in the press or on the web (Binderkrantz, 2008).

The second model is that of interest groups which try and participate in the debates animated by candidates in order to make them take into account a specific theme or proposal. In this case, the influence question is worth asking. But the recent and rapid transformation of the position occupied by interest groups makes it more difficult. Some researchers show that the links which connected interest groups to political parties have loosened or have been broken (it is the case in Germany according to Farrell, Schmitt-Beck, 2008, p.14). Influence does not operate in the same way but we have very few elements on how it used to be exerted and even less on how it works now. The difficulties linked to this model increase with the recent intervention of think tanks and individuals who take personal stands or question candidates without being part of a collective group. People who name themselves “ordinary citizens” do so but it is also the case of big companies’ heads who speak in favor or against certain proposals. Some of them even resort to consultancy firms in order to plan this kind of interventions which usually get a large coverage in the media. The challenge of our collective research is to include this new form of electoral campaigning (the outside one) and the new players who try to participate in the electoral game.
Last, resorting to the notion of influence cannot but come with a relevant analytical framework, in an interactionist perspective (McFarland, 2010). This leads to a number of difficulties. First, one must pay attention to the fact that all the individuals who participate in the election do not have the same intentions nor the same goals and objectives. Then, one must spot all the individuals who do not manage to participate in the electoral game and all those who do not want to be seen while giving their point of view. With these difficulties in mind, we suggest analyzing three effects that electoral campaigns have on interest groups.

First, a labelling effect. Campaigning constitutes an opportunity for some interest groups to impose themselves over their competitors: to be recognized and established by public authorities, the media or a legitimate candidate as being the author of a worthy proposal. Having been heard during a campaign provides an interest group with the associated label “heard during the campaign”, a label they can claim in order to then get in touch with the new decision makers.

Second, a legitimizing effect. Activities one can observe during a campaign are often the result of internal negotiations, working groups, battles won by one side over the other (the pro petitions versus the pro letters to the candidates, or the pro media coverage versus those favoring a silent strategy). Rather than focusing on the question of influence over campaign staff, it seems more interesting to pay attention to the question of how the supporters of a specific strategy managed to impose it within their organization (rather than merely considering their activity from the point of view of its aim, i.e. as an activity directed towards candidates).

Finally, a belief effect. The notion of influence that we criticize is in fact symptomatic of the collective belief implied by professional politics. The citizen, the activist and the journalist believe in the influence of some individuals. In the UK, post-electoral surveys (Crewe et al., 1995) have followed for fifty years the variations of these beliefs. There are two groups of adepts, those who believe in the power of trade unions and those who believe in corporate influence. This belief is not randomly spread over society: age, sex and partisan preferences divide the group of believers in two very distinctive sections. But more importantly, these beliefs evolve. The number of British people who believe in the power of trade-unions decreases and an increasing part of them believe in that of business circles. Our proposal consists in considering influence as a collective belief, splitting and split, which endows some interest groups with an added value and depreciates that of others.

As underlined by Max Weber, it is easy for one to criticize a religious dogma when one doesn’t believe in it. The interviews we are undertaking show that lobby professionals do not believe in the influence dogma: they often are its most ferocious critics as they know important issues lie elsewhere. Thinking of themselves as being influential appears to them as amateurs’ politics. For
them, the insiders, it seems obvious that publishing an official report will not lead decision makers to draft a bill but it doesn’t prevent them from publishing anyway. And when a candidate quotes one of their proposals they are usually the most surprised and they wonder what triggered it. One question remains though: what do they actually do?

In this regard, we would like to debate a question which is very classical in anthropology ie that of the gift/counter-gift exchange theory. Every political scientist remembers R. Salisbury’s lesson (1969) when he stresses the importance of entrepreneurs in interest groups. His famous exchange theory introduces “men” in organization and shows the resources they can use or not. Our line of questioning is derived from his lesson and Marcel Mauss’ analysis of gift exchange, as we would like to determine what kind of gifts entrepreneurs expect or try to get while campaigning and, meanwhile, what do they themselves give to politicians.

3. 3 Our method

Such a line of questioning implies that we can observe lobbies’ day-to-day concrete activities in order to determine their schedule and practices, as well as the ways in which they intend to spread values, principles, tools and advisory services to the key players in the field of public policies and administration. In order to try and answer the unexplored questions previously highlighted, we have undertaken an ethnographical enquiry. By conducting ethnographical fieldwork, we would like to grasp what lobbies really do during campaigns and thus get a detailed sense of their practices, their work, the types of interactions they have with the political field, etc. In other words, we consider that undertaking ethnographical-type fieldwork will help us widen the lines of questioning related to interest groups activities during electoral campaigns.

