

Who listens to the grassroots? A field experiment on informational lobbying in the UK

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Abstract

Studies of lobbying have tended to neglect the measurement of the influence, which is because of the difficulty of making an inference when lobbyists select their targets and strategies based on the likelihood of success. In these circumstances observational studies find it hard to show that the effort of lobbyists causes an outcome whereas the experimental method can make such an inference by randomly allocating lobbying strategies to policy-makers. To test for lobbying impact, this paper presents the design and findings from a cluster randomised controlled trial of lobbying of locally elected representatives in England, who received different letters from citizen interest groups recruited into the study. We report descriptive statistics and regressions with clustered standard errors on different measures of councillor response. The findings show that informational content does not make a difference, suggesting that efforts to argue more effectively from grassroots may not be listened to by local representatives.

Key words

Field experiment, lobbying, information, elected representatives, citizen interest groups.

With a tradition and line of thinking reaching back to Madison, scholars have long speculated on the influence of interest groups, and whether particular kinds of tactics are likely to win over policy-makers. But interest group scholars have often avoided studying the impact of lobbying (Mahoney 2007). This is probably due to the difficulty of making an inference because interest groups select strategies they know will work and avoid ones that do not, so just observing what successful interest groups do does not adjudicate on effectiveness. Added to this is the difficulty - outside studies of campaign contributions - of relying on self-reports, both of studies of advocates and of the policy-makers themselves, making it difficult to generate valid results as self-ascribed influence may be over-estimated, both by the interest group and by the policy-maker (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998: 156).

With limitations to observational studies, scholars have understandably failed to answer fully one of the key questions about interest groups, which whether the selection of a tactic actually works in terms of a desired response. Scholars do not know whether the effort lobbyist put into crafting the approach to an elected representatives works or not. Is the act of contacting that matters or is it the quality of contact in terms of evidence and the quality of the argument? Our remedy is to offer an experiment to measure the impact of a lobby activity, in this case letter writing campaigns by citizen interest groups. We hold constant the type of interest group and lobbyists' decisions whether to lobby or not so that any response we measured depended on the difference in the content of the lobby. In this way, we build on other field experiments as applied to citizen acts of participation (e.g. Green and Gerber, 2008).

In this paper, we review extant studies of the influence of lobbying and of the likely instruments lobbyists are likely to use and their likely effectiveness. We then

detail our methods, discuss the results, and draw out the implications for the study of interest groups.

Studies of lobbying influence

Most groups are assumed to aspire to insider status, with insider strategy and tactics as the means to getting access (Grant, 2000, 2004). Beyond this, interest groups will choose a range of strategies to influence policy, depending on whether the groups wish to change the status quo, with choices about whether to expand conflict or 'go negative', and whether to be visible or not (Baumgartner et al., 2009: pp. 192-194).ⁱ

There is a range of tactics interest groups use their resources to lever influence and achieve their ends. US groups rely more on campaign contributions (Watson and Shackleton, 2003), though the UK does not have Political Action Committees or anything near equivalent. Voter mobilisation, on the other hand, is important both in Europe and in the United States. By mobilising voters, interest groups can directly shape the positions of elected decision-makers (Milner, 1997: p. 60).

There is a lively debate about the relative importance of cash contributions versus all other lobbying tactics, given that if contributions are an effective tactic then this produces and reflects inequalities between lobbyists. However, access to large sums of cash may not be the key to success, with some work arguing that "one of the best single predictors of success in the lobbying game is not how much money an organization has on its side, but simply whether it is attempting to protect the policy that is already in place." (Baumgartner et al., 2009: p. 12). This line of argument is supported by other research e.g. by Lohmann (1995), which found that interest groups with preferences in line with the decision-maker's got free access, while other lobby groups had to pay contributions.

Aside from cash donations, other tactics include direct and informal contact, involvement in policy formulation, presentation of research findings, litigation, protests, constituent influence (e.g. letter writing campaigns), testimony at hearings, and the strategic use of information to influence policy choice. Leaving cash donations out of the list of tactics, Milbrath (1963) and then Berry (1977) rate the effectiveness of different tactics, with direct or personal contact rated top, and letter writing and presentation of research results rated next.

