Politicized policy access: The effect of politicization on interest group access to advisory councils

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Abstract
Current scholarship often concludes that technical expertise is one of the most important commodities for interest groups wishing to gain access to political-administrative venues. Less attention has been given to politicization and the scope of societal support that interest groups bring to bear. Specifically, I hypothesize that the capacity of interest groups to supply broad societal support is decisive for gaining access in highly politicized policy domains. To test this expectation, the article combines a mapping of interest group membership in 616 Belgian advisory councils with survey data from more than 400 organized interests. The empirical analyses demonstrate that interest groups with broad support are more likely to gain access to advisory councils in highly politicized policy domains, but this effect is negatively moderated when interest groups involve their constituencies intensely in advocacy processes.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2017–18, the Walloon government, the executive branch of one of Belgium’s subnational entities, decreed that environmental associations would become members of its most important socioeconomic advisory council, the Conseil économique et social de Wallonie. Specifically, the government changed the council’s composition in response to the ongoing politicization of environmental policy. This is exemplified by the government’s Regional Policy
Declaration of July 2017 which stated that ‘given the evolution of society and the importance of climate issues and sustainable development, social dialogue will be strengthened by ... environmental stakeholders’ (Walloon Government 2017). However, labour unions and employer associations contested the proposed change; they alleged that inclusion of environmental associations would threaten a balanced composition, increase the representation of ‘narrow sectional interests’, and incentivize other interest groups to claim membership of this and other advisory councils (Lefèvre 2018). The example illustrates that the politicization of particular policy domains may profoundly impact the access organized interests enjoy to political-administrative venues.

Access to political-administrative venues such as advisory councils provides interest groups with important opportunities to monitor policy processes and to shape public policies. Drawing on resource-exchange theory, many interest group studies have demonstrated that supplying technical expertise and signalling the scope of societal support for particular policies leads to access (Bouwen 2002; Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Fraussen et al. 2015; Weller et al. 2018). In this article, I relate interest groups' capacities to provide technical expertise and societal support with the politicization of particular policy domains. Policy domains differ extensively in the levels of politicization they attract, and the three dimensions of politicization—the degree of political contestation, public salience and interest mobilization—are presumed to affect advocacy strategies and lobbying success (Hutter and Grande 2014; Klüver et al. 2015). However, few empirical studies have examined how politicization affects the access organized interests enjoy to advisory councils because these venues are commonly perceived as technocratic and apolitical (Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Weller et al. 2018). A closer look at politicization may thus render novel insights into interest group access to political-administrative venues across policy domains.

Contemporary research provides indications on how politicization affects access. For instance, scholars have highlighted the impact of increased citizen group mobilization since the 1970s on the access interest groups enjoy to advisory councils (Pedersen et al. 2014; Binderkrantz and Christiansen 2015; Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Christiansen et al. 2018; Weller et al. 2018; Junk 2019). Nevertheless, bureaucratic access is commonly considered as being dominated by business interests, while citizen groups gain more access to the parliamentary arena. These differences across arenas are related to parliamentarians' susceptibility to broad public appeals made by citizen groups, whereas bureaucrats—being more insulated from electoral politics—grant access based, in particular, on the technical expertise (business) groups supply (Pedersen et al. 2014; Binderkrantz et al. 2015). Still, these studies often do not take into account variation across policy domains and focus on only one dimension of politicization, namely the extent of interest group mobilization.

Politicization is usually associated with a shift from technocratic and expertise-based policy-making to ‘pressure politics’ when policy-makers are sensitive to electoral and legitimacy concerns (De Wilde 2011; Hutter and Grande 2014; De Bruycker 2016, 2017). Public policies crafted in highly politicized domains are more likely to be the result of public evaluations and to be subject to controversial compromises among politicians as well as between policy-makers and affected interest groups (Rauh 2019; Smith 2000). Therefore, in politicized domains, policy-makers’ susceptibility to the scope of societal support signalled by organized interests is expected to increase relative to their demand for technical expertise (for similar views see Beyers and Kerremans 2004; Albareda and Braun 2019; Grömping and Halpin 2019; Rauh 2019).

The article focuses on the Belgian system of interest representation, which presents a representative case for other neo-corporatist systems (e.g., Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, Austria). These systems are characterized by extensive systems of advisory councils, and interest group membership of such councils can be used as an indicator of formal access to the policy-making process (Christiansen et al. 2010; van den Berg et al. 2014). Moreover, decision-making in neo-corporatist systems tends to be consensual in nature—political compromises need to be reached across socioeconomic and cultural societal segments (Christiansen et al. 2010; van den Berg et al. 2014). This latter feature exemplifies the relevance of societal support in relation to politicization; when societal support is supplied, policy-makers more easily reach cross-cutting political compromises in politicized domains.

The empirical analysis combines a mapping of the members of 616 Belgian advisory councils with survey data from more than 400 organized interests. Although the consultation of interest groups in advisory committees is
often considered to be depoliticized in nature (van den Berg et al. 2014; Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Weiler et al. 2018), the results demonstrate that access is determined by the extent to which policy domains are politicized. Organized interests are more likely to gain access in politicized policy domains, but this effect is moderated by the scope of societal support that interest groups are able to signal. While some groups can provide broad societal support because of their encompassing constituency base, others represent concentrated constituencies and/or closely interact with their members and supporters, resulting in the provision of more narrow support. The results point to an important tension for groups between closely engaging with their constituencies and signalling broad societal support. Interest groups that signal a rather narrow scope of support gain less access to highly politicized domains.