The fieldwork started in January 2012 during the French presidential election campaign and was carried out until 20 May as far as this paper is concerned. It involves a research team of 14 CNRS-related researchers, coordinated by the two co-authors of this paper.

The research project is based on an extensive data base started in 1999 and which now includes 730 members of various interest groups. These French professionals either act as consultants or as institutional relations managers. The first people to have been included were members of professional organisations gathering consultants in lobbying and specialised firms. Were also included companies which had created a “public affairs department”. During the 2000s were added law firms providing this kind of service, as well as paid officials from trade unions and business organisations who now claim to act as lobbyists. More recently, think tanks were included in the scope of our fieldwork. They have aroused much interest in the last French
presidential campaign. Their recent success which is testified by the sudden craze for the label “think tank” led to their increasing exposure in the media. We will carefully analyze this phenomenon as their exposure on television and in the press during the campaign may be more the result of their increasing willingness to appear in the open rather than their increasing influence over the candidates. They are nonetheless considered as competitors by more traditional interest groups, which leads us to various questions related to whether they intervened in a distinctive way during the campaign and whether they brought something different from the more traditional interest groups. Individuals gathered in this data base therefore belong to different types of organisations operating in various fields, related to different interests. Our fieldwork doesn’t take into account personal opinions coming from a member of an interest group and only includes individual stands when they are taken in the name of an organization.

For the aim of this paper, we worked on the following scope: 298 documents sent to the candidates and 95 collective actions organized during the presidential campaign. It covers 318themes/issues represented by 989 different organizations. Information gathered on each individual enable us to track their professional career on a period of 13 years. Our research design derives from this data base and is both quantitative and qualitative, resorting to four main enquiry techniques.

First of all, a survey is currently being sent and handed out to the 730 individuals of our database. The first set of questions concerns both the institution they work for and their own profile (academic background, career, types of professional positions, types of employees, etc.). A second set of questions deals with the possible impact of the presidential campaign on their work: do/did their clients show any interest in the presidential campaign? Do/did they express new types of request? Do/did they want to know more about the candidates and their platforms? In the course of their work, have they been/were they in touch with a political party or a candidate’s staff? Do/did they try and inform them on their positions and wishes in terms of law and public policy? The remaining questions deal with their professional activity during previous presidential elections and with their possible link to political parties and political life in general.

The second technique consists of documentary analysis. Our team assembled the paperwork produced by different organizations from our database in order to see how much they published and what did they actually have to say. As far as the first (quantitative) question is concerned, we can assert that publishing is part of interest groups’ main activities as 93% of the organizations involved published 298 documents resulting in 2264 pages and 1988 proposals during the
presidential campaign. As far as the content of their publications is concerned, we are just beginning the analysis. We have examined the kinds of verbs which are used in these documents to assert their organizations’ goals. Our first findings show that they use very soft wording. The verbs (n=78) which come up the most are the following: to question (10%), to expect (2%), to ask (7%), to debate (3%), to publish (4%)(in French: “interpeller”, “attendre”, “lancer un appel”). Thus the thematic of influence never appears as such. This may speak in favor of the hypothesis of electoral campaigns as atypical conjunctures for interest groups which would usually position themselves more as solutions providers (Salisbury, 1991, p.383) during “more typical” periods (outside electoral campaigns). This question is yet to be explored.

The third technique consists of direct observations carried during more or less public events set up during the campaign by the organizations included in our database. 30% of them have indeed set up events in relation to the future election: from meetings gathering think tanks, to press conferences, seminars or happenings (eg: one of them was organized by an association representing disabled people’s interests: their members invited themselves to the main presidential candidates’ headquarters to get them to express their support to their cause and to expose their wishes in terms of future public policies). The observations carried by our team all follow the same template as researchers have to pay attention to a series of questions such as the setting where the observation is held (the level of standard of the venue, its furniture, the disposition of the rooms, the decoration etc.), the people they meet in this place (number, gender distribution, dressing codes, etc.), interactions (type and level of language, atmosphere, vocabulary, etc.).

