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The access of business interests to EU institutions: towards élite pluralism?

Rainer Eising

ABSTRACT It has often been suggested that bias in the access of interest organizations to policy-makers leads to biased policies. The paper analyses the access of interest organizations to the EU institutions drawing on data from 800 business interest associations and 34 large firms. Exploring the proposition that some form of élite pluralism may emerge in the EU, it argues that the contact patterns derive from resource dependencies among the political actors and the interest groups, institutional opportunities in the EU, and the characteristics of the interest organizations. The study identifies imbalances in the access of EU associations, large firms, and national associations to the EU institutions, with large firms being in the forefront. Nonetheless, the evidence does not hint at the emergence of élite pluralism in the EU but points to important variations across the EU institutions and among the working level and their political leadership in each institution.

KEY WORDS EU institutions; EU policy-making; interest organizations; large firms; pluralism in the EU.

Relations among its institutions and business interest groups have become a major element in the governance of the European Union (EU). Many scholars consider the access of interest groups to the EU institutions as important because systematic variations in these access patterns can result in biased politics. Thus, finding an élitist bias in these contact patterns, Thomas Hueglin (1999: 260) transferred Ernst E. Schattschneider’s well-known comment on the political process in the United States to the EU: ‘the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper class accent.’ David Coen (1997, 1998) arrives at the same conclusion when characterizing EU patterns of interest intermediation as a form of ‘élite pluralism’ (see also Cowles 2001). The analysis of these access patterns is all the more important because the officials of the European Commission maintain almost as many contacts with interest organizations as with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) or with officials in the Council of the EU. In fact, they are only more often in touch with national civil servants than with business interest groups (Hooghe 2001: 64–5).
It is therefore puzzling that only a few studies scrutinize the access of interest groups to EU institutions. In their seminal study of European interest group politics at the beginning of the 1970s, Jean Meynaud and Dusan Sidjanski (1971: 491–638) outlined a ‘morphologie d’accès’ to the European institutions that expressed what has become the conventional wisdom on these contact patterns: among the various routes that interest organizations could take to influence the institutions of the early European Community (EC), they highlighted the importance of the Commission and pointed out that access to the Council of the EC occurs, for the most part indirectly, with national interest organizations via those national departments which are in charge of the policy dossier and send their experts to the Council working groups. Interest groups would rarely seek and obtain access to the Council as a collective decision-making body. Given that the European Parliament (EP) then had only a consultative status in the formulation of EU policies and was composed of national parliamentarians, Meynaud and Sidjanski (1971: 577–86) ranked it, together with the Economic and Social Committee, as an institution of secondary importance to interest organizations. As in the case of the Council, many contacts with MEPs were initiated by national associations rather than by Eurogroups.

In recent years Pieter Bouwen (2002a, 2002b) has put forward an elegant and systematic explanation of these patterns. He suggests that the ‘access goods’ of interest organizations account for the access patterns. He compares the access of three forms of organizations: firms, EU associations, and national associations, claiming that these types of organizations deliver different ‘access goods’. The argument centres on the kind of information that these organizations can provide: supposedly, firms are best at delivering expert knowledge about markets and technologies, EU associations control information about the so-called ‘encompassing European interest’ of their members, and national associations command information about the ‘encompassing national interest’ of their members. Bouwen investigates the contact patterns that EU politicians and officials maintain with these organizations in order to test his propositions, drawing on interviews with the representatives of the EU institutions.

This empirical study is important, but also piecemeal. It draws only on evidence provided by the demand-side about the financial sector, it disregards variations among the firms as well as among the associations, and it neglects explanatory factors beyond the information which interest organizations can provide. It also aggregates contacts at different levels of the political institutions. In this article, I intend to broaden the study of the access patterns by drawing on data from the supply-side. I analyse the access of interest groups that operate in different economic sectors, consider cross-national variations, and look at different levels of the state institutions, namely the level of the political leadership and the working level.

I argue that access patterns are shaped by resource dependencies, institutional opportunities, and the capacities of the interest organizations. Thereafter, I compare the access of the interest organizations to the EU institutions. Then, I validate the outcome of the access study by analysing in detail the relations
that have emerged between the state and business in the EU. The results cast into doubt the proposition that élite pluralism is characteristic of EU interest intermediation even though they point to some imbalances in the representation of business interests.