The relationship between effective lobbying tactics and what lobbying organisations actually do is complicated. Hall and Deardorff (2006) argue that even professional lobbyists “behavioural patterns often appear anomalous when viewed in the light of existing theories” (p. 69). This suggests that the ability even of the most professional lobbyists to act effectively is severely limited. Mahoney (2007) did not find a strong relationship between the frequency with which an organisation uses a particular technique and the perceived effectiveness of that technique. In nearly all cases organisations rated the effectiveness of the method higher than their use of the method. Two of the lobbying methods, membership on advisory boards and participation in regulatory negotiations, were considered quite effective but used very infrequently. Her explanation is that the more effective tactics tend to be more costly and time consuming or hard to access and the least effective are easier to do and access. Less studied are the sets of complementary activities that range between direct contact and campaign finance, such as letter writing where a lobbyist would be able to vary aspects relatively easily (e.g. compared to somehow obtaining membership of advisory boards) in the course of a lobby. Such activities are available to smaller, less well resourced interest groups. There are significant differences between the resources and capacity of different types of groups to undertake their lobbying efforts: Some

can afford lobbying efforts costing millions of dollars for a single lobbying campaign. Others operate on a shoestring, if they operate at all.” (Hall and Deardorff, 2006: p. 80). Direct letter writing is a simple and low cost tactic that any group can use. It does not require the group to have significant time to devote to seeing up to seventy different politicians, or have the capacity to undertake its own research, finance litigation or cash contributions, or organise protests.

More importantly, the tactic may help the lobbyist achieve the valued direct face-to-face contact. A letter could act as an introduction to the group for decision makers who are not familiar with the organisation, initiating further dialogue and discussion. Given the importance of informal contact between interest groups and decision makers, one of the aims of the letter would be to generate new personal contacts. Part of the issue for citizen interest groups is that they lack access and contacts to lobbying face-to-face, and therefore using direct contact as our tactic would lead to a circular problem.

Much of the contacting will involve the provision of information, which has been identified in the literature on informational lobbying, from Milbrath (1963) onwards. An influential branch of the literature approaches lobbying as the strategic transmission of asymmetrically held information (e.g. see Potters and van Winden, 1992). In terms of effectiveness, Gerber and Lupia’s work (1992) provides evidence that information can have powerful effects on behaviour, in this case voters were able to use interest group statements as cues about the impact of proposed policy changes, which effected voting patterns.

A review of lobbying studies shows that there are several factors which may contribute to an effective lobby of this sort. In summary, these are that it comes from a credible source; frames the issue in a way that is consistent with lobbyists' values

and goals; offers the policy maker private or costly information that would otherwise be difficult for the policy maker to gather; summarises and processes a mass of publicly available information in a way clarifies the implications for the policy maker; contains emotive or symbolic appeals to commonly held values; outlines how current policy approaches lead to negative outcomes, and how an alternative approach would promote shared policy goals; and has a clear set of recommendations or a clearly articulated demand of the policy maker. These are shown in Figure 1. We look at this literature in more detail below.

[FIG 1 HERE]

Lobbying must be from a credible source if the likelihood of policy makers responding is to be increased. For example, Druckman (2001) found that the credibility of the source of information has a significant impact on the chances for the successful framing of an issue. Gerber and Lupia's studies (1992) have discovered that the campaign process can provide information if the groups are credible and the campaign can thereby increase the informational efficiency of the electoral outcome. Some see much of the lobbying that goes on as an exercise in framing or issue definition (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2002). Attempts to reframe the issue are attempts to change the nature of the argument, and frame the issue in a way that is consistent with lobbyists' values and goals.

There are two key aspects to informational lobbying: the provision of costly or private information; and the lobbyist making sense of public information. Offering policy makers private or costly information that would otherwise be difficult for the policy maker to gather reduces costs for the policy-maker. Decision makers value

information that would otherwise not be accessible (see Hansen, 1991; Hall and Deardorff, 2006). In the model of Potters and van Winden (1992), informational lobbying - the use by interest groups of their (alleged) expertise or private information on matters of importance for policymakers in an attempt to persuade them to implement particular policies - is often regarded as an important means of influence. For local politicians, the decision makers in our study, their interest in re-election means that they were likely to be more responsive to information that could help in that, including information from citizen interest groups about what constituents' views and issues are (Mahoney, 2007).

When we look at public information, the hypothesis is that successful lobbying will summarise and process a mass of publicly available information in a way clarifies the implications for the policy maker. Hall and Deardorff (2006: p. 74) focus on the transmission of “information that legislators require for their work in influencing legislation,” including policy analyses, research reports, and other expertly developed information as well as “political intelligence” that is designed to assist policymakers. The (disputed) argument is that legislators could reduce their level of uncertainty about policy choices by “adding lobbyists' signals to the multitude of cues” (Hall and Deardorff, 2006: p. 71) they already have, as well as the “expansive testimony, policy analyses, reports, publications, and other detailed materials” (p. 71) that lobbyists provide.