The fourth technique consists of semi-direct interviews carried with individuals from our database. We assume that it is by meeting people, interviewing them and/or observing their activities that we will manage to widen the very question of lobbies’ influence and go further than exploring it through the sole question of the causal relationship between their activity and possible political or legal outcomes. Here again, our team works in a similar way as the questions asked during interviews are the same from one researcher to the other. They are basically derived from the survey and expanded.

We are only starting to count and to draw broad comparisons (without any background, historical data or sectorial restrictions for the moment) but we can already assert that something has very recently changed in France. One can draw on the example of one of the organizations from our data-base and the way it changed its strategy. This environmentalist NGO now defines itself as a
“lobby” while it used to resort to the word “advocacy” when referring to its activities in 2007, “when [they] were still amateurs [and used to] delet[e] the word ‘lobby’ from all [their] reports”. The same phenomenon can be underlined as far as the term “think tank” is concerned with organizations trying to take over a label now synonym of prestige in the “world of ideas” (Boucher et Royo, 2012). Moreover, the attempts of some interest groups to get directly in touch with citizens seem to be part of the transformations which have occurred during the recent campaign. This assertion requires further enquiry but it seems that some interest groups wish to articulate directly with “civil society” by intending to act as spokesmen or by directly addressing them through adverts. These new practices were certainly not possible ten years ago.

4. How interest groups play the game of electioneering: our first main findings and hypothesis

Our interest in the ‘how’ question leads us to cross political science with sociology. Elections are on both sides of these academic disciplines. Political scientists focus on agenda setting while sociologists are interested in mobilization. We would like to test this cross-cutting approach (Walker, 1991) on lobbyists’ practices during electoral periods, our goal being to understand why it is (and how) that interest groups are not all competing in an equal footing. This is indeed another kind of bias in pluralist democracy (Schattschneider, 1960) during elections: those who want to be heard do not necessarily need to be the richest but they need to know how to implement their lobbying practices from the parliamentary field to political parties while also adapting them to media’s expectations.

4.1 Publishing or event planning?

The first main hypothesis is that interest groups use by-products from their usual “repertoires of contention” (Tilly). Usually, they use a specific repertoire: they publish or they develop collective action but they do not act at random. During legislature, those who write position papers and different kinds of legal texts do not organize street demonstrations. During electoral periods, they continue to write but the very nature of their publications changes (See figure n°1). They produce another type of political wording: not a legal one but a set of policy proposals. The tools remain the same but the repertoire changes: they aim at being visible in the media, they need to be heard by political leaders, and they cannot do it in secrecy anymore.
We can assert that there is a tradition in French elections: white papers and letters seem to be the most common written productions in 2012 but they are not exactly the same compared with 2002 and 2007: our first analyses show that, except for one or two cases, these publications are now much more concise. For example, one of the business organizations we study sent a 200 pages book in 2007 while it only published a 10 pages white paper for the last presidential campaign.

We can also observe where the main censorship is during elections: interest groups try to find the appropriate ways of addressing candidates. Some NGOs and some business organizations think that they are doomed to be original in order to be heard. For example, a road haulage association produced a video but, two months later, this organization resigned itself to publishing a press release as nobody seemed to have noticed its first “call for attention”. Another business union sent a paper entitled “General address on politics” as an allusion to the traditional first speech the French prime minister gives when he/she presents his/her program for the legislature. We will see if this kind of humor is considered as appropriate and legitimate or not.

On the whole — but cautiously as our fieldwork is still ongoing and we haven’t yet explored all of our data, in particular regarding the bargaining repertoire, we want to explore the interaction between three repertoires of contention: the written one, the bargaining one and the event-planning one. The most common one is the first repertoire, the written one (90% published a
Furthermore, when they publish they only do so once and rarely twice or more — only 24.4% published more than one document. In this logic, we would like to check whether lobbying is a one shot tactic or not: our hypothesis is that most interest groups do not have time nor the resources to try and insert an issue in a candidate’s platform because they have difficulties suiting the action to the word. The iron law of influence seems to sound as followed: one must “voice” (Hirschman) and write during electoral campaign. But actually this iron law has two sides to it. On the one hand, those who mobilize or plan event (30%) frequently publish too (83.1% of them). On the other hand, those who publish (90% of the scope) do not necessarily mobilize or plan event (only 27% of them). Thus, there seems to be two types of interest groups. The first type (30% of the scope under study) opens its campaign with a written outcome and then mobilizes or plans events. The second type (25.3%) first mobilizes and later on sends a written document. We have to explore how candidates and their staffs read the publications they receive and whether they pay more attention to written documents which come on their own or to documents which come with or after an event — given that organizing events seems to be a ritual (a kind of propitiatory one), a way to introduce and to bring about proposals.