2 | POLITICIZATION AND ACCESS

Access to political-administrative venues such as advisory councils is often conceived of as the result of a resource-exchange relationship in which interest groups supply valuable resources such as technical expertise and societal support to policy-makers (Bouwen 2002; Braun 2012; Binderkrantz et al. 2015, 2017; Fraussen et al. 2015; Weiler et al. 2018). These studies linked organizational characteristics to varying resource dependencies; while some interest groups—such as professional associations—possess more technical expertise, others—such as citizen groups—are better able to supply societal support. In this regard, the scope of support signalled by organized interests can be tied to broad societal segments such as consumers and environmentalists or tied to rather narrow societal segments such as farmers and the financial services industry (Beyers and Kerremans 2004; Flöthe 2019). Notably, the signalled scope of societal support is not restricted to the support of formally affiliated members; in addition, it includes the support for particular public policies by the constituencies affected such as patients or youngsters (Flöthe 2019).

Interest groups providing broad societal support signal to policy-makers that policies are widely accepted and perceived as legitimate, while a narrow scope of support entails that a specific subset of society is backing the policy. Conversely, technical expertise entails specialized and scientific information as well as the capacity to translate this information into public policy (Beyers and Kerremans 2004). Many scholars concluded that technical expertise and organizational capacities are the most important factors in explaining access to political-administrative venues such as advisory councils, while broad societal support is deemed to be less decisive (Bouwen 2002; Beyers and Kerremans 2004; Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Fraussen et al. 2015; Weiler et al. 2018).

I add to this burgeoning literature that the resource-exchange relationship between interest groups and policy-makers is moderated by the politicization of the domain in which advisory councils operate. Policy-making in advisory councils is usually perceived as technocratic because such venues are more insulated from electoral processes (Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Weiler et al. 2018). Moreover, in neo-corporatist and consociational systems, advisory councils were historically established to depoliticize socioeconomic and cultural cleavages (Christiansen et al. 2010; Deschouwer 2012; van den Berg et al. 2014). However, insulation from electoral politics and the historical background of many advisory councils does not imply that policy-making in these venues is devoid of politicization. Interest groups with core positions in advisory councils regularly appear in the news, and the policy recommendations produced in these venues affect policies for which elected politicians can be held accountable (Fobé et al. 2013; Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Fraussen and Wouters 2015).

Overall, interest group scholars have acknowledged the impact of politicization on interest representation as well as on the susceptibility of policy-makers to the scope of societal support signalled by organized interests (Klüver et al. 2015). Higher levels of politicization entail that policy-makers face electoral retribution if they fail to take into account the extent to which policies are supported by broad societal segments (Beyers and Kerremans 2004; De Bruycker 2016). Therefore, in highly politicized domains, policy-makers' susceptibility to broad societal support supplied by interest groups will increase relative to their demand for technical expertise. In contrast, in contexts with limited politicization, consulting groups providing credible signals of broad societal support is less relevant because policy-makers face less direct electoral retribution. The goal of effective and feasible policies for which narrow support suffices will prevail, leading to expertise-based exchanges between policy-makers and interest groups (Beyers and Kerremans 2004; De Bruycker 2016).
Politicization is commonly conceptualized along three dimensions, namely, public salience, interest mobilization and political contestation (De Wilde 2011; Hutter and Grande 2014; De Bruycker 2017; Rauh 2019). Each of these factors increases the importance of broad societal support for policy-makers and, consequently, affects access. First, public salience is understood as the importance the general public attributes to specific policy domains or issues (Wlezien 2005). Only a few policy domains or issues can be simultaneously salient, and the public thus prioritizes the topics to which it pays attention (Kingdon 1984). For these salient domains, electoral consequences are more apparent; the cost and benefits of policies are more visible to the broader public, crystallizing public opinion and placing pressure on policy-makers (De Bruycker 2017; Rauh 2019; Smith 2000). Therefore, neglecting the support or opposition from broad societal segments when granting access will backfire when the public care deeply about the policy domain.

Second, the degree of interest mobilization pertains to the number of mobilized groups in each domain that are potentially seeking access and challenging the composition of political-administrative venues (Kriesi et al. 1995; Binderkrantz and Christiansen 2015; Weiler et al. 2018). Or as Schattschneider (1960, p. 10) put it: ‘The controversy has been to a very large degree about who can get into the fight and who is excluded’. Moreover, if many interest groups are active in a policy domain, policy-makers become more sensitive to the scope of societal support signalled by groups. Multiple studies have found that the density and diversity of group mobilization varies across domains. While domains such as financial regulation are characterized by a high concentration of a few business interests, other domains such as healthcare demonstrate more diversification of mobilized interests (Coen and Katsaitis 2013; Berkhout et al. 2017). Therefore, if many interests groups are mobilized, the likelihood increases that multiple and contrasting policy demands will be voiced and that conflict expands. Conversely, if only a few groups are mobilized—even those with a large number of members or supporters—the range of policy positions pitched against each other is smaller and conflict is less likely to expand (Beyers and Kerremans 2004; De Wilde 2011; Hutter and Grande 2014). Higher levels of mobilization then also serve as an amplification mechanism of public salience because political debates intensify; and policy-makers are pressured to grant access to interest groups signalling broad societal support (Kriesi et al. 1995; Kollman 1998; Agnone 2007; De Wilde 2011).