THE POLITICS OF ACCESS IN THE EU: RESOURCE DEPENDENCIES, INSTITUTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, AND ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITIES

Political access and resource dependencies

I define access as the frequency of contacts between interest organizations and EU institutions. These contacts range from informal bilateral meetings with EU officials and politicians to institutionalized committee proceedings. This definition emphasizes that interest organizations obtain contacts with EU political institutions and do not just seek them out or forgo their access opportunities. Evidently, the access concept excludes indirect ways and means to exert influence on policy-makers via the public or the media. Nonetheless, the access concept is well suited to the study of the representation of interests by business, which is said to pursue insider strategies and seek face-to-face negotiations with policy-makers (Wilson 1973). Access implies either a successful attempt of an interest group to approach the EU institutions or the incorporation of an interest group into EU policy-making by these institutions. I argue that political access results from resource dependencies among the interest groups and political institutions, political opportunities enshrined in the institutional structure, and, finally, from the organizational capacities of interest organizations.

Resource dependencies matter because neither state institutions nor interest groups can autonomously pursue and achieve their political goals. Hence, access cannot be fully understood without an exchange paradigm. On the one hand, owing to their regulatory tasks, EU institutions depend on interest groups for their information, their consent, or their active co-operation (Meynaud and Sidjanski 1971: 523; Majone 1996). Some authors maintain that political money in the EU is information (Bouwen 2002a, 2002b; Crombez 2002) because their organizational features make for the dependence of the EU institutions on external advice: they have only limited resources at their disposal and are detached from the implementation of EU policies on domestic grounds. Accordingly, they are in need of information that enables them to devise policy proposals that solve the problems at hand, can be administered in the member states, and win a sufficient political majority (Meynaud and Sidjanski 1971: 552; Mazey and Richardson 2002: 148).

The EU institutions have recourse to several sources of information. International organizations, member state administrations, think-tanks, interest organizations, and scientific experts all give important policy advice. Firms and business associations are particularly important sources of information in
the areas of market integration and regulation, standard setting, and external commercial policy. The incentives of actors to withhold or manipulate information are reduced by this broad variety of sources as well as by the fact that many of them are involved in a series of policy games. Their reputations might suffer if they prove to be unreliable.

On the other hand, business interests seek access to obtain information about EU policies and influence their development because they carry the costs of or obtain benefits from EU regulation (Majone 1996). However, having access does not imply that their contacts have an effect on EU policies. Even many discussions with EU policy-makers may not bring about the desired results. And in those cases in which EU politicians include business concerns in EU legislation, this may simply be the result of convergent policy preferences. In some instances, EU institutions perhaps co-opt interest organizations in order to pursue their own policy preferences.

In short, access is not equal to influence even though it helps in having a say in EU policies (see Meynaud and Sidjanski 1971: 465; Beyers 2002). In particular, those organizations regularly in touch with EU officials and politicians are well positioned in the EU policy process. They tend to be well informed about EU policy-making and can process this information for their members and political allies. Ceteris paribus, it is likely that they are in a better position to exert influence on EU policies than those actors that do not have access. In sum, study of the access pattern helps to identify the features of those organizations that assume crucial positions in EU policy networks as well as important patterns in the European political process.

Institutional opportunities in the EU

While their resource dependencies motivate interest groups and EU institutions to exchange information and negotiate with their counterparts, the structures and competencies of EU institutions shape the incentives and opportunities of interest organizations to get in touch with them. Clearly, the European multi-level system offers multiple points of access (Grande 1994; Marks and McAdam 1996; Pollack 1997). This article explores the institutional opportunity structure at the EU level, concentrating on the EC pillar which comprises the vast majority of the Union’s regulatory and distributive policies and on legislative lobbying rather than litigation strategies.

Enjoying a monopoly over policy initiation and monitoring compliance with Community law in the member states, the European Commission is considered to be the most important point of contact for interest groups in the EC (Mazey and Richardson 2002: 135–6). Many interest organizations underline the fact that it is difficult to obtain substantial modifications of a Commission proposal once it has been presented to the EP and the Council of the EU (Meynaud and Sidjanski 1971: 550). Even though the Commission exercises its powers collectively, it is rarely approached as a collegiate body. Being organized into several Directorates-General (DGs), each of which is responsible for specific policy
areas, interest groups tend to maintain relations with one or more of these DGs. Therefore:

\[ H_1 \text{ Interest organizations maintain more contacts with the Commission than with other EU institutions.} \]

Over time, the EP has acquired substantial legislative powers (Wallace 2005: 65). Nonetheless, even today, it is often held to be less important to interest groups than the Council or the Commission because its influence varies greatly according to the issue and the decision-making procedure at hand. According to Mazey and Richardson (1993: 12), the normal pattern for producer groups is to see the EP ‘very much as a secondary arena’. In general, the EP is considered to represent supranational interests in the EU policy-making process. But being elected by national voters, its members are said to be more amenable to national interests than the European Commission and also more open to diffuse interests, including those representing the environment, consumers, or large groups such as the unemployed and pensioners. Some analysts regard the links forged between interest groups and MEPs as ‘coalitions of the weak’ (Kohler-Koch 1997: 6–7).

