

Links between MPs and interest groups: a cross-country analysis

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1. Introduction

In West European countries, a strong linkage between trade unions and social democratic parties was established at the late 19th century (Allern & Bale, 2012). Corresponding positions on a societal cleavage and addressing the same group in society (i.e. the working class) serve as possible explanatory factors. Consequently, the traditional cleavages described by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) not only divide society and determine the political party system, but also shape the activity of interest groups when defending the concerns of a particular group in society and establish links between these interest groups and particular political parties (Rasmussen & Lindeboom, 2013). Two key developments place these fixed connections between specific interest groups and specific political parties in the spotlight: the increasing importance of targeting political actors in the overall strategy of interest groups to influence public policy on the one hand, and the (alleged) fading away of the traditional cleavages to make way for a new value-based one on the other hand (Binderkrantz, 2003; Dalton et al., 1994).

In the first part of this paper we discuss the strategies, which interest groups adopt in their attempts to influence public policy. To achieve changes in public policy outcomes, interest groups outline both direct and indirect strategies. Interest groups are, however, increasingly investing in direct contacts with parliamentary actors, such as members of parliament (MPs) (Binderkrantz, 2003). Furthermore, it is stated that interest groups are selective with regard to the contacts they engage in (Prethuis, 1971). In the light of the recent debate on the fading away of traditional cleavages and the arising of a new value-based cleavage, the main ambition of this paper is to determine to what extent the political affiliation of an MP plays a role in establishing these contacts. With blurring traditional cleavages, the strong linkages between social groups and political parties, as well as the connections between interest groups and parties are increasingly put into question. In the second part of this paper we address this possible decline of the old and the rise of a new cleavage.

In the third part of this paper, we analyze two kinds of interest groups: trade unions and organisations for the elderly. Trade unions relate to a group based on an old cleavage (i.e. the working class); elderly organisations, in contrast, are perceived to map onto the new value-based cleavage. Based on the traditional cleavage theory, the expectation is that MPs from socialist parties have most frequently contacts with trade unions. For the elderly, on the contrary, expectations are less straightforward as this is a group with no privileged party since there are no (or only minor) parties exclusively focusing on the elderly. Based on the idea that in general leftist parties (socialists and greens) tend to support egalitarian ideologies more than rightist parties and tend therefore to be more open to marginalized groups in society, we expect that MPs from parties of the left tend to

have more contacts with elderly organisations (Hyde, 1995; Matland & Studlar, 1996; Caramani et al., forthcoming). Besides the political affiliation of an MP, also characteristics of individual MPs (belonging to an opposition or government party, holding a formal position in parliament, belonging to the working class or the group of people above 60, sex and age), and of the political system as a whole (the electoral system and regional parliaments) are investigated as possible influencing factors on the contacts interest groups engage in. Our hypotheses are investigated based on survey data of the Partirep MP Survey.¹ The findings suggest that for trade unions party affiliation remains very important in the contacts with MPs, whereas for organisations of the elderly the picture is more mixed.

2. Interest groups and their contacts with MPs

In this section, we define interest groups and discuss into detail one of their strategies, i.e. having contact with parliamentarians. This particular strategy will be the focus of our paper.

Interest groups and strategies of influence

Interest groups organize people that are highly attentive and concerned about specific policy issues (Berry, 1977). By definition, interest groups defend the concerns of a selected group in society. The delineation of this group can be based on socio-demographic characteristics, on ideological beliefs, on shared experiences, and so on. The desires of their constituency are translated into specific policy goals, which interest groups strive to attain by influencing public policy (Binderkrantz & Krøyer, 2012). In this way, interest groups accomplish their most important function: “[...] *to represent the policy preferences of their constituents*” (Berry, 1977: 288). As one of the main ambitions of interest groups is to influence public policy, it is not surprising that a substantial amount of research is dedicated to interest groups and their ability to influence public policy (Allern & Bale, 2012; McSpadden & Culhane, 1999; Denzau & Munger, 1986). With the specific interests of their constituents in mind, interest groups try to shape public policy outcomes in particular policy areas. They are therefore important political actors who can play a significant role in the formation of public policy and consequently in the democratic policy making process (Allen, 2005; Burstein & Linton, 2002; Smith, 1995; Potters & Sloof, 1995). Scholars allege that the activities of interest groups form, next to political institutions and political parties, an important part of the political environment (Norton, 1999; Berry, 1977). Hence, understanding their political behavior is crucial for

¹ PARTIREP MP Survey, funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy BELSPO: www.partirep.eu.

understanding public policy outcomes and consequently public policy change (Beyers et al., 2008; Berry, 1977).