Third, political contestation is determined by the degree to which political parties’ positions diverge on specific policies (De Wilde 2011; Hutter and Grande 2014). ‘The most polarising constellation can be found when two camps advocate completely opposing issue positions with about the same intensity’ (Hutter and Grande 2014, p. 1004). When policy domains are characterized by conflict or disagreement, policy-makers face a greater need to justify and legitimize their policies because citizens pay more attention to the decision-making process and, consequently, form clearer opinions (Smith 2000; De Bruycker 2017; Rauh 2019). Moreover, in domains marked by politically contested issues, granting access to interest groups supplying broad societal support can strengthen policy-makers’ policy positions (Fobé et al. 2017). In contrast, in domains attracting little political controversy, broad societal support is less necessary to tip the balance towards specific political compromises, leading to expertise-based exchanges (Beyers and Kerremans 2004; De Bruycker 2016).

All three dimensions are considered to be mutually reinforcing and to affect the value that policy-makers attribute to the scope of societal support signalled by interest groups. Policy domains are considered to be politicized only if they are publicly salient, many organized interests are mobilized and political contestation is present (De Wilde 2011; Hutter and Grande 2014). However, domains characterized by political conflict and/or a high number of mobilized interests, but without public resonance, cannot be considered to be strongly politicized (De Wilde 2011; Hutter and Grande 2014).

3 | HYPOTHESES: THE ROLE OF SOCIETAL SUPPORT IN POLITICIZED POLICY DOMAINS

In this section, the relationship between politicization and the scope of support is further disentangled. Although organizational capacities, such as financial and human resources, are important predictors of access, such factors may both facilitate the production of technical expertise and contribute to the ability to supply support (Bouwen
2002; Fraussen et al. 2015; Weiler et al. 2018; Albareda and Braun 2019). Therefore, greater organizational capacities are expected to lead to more access regardless of the (de)politicized nature of policy domains. Rather, the ability to provide broad societal support or more narrow support is expected to be a function of the represented constituency and the intensity with which constituencies are involved in advocacy activities (Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Albareda and Braun 2019; Grömping and Halpin 2019).

First, the type of constituency represented indicates the scope of societal support that interest groups can offer. I distinguish between three types: concentrated, representative diffuse and solidarity organizations (Halpin 2006). Concentrated interest groups—such as business associations, professional associations and associations of institutions—typically have a formally affiliated and well-circumscribed membership (Olson 1965; Salisbury 1969). Examples include associations of construction companies, associations of pharmacists, and associations of universities. Due to their formally affiliated and specialist members, concentrated groups are especially able to provide technical and sectorial information pertaining to the (economic) self-interest of their members (Bouwen 2002; Beyers and Kerremans 2004; Fraussen et al. 2015). Concentrated groups consequently provide policy-makers with support narrowly tied to the interests of their membership. Moreover, these groups often do not need to capture the attention of the general public to reach their policy objectives or maintain their membership base (De Bruycker et al. 2018). Hence, they can invest resources in the production of technical expertise and can prioritize insider strategies (Dür and Mateo 2013; Binderkrantz et al. 2015). Concentrated groups therefore thrive on issues of low salience, when conflict is contained and less ideological (Schattschneider 1960; Smith 2000; Dür and Mateo 2013). On such issues, public opinion is less articulated and policy-makers face fewer electoral incentives to be responsive to the broader public (Smith 2000). Therefore, in a less politicized context, the demand for technical expertise prevails, improving the odds of access for concentrated groups.

In contrast, diffuse groups are typically more encompassing of broader societal segments compared to the narrowly focused membership of concentrated groups (Salisbury 1969); and have been found to be slightly more congruent with public opinion than concentrated interests (Flöthe and Rasmussen 2018). Furthermore, these groups often engage in outside lobbying activities aimed at the broader public to achieve their policy objectives and maintain their supportive constituency (Kollman 1998; Dür and Mateo 2013). A common presumption is that these groups seek to expand the scope of conflict and increase the public salience of issues, and thus may contribute to politicization (Schattschneider 1960; Kollman 1998; Dür and Mateo 2013). Diffuse groups thrive in a politicized context in which policy-makers are susceptible to political pressure. Granting access to diffuse groups then constitutes a way for policy-makers to institutionalize broadly endorsed societal grievances into policy-making processes (Kriesi et al. 1995; Bouwen 2002; Fraussen and Beyers 2015; Fraussen et al. 2015).

Building on Halpin (2006), an additional distinction among diffuse groups is made between representative organizations and solidarity groups. Representative diffuse groups typically have an encompassing and formally affiliated membership base consisting of (associations of) individual citizens; these groups then advocate for their members’ self-interests (Halpin 2006). Examples include labour unions, cause groups such as parents’ associations advocating for traffic safety, and identity groups such as youth associations. These organizations are labelled ‘representative’ because of their formal membership structures, allowing the leadership to gain insights into the grievances of broader societal segments (Halpin 2006; Halpin et al. 2018). Representative diffuse organizations therefore have the capacity to credibly signal societal support for policy decisions tied to the interests of broader constituencies, which is expected to result in higher levels of access in politicized domains.