Owing to its decisive position in EU legislation, the Council of the EU is a highly relevant point of access for interest groups. The meetings and decisions of national ministers are prepared by the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER I and II) and the numerous Council working groups which are composed, for the most part, of national experts. Given its relatively few meetings, the Council and its administrative machinery are rarely lobbied in Brussels. Rather, domestic interest groups address their concerns to government departments at national level. While the Council’s policy positions evolve along national lines, in part as a consequence of pressure by domestic interests, the European Council is more removed from interest group pressure. Not only does it comprise the heads of state and government (as well as the President of the Commission), thus representing the general interest to a greater degree, it also meets formally only once every six months, lessening its impact on the minutiae of day-to-day politics in the EU. Therefore, the analysis concentrates on the EU Council. The second hypothesis is:

\[ H_2 \text{ Interest organizations maintain more contacts with the EP than with the Council of the EU.} \]

In general, it can be expected that interest organizations have more frequent interactions with the working level of EU institutions than with their political leaders. European integration consists largely of technical details (Mazey and Richardson 2002: 136; Wallace 2005: 58). The desk officers in the DGs of the Commission and in the Council working groups as well as the rapporteurs of the EP committees are responsible for drafting policy proposals or sorting out their details. Accordingly, bureaucratic staff depend heavily on external
information and support. In contrast, the Commissioners and the Ministers do not usually pay attention to every policy detail but focus on those aspects that are contested or deemed to be crucial. As far as interest groups are concerned, lobbying them aims at either establishing broad policy principles, revising decisions taken previously in the policy process, or raising the stakes in favour of a specific policy alternative rather than others. Hence, less frequent access to these leaders does not imply that these contacts are less important than those at the working level.

\[ H_3 \] Interest organizations maintain more contacts with position holders at the working level of European institutions than with their political leadership.

The Economic and Social Committee (ESC), set up to channel the opinions of organized interests within the European policy process, has only consultative rights in EU legislation. It is generally considered to be of marginal importance in influencing EU legislation. Direct contacts between EU institutions and interest organizations are now much more important than this institutionalized forum for interest intermediation so it is not included in the empirical analysis.

The capacities of interest organizations

Besides resource dependencies and institutional opportunities, the capacities of interest organizations have an effect on their access to policy-makers. It is trivial to state that not all firms are equally well equipped to take political action at the EU level. To a large extent, a firm’s dependence on associations and capacity to act individually at EU level is determined by its size (see Coen 1997, 1998). Small firms tend to rely on associations to represent their interests because they do not have the resources to sustain substantial public affairs capacities, and lacking individual investment power, they must unite to gain political clout. In contrast, large firms control substantial resources that allow them to act unilaterally and turn them into relevant interlocutors of the EU institutions.

However, it is interesting to note that, despite these capacities, many large European firms relied for quite a while on national routes. Several firms were preoccupied with regaining their national markets in the 1950s and 1960s and others were national champions (see Hayward 1995) in public ownership or received preferential treatment at the domestic level. They enjoyed excellent access to their national governments which looked after their interests in the European arena. Moreover, initially, the Commission had a distinct preference for consulting community-wide interest organizations so that it would not need to arbitrate among different national points of view (Meynaud and Sidjanski 1971: 394–5).

Notably, firms responded to two major regulatory carrot and stick situations in the 1970s and 1980s: on the one hand, they mobilized against the efforts to introduce regulations for works councils in multinational firms by the end of the
1970s (Vredeling directive). And, on the other hand, they supported the Internal Market Programme when they were facing the European economic crisis and growing international competition in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Sandholtz and Zysman 1989). The failure of national programmes to address these problems provided incentives for big business to organize at the European level (Cowles 1997).