In contrast to evidence about the impact of informational lobbying, there is also a line of argument that emotive or symbolic appeals can be effective, following ideas about the use of emotional intelligence in policy making. For example, one writer shows that although policy makers publicly express a preference for hard facts, in practice it is the symbolic material rather than statistics that they retain, such as

stories of individual cases structured to articulate a particular set of commonly held social values (Westen, 2007). The existing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of different pressure group tactics is large and often contradictory (Hall and Deardorff, 2006). For example, it is not clear whether provision of costly information or emotive appeals are most effective, and under which circumstances. It may be the case that these two approaches are doing very different things: “symbolic or valence appeals [that] are unlikely to convey information that is difficult for policymakers to acquire for themselves.” (Baumgartner et al., 2009: p174). We assume that emotive appeals are playing a different, but not mutually exclusive, function to the offer of information.

The different forms of argumentation used are an area where a research gap has been identified (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998). “An argument is a statement that links a policy goal with either a justification for the policy or a discussion of its implications” (Baumgartner et al., 2009: p. 388). Empirical work indicates that the two most frequently used forms of argument refer to a) problems with implementation or feasibility, for example outlining how current policy approaches lead to negative outcomes and b) how a policy promotes or inhibits a policy goal, and how an alternative approach would promote shared policy goals. Although frequency is not a reliable guide to effectiveness, we have also included these forms of argument in our study. Some have argued that these arguments are more attractive to unelected civil servants than politicians, but this case could be further tested.

Finally, the literature tells us that effectiveness of lobbying is partly dependent on the quality and clarity of lobbying request, known as the ‘ask’. This means that lobbyists need a clear set of recommendations, including alternative policy proposals to be successful. There is some evidence to suggest that defenders of the status quo

have an advantage as they need to undermine the oppositions' proposals without justifying the status quo position. Whereas, challengers of the status quo need to work harder by outlining a viable alternative policy, and explain how this would work (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

Approach and Methods

To test for the impact of information, source, framing and clarity of communication, we focus in our study on letter writing by citizen interest groups. By this we mean the groups themselves write a letter to decision makers, rather than create a letter writing campaign i.e. persuade large numbers of members and supporters to write letters. Some of this was that letter writing would go with the grain of what citizen interest groups were already doing; interest groups already spend time making formal representations to policy-makers, such as writing letters. Some of the reason for this was around resources - financial, capacity and time, and skills. Clearly groups with more resources are at an advantage in conducting campaigns in all sorts of ways, compared to small citizen interest groups typically with very few resources, including some of the overstretched groups in our study, four of which did not have e-mail access for their group before the experiment. In the UK, voluntary organisations with annual incomes under £10,000 made up 56 per cent of all registered charities in 2006, and it was estimated that of the 600,000 organisations in the not-for-profit sector in 2002 (including registered charities and others), up to 360,000 were community-level organisations with small amounts of income, not registered as a charity (self citation 2008). We wanted to test whether effectiveness of an interest group was the consequence of the quality of its lobbying messages or whether there was no difference.

The study is a cluster randomised controlled trial, where the units were experiments carried out within local government areas. The intervention was a comparable letter sent by citizen interest groups to local elected representatives in English local governments. The two treatments were differently worded letters that was sent by a lobby group to the politicians, which were generated from a random sample of half of all elected politicians in a local government, which were then randomised into two groups. Each representative received just one letter.

To create the lobby we recruited local community and voluntary sector partners in each authority to deliver the intervention. We selected the authorities on the basis of the availability of a comparable and willing interest group to do the intervention, and actively recruited groups in different places in order to get variations in political control and location. We carried out eight experiments, which created a sample size of 248, i.e. eight local community groups or associations each in a different authority each with an average of around 60 councillors in total (of which half were randomly selected to make up the sample). We carried out power calculations to determine for different sample sizes.ⁱⁱ