4.2 When does the election kick in?

This question offers another view on the way in which elections are at stake in a mid/long-term perspective for some interest groups.

Graph n°1. How and when do interest groups mobilize or publish?

Green curve: publishing interest groups; Red curve: multi-publishing interest groups ; Blue curve: collective action / events planning
N.B.: interest groups’ schedule include dates for September 2012 onwards.
Most of the lobbyists we met - who publish and plan events - told us that they started working on the presidential election one year before the elections actually took place. This whole critical dimension of the campaign which kicks in long before the candidates become official remains totally unseen by the media or the political staff.

As far as interest groups are concerned, the beginning of an electoral campaign is characterized by two main issues they all have to face. The first one which comes up is related to funding. To give a rough idea of the costs involved, setting up an event costs around 80,000 euros and the whole process – written productions, media relations, catering, renting a venue, etc. – amounts to 500,000 euros on average for a NGO with 800,000 members. The second issue which interest groups have to face long before the official electoral campaign begins is related to the content of their lobbying activities: how to find out new proposals that their members can share, agree on and stand up for?

Graph n°1 does not include this period of preparation. Activities registered here are official and public ones as it includes proposals once they have been published and events once they have been – more or less – publicly organized. It does not include the more sub terrain activities undertaken by interest groups during the first part of their campaign, when organizations work more or less as usual, write draft, gather ideas and plan events. In order to get a grasp of this otherwise invisible preparatory work, we carry interviews focused on the timing and the content of lobbyists’ campaign. What graph n°1 does show is different. Even if one cannot compare this period to another, the 2012 presidential election didn’t cause much trouble and, on the whole, the political conjuncture remained a peaceful one. All other things being equal, if this was not an electoral period, one could draw a comparison with the multi-sectoral crisis conjuncture described by Michel Dobry (Dobry, 1986). The question we have to explore is not “which sector mobilizes?” but “which sector or which part of a sector does not participate in the election”? For example, if one takes a look at the transport sector, all the workers expressed claims: railways, teamsters, seamen. Automobilists’ petitioned, motorcycles demonstrated but nothing happened in the airlines industry except from one airport.

Graph n°1 also brings up questions related to the conjuncture that we need to explore. Being at the first stages of our collective research, we will remain cautious but there may be an interesting track to follow related to the Merah case. Mohammed Merah, a man from Toulouse, was the
author of three different waves of assassinations which caused seven deaths in total in March 2012. These slaughters — which involved kids and servicemen — as well as the 32 hours attempt to arrest him, which ended up in his death, got a high media coverage amid the French presidential campaign. During this national drama, interest groups seem to have suspended their activities. As if the latter had followed the attitude of candidates among which there was a consensus to put the campaign on a temporary halt.

This global activity invites us to speculate on the role of interest groups, their aspirations and ambitions. In this perspective, we will take into account interest groups’ claims as representatives of “civil society”. They indeed claim to be developing a “civic culture” during electoral campaign by addressing political representatives “in the name of lots of citizens”. This claim is particularly present among most French think tanks which consider themselves as part of a movement towards participative democracy (Delmas 2012).

To conclude, we must insist on another aspect of the bias concerning interest groups. This election shows that the window is open during a very short period, about a month, during which everybody writes at the same time, only a small part of them waiting to publicize their proposals. We do not know yet how some interest groups can speak louder than others or how the issues they advocate end up being considered as a priority in terms of public policy.

4.3 A common belief: does meeting candidates make you influential?

During the legislature, parliamentary activity echoes a strange common belief: lobbyists are expected to be acting from within the House to have any chance of being influential. Journalists and rank-and-file members are the main believers of such a principle but, during elections, a variation is added to this common belief: one must meet the candidates if one hopes to be heard. In fact, less than 15% of the organizations under our scope try to organize this kind of meeting (see figure 2).

**Figure 2: Do they meet candidates?**

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>They invite them</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They do not invite or do not mention the candidates’ names</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They meet them</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
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On this point, our hypothesis stems from the 2007 election, when Nicolas Hulot, a very well-known TV show producer as well as an ecologist activist, created a new event. He invited the presidential candidates in front of TV cameras to sign a pact in order to solve climate change problems. This ritual can be seen as a precedent that interest groups now try to reproduce. There are different processes at stake within this ritual.