Given the economic and political ‘Eurosclerosis’, the Commission also reviewed its stance on the involvement of firms in the making of economic policies. It started to work directly with a number of firms to find solutions to the problems plaguing industrial sectors. To the Commission, it can be important that large firms command tremendous investment power. Furthermore, their economic and technical knowledge is usually closer to the market than that of associations. Some large firms may also serve the Commission as avenues for exerting influence on national governments. Meanwhile, there are several important examples of the emergence of Commission bodies that brought together Chief Executive Officers (CEO) from large firms; for example the Competitiveness Advisory Group (see Cowles 2001).

As a consequence of the increasingly felt political weight of the European institutions and the loss of their governments’ veto powers in the Council owing to the EC treaty reforms, many firms pressed for direct membership in EU associations. Nowadays, several Eurogroups which organize large firms exclude national associations (Cowles 1997). The public affairs activities of the firms have also become more professional including greater attempts to co-ordinate the lobbying efforts of international subsidiaries and the establishment of public affairs offices in Brussels (Coen 1998). In light of these developments, some analysts claim that the European Commission has come to work more closely with large firms than with associations, labelling this a form of ‘élite pluralism’ (Coen 1997; Cowles 2001). In sum, while according to Meynaud and Sidjanski (1971) European associations dominated EU lobbying efforts until the 1970s, there are good reasons to believe that a form of élite pluralism has emerged in which large firms have better access to EU institutions than EU business associations.

H 4 Large firms have better access to EU institutions than associations.

Just as small and large firms differ, not all business associations will have equal access to the EU institutions. In particular, their location in the EU multi-level setting shapes the political activities of business associations (Eising 2004). It is unlikely that domestic groups will be equally active at each level in the EU multi-level system. These organizations are embedded in domestic structures and social relations. They depend on routine exchanges with domestic partners from whom they extract resources (see Wilson 1973). Only if the EU regulation has an important impact on them and their members, if the division of labour among those EU associations which are supposed to represent them in EU politics is unsatisfactory, or if the terms of EU policy implementation at the national
level have to be worked out, will they extend their activities to the EU level. Hence, national associations concentrate on domestic institutions whereas EU associations focus on EU institutions.

**H 5**

*EU business associations maintain more contacts with EU institutions than national business associations.*

I do not assume that the relative access of large firms, national associations, and EU interest groups varies across the Council, the Parliament, and the Commission. In contrast, Pieter Bouwen has suggested that these institutions are in need of different exchange goods (2002a, 2002b: 13–16). Promoting European policies, the Commission very much depends on the economic and technological knowledge that firms possess. Given that it must ensure sufficient political support for its proposals, it is also interested in the information that EU associations can provide about the ‘European encompassing interest’. Only then is it in short supply of the knowledge that national associations possess about the ‘domestic encompassing interest’. Given that it is supposed to represent supranational interests but that its members are responsible to national voters, the EP seems to be most interested in the information provided by EU associations about the encompassing European interest, followed by the knowledge of national associations about their domain. Finally, the intergovernmental EU Council is most concerned about the ‘domestic encompassing interest’ that national associations can provide. As national governments usually seek to reach consensus among themselves in the Council, the Council also needs some information about the ‘European encompassing interest’. Table 1 summarizes the expected rank orders of the contacts that the interest organizations maintain with EU institutions.

However, Bouwen (2002b: 24) does not find empirical support for the hypothesized rank orders: according to his data, EU associations maintain more contacts with the Commission than firms, and these have more frequent

*Table 1* Expected and empirical ranking of interest organization contacts with EU institutions and national governments

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<th>Political institution</th>
<th>Expected and empirical rankings of interest organizations</th>
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<td>All EU institutions</td>
<td>1 Firm &gt; EU associations &gt; National associations</td>
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<tr>
<td>European Parliament</td>
<td>2 EU association &gt; National association &gt; Firm</td>
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<td>3 EU association = National association &gt; Firm</td>
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<td>European Commission</td>
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<td>3 EU association &gt; Firm &gt; National association</td>
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<tr>
<td>Council of Ministers</td>
<td>2 National association &gt; EU association &gt; Firm</td>
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<td>3 National association &gt; Firm &gt; EU association</td>
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*Notes:* 1 Elite pluralism, expected ranking; 2 Bouwen expected ranking (2002b: 17); 3 Bouwen empirical ranking (2002b: 24).
access than national associations. The conclusion would be that the European Commission depends more on the European encompassing interest than on economic and technological knowledge. Second, Eurogroups do not have more contact with the EP than national associations. However, both maintain more contact with MEPs than large firms. It follows that the Parliament demands as much information about the European as about the national encompassing interest. The firms’ expert knowledge about markets is far less relevant to MEPs. Third, national associations have the best access to the Council of the EU, closely followed by firms and then EU associations. Thus, Council members are most interested in the domestic consequences of EU policies, and then they depend on market knowledge provided by firms. The subsequent section checks whether these empirical findings are also supported when using supply-side rather than demand-side data.