The local associations are unique to each locality, but similar in terms of their grassroots connections. The consistent features were that the issues were live problems generated by the groups, and that the groups themselves were genuine organisations that existed outside of the experiment, operating in that locality. Our lobby was of hard pressed legislators by under-resourced groups, therefore the experiment needed to be genuine. We were keen to use clear ethical standards in the execution of our experimental work (for more detail on guiding principles in the ethics of conducting experiments, see author, 2010). Interest groups involved in the experiment included faith organisations, refugee/new migrant organisations,

organisations working with black and ethnic minority groups, participatory arts organisations, disability/carers' networks and youth groups. Three of the groups were made up of, and run by, small groups of young people aged between 10 and 21. All three youth groups were unfunded, and had light-touch support from an adult worker. Two of the organisations were self-help, advocacy and support groups for people with physical and mental disabilities, and for carers of family members with mental health issues, both made up of and run by members with limited or in-kind funding. One group was an umbrella body for marginalised black and minority ethnic community organisations, with one full-time worker. One group was a project hosted by the local Cathedral, with 1.5 full time equivalent (FTE) staff members, which provided drop-in support, legal and welfare advice and English classes for asylum seekers and refugees, many of whom were recent arrivals to the UK from war stricken countries. The eighth group was the largest organisation, with five FTE staff members, which used a specialist form of creative arts, called participatory dance, to work with at-risk young people, women in prisons, and people with physical and mental health problems. A summary of the size and age of the eight groups is shown in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

The letters outlined a real local issue of concern for the groups, and were adapted to that local issue, but followed a standard and consistent structure for both treatments. The issues were: the need for more participatory dance activities; harassment of young women by young men; gang-related crime and anti-social behaviour by young people, including alcohol and substance misuse; lack of adequate

support and resettlement for asylum seekers and refugees; lack of support for carers of people with mental health problems; mobility and access problems for people with disabilities; lack of community development support and engagement of marginalised black and minority ethnic community organisations. Figure 2 summarises the lobbying issues.

[FIG 2 HERE]

Although there was variation in the issues, the consistent feature was that each issue was of local relevance and salience for the local authority area. There were solid grounds for presuming consistency. For example, the area where the asylum seeker and refugee project was based had experienced recent rapid population change, with new arrivals from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. There was a high level of local disquiet about these new arrivals, for example with regular reports in the local press about attacks by refugees on the longer standing community and vice versa, and disproportionate levels of criminality amongst asylum seekers and refugees. Local politicians were well aware that a close neighbouring authority had experienced serious racial disturbances in the last ten years (which had national coverage), but so far, their area had avoided this outcome despite simmering tensions. Therefore, a lobby about integration and resettlement of refugees was a topical and appropriate local issue.

In contrast, there were very few racial tensions in the area where the participatory arts organisation worked, which had a much wealthier, and more ethnically homogenous, population. With a reputation as a traditional and conservative area, and pockets of conspicuous consumption, the authority was known

in the wider region for attracting well-paid footballers to live in lavish homes. Here, the focus of local attention was on material aspiration, with acknowledgement of, but less widely shared concern about, a large gap between the wealthier and less affluent. Although well catered for by conventional cultural facilities, 'alternative' arts were not historically well-supported. Therefore, a lobby to raise the profile of creative dance for socially excluded groups was very locally appropriate.

There were two treatment groups receiving letters from the same local group. The research randomly allocated half of all the local politicians into these two groups so the only difference between the groups of politicians other than random error was the content of the letter on a local issue they received from the local association working with the researchers. The experiment incorporated the eight factors considered by the literature to form an effective lobbying letter. This created the two treatments: weak and strong. However, the rationale for structuring the treatments in the way we did was to test a maximum effect. That is, in an initial experiment where the results are unknown and uncertain, a polyglot treatment is more appropriate. If there are results, then the elements of the treatment can be further disaggregated in later experiments. We assumed the eight factors were additive, and that the use of more of them creates greater effectiveness.

The structure for both treatments is shown in Figures 3 and 4, which show the treatments and how they link to the literature as summarised in Figure 1. Treatment 1 was designed to be the weak treatment. It contained weak, un-evidenced and not locally relevant versions of five of the eight factors in effective lobbying. It did not contain three of the eight factors (private information, values, alternative policy). It had only one reference to a weak and unclear request. Treatment 2 was designed to be the strong treatment. It contained strong, evidenced and locally relevant versions of all

the factors in effective lobbying. There were three references to a clear request, and two references to all other factors, apart from how current policy is failing or leads to negative outcomes which has one reference.

[FIGS 3 and 4 HERE]

A series of manipulation checks were done on the treatments. All of the letters were written by one researcher, using a standard template, then checked and agreed by the groups. The language and style for all letters across both treatments, and across the different issues and groups, was standardised. Each treatment was adapted for the content of the issue, but otherwise the ordering, length and format for each treatment was held constant. It was not the case, or intention, that the weak treatment was more home-spun, sounded more authentic, had plainer English or was otherwise more appealing than the strong treatment. If anything, the weak treatment contained more jargon-like phrases than the strong treatment because it was deliberately not locally relevant, and therefore vaguer. The style and tone of both treatments was designed to be straightforward, relatively articulate, and to a reasonable standard of professionalism e.g. correct spelling and grammar.