Solidarity groups, in contrast, have an encompassing but rather loose informal supporter base of citizens acting as financial contributors or sponsors. These organizations typically advocate for public causes or disenfranchised constituencies (Jordan and Maloney 1997, 2007; Halpin 2006). Examples include anti-poverty associations, animal rights groups, and development NGOs. Solidarity groups are thus characterized by policy objectives that do not necessarily overlap with the self-interest of their supporters (Jordan and Maloney 1997, 2007; Halpin 2006). Many solidarity groups therefore lack formal membership structures and their constituents usually do not occupy decision-making or financial veto player roles within the organization. This absence of a strong and direct link between the
supported constituencies and the group’s activities makes them less able to credibly signal broad support for proposed policies (Jordan and Maloney 1997, 2007; Halpin 2006). In highly politicized domains, solidarity groups are therefore expected to enjoy less access compared to representative diffuse groups. The expectations are summarized in hypothesis 1:

**Hypothesis 1** The more a policy domain is politicized, the higher the likelihood that representative diffuse groups gain access compared to concentrated groups, while solidarity groups are expected to have the lowest levels of access.

Second, constituency involvement allows organized interests to produce credible signals of societal support (Bouwen 2002; Fraussen and Beyers 2015; Albareda and Braun 2019; Grömping and Halpin 2019). Constituency involvement is related to the substantive representation by the organizational leadership acting on behalf of their constituency after being endorsed via internal consultation procedures and being held accountable by those constituents (Halpin 2006; Johansson and Lee 2014). Interest groups that intensely involve their constituencies can assure policy-makers that they rely on internal alignment and consensus. This could strengthen the credibility of claims made by organized interests; these groups provide support for policy decisions based on their constituents’ interests (Albareda and Braun 2019; Grömping and Halpin 2019). At the same time, constituency involvement signals a group’s ability to control and mediate the opinions of the members and supporters (Öberg et al. 2011).

This feedback loop can become especially important when policy decisions are controversial, and when the costs and benefits of policies are highly visible for members and supporters. For instance, labour unions that have negotiated a deal with the government are expected to appease their members (Öberg et al. 2011). Granting access to interest groups with engaged constituencies therefore allows policy-makers to institutionalize narrow as well as broader societal support into the policy-making process. Recent research has confirmed that interest groups with more engaged members and supporters gain higher levels of access to political-administrative venues (Albareda and Braun 2019; Grömping and Halpin 2019).

Nevertheless, constituency involvement does not necessarily entail that interest groups offer broad societal support. Those interest groups that operate in highly politicized domains may feel tension between the need to provide broad societal support and the need to engage with their constituencies (De Bruycker et al. 2018; Halpin et al. 2018; Grömping and Halpin 2019). In highly politicized domains, organized interests must demonstrate that their policy views are widely accepted by broad segments of society because policy-makers are more sensitive to electoral and legitimacy concerns (De Wilde 2011; Hutter and Grande 2014; De Bruycker 2016, 2017). However, extensive internal consultations could make interest groups less effective in accommodating policy-makers’ political demands. For example, constituents who agree on the group’s overall policy objectives may disagree on concrete objectives when issues become politicized (De Bruycker et al. 2018; Halpin et al. 2018). Interest groups are not equally responsive to all constituents’ grievances and are likely to focus on issues promoted by members and supporters who are more vocal and demonstrate intense, caring interest (Strolovitch 2006). Politicization might then accentuate differences within (heterogeneous) organizational constituencies. When the costs and benefits of policies become highly visible to the members and supporters due to politicization, the organizational leadership may face more difficulties in reaching internal consensus and accepting political compromises (De Bruycker et al. 2018; Halpin et al. 2018; Grömping and Halpin 2019). Under these circumstances, close engagement with constituents may become a liability for gaining access because it drives the group towards the more narrowly focused interests of their members and supporters. Taken to the extreme, internal dissent might also prevent the group from seeking to affect public policy altogether (Strolovitch 2006).

Furthermore, internal processes of constituency involvement can be complex and time-consuming (Grömping and Halpin 2019). Constituency involvement can decrease organizational flexibility to select issues or to adopt strategies and positions that enjoy broad societal resonance (Minkoff and Powell 2006; De Bruycker et al. 2018; Halpin et al. 2018). Interest groups do not want to alienate their members and supporters—who are crucial to their survival—and therefore will not take action on policies that are not supported by their constituencies (Strolovitch
Meanwhile, in highly politicized domains, policy-makers also rely on many other information sources such as the news media, experts and organized interests that more flexibly adapt to a politicized environment (Van Aelst and Walgrave 2016). In contrast, less politicized domains—where narrow societal support is sufficient for effective and feasible policy outcomes—are characterized by expertise-based exchanges between policy-makers and interest groups (Beyers and Kerremans 2004; De Bruycker 2016). To summarize, the value attributed by policy-makers to the provision of (narrow) societal support through interest groups’ constituency involvement is expected to decrease in highly politicized domains, while it increases in less politicized domains. This leads to hypothesis 2:

Hypothesis 2 The more a policy domain is politicized, the lower the likelihood of access for interest groups with intensely involved constituencies.