THE EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The data

These hypotheses will be tested in a study that combines Lijphart’s comparable-cases research strategy (1975) with statistical methods. Important context variables are controlled by focusing on large firms as corporate actors and business associations as collective actors in EU member states with several common features. The cross-sectional analysis is based on a survey which was conducted between June 1998 and March 1999. A great variety of economic branches from agriculture, industry, and services are included. The survey addressed 1,998 German, French, British, and EU business associations and asked them to specify their patterns of interest intermediation. In addition, 68 large firms in these countries were questioned. Owing to its large size and broad sectoral coverage, the analysis gives a good indication of the cumulative responses of business interests to European integration after almost 50 years of the integration process. But note that there is no time series data available (yet) on this topic and that only a few items in the questionnaire cover the time dimension. Overall, 834 responses were received (see Table 2). Excluding international

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<td>EU associations</td>
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<td>international associations (%)</td>
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associations, the rate of return was 40.9 per cent, and the return rates for the
different sub-groups ranged from 32.3 per cent in the case of the French associ-
ations to 50 per cent in the case of the large firms. While providing a reasonable
rate of return on which inferences can be based, the sample might, to some
extent, disproportionately cover those organizations that are affected by EU
regulation and have dealings with EU institutions. However, this has not
been corrected by statistical weights as the exact structure of the business interest
group population is not well known.

The sample excludes public interest groups because their organizational logic
differs to some extent from that of business interest groups (Olson 1965).
Instead, the study focuses on producer and employer associations. This means
that the largest family of interest organizations active at the EU level is
covered: about 80 per cent of the EU associations are business interest associ-
ations (see European Commission. General Secretariat 2002).

The focus on the large member states France, Germany and the United
Kingdom makes for variations among the domestic patterns of interest interme-
diation. France is often said to be statist, Germany is frequently counted among
the corporatist countries, and the UK is more often than not considered to be
pluralistic. Hence, it is reasonable to expect significant cross-national variations
in the access patterns (Schmidt 1999; Cowles 2001). At the same time, this
choice of countries holds important background conditions fairly constant:
these are the country size, the level of economic and technical development,
the relevance of these countries in EU decision-making, their formal decision
rights, and their long duration of EU membership. Therefore, the findings
presented here cannot be easily translated into the contexts of the worse-off
member states (Portugal, Spain, and Greece) whose economic structures
diverge somewhat, or into the contexts of those member states that entered
the EU in 1995 (Sweden, Finland, and Austria) because these were only recently
exposed to the full influence of the EU. Evidently, this holds all the more for the
new member states of the Eastern enlargement.

The access patterns

I test the presented hypotheses by comparing the mean access of the interest
organizations to the EU institutions. Access has been measured on a six-fold
scale that includes the following classes: no contacts, annual contacts, half-
yearly contacts, quarterly contacts, monthly contacts, weekly contacts.
T-tests (pairwise comparisons) compare the mean access that each type of
interest organization–EU association, national association, and large firm–
has to different EU institutions (H 1–H 3). Analyses of variance (ANOVA) ident-
ify whether the mean access to a specific EU institution varies across these types (H
4–H 5).3 They are supplemented by pairwise post-hoc comparisons (not reported)
that specify the significant differences.