In their attempts to shape public policy outcomes, interest groups adopt a wide range of tactics and strategies (Binderkrantz, 2008; Berry, 1977). The beliefs of interest groups on how to best influence governmental decision-makers, are reflected in their choice for specific strategies. Strategies are the general approaches applied by groups to fulfill specific policy goals. The various activities these strategies consist of, are called tactics (Berry, 1977). Although interest groups are capable of making strategic decisions regarding the most beneficial strategy, they are guided, influenced and even constrained in their choice by several internal and external factors related to the interest group itself, such as membership characteristics, financial resources, size, characteristics of policy goals and institutional structures (Binderkrantz & Krøyer, 2012; Maloney et al., 1994; Smith, 1995; Meier & Lohuizen, 1978).

In the literature a main distinction is made between direct and indirect strategies of influence (Binderkrantz, 2004). When favoring direct strategies, interest groups aim to establish linkages with political institutions and thus approach public decision-makers directly. This can include targeting public officers as well as politicians and political parties. Interest groups that deploy indirect strategies, try to influence policy in less direct ways by capturing the attention of the media or by mobilizing members or citizens (Binderkrantz, 2008). In the literature, interest groups that try to influence policy outcomes through contacts with public officers, politicians or political parties are also labeled as 'insider' interest groups. 'Insider' interest groups experience a privileged position in the policy making process characterized by close consultation with political and administrative actors, whereas 'outsider' interest groups appeal to mass media and mobilization for gaining public attention (Maloney et al., 1994; Page, 1999). The insider/outsider dichotomy does however not distinguish between the status ascribed to groups by decision makers and the deliberate choice of strategy made by these groups (Maloney et al., 1994). In other words, why interest groups are labeled as 'insider' or 'outsider' groups cannot be simply concluded: it is unclear if it is due to the status ascribed by governmental actors or because of their own strategic choices. Furthermore, previous research on the strategies used by interest groups reveals the preference of interest groups to combine different strategies (Binderkrantz, 2004). Interest groups hence switch between insider and outsider roles.

Interest groups and MPs

This paper deals with one particular direct strategy of influence: the contacts sought by interest groups with parliamentary actors. This parliamentary strategy comprises the establishment of regular contacts with parliamentary committees, party spokespersons, party organisations and other

members of parliament (Binderkrantz, 2004). We will focus upon the contacts between interest groups and individual members of parliament (MPs).

In pursuing the parliamentary strategy to achieve changes in public policy, parliaments can be used by interest groups both as targets and as channels (Norton, 1999). When interest groups use parliaments as targets, they have confidence in parliaments as “[...] *institutions who can bring about a desired change*” (Packenham cited in Norton, 1999). From this point of view, interest groups seek contact with MPs because they believe in the capability of these political actors to affect public policy outcomes through law-making (Della Salla, 1999). As a result, interest groups will devote more attention to the establishment of regular contacts with MPs if parliaments play a more central role vis-à-vis the administration in regard to policy making (Christiansen & Rommetvedt, 1999). It is expected that more economic and professional resources for MPs and a strong position of parliament towards government will translate in an increase of the frequency and importance of contacts between interest groups and MPs (Binderkrantz, 2003). If this is the case, interest groups will address their close contacts with MPs to block a particular governmental measure, to introduce an amendment or to introduce or support legislation in favor of the interests they represent (Norton, 1999; Denzau & Munger, 1986). When on the other hand interest groups perceive bureaucrats and ministers more powerful than MPs in law-making, interest groups will spend more resources on establishing contacts with bureaucratic actors and consequently will only target parliaments secondary to the administration (Saalfeld, 1999).