4 | DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The empirical analysis combines a bottom-up mapping of the Belgian interest group population and a top-down mapping of access to advisory councils (details in the online appendix). First, the bottom-up population mapping of 1,678 Belgian organized interests—mobilized at the (sub)national government level—was performed in 2015 (Beyers et al. 2016). These identified organizations were surveyed in January–May 2016 on their organizational characteristics and their advocacy strategies; the survey delivered a response rate of 42 per cent (n = 727 organizations that responded to >50 per cent of questions).

Second, the top-down assessment of access is based on a mapping in 2016–17 of interest group membership in 616 Belgian advisory councils. To differentiate interest groups with access from those without access, all 1,678 interest organizations identified through the bottom-up mapping were coded to assess whether they had access to one of 616 advisory councils clustered in 12 possible policy domains. Of the 1,678 organizations in the bottom-up mapping, 608 organizations (36 per cent) were found to enjoy access. As such, the dependent variable distinguishes, per policy domain, groups without access (0) from those with access (1). Thus, the dataset consists of 12 repeated observations per group, meaning that the unit of analysis is a group having (no) access-policy domain dyad. Connecting the groups that responded to the survey with the advisory council data and omitting missing values resulted in 473*12 = 5,676 dyads.

The first independent variable categorizes interest organizations based on information available on their websites into (1) concentrated organizations, including business associations, professional associations and associations of institutions and (semi-)public authorities (n = 233); (2) representative diffuse organizations, including labour unions, cause groups and identity groups with formal members (n = 148); and (3) solidarity organizations, including cause groups and identity groups without formal members (n = 92) (Halpin 2006; Binderkrantz 2008).

Second, to measure constituency involvement, an index based on the following question was created: ‘How important are your members for the following activities?’ These activities included (1) ‘helping to influence public policy’, (2) ‘providing ideas about your organization’s campaigning strategies’, (3) ‘identifying problems or providing ideas about your organization’s activities’, (4) ‘providing evidence of support from affected members or concerned citizens’, and (5) ‘running local groups or branches’. Respondents could indicate the intensity of constituency involvement on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from ‘unimportant’ to ‘very important’. These responses were summarized to create a scale ranging from 5 to 25 with a mean of 17.92 (α = 4.17), a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.66 and a polychoric ordinal alpha of 0.71. Conceptually, it is important that this measurement is independent from the group type variable as some group types—for instance, those with a formal or concentrated membership—might be more likely to involve their members (De Bruycker et al. 2018). Figure A.3 in the appendix describes the co-variation of constituency involvement with group type.

The three dimensions of politicization were operationalized as follows (De Wilde 2011; Hutter and Grande 2014; De Bruycker 2017). First, public salience is measured by scoring each policy domain according to the number
of respondents in the 2014 European Election Survey who indicated a domain as the first or second ‘most important problem’ facing the domestic government (Schmitt et al. 2015). The 148 topics coded by the survey conductors were matched with the 22 domains included in the interest group survey and the 19 coded policy domains for advisory councils. This recoding process and the merging of small and closely related domains (such as foreign affairs and defence) resulted in a categorization of 12 domains. The measure was logarithmically transformed because of its skewed distribution. In Belgium, the 2014 European Parliament elections coincided with the (sub)national elections, which benefits the validity of the data due to the proximity in time of the various phases of data collection.

Second, to determine the degree of interest mobilization per policy domain, each interest group was individually scored, based on survey responses, for its inside and outside advocacy intensity per week in each domain. Subsequently, the overall advocacy intensity each organization developed per domain was summed across all organizations to create an aggregate measure of interest mobilization per policy domain (Boräng and Naurin 2016).

Third, political contestation was measured based on a set of 110 policy issues included in the 2014 Benchmark Survey for the national voting advice application and for which the political parties indicated whether they agreed or disagreed with the issue statements (Lesschaeve 2017). The dispersion of party positions was calculated by taking the ratio of the number of parties that agreed over the number of parties that disagreed, so each statement received a score ranging from 0 (unified) to 1 (completely polarized). Subsequently, each statement was attributed to a specific policy domain to calculate the average dispersion of political parties’ positions per domain.

Finally, the three measures were combined into one index according to the formula of Hutter and Grande (2014): politicization = public salience* (interest mobilization+contestation). Politicization requires the presence of all three dimensions; while political contestation and interest mobilization are considered to be additive, public salience amplifies the impact of these two components (Agnone 2007; Hutter and Grande 2014). Given the negative but non-significant correlations between the three variables (shown in the appendix), I opted to use the politicization index and to include each variable—as a robustness check—separately in the models. A control variable measuring the percentage of advisory councils in each domain relative to the total set of councils was also included; the more councils established per domain, the higher the probability that interest groups who seek access will effectively gain access. Table A.4 in the appendix provides an overview of the variables measuring politicization and details the distribution of councils across domains.

A set of organizational control variables was also included. First, to gauge the propensity to share technical and scientific information—often considered to be an important explanation for access (Bouwen 2002; Beyers and Kerremans 2004)—each organization indicated how frequently they did so during the past 12 months on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from ‘never’ to ‘once a week’ (min. = 1/never; μ = 2.25; α = 1.02; max. = 5/once a week).

Second, policy-makers might be interested in groups knowledgeable about a broad set of policy issues and who, consequently, are able to supply advice on complex, overarching issues. Such groups are often more generalist in nature and cover many policy areas (Halpin and Binderkrantz 2011). Alternatively, specialist/niche groups can supply detailed information on specific industries and signal preferences of well-circumscribed societal segments. To differentiate specialists from generalists, the number of domains in which groups are active was measured based on a list containing 22 policy domains for which respondents were invited to tick multiple boxes. This measure was right-skewed and therefore logarithmically transformed (min. = 0.69; μ = 1.23; α = 0.53; max. = 2.71).