We used blind coding to test whether the letters had adequately operationalised the treatment designs of the weak and strong formats, using two colleagues with different levels of knowledge of the lobbying literature, and who were not involved in or familiar with the experiment. They were given three sample copies, covering three issues, of each of the treatments, and asked to score each treatment overall out of five on each of the eight factors, and comment on why they had given that score. We then averaged the scores between the two coders, which were almost

identical with a difference of one point on each treatment. From a total possible score of 40, treatment one scored 20.5 and treatment two scored 24.5. Their comments were that treatment one was “*poorly written in some areas*”, and “*the purpose of the letter was unclear*”, the private information lacked enough depth to be convincing, the ‘ask’ was not clear “*specifically what they will do*”, and it was not clear “*what the recommendations are*”, and the sections on ‘alternative policy’ were “*vague*”. Their comments on treatment two were that it contained examples throughout, was overall “*a clearer letter*”, the recommendations had a clearer purpose, and the private information was “*more obvious*”. This confirmed that treatment one was interpreted as the weaker treatment.

Both treatments were sent in the same way by all of the groups, supervised by the researchers, using email and hard copy letters sent at the same time. The hard copy letters used the same design, i.e. typed, on plain white A4 paper without attachments or additional information. The email account where the letters were sent from was that of the group, not a personal email address. Care was taken that the emails in particular were sent to each politician individually, not as a group email or ‘round robin’ mailshot. Neither the email or hard copy letters made reference to the research, e.g. where necessary emails were blind copied to the researchers, or forwarded afterwards. Four of the eight groups did not have an email account for their group before the experiment, and researchers assisted the groups to set up new accounts.

Other than the specifics of the issue, the letters varied only in the degree to which they contained the elements of an effective lobby letter, and whether those elements were strong, evidenced and locally relevant or not. A sample of each treatment is shown in the Appendix.

Analysis

The analysis report the overall response rates; compared mean letter responses according in the two groups to see whether the apparently more effective approach yielded a higher response; compared the quality of the responses in the two groups to see whether the strong treatment yielded a more helpful response. The responses from each authority are shown in Table 2.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

Table 2 shows that the overall response rate was 18.5 per cent. It also shows that there was a considerable variation according to local authority ranging from 4.2 to 30.6 per cent.

Next we present the replies according to the treatments. The result in Table 3 is the perhaps counter-intuitive finding that the response to the weaker Treatment 1 was higher than for the supposed stronger Treatment 2. A t test of difference of means is significant at $p < .1$ ($t=1.3$, $p=.096$). The clustered nature of the trial present a full report at this stage on the statistical results, but it seems the weak letter with its information-low and emotion-poor approach yielded a higher response than the strong letter with its information-high and emotion-rich approach.

Next we report a probit regression with clustered standard errors. We control for the treatment and also the party of the respondent, excluding the two major parties in terms of national shares of local seats, Conservative and Labour, on the grounds that the established power brokers may be tied into existing producer interest groups so more responsive to a citizen interest group. The Liberal Democrats, who form a

large number of councillors in this variable, have traditionally performed this role. We create a variable that take the value of zero for the Labour and Conservative parties and one for the Liberal Democrats and other Opposition parties. The dependent variable is the reply to the letter, making the treatment and the party variable the response terms. The results are presented in Table 4. The table shows that the weak treatment had more of a response, but is not statistically significant. The outside parties are more responsive as predicted.

The number of responses is only one outcome. The quality of the responses is also clearly critical; fewer but constructive and supportive responses from appropriate decision makers may be of more benefit to the interest groups than a larger number of non-committal or unhelpful answers from politicians not in a position to assist. And ultimately the best measure of quality would be that the lobby succeeded. Following the lobby, some of the groups saw progress, e.g. the participatory arts organisation was awarded a £0.25m contract to provide services, and the carers network were invited to local authority strategic planning meetings for the first time. However, while incredibly positive for the groups, these outcome variables cannot be considered to be direct results of the intervention. Although concrete and observable outcomes like these are attractive for the research, they are decisions much further down the chain of decision making and are the result of a complex mix of institutional factors not attributable solely to the treatment. A successful outcome to the lobby was not necessarily within the gift of all of the individual councillors. The initial response by telephone, letter or email was used in the analysis as the standardised outcome variable. Both treatments contained a set of generic requests as a basis for outcome measurement: “We would very much appreciate the opportunity to collaborate. Please

could you let us know: your position on [the relevant local issue]; how you would like to take this issue forward.”