Next to being used as targets, parliaments are also approached as channels by interest groups to achieve changes in public policy (Norton, 1999). MPs can draw the attention of the government and the mass media towards specific issues by discussing proposals or bills. MPs are therefore capable of putting issues on to the political agenda (Della Salla, 1999). Next to law-making and agenda setting, MPs are also important actors in controlling the actions of governments and bureaucrats. They are entitled to question ministers and to demand information regarding bureaucratic decision making, in order to influence how this decision making takes place (Binderkrantz, 2003). Consequently, interest groups recognize the value of contacting MPs to get issues on the political agenda and to achieve governmental and wide public attention for specific issues (Norton, 1999).

Ultimately, whether parliaments are used as a target or as a channel by interest groups, varies from parliament to parliament and over time (Norton, 1999). However, research has pointed out that the contacts with MPs take, next to contacts with bureaucrats, an increasingly important place in the overall strategies interest groups pursue to influence public policy (Binderkrantz, 2003; Christiansen & Rommetvedt, 1999; Norton, 1999). Norton (1999) argues that in Western Europe interest groups do seek contact with parliaments as a target (though secondary to government) and even more frequently as a channel. Research in the Scandinavian countries has pointed out that parliamentary

actors have more intensive contacts with interest groups than two decades ago (Christiansen & Rommetvedt, 1999). Here, the parliamentary strategy of influence has clearly gained importance (Binderkrantz, 2003). Also the work of Presthus (1971) revealed that interest groups systematically lobbied Canadian MPs in their attempt to influence public policy.

When seeking contact with MPs as a part of their strategy of influence, interest groups are selective (Presthus, 1971). What then determines the contacts between interest groups and MPs? In this paper it is our central focus to answer the question which factors influence the contacts between interest groups and MPs. Generally, factors at three levels influence these contacts: the political system, the group level (i.e. characteristics of interest groups) and the individual level (i.e. characteristics of individual MPs) (e.g. Rasmussen & Lindeboom, 2013; Binderkrantz, 2003; Christiansen & Rommetvedt, 1999 for the political system; Ramussen & Lindeboom, 2012; Binderkrantz & Krøyer, 2012; Saalfeld, 1999 for the group level; Beyers, 2008; Presthus, 1971 for the individual level).

As already mentioned above, financial resources and –interlinked- the size (and other characteristics) of the interest group are influencing factors on the **group level** guiding interest groups in their strategic choice whether or not to engage in contacts with MPs. The influence of group characteristics upon the relation between interest groups and MPs is excluded from further analysis in this paper. Our research focuses on factors regarding the political system and, mainly, the individual level.

Factors related to the **political system** shape the interactions between interest groups and MPs. One particular factor stands out as decisive for the contacts interest groups engage in: the strength of parliament vis-à-vis the government. If parliament plays a more powerful and autonomous role in the decision making process and interest groups perceive MPs as political actors who have the capacity to affect public policy outcomes, then interest groups will invest in their contacts with MPs (Christiansen & Rommetvedt, 1999; Della Salla, 1999).

Our major focus however, lies with the possible influencing factors on the **individual level**. Characteristics of individual MPs determine whether interest groups establish contacts with them and how intense these contacts are. An essential characteristic in this respect is the political affiliation of an MP. Both parties and interest groups position themselves on a societal cleavage, i.e. a socio-demographic group in society with shared opinions and beliefs. If a party and an interest group are situated on corresponding political cleavages, this interest group will have strong links with MPs from that specific political party (Beyers, 2008). For example social democratic parties in Western Europe have always had strong relations with trade unions (Christiansen & Rommetvedt, 2012; Allern & Bale, 2012; Beyers, 2008). Therefore it is expected that MPs from social democratic parties will

have more frequently contacts with trade unions than MPs from other parties. As a result, cleavages not only divide society and determine the political party system, but also shape the activity of interest groups since interest groups will take into consideration the ideological labels attached to political parties when outlining their strategy of influence (Rasmussen & Lindeboom, 2013; Beyers, 2008). Due to a decline in relevance of the traditional cleavages (see below), however, it seems likely that these formal ties have weakened over time.