In addition, the number of employees affects the capacity to produce technical expertise (e.g., monitoring politics, conducting research) and societal support (e.g., engaging and mobilizing members and supporters) (Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Fraussen and Beyers 2015; Weiler et al. 2018). In this regard, the number of full-time employees, which has a right-skewed distribution, was used to create a logarithmically transformed variable (min. = 0; μ = 1.61; α = 1.36; max. = 8.7).

Furthermore, a control for the dependency on government funding was included. Interest representation in Belgium is characterized by generous government funding schemes. Receiving subsidies may signal to policy-makers that an interest group is a credible and legitimate interlocutor. Funded organizations are also more inclined to seek access to their beneficiary government (Heylen and Willems 2019). Respondents indicated the percentage of...
government funding within their 2015 budget, which resulted in a right-skewed distribution. Considering that the survey question was intended as an ordinal measure, a categorical variable was created: no subsidies (n = 190), government subsidies contributing 0.01 per cent to 50 per cent of the budget (n = 115) and government subsidies contributing 51 per cent to 100 per cent of the budget (n = 168).

Finally, the development of a wide range of advocacy inside and outside tactics within advisory councils’ policy domains indicates the latent interest of groups to gain access to the policy-making process. Individual advocacy intensity was operationalized following Boräng and Naurin (2016) and the full operationalization of this variable can be found in the appendix. The variance inflation factors (VIF) indicate no multicollinearity problems between advocacy intensity and the number of staff nor with any other variables (mean VIF models = 1.66).

5 | ANALYSIS

Advisory councils are widely present at all government levels in Belgium. Framework legislation provides the backbone for the overall design and functioning of the Flemish and Walloon advisory councils; such encompassing legislation is absent at the national level. Changes in the composition of advisory councils (and also at the national level) were often subject to extensive political debate, and the politicization of particular domains affecting the composition of councils is a long and incremental process. The design of individual advisory councils—composition, thematic scope, government funding and support staff—and day-to-day functioning is usually regulated by law/decrees (56 per cent) or executive order (39 per cent). Typically, ministers are required to solicit non-binding policy recommendations on initiated legislation from the relevant advisory councils in their domain(s). Furthermore, many advisory councils (e.g., those associated with government agencies) are tasked with providing recommendations for policy implementation. While it is a less frequent occurrence, advisory councils can also initiate policy recommendations of their own accord. Neo-corporatism and Belgium’s consociational legacy entail that preference is afforded to interest group representatives—traditionally, prominent business associations and labour unions—over (academic) experts when policy-makers decide on the composition of councils (Fraussen et al. 2015; Fobé et al. 2017). However, due to reforms by the Flemish and Walloon governments during the past decade, membership of advisory councils has expanded to include other organized interests besides the traditional government interlocutors (Fobé et al. 2017).

Figure 1 presents a descriptive analysis of the relationship between the number of interest groups with access to advisory councils across policy domains, by levels of politicization. Considerable variation exists in the extent to which different group types gain access across domains.

Concentrated interests such as business and professional associations are dominant in economic affairs (of those with access in these domains, 74.5 per cent are concentrated interests), healthcare (64 per cent) and labour market policy (64 per cent). These domains are relatively more politicized and can be characterized as welfare state domains in which the traditional neo-corporatist interlocutors of government—prominent business associations and labour unions—have maintained their core insider positions (Deschouwer 2012; Beyers et al. 2014). In the education, transportation and human/civil rights policy domains, representative diffuse groups have more access than concentrated interests—on average, 52 per cent of those with access are representative diffuse groups in these domains. Regarding environmental policy, social affairs and cultural policy, representative diffuse groups are almost on par with concentrated interests—on average, 42 per cent of those with access in these domains are representative diffuse groups. These domains are also relatively highly politicized. By contrast, in less politicized domains such as justice or foreign affairs, all group types enjoy lower levels of access. Hence, three patterns emerge: (1) highly politicized welfare state domains in which concentrated interests are most prominent, (2) highly politicized domains in which representative diffuse groups are on par with concentrated interests and (3) domains with limited politicization to which all types of interest groups have low levels of access.

To test the hypotheses, Table 1 presents logistic regression models. The dependent variable captures whether a group gained access to advisory councils nested in 12 domains. To account for this nesting of the data, clustered
standard errors were estimated. Numeric variables are standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing this by two times the standard deviation; this facilitates comparison between the various measures of politicization and aids the interpretation of the interaction parameters (Gelman 2008). Moving one unit of analysis corresponds to moving one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean.

The first model presents the direct effects of group type, constituency involvement, and politicization on access. First, compared to concentrated interests, representative diffuse organizations are as likely to be members of advisory councils, while solidarity groups have a lower likelihood of gaining access. These results are in line with previous research on interest group access which found that organized interests with informal constituencies of supporters enjoy less access compared to groups with formally affiliated members (Fraussen and Beyers 2015; Fraussen et al. 2015; Junk 2019). Second, the extent to which organizations involve their constituencies has a positive effect on access. This corroborates recent research demonstrating that policy-makers value organizations functioning as transmission belts between their constituencies and policy-makers (Albareda and Braun 2019; Grömping and Halpin 2019; Junk 2019). Finally, politicization has a positive effect on the likelihood of gaining access for all group types, which confirms that access of organized interests to advisory councils is not predominantly depoliticized and technocratic in nature.