However, this causes an issue for the analysis of quality of response, in that any verbal response to a request can be considered suspect, more so in a politician's world where there is a high likelihood of pseudo- or symbolic agreement to secure (or avoid losing) electoral and public support. Early comments from colleagues offered hypothetical responses they considered at best, difficult to categorise, and at worst, typically British formulations of pseudo-agreement: 'I will help in any way I can'; 'My colleague is much more useful to you'; 'For you, the door is always open'.

The analysis attempted to deal with these issues by creating a coding framework that allowed for a series of different types of response from the same individual in order to see if a response was backed up by other (seemingly) helpful actions or comments, or they were just empty phrases. A coding framework for the quality and content of the responses was created based on the generic request combined with the nature of the actual responses received. The coding framework covered: quality of help overall; statement that issue was not the councillor's responsibility or remit; suggested other contacts without a direct referral; direct referral to civil servant/officer or relevant committee; direct referral to fellow councillor; willingness to take up the issue; offered or had further discussion; commented on the issue; offered personal support to the group for their lobby; willingness to meet or met in person; and gave information about party policy;

The responses were then blind coded by two researchers who had not been involved in the experiment and had no knowledge of which group the councillor was in.ⁱⁱⁱ We probe the structure of these responses with factor analysis, in this case

principle components, and present the rotated factors scores of the three factors that emerged with eigenvalues over one, shown in Table 5.

[TABLE 5 HERE]

Factor one loads heavily on helpfulness, including willingness to meet, and offers of face-to-face discussion and meeting up factors. Here councillors were willing and able to help directly. Factor two loads on the less helpful and dismissive factors, e.g. councillors stating it was not their remit or responsibility and the letter writer needed to go elsewhere, without positively signposting the lobbyist on to colleagues, referring them on, or even in many cases offering a relevant name to the writer. Factor three was generally helpful but in a more indirect way, where the councillor was willing to take up the issue but did not offer to help directly or meet up. In most cases this was because the issue would be better dealt with by someone else. But in contrast to Factor two, in these cases the decision maker pro-actively referred the lobbyist on to named relevant fellow councillors or public officials, usually with a covering note asking colleagues to respond to the group on their behalf. These factors, especially the first three, show a structure of the responses reflecting different kinds of behaviour on the part of elected politicians.

We then present regression results based on regressing the treatment and party variables on these scores. Table 6 contains the results. In all cases the treatment variable is negative suggesting the supposedly weaker letter had more of an effect, but that in all three regressions the coefficient is not statistically significant. The results also show that outside parties do not make an impact on the saved factor scores.

[TABLE 6 HERE]

Discussion and Conclusion

The counter-intuitive result that the weaker treatment may have generated the highest number of responses as well as a better quality of response. Even where the results are not statistically significant, we find a robust non-effect across a range of measures. At the very least, they do not show a positive effect of the stronger treatment, which is the standard hypothesis of the lobbying literature. In this case, the informational advantage of a certain kind of lobbying effort are not apparent, and it maybe the case that the higher quality of information may impede a response in many ways. We do not directly observe the responses from elected officials, but there are several other avenues possible explanations.

It may be the case that demands on local politicians have substantially increased in the last decade, with a rise in the number of internal organisational and party political demands, leaving less time to represent the people who voted them in. In this context, the weak treatment may have been easier to process as it made fewer cognitive demands on elected representatives.

Another explanation is that offers of private and public information are off-putting to local decision makers as they downgrade the expert status of the local politician. At the core of the informational lobbying argument is a presumption that the lobby target will welcome (alleged) external expertise or information as an aid to policy-making. Our results seem to suggest the opposite, at least in the case of UK local politicians. While the literature suggests that credibility of the lobbyist is a critical factor in effectiveness (Druckman, 2001; Gerber and Lupia, 1992), in our experiment more systemic and fundamental questions over legitimacy and credibility

were perhaps not overcome by the lobby. Ongoing battles over legitimacy between elected representatives as beleaguered staff carriers of representative democracy, and the upstart interest groups of participatory power, may overshadow decision-makers' commitment have working with lobby groups to enhance democratic decision-making processes.