Figure 1 illustrates the average access of business associations and firms,
demonstrating that consultation practices vary both across and within EU
institutions. The corresponding inferential analyses largely confirm the expected access patterns to the EU institutions (H 1–H 3). Perhaps not surprisingly, all three types of organizations maintain significantly more contacts with the Commission (at working level) than with the MEPs and the position holders in the Council of the EU, confirming H 1: the European Commission is clearly the most important addressee of interest group demands at the EU level. Compared to the findings reached in early studies (Meynaud and Sidjanski 1971), the EP nowadays draws far greater attention to itself. Business associations and firms tend to maintain least contact with the Council. Nonetheless, H 2 does not find full support: Business associations have more frequent contacts with the EP than with the Council which was expected, but this is not true for large firms. They present their arguments as often to the EP committees as to the Council machinery. Apparently, large firms find it easier to obtain access to the rather intractable Council machinery than their supposed interest intermediaries, the business associations. Finally, contacts with officials at the working level outnumber those with the political leadership of the Commission and the Council, supporting H 3. For each type of organization, the contact density with the political leaders is below that at the working level. The interest organizations devote the bulk of their political activities to influencing the details of EU legislation, whereas their exchanges with the leadership complement these activities.
The hypotheses about the importance of organizational capacities and location in the institutional setting find only partial support: as expected (H 5), large firms and EU associations are more frequently in touch with EU institutions than national associations. On average, these maintain only occasional contacts with EU institutions. Note also that the differences caused by variations in the domestic modes of interest intermediation are not very pronounced. When explaining these contact patterns, it is more relevant that the EU institutions are dependent on the technical information and economic clout of firms and on ‘European encompassing interests’ rather than on any ‘domestic encompassing interest’. As a consequence, the majority of large firms and EU associations have become regular interlocutors of the EU institutions. Communicating frequently with EU institutions, EU associations serve as information brokers and act as interest intermediaries for their members. Evidently, their tremendous resources allow large firms to opt out of their domestic contexts when representing their interests, whereas most national associations remain firmly tied to their domestic arenas.

With respect to the expectation that elite pluralism is characteristic of the EU, it is important to register that, contrary to H 4, the access of large firms and EU associations does not differ as much as expected. While the firms have better access to the EU Council, they do not have more contact with Commission officials and the parliamentary committees than the Eurogroups. Hence, differences between firms and EU associations are less pronounced than general characterizations of the EU as a political system marked by elite pluralism would suggest. This finding is also backed up by Bouwen’s analysis of the aggregated institutional contacts: according to this study, overall, the European Commission and the EP are more frequently in touch with EU associations than with large firms (see Table 2).

However, it should be noted that large firms have indeed better access to the Commission’s leadership and to the members of the EP than EU associations, indicating important intra-institutional variations. The economic clout and technical expertise of firms counts for more among the political leaders than among the policy experts. These are also very open to the information provided by EU associations which act and speak for EU-wide constituencies. It follows that the extent to which firms and associations can affect the policy-making process in the EU is, inter alia, conditional on the degree to which EU bureaucrats and politicians shape this process. Surprisingly, the bias in favour of large firms seems to be greater if the political leaders are in full control of the bureaucracy, whereas comparative studies of domestic state–society relations have usually suggested that bureaucratic segmentation in various sub-systems is likely to ‘create privileged relationships from which the uninitiated are excluded’ (Atkinson and Coleman 1992: 157).

In conclusion, the characterizations of the EU political process as a form of elite pluralism seem to be exaggerated even though large firms enjoy somewhat better access than EU business associations. In fact, comparisons with patterns in the member states (see Eising 2006: 163, 207) indicate that EU institutions
are less inclined to grant firms privileged access than is the case in its large member states—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Even though these findings depend partly on the greater specialization of Eurogroups in interest representation than is common among national associations (Greenwood 2002), they suggest that associative interest intermediation is more important in EU politics than the notion of élite pluralism implies.

RELATIONS BETWEEN EU INSTITUTIONS AND INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS

A closer inspection of these contact patterns serves both to provide a more detailed account of the relations between EU institutions and interest organizations and to validate the findings of the access study. In what follows, I scrutinize whether interest group access to information and their activities during the policy-making cycle support the outcome of the access analysis or shed new light on it.

Figure 2 illustrates that, in general, those interest organizations with access find it not very difficult to obtain information from the Commission or the Parliament. On a scale ranging from 1 (very difficult) to 6 (not difficult at all), on average, the EU associations score 4.7 and 4.4, respectively. Without any noteworthy difference among French, German, and British groups, the national associations achieve between 4.0 and 4.4, and the firms have scores between 4.8 and 4.9. By comparison, obtaining information from the Council proves to be more difficult. EU and national associations score only between 3.6 and 4.0. With an average score of 4.7, firms find it

Figure 2 Access to information from EU institutions (means)
Note: 1 very difficult, to 6 not difficult at all.
easier than business associations to obtain information from the Council (except the German groups). Large firms also have better access to information from the Parliament than the British and French groups. While these findings support the outcome of the access study which indicated a somewhat better access for firms to the EU institutions, they also demonstrate that EU institutions are as open to those national associations that manage to establish themselves as interest intermediaries in the EU multi-level system as to EU business associations.6