The control variables—in line with existing research—point to the importance of supply-side factors (Dür and Mateo 2013; Binderkrantz et al. 2015). The more advocacy activities developed in particular domains, the higher the likelihood that interest groups gain access. The propensity to supply technical information and staff size also positively affect access.

The second model assesses whether representative diffuse groups enjoy more access in highly politicized domains. The interaction term for group type and politicization does not have a significant effect, which comes as no surprise given the descriptive results. To further flesh out this result, models controlling for the moderating effect of ‘welfare state domain’ on the relationship between group type and politicization are presented in the appendix.

**FIGURE 1** Access of different group types across policy domains by levels of politicization (n = 606 organizations with access—absolute count indicated per bar)
| TABLE 1  | Logistic regression models for access |
|----------|--------------------------------------|
| **Independent variables** | **Direct effects** | **Interactions** |
| **Group type (reference = concentrated interests)** | | |
| Representative citizen groups | −0.319 (0.21) | −0.256 (0.24) |
| Solidarity groups | −1.316*** (0.27) | −1.252*** (0.33) |
| Constituency involvement (index) | 0.347† (0.21) | 0.465** (0.15) |
| **Organisational controls** | | |
| Intensity of advocacy activities (ref.cat. = no activities) | | |
| Below median | 0.849*** (0.25) | 0.836** (0.27) |
| Above median | 1.702*** (0.21) | 1.686*** (0.24) |
| Propensity to share technical information | 0.307*** (0.07) | 0.305*** (0.07) |
| Generalist vs. Specialist | 0.178† (0.10) | 0.179† (0.11) |
| Staff (log) | 0.931*** (0.11) | 0.942*** (0.11) |
| Government funding (ref.cat. = no subsidies) | | |
| 0.001% to 50% of the budget | 0.193 (0.18) | 0.193 (0.18) |
| 51%–100% of the budget | −0.004 (0.31) | −0.007 (0.31) |
| **Politization** | | |
| Politization (index) | 0.636* (0.26) | 1.076** (0.33) |
| **Contextual control** | | |
| Number of advisory councils | 0.822*** (0.12) | 0.830*** (0.12) |
| **Interactions** | | |
| Representative citizen groups*Politization | | −0.634 (0.52) |
| Solidarity groups*Politization | | −0.590 (0.54) |
| Constituency involvement*Politization | | −0.846*** (0.23) |
| **Constant** | −3.927*** (0.33) | −4.000*** (0.31) |
| **Model fit statistics** | | |
| Observations | 5676 | 5676 |
| Log Likelihood | −1460.093 | −1447.858 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 2942.186 | 2917.717 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | 3015.270 | 2990.801 |

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses; †p < .1, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
line with hypothesis 1, these models demonstrate that the politicization of policy domains affects which particular group types gain access across different domains. More precisely, policy-makers are more susceptible to broad societal support supplied by interest groups in politicized domains. The caveat is that this holds only for less traditional domains such as the environment, human/civil rights and cultural affairs. In these, generally highly politicized domains, diffuse representative groups are as likely to gain access as concentrated groups are. In traditional welfare state domains, the neo-corporatist interlocutors of government—prominent business associations and labour unions—maintain their core insider positions (see also Fraussen et al. 2015). Nevertheless, politicization, for instance due to interest mobilization, also positively affects the access diffuse representative groups enjoy in welfare state domains (see Figure A.7 in the appendix). One example is the composition of a new Flemish consultation body in healthcare, established in 2015. Although the traditional labour unions and healthcare providers gained access, much emphasis was placed on the inclusion of patient groups and associations of the elderly. While healthcare is somewhat less publicly salient, the ongoing and strong mobilization by these diffuse representative groups, in particular, ultimately resulted in their formal membership of the council (Moens 2015).

The second model confirms hypothesis 2, which reasons that the more politicized a domain, the lower the likelihood of interest groups intensely involving their constituencies to gain access. This is further illustrated in Figure 2, which presents the predicted probabilities for the interaction term between constituency involvement and politicization (Figure A.6 in the appendix presents the marginal effects). For highly politicized domains (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean), moving from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean for constituency involvement corresponds with an 8 per cent decrease in the likelihood of gaining access. Conversely, when a domain features limited politicization (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean), moving from one
standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean for constituency involvement corresponds with a 12.3 per cent increase in the likelihood of gaining access.