Besides the political affiliation, other characteristics of individual MPs might as well influence the contacts between interest groups and MPs. Based upon the 'politics of presence' theory of Anne Philips (1995), it can be expected that MPs belonging to a particular demographic group have more insight in the interests of that group and will give more priority to these interests than other MPs. Consequently, (s)he will seek more contact or will be more contacted by organisations aiming to defend the concerns of that demographic group. In other words, the identity of individual MPs might be an influencing factor with regard to the relation between interest groups and MPs. Tailored to our study here: we expect that older MPs will have more contacts with elderly organisations and that working class MPs will more frequently interact with trade unions.

3. Old and new cleavages

Whether the party affiliation of MPs plays a role in the contacts interest groups engage in, is the main focus of this paper. As indicated above, cleavages play an important role in this perspective: MPs of parties that have positioned themselves on the same side of a political cleavage as an interest group tend to have more intense contacts with that interest group. Therefore, we introduce now the concept of cleavages and discuss the evolutions that cleavages have undergone the last few decades.

The decline of the old cleavages

Cleavage politics implies a strong and stable fusion of party and group identity (Bartolini, 2005; Knutsen & Scarbrough, 1995). A political landscape defined by cleavages features a neat mapping onto each other of identities, ideologies and political actions. It is defined by a fixed connection between social structure – i.e. social groups and their interests- on the one hand, and political agency – i.e. political parties giving coherence and political expression to the beliefs, values and interests of those social groups- on the other hand. Also interest groups can act as a political agent of societal groups by defending the interests of a particular group, e.g. the elderly or the working class.

When investigating the influence of political affiliation on MP-interest groups relations, we need to take into consideration the 'traditional' cleavages described in the seminal work by Seymour Martin

Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967): church versus state; working class versus bourgeoisie, center versus periphery, and urban versus rural. These cleavages marked party politics of a large part of the 20th century. In such party systems, political parties represent specific groups in society. The same is true for interest groups representing interests of farmers, workers, etc. When the social group represented by a party corresponds with the group defended by an interest group, strong connections between parties and interest groups might be present. Often, they are reflected in the extensive contacts between MPs of that party and the interest group at stake. When for instance socialist parties' main goal is to represent the working class, trade union officials will engage more in contacts with MPs from socialist parties. In other words, interest groups will take into consideration the ideological labels attached to political parties, when building up a network with MPs. The traditional cleavages that shape party politics, will consequently also impact the activities of interest groups and thus the contacts interest groups invest in.

For some authors, however, this type of group based politics seems to have come to an end (Dalton et al., 1984; Franklin et al., 1992). Multiple factors such as tertialization, mediatization, affluence, cognitive mobilization, individualization and secularization, encouraged the process of de-structuring of the traditional cleavages, or the de-alignment of traditional links between social groups and parties (Enyedi, 2008). The result of this process is a decline of structural and ideological voting in Western and Central Europe (van der Brug, 2010). Electoral behaviour became volatile and 'floating' on the waves of short term issue-position, popularity of party leaders and the retrospective evaluation of government performance (Enyedi, 2008; Enyedi & Deegan-Krause, 2010). This lead, for instance, to the (perceived) death of class voting (Clark & Lipset, 1991). At the same time, political parties no longer appeal to these traditional social groups like blue collar workers and turn to a catch-all strategy aimed at the population at large (Kirchheimer, 1966; Katz & Mair, 1995; Przeworski & Sprague, 1988). Parties became free from social structural anchors (Enyedi, 2008).

With the fading away of the traditional cleavages and thus a loosening of the fixed link between parties and social groups, also the strong linkages between interest groups and parties are increasingly questioned. It is unclear whether trade unions will still invest in close contacts with MPs from socialist parties when there is an increasingly blurred relationship between their main constituents (i.e. the working class) and socialist parties.