Figure 3 indicates whether interest organizations represent their interests never, sometimes, or often vis-à-vis the EU institutions during the policy-making cycle, ranging from the agenda-setting stage (left-hand pillars) to the implementation of EU policies (right-hand pillars). As the timing of interest representation is measured in only three categories, I use CHI2 tests to analyse whether EU associations, national groups, and large firms differ in their level of activities in these stages. The results demonstrate that the attention and efforts of the interest groups vary across the policy-making cycle. Moreover, the level of activities displayed by EU associations, firms, and national groups in each stage of the policy-making cycle differs significantly, even though it is in order to note that the corresponding statistical associations are weak or at best modest.7

Given that the primary task of EU institutions is the conception of common policies rather than their execution, the interest organizations are more active when EU institutions design policy proposals and decide upon them than during the implementation stage. But only a minority of them are already present when the EU policy agenda is being set. Given the

![Figure 3 The timing of lobbying activities at the EU level (percentage of firms and associations)](image-url)
‘broad market for policy ideas’ (Mazey and Richardson 1993: 22) in the EU this is hardly surprising. The EU political process is ‘difficult for everyone – including groups – to manage . . . new ideas and proposals can emerge from nowhere with little or no warning, simply because the Commission has seen fit to consult a particular group or a particular expert’ (Mazey and Richardson 1993: 22).

Large firms and EU associations tend to be more active than national associations when the political agenda is being set. Among the national groups, German associations are involved earlier in the game than the other groups. The French groups are basically absent from the early stage of the policymaking process.

During the next stage, most interest organizations intensify their efforts and seek to represent their interests frequently when the European Commission devises its proposals for EU directives and regulations, underscoring the importance of its monopoly on policy initiation. Interest group activities decrease once the Commission has delivered its proposals to the Parliament and the Council, also underlining the crucial position that these organizations attribute to the Commission in the EU legislative process. Many associations still regard the Parliament as an institution that is only of secondary importance. By contrast, the EP draws as much attention from large firms as the Commission. It seems that only particularly resourceful actors and those groups that consider its members to be likely allies include the EP regularly in their lobbying strategies. When the Council discusses a policy proposal, national groups direct their attention to its national members and the national bureaucracies rather than to the EU decision-making body: only 31 per cent of the German groups, 19 per cent of the British organizations, 26 per cent of the French associations, but 53 per cent of the large firms claim to be frequently active at the EU level when the Council working groups meet, COREPER debates, or the Council of Ministers makes its decision.

In the final stages of the policy-making cycle, when EU policies are being transposed into national law or implemented in the member states, domestic associations and firms are far more interested in discussing the details of EU legislation and the nitty-gritty of the implementation process with EU institutions than EU associations. These tend to confine themselves to influencing the early stages of the policy-making cycle, while leaving the details of transposition and implementation to their national members.

In sum, large firms tend to display a high level of activity at EU level throughout the entire policy-making cycle, whereas EU associations concentrate heavily on the formulation of EU policies, focusing particularly on their relations with the European Commission. Given that national associations spread their activities across the policy-making cycle, but maintain fewer contacts with EU institutions than EU associations and firms, the early stages of the policy-making process seem to be dominated even more by firms and EU associations than was suggested by the access analysis.
CONCLUSION

Access patterns in the EU are shaped by the resource dependencies among EU institutions and interest organizations, the institutional opportunities of interest organizations, and their organizational capacities. The analysis confirmed the central position of the European Commission in the policy-making process at EU level and illustrated that the importance of the EP for interest organizations has increased over time. However, only resourceful interest organizations and groups that consider MEPs as likely allies include the EP regularly in their lobbying strategies. The findings also demonstrated that policy experts in EU institutions generally consult a multitude of stakeholders in EU policy-making. The conclusion is that the EU does not necessarily display a form of élite pluralism in which firms have invariably better access than associations to the policy-making process, even though EU interest intermediation displays important imbalances: in these processes, technical expertise and the economic clout of large firms and the ability of Eurogroups to represent the Europe-wide interests of their members matter more to EU policy-makers than the representation of domestic encompassing interests by national associations. Moreover, political leaders in the EU prefer dealings with large firms rather than with business associations. In contrast to the findings of domestic state–society relations, in the EU a tightening political control of bureaucracy tips the balance in favour of big business. As a consequence, it is doubtful that recent efforts at institutionalizing the political participation of civil society in the draft constitutional treaty and at regulating consultation patterns will offset such structural imbalances.