The first process is the selection of the “real” candidates, a ritual of consecration. This means that all candidates are not perceived as real ones. The leader of the extreme right party (Marine Le Pen) is one of them. Some lobbyists admit, off the record, that they do not invite her or, more accurately, that they only send invitations to the candidates coming from what they name “governmental parties”. In the same way, during the presidential election, farmers’ trade unions invited seven candidates but nobody from the extreme left. Generally, interest groups do not invite all the candidates: they usually omit what they call “fancy” ones and they boggle at those who do not have credit in opinion poll. In doing so, they actually participate in the election, inviting those who stand a chance to win, selecting the candidates they favor for their members, contributing in turn to their legitimization.

The second process is the selection of legitimate “common causes”. All the candidates do not respond positively to invitations. For example, extreme left leaders and the ecologist candidate refused to take an oral exam in front of Ethic (“Entreprises à Taille Humaine, Indépendantes et de Croissance”), a corporate business club. Ditto, the former president N. Sarkozy did not respond to the CFDT trade union’s letter, though it is a tradition to do so.

The last process is another contribution to electoral sequences. Because candidates’ speeches on the hustings always hit the headlines, organizing an event to which they can come and speak can be on itself a highly attractive idea to interest groups in search of their fifteen minutes of fame. Moreover, it sometimes creates the buzz as in the last French presidential elections when the socialist’s candidate François Hollande received flour in his face during his speech for the NGO “Fondation Abbé Pierre”, an issue advocate about the housing crisis. Some other times, it is not a simple event but a real political act as when M. Le Pen was booed off the stage at the farmers’ national congress for having criticized the farmers’ union’s president.

4.4 Interest groups: who acts?

American political scientists can compare the population of interest groups in Washington to the population mobilizing or funding candidates. They assume that 30% of the lobbyists are active during elections (Wilcox, Lida, 2010).
In France, one has to face two difficulties. The first one is the role of think tanks since the mid 2000’s (see supra). The second question is that we do not know the density and the diversity of interest groups in France. We would like to explore this question, starting with figure n°3 which shows what kind of interest groups intercede with political staffs.

**Figure 3: What kind of interest groups act?**

These results show that the types of interest groups which participate in electoral politics are dense and diverse. The first result refers to the quantity of proposals coming from Unions and associations: business and workers organizations represent both more than 50% of the demands (“syndicat” and “organisation professionnelle”) but associations are more active. Business plays an important part during elections but nonprofit organizations play the title role.

The second surprise is the presence of institutions from the public sphere (mayors, State-owned companies, local authorities) during the electoral campaign. But their participation has to remain limited and subtle because according to the French tradition of officials’ neutrality, they cannot take sides in an electoral process. They try to deal with this constraint by limiting their contribution to writing papers related to the campaign but they never get directly involved in the organization of meetings (see figure n°4).
The third surprise is the position developed by churches, which participation to the political debate requires to be further explored in a long term approach.

The fourth one is not yet included in this figure as we have to create a new statistic treatment for this: lots of interest groups do not act on their own and they support proposals coming from other NGOs or they propose a “contract” signed by others NGOs while they publish their own questions. For one issue, the average is around 3 interest groups involved.

Last but not least, we found that nonprofit organizations are as prominent during elections as they are active in French society. The question we would like to explore in our cross-cutting approach is whether sociability between members predisposes to political activity during elections (Oberschall, 1993).

4.5 Demand and political supply: what are the issues?

Our collective research aims at testing the following hypothesis: during electoral campaigns the connection between “civil society” and politics is thinner than during “normal politics”. We have some alleys to explore and we hope that they are not all blind.

First of all, we have to deal with two classifications that political scientists often use, i.e. insiders vs. outsiders. Are “insiders” more successful players during elections than “outsiders” are? The answer is not an easy one because we discovered that some insiders do not act during elections and we found out that new outsiders made an entrance into politics in 2012. Perhaps are these neo-outsiders learning how to become future insiders. We will have to check this hypothesis.