As Hall and Deardorff rightly point out, more complete information for policy makers is not as valuable as the ability to problem solve and “the capacity to use information. Cheap talk will not do” (Hall and Deardorff, 2006: p. 72). This may be the crux for our null result. Elected representatives may be responding to the issue rather than the quality of the arguments put to them, and may even be put off responding to constituents that have a lot of information about the issue. Rather than using the selective information as the lobbying literature predicts, it maybe the case that well argued cases do not yield this benefit, either being no different to simply argued case, or where the information threaten the standing of the representative or implies high costs in dealing with the interest groups.

Further research may vary the information content of lobbying letters with larger sample sizes using mediation analysis. Simulation of lobbying with groups of legislators may be able to understand the reasons for their responses as well allowing the opportunity for direct observation of the receipt of letters. The experiment also needs replicating in other jurisdictions and levels of government to show external validity. We would argue that UK local politicians are different to other forms of political representative. These local representatives have weak status and low power. It is possibly that, under these conditions, informational lobbying is not as effective as it may be at the state or national level.

By finding out that a commonly held assumption in the literature does not apply in our case, that informational lobbying does not work, we are laying the foundations for further studies of lobby effectiveness. The experiment is the first step toward a more experimental approach to the study of lobbying, which has been dominated by observation and survey based studies that are not able to adjudicate on the techniques lobbyists can use to study effectiveness.

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Tables and figures

Table 1: Summary of size and age of the citizen interest groups

Area /group	Age of group in years	No. of committee members/ core group	No. of other members	No. of users	Paid staff (FTE)	Support workers
Blackburn	>5	n/a	n/a	80/wk	1.2	n/a
Bolton	5	10	n/a	n/a	0	1
Bristol	<1	8	n/a	n/a	0	1
Cambridge	2	7	n/a	n/a	0	1
Cheshire East	>30	10	n/a	<1,000/year	5	n/a
St. Helens	15	18	75	n/a	1	n/a
Stockton	9	15	825	n/a	0	n/a
Sunderland	6	15	17 (organisations)	n/a	2	n/a

Table 2: Responses to letters by local authority

Reply	Blackburn	Bolton	Bristol	Cambridge	Cheshire East	St Helens	Stockton	Sunderland	Total
No	87.5	83.3	69.4	70.0	82.5	95.8	71.4	89.5	81.5
Yes	12.5	16.7	30.6	30.0	17.5	4.2	28.6	10.5	18.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	32	30	36	20	40	24	28	38	248

Table 3: responses to letters by treatment

Reply	Weak letter T1	Strong letter T2	Total
No	78.2	84.7	81.5
Yes	21.8	15.3	18.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	124	124	248

Table 4: probit regression of intervention on reply to letter

VARIABLES	Reply
Intervention	-0.263 (0.166)
Liberal Democrat Party/ minor parties	0.334*** (0.080)
Constant	-0.872*** (0.154)
Log pseudolikelihood	-116.72
Observations	248

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Table 5: rotated factor scores on responses to lobbying

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Uniqueness
Quality of help	0.7900	-0.1120	0.2484	0.3016
Denied responsibility	0.0635	0.9114	0.0862	0.1579
Suggested other contacts (but no direct referral)	0.1302	0.8773	-0.0093	0.2133
Referred to official or committee	0.4661	-0.0390	0.5281	0.5024
Referred to fellow elected representative	0.3649	0.2298	0.4300	0.6292
Showed willingness to take up the issue	0.8389	-0.1487	-0.0994	0.2643
Willingness to meet/meet	0.8375	-0.1507	-0.1106	0.2636
Offered further discussion	0.8122	-0.0692	-0.3317	0.2255
Commented on the issue	0.7212	0.0363	0.4494	0.4035
Information about council or political party policy	0.4762	0.3154	-0.4794	0.4035
Offered personal support	0.6274	-0.0296	0.4494	0.4035

Table 6: Linear regression of intervention on saved factor scores

VARIABLES	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Intervention	-0.0840	-0.00957	-0.0347
	(0.120)	(0.109)	(0.142)
Liberal Democrats	0.113	-0.0605	0.0902
	(0.0849)	(0.147)	(0.187)
Constant	0.0110	0.0214	-0.00738
	(0.134)	(0.126)	(0.130)
Observations	248	248	248

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 1: Summary of the literature on effective lobbying