Some of these differences are due to the institutional setting of the EU. In the EU multi-level system, associations tend to focus on one primary level of operation and most domestic interest organizations have developed a division of labour with EU associations. EU organizations focus on the EU level and also on the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages of the policy cycle. Being privileged negotiation partners of the EU institutions during these stages, the Eurogroups evolved into intermediaries between these institutions and their national members. They have become experts in processing information about EU policies to their members, in building a common platform with them, and in co-ordinating the representation of interests across member states. To say the least, they have turned into important negotiation arenas, and in some cases even into actors in their own right.

Turning to the domestic level, the differences in the access patterns of the British, German, and French associations are less pronounced than might be expected from the literature on national modes of interest intermediation. There are several explanations for the extent of these similarities: First, factors other than these national modes may be more important in EU interest intermediation: to some extent, organizational factors have been shown to outweigh their impact. Second, the domestic modes of interest intermediation in these countries – French statism, German corporatism, and British pluralism – may be less different than is often supposed. It is likely that, after 50 years, European
integration has levelled out some of these national differences. Moreover, these
modes are analytical constructs and rarely found in their pure form. Finally, clas-
sical studies on modes of interest intermediation do not pay much attention to
institutional differentiation, which is of great importance to this study.

More specifically, these findings put into perspective the results obtained in
earlier studies. Pieter Bouwen (2002b: 20) considered only ‘insider groups’ with
access to the EU institutions in his analysis. Undoubtedly, this study has shed
much light on the overall balance of interest organizations consulted by the
EU institutions in the financial sector. However, the exclusive focus on organ-
izations of a single economic sector that have access does not allow for the infer-
ence that, on average, national associations, EU interest organizations and firms
have similar or dissimilar access to EU institutions. In particular, the exclusion
of those organizations that do not maintain contacts exaggerates the mean access
of national associations because only a minority of the national groups represent
their interests regularly at the EU level (Eising 2004). It is only this minority
that maintains as many contacts with EU institutions as EU associations and
large firms.

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NOTES

1 To some extent, Bouwen also considers professional consultancies, but less system-
atically than the other three forms of organization so I do not consider them here.
2 The sample is based on the following sources: Oeckl 1997; Conseil National du Patronat Français (1997); Henderson and Henderson (1995); European Commission (1996).

3 While T-tests and analyses of variance are designed to analyse interval data, as quite robust procedures, they are frequently considered to be applicable to the study of ordinal data such as is used in this analysis.

4 ANOVA for access to EU institutions by firms and associations: European Commission working level: F 56.109 df between 4, df within 794, p 0.000; European Commission leadership: F 52.172 dfb 4, dfw 756, p 0.000; Members F 29.229 dfb 4, dfw 777, p 0.000; European Parliament Committees F 36.357 dfb 4, dfw 754, p 0.000; Council of Ministers F 17.829 dfb 4, dfw 718, p 0.000; COREPER F 36.969 dfb 4, dfw 737, p 0.000. Post-hoc comparisons indicate significant differences for all institutions between EU associations and firms, on the one hand, and national associations, on the other. There is just one significant difference between the national associations: German groups are more frequently in touch with the working level of the Commission than British groups. Finally, large firms have better access than EU associations to the Commission leadership, the Council of the EU, and the MEPs.

5 T-test for access of firms to the EP and the Council: T 1.034 (df 32), p 0.309. The other T-tests that compare access to the EP with that to the Council, access to the Commission with that to the EP, and access to the Commission with that to the Council for each type of organization are significant at the 1 per cent level (not reported).

6 ANOVA for access to information from EU institutions: European Commission: F 2.18 df between 4, df within 625, p 0.069; EP: F 3.64 dfb 4, dfw 574, p 0.006; Council of the EU: F 4.11 dfb 4, dfw 531, p 0.003.

7 Associational measures for the timing of interest representation by type of organization: agenda setting: CHI² 95.005 (df 8), p 0.000; Commission proposal: CHI² 69.152 (df 8) p 0.000; EP debate: CHI² 47.148 (df 8) p 0.000; EU Council debate: CHI² 32.217 (df 8) p 0.000; transposition: CHI² 66.938 (df 8) p 0.000; implementation: CHI² 62.565 p 0.000. The Cramer-V measures that indicate the strength of these associations range between 0.147 (Council debate) and 0.250 (agenda setting).

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