It is clear that traditional cleavages have lost at least some relevance and that voting behavior has become more individualistic and flexible, but this does not denote that cleavages have become completely irrelevant. The picture of de-structuring and de-alignment has to be nuanced. Enyedi (2008) and Kriesi (2010) draw attention to significant counter-tendencies that point to the

continuous relevance of group based politics. Firstly, although blue collar workers increasingly vote for radical right populist parties and leftist parties wins votes from the middle class, class patterns in voting behavior not lost all relevance. It has been shown that class divisions still matter for policy positions of voters on socio-economic issues (role of trade unions, organisation of social security, etc.). These issues are however, increasingly overtrumped as vote determinants by socio-cultural or left-libertarian topics (attitudes towards ethnic minorities, etc.). On these topics, workers often take a more authoritarian stance, which drives them to (extreme) right parties (Van der Waal et al., 2007). This attractiveness of rightist parties does however not mean that their class position no longer determines their points of view on socio-economic topics.

Secondly, the de-structuration or de-alignment theses suffer from conceptualisation problems and heavily depend on the use of class categories that no longer adequately characterize contemporary social structures. When social status is captured by employer relations, working environment, task structure, the autonomy of the job, life styles, consumption patterns, or the ability to change residence, some studies show that it still informs voting behaviour (Evans, 1999; Oesch, 2008).

Thirdly, other social structures like religion, region and ethnicity still define political behaviour in large parts of Europe (Enyedi, 2008).

It remains the question to what extent these developments have affected the relationship between MPs and interest groups.

The rise of a new value based cleavage?

Another important debate concerns not so much the irrelevance of the old cleavages, but the relevance of new cleavages based on value orientations. This value cleavage has been given different names: 'authoritarian/libertarian' (Flanagan, 1987; Kitschelt, 1994; Dolezal, 2010); 'libertarian-universalistic/ traditionalist-communitarian' (Bornschieer, 2010); materialist/post-materialist (Inglehart, 1977); self-expression/survival (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

Although this division based on values does not neatly fit on social categories or identities, it has some structural roots in terms of social-structural categories of class, occupation, education, generation, and nation (Kriesi, 2010; Stubager, 2009). These groups do not feature the same type of closure, social control and sanctioning as was the case with the traditional cleavages. Consequently, the linkages between parties and groups are, in comparison with the traditional cleavages, more optional. The elderly are for instance not represented by one single political party. Instead, multiple parties advocate the interests of elder people. Present-day media techniques, however, feed into cleavage politics in another important way: parties can tailor their strategies to specific groups, of whom they have more detailed information than ever before (Enyedi, 2008: 297). This allows for cleavage-centred strategies, at the same time as catch-all-strategies to cater the median voter as well

as specific groups. These specific groups include amongst others women, ethnic minorities and the elderly. We will focus here further on the elderly, a social group whose number and political relevance is increasing.

4. Research questions and methodology

The central question of this paper is to what extent the party affiliation of an MP explains the contacts (s)he has with interest groups. We focus on two kinds of interest groups: trade unions and organisations for the elderly. The former relates to a group based on an old cleavage (i.e. working class) and has historically been linked to the social-democratic party whose main goals coincided with that of the trade unions, i.e. defending the interests of the working class. It remains to be seen whether this still holds after the (alleged) decline of the traditional class cleavage.

For the elderly, on the contrary, expectations are less straightforward as this is a group with no privileged party since there are no (or only minor) parties exclusively focussing on the elderly. We know, however, that in general leftist parties (Socialists and Greens) tend to support egalitarian ideologies more than rightist parties and tend therefore to be more open to marginalized groups in society (Hyde, 1995 ; Matland and Studlar 1996 ; Caramani et al, forthcoming). Consequently, we expect that MPs from parties of the left (and thus not only social-democratic MPs) tend to have more contacts with elderly organisations.