Another classification is useful, i.e. the one which differentiates representation from advocacy. The representative dimension of our approach leads us to enquire on how lobbyists work out solutions in order to speak in the name of their members while the French State has limited consultation and institutions from which they can express their interests (the fragmentation of the so called French neo-corporatism). The connection between “civil society” and State requires qualifications and positions from where lobbyists can speak to the media (e.g. the president of a corporate trade-union would be invited as such to express his/her views). We are currently working on spotting the different arenas from which they express their demands during the elections – but it is difficult to spot individuals (who represent) because they are usually “hidden” behind organizations (what is represented). We assume political staffs face the same problem when they receive letters from neglected organizations (what does DPEA4O write about artificial insemination?) or organizations expressing anonymous proposals (such as an email with a link to download a pdf file).
Figure 4. What do they do?

The advocacy part is another contribution. Lobbyists play the political game in the sense that they give words, sentences, ideas, arguments and data to candidates. One lobbyist said that he “won” because his sentence was included in one of Nicolas Sarkozy’s discourse during his first meeting as a presidential candidate in 2012. Another leader of a NGO told us that he “scored” when a candidate used one of his proposal on a radio show while he was criticizing it two days before. Furthermore, consultants are players in the political game as they act as translators for the benefits of their customers: they inform them, they provide them with explanations, they make predictions. They also produce an overview of the campaign, selecting the events they deem important, creating a hierarchy between issues, actors and events. In other words, they play the role of opinion leaders for their customers.

But, at the same time, they aim at translating their customers’ desires into what they consider as real political issues. It is what graph n°2 enables us to show: the issues pointed out by “civil society” do not correspond to the ones put forward by the candidates. We find a new bias in the interest groups system. In fact, everything takes place as if there were three different voices in electoral campaigns. The first voice is political and refers to the candidates’ platforms and TV performances. If presidential elections in France are rarely a moment of major splitting political debate, all the media commentators agreed on saying that this political voice was quite low and hardly hearable during the recent French presidential campaign. The second voice has the sound of opinion polls: the media publish the results of what they assume to be what French people
want to hear. The scope shows that unemployment, the economic crisis and the housing crisis are the most important questions that they want the candidates to tackle.

The third voice is the result of our research, i.e. the types of proposals that interest groups put forward.

Graph n°2. What are the issues interest groups speak about?

Campaign commentators agree that having political leaders with about 110 proposals for a legislature (F. Mitterrand in 1981) is a thing of the past. Among our first results regarding the issues at stake during the campaign, we found that interest groups were part of the same trend during France’s recent presidential election. They indeed publish short papers (about 2 or 3 pages each) and they also put forward short lists of solutions: 1988 proposals which amount to 8.7 proposals per document or to 2 proposals per interest group. Most of the interest groups we study were focused but those who put forward more issues (12.5% put forward multi-issues proposals) tried to widen their scope and intended to cover concerns relevant to the entire society, promoting solutions related to education, employment, health care, industrialization and so on and so forth. By putting forward multi proposals platforms of this type, they attempted to develop another campaign and not only an “outside” one — in the sense that they were full players in the campaign in which they effectively took part.

What is interesting in such a context is to examine to which extent the three “voices” share common causes. What our first findings show is that the voices coming from the media and from the candidates remained silent about many of the interest groups’ proposals. To put it differently,
interest groups develop and promote issues that the media and the candidates do not raise. For example, as shown in graph n°2, health care is the most prominent subject dealt with by interest groups. It has led to petitions, letters and proposals but it hardly received any media attention and it was not a major issue in most candidates’ platforms. The “politics of attention” (Baumgartner, Jones, 2005) begins during the campaign: it is the first act framing the issues that the government will try to support. We will study the forthcoming public policies in order to see whether their lobbying on such subject had any impact on the policy process in spite of its lack of success during the electoral campaign itself.

The conclusion of this attempt to verify where the line is between interest representation and political parties leads us to formulate a paradox. On the one hand, interest groups claim to reduce the distance with politics because they are numerous to speak and to come up with solutions for the candidates. But, on the other hand, the solutions they advocate do not always make supply and demand match.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we presented the challenge we want to take up, i.e. to observe and analyze interest groups’ practices during elections. We pay a lot of attention to the double fact that interest groups act in the game of politics as well as they put forward solutions and try to act as “civil society”’s representatives.

Electoral conjunctures appear to be very interesting to analyze insofar as they enjoin lobbyists to carry on their job and continue to represent specific interests but with different tools. Studying elections through the scope of interest groups shows what a different conjuncture it is for them: not only because individuals must mobilize adequate resources for themselves and for their organization but also because they have to act under the watchful eyes of the media and the opinion leaders.

Many unresolved questions remain in our collective research. As far as we are concerned, we are impatient to find adequate answers…
Bibliography