These findings confirm that as the level of politicization of the advisory councils’ policy domains increases, interest group access decreases, conditional on the level of constituency involvement. Groups with closely engaged members and supporters are more narrowly focused on their constituencies’ interests. High levels of politicization accentuate the costs and benefits of particular policies to the members and supporters, thereby making organized interests more likely to experience internal disagreement and encounter difficulty in overcoming veto points within the organization (De Bruyckere et al. 2018; Grömping and Halpin 2019). The results suggest that politicization may amplify the ‘inefficiency costs’ of constituency involvement (Grömping and Halpin 2019). These findings are robust to controlling for the effect of constituency involvement and public salience, interest mobilization, and political contestation as separate interaction terms in the analyses (presented in the appendix), thereby demonstrating the mutually reinforcing impact of the three dimensions of politicization.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article aimed to explain how politicization affects interest groups’ access to advisory councils. Although scholars often conclude that supplying technical expertise is one of the most important factors in gaining access to political-administrative venues (Bouwen 2002; Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Fraussen and Beyers 2015; Weiler et al. 2018), this study demonstrates that the scope of societal support that interest groups are able to supply moderates the likelihood of access, depending on the level of politicization. The empirical analyses—based on a mapping of access to 616 advisory councils, combined with survey data from more than 400 organized interests—illustrate that in politicized policy domains, (1) diffuse groups are often on par with concentrated groups in gaining access and (2) interest groups with closely engaged constituencies gain less access.

First, in politicized domains, all group types demonstrate a higher likelihood of gaining access. Still, the Belgian advisory council system is characterized by distinct constellations of organized interests in each domain. Representative diffuse groups that are able to send credible signals of broad societal support—because they represent wide societal segments such as consumers or workers (see also Flöthe and Rasmussen 2018)—gain ample access to politicized policy domains such as environmental and cultural policy. In welfare state domains, the neo-corporatist interlocutors of government maintained their core insider positions, despite, or maybe thanks to, high levels of politicization. These findings demonstrate that, next to providing technical expertise, the ability to signal broad societal support by having an encompassing constituency is a valuable commodity for organized interests to gain access to politicized domains—which entails some important implications for public policy-making. When only one particular set of interest groups is relied on for information, these groups are more likely to shape public policy (Yackee and Yackee 2006; Binderkrantz et al. 2014). However, politicization proves to be an important driver in diversifying the overall composition of advisory councils, resulting in the inclusion of groups other than the traditional neo-corporatist interlocutors. In ‘newer’ and politicized domains, policy-makers are more likely to be confronted with multiple perspectives and thus less likely to be persuaded by one-sided information. Furthermore, if broad consensus is reached across a diverse set of groups, or these groups can politicize specific issues when drafting policy recommendations, a stronger message is sent to policy-makers to shape legislation in a particular direction (Yackee 2005; Fobé et al. 2017). In this regard, future studies might adopt a longitudinal design to analyse whether changes in politicization precede changes in the composition of advisory councils and how such changes affect public policy.

Second, the results highlight an important tension for the functioning of interest groups as intermediaries between society and policy-makers (Jordan and Maloney 1997, 2007; Halpin 2006; De Bruyckere et al. 2018). Constituency involvement reaps results, especially in policy domains with limited politicization, but it constrains the access of interest groups to more politicized domains as intensely engaged members and supporters might inhibit
groups from signalling broader societal support. While Grömping and Halpin (2019) have demonstrated that constituency involvement accrues to a 'beneficial inefficiency' for organized interests to gain access, this study highlights some restrictive scope conditions of constituency involvement. Close engagement with members and supporters might correspond with more narrow societal support, which suppresses the inclination of policy-makers to supply access in politicized domains. In such domains, policy-makers need widespread support to adopt policies, and broad and encompassing societal support is a valuable commodity. Qualitative case study research could further disentangle the tension between constituency involvement and signalling broad societal support by analysing additional indicators of constituency support and involvement (e.g., surveying group constituencies). Moreover, future research might explore more closely whether policy-makers grant access on the basis of the scope of societal support signalled by organized interests and/or how politicization affects how policy-makers select interlocutors.

Interest groups’ inclusion in advisory councils is often prompted by their functioning as intermediaries between government and society (Fobé et al. 2017). Therefore, when close constituency engagement results in less access in highly politicized domains, public policies might become less grounded in the support of possibly key but narrow affected constituencies (e.g., regulated industry). Moreover, although politicization positively affects the diversification of advisory councils, too much politicization might lead to a deadlock in concertation. For example, in Belgium, deadlock often ensues on socioeconomic councils because of the exceedingly visible costs for affected constituencies when highly politicized issues such as social policy retrenchment are at stake (Van Gyes et al. 2017). Interest groups’ constituencies then constrain their leadership to such an extent that advisory councils fail to produce policy recommendations. Follow-up research could further clarify how groups’ constituencies constrain or facilitate the deliberation within councils, and how this affects policy recommendations and outcomes (see for instance Yackee 2005; Yackee and Yackee 2006; Arras and Braun 2018; Beyers and Arras 2019).

At present, findings cannot be easily generalized beyond the Belgian system of interest representation, although the hypotheses tested were not country or arena specific. As previously mentioned, Belgium can be considered a representative case for other neo-corporatist systems of interest representation with deeply ingrained ties between societal constituencies and interest groups, such as the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland and Austria. Comparative research could further clarify the external validity of the results by exploring relevant inter-polity variation (e.g., between Belgian government levels and between various countries) and testing the hypotheses for other political arenas such as the parliament. Recent research on consultations in national and European parliamentary committees, for example, has focused on variation in access due to institutional set-up and procedural constraints (Pedersen et al. 2015; Coen and Katsaitis 2019). However, it can be expected that the varying politicization of policy domains will have an even stronger impact on access in the parliamentary arena due to the greater prominence of electoral sensitivities. To summarize, this study reveals that rather than being technocratic and apolitical in nature, interest group access to political-administrative venues can be a distinctly politicized endeavour.

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**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

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

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