Factor in effective lobbying	Label
Lobby comes from a credible source	Credible
Frames the issue in a way that is consistent with lobbyists' values and goals	Framing
Offers the policy maker private or 'costly' information that would otherwise be difficult for the policy maker to gather	Private information
Summarises and processes a mass of publicly available information in a way clarifies the implications for the policy maker	Public information
Contains emotive or symbolic appeals to commonly held values	Values
Outlines how current policy approaches lead to negative outcomes	Bad policy
Outlines how an alternative approach would promote shared policy goals	Alternative policy
Has a clear set of recommendations or 'ask'	Ask

Figure 2: Summary of lobbying issues

Area /group	Type of group	Subject of the lobby
Blackburn	Church-based asylum seeker and refugee project	Lack of adequate support and resettlement for asylum seekers and refugees.
Bolton	Self-run young women's group	Harassment and attacks on young women. Lack of personal safety of young women.
Bristol	Self-run youth group	Gang-related crime and anti-social behaviour by young people in local parks.
Cambridge	Self-run youth group	Tackling the misuse of alcohol and substance abuse by young people.
Cheshire East	Participatory arts organisation	Health and social benefits of dance. Dance as tool for work with socially excluded groups.
St. Helens	Self-help and advocacy group for people with physical and mental disabilities	Mobility and access problems for people with disabilities.
Stockton	Self-help, support and advocacy group for carers of people with mental health issues	Lack of support for carers of people with mental health problems.
Sunderland	Network/umbrella body for BME community organisations	Lack of community development support for marginalised black and minority ethnic community organisations.

Figure 3: structure of Treatment 1 in relation to the literature

Treatment 1 - Letter structure	Link to literature by label	Nature of treatment
Brief description of group/organisation. Why the group is writing.	Credible Ask	No evidence of the legitimacy and credibility of the group. A weak ask.
Brief overview of strategic priorities.	Public information	No detail of relevance to lobby.
Description of groups' work.	Credible	Weak version of why group is credible, not including facts or evidence.
Wider impacts for society and/or the local area of the issue, and/or people's attitudes in the UK.	Bad policy	Problems asserted but not referenced or evidenced. Not locally relevant.
Statements about the value of voluntary and community groups' roles in relation to the issue, not referenced.	Framing	Framing is done without specific reference to the group.
Generic ask i.e. outcome measure.	n/a - measurement	
<p>Summary</p> <p>Contains weak, un-evidenced and not locally relevant versions of five of the eight factors in effective lobbying. Does not contain three of the eight factors (private information, values, alternative policy). One reference to a weak and unclear ask.</p>		

Figure 4: structure of Treatment 2 in relation to the literature

Treatment 2 - Letter structure	Link to literature by label	Nature of treatment
Why the group is writing, including goals that will benefit the local authority and area.	Alternative policy Request	Clear formulation of how lobby request would deliver outcomes. A clear request.
Acknowledgement of work the local authority has already done, but brief overview of need for further work. Need for all parties to play a role.	Bad policy Framing Public information	Gaps in policy outlined using locally relevant evidence. Contribution of all stakeholders outlined.
Statement that group has ideas or proposals and summary of possible policy outcomes of proposals. Overall benefits to communities.	Alternative policy Request	Clear formulation of how lobby request would deliver outcomes. A clear request.
Acknowledgement of any existing activity by politicians and statements about need to work together.	Request	A clear request
What role the group wants to play in future, how they can contribute, or what skills they can offer.	Private information Framing	Private information explicitly stated. Framing done in relation to the lobby group.
Boxed example of groups' work highlighting their capacity, membership or skills and track record, and issues for members.	Private information Credible Values	Evidence to support claims of group's credulity and ability to contribute. Case study example to make an emotional appeal to values.
Summary of strategic and policy links in local area. Summary of societal impacts and research showing benefits of work, including references.	Public information Values	Detailed public information summarised using locally relevant evidence. Appeal to values made using referenced evidence.
Description of organisation highlighting its strengths, membership numbers etc.	Credible	Strong statement using evidence of why the group is credible.
Generic ask i.e. outcome measure.	n/a - measurement	

Notes

- ⁱ. Forthcoming (all page numbers for Baumgartner et al 2009 are for draft version).
- ⁱⁱ. Using the University of Aberdeen Health Services Research Unit sample size calculator (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/hsru/uploads/files/calculationmanual.pdf>), we made some estimates of the increase in sample size needed when the intra-correlation coefficient (ICC) is assumed to be .01. The formula and the worked examples on the Aberdeen site show how modest increases in the ICC would lead massive increases in sample size needed.
- ⁱⁱⁱ. Intercoder reliability averaged 92.2 per cent agreement for the thirteen items. Krippendorff's alpha ranged from -.04 to .156.