Our analysis is based on survey data of the Partirep MP Survey, which contains data about characteristics, attitudes and behaviour of regional and federal MPs in 15 European countries (N = 2326).² These countries are Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. All MPs of the selected parliaments were contacted between March 2009 and January 2011. These countries represent a wide variety of political systems: both unitary and federal countries, both states in which regions have always had considerable competences and states in which competences were transferred only recently to the regions. For some countries (such as Belgium) all regional parliaments were included in the sample, for other (larger) countries (such as Germany, Switzerland and Italy) a selection was made. The method of contacting the respondents differed from one country to another, as the country specialists were in the best position to estimate which approach

² PARTIREP MP Survey, funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy BELSPO: www.partirep.eu.

would be most fruitful in their country. Consequently, both face-to-face interviews and online surveys were used.

The data were weighted in order to correct for (1) differences in answer patterns between parliamentary party groups, (2) differences in answer patterns between regions in the multi-level countries, and (3) the overrepresentation of Swiss cantonal parliaments.

Apart from the party affiliation (which is the main focus of the paper), characteristics of individual MPs and of the political system as a whole will be included into the analysis.

On the individual level, we include five variables related to individual MPs.

A first variable is whether an MP belongs to an opposition party or a government party. Interest groups are selective in their contacts and prefer contacts that bear fruit. Consequently, the strength of parliament is, as indicated above, a factor that could be expected to affect these contacts. However, as in most of the countries at stake here, MPs in general vote according to the party lines (Depauw & Martin, 2009), parliaments are in general equally powerless in terms of law-making (Saalfeld, 2000). A relevant distinction to be made here is not so much between countries, but between MPs from the opposition for whom it is albeit impossible to realize legislation, and MPs from government parties, who happen to succeed in passing legislative bills (if the other parties of the coalition agree) or who can channel the demands through to government officials of their party. Therefore, the variable we take along in the analysis is whether or not an MP belongs to a government party.

Secondly, as membership of a social group can, according to the politics of presence theory, lead to a greater awareness of the problems and organisations of that group (see above), we expect that MPs belonging themselves to respectively the working class or the group of people aged above 60, will have more contacts with respectively trade unions or elderly organisations.

Another variable that we include is whether an MP holds a formal position in parliament (such as speaker of the House or leader of a parliamentary party). If this is the case, we expect that this MP will have a rather general focus and a more coordinative role, which leaves less room for keeping in touch with groups aimed at specific interests.

Finally, we also introduce two socio-demographic variables, namely sex and age.

As for the political system, we select two variables to be included in the model.

A first variable in this respect is the electoral system. We make a distinction between PR systems and majority systems. In general, a PR system is thought to be more beneficial for group representation, and hence for the contacts MPs maintain with organisations defending the concerns of social groups. The size of the electoral district is a relevant element in this respect: whereas in large districts in PR

systems, a division of labour between MPs can take place allowing some MPs to focus on the interests of particular groups, this is more difficult in the smaller districts of a majority system in which an MP is supposed to present the concerns of all the constituents of his district (Matland, 2005).

Secondly, we bring regional parliament as a variable into the analysis. We expect that regional parliaments provide more fruitful arenas for the representation of group interests (and interests of new groups in particular) than national parliaments (Caramani et al, forthcoming). They are newer institutions, and hence less path-dependent, which creates opportunities for new groups (Mackay, 2006), they are situated closer to the (organized) citizens (Ortbals, 2008) and the antagonisms between regions present at the federal level are less sharp creating more room for other (new) cleavages (Rebouché & Fearon, 2005).

5. Empirical analysis

We will now turn to the empirical analysis, in which we first give a description of the dependent variable and afterwards, we will discuss the effects of the variables mentioned above on this dependent variable.

Descriptive analysis

The dependent variable in our analysis is measured by a question about the contacts MPs have with relevant organisations, i.e. elderly organisations and trade unions. MPs are asked how often in the last year they had contact with these organisations defending the interests of particular social groups. They were offered five options: at least once a week, at least once a month, at least every three months, at least once a year and (almost) no contact. In Table 1, we give a general picture of the percentage of MPs that have contacts with trade unions and organizations for the elderly.

Table 1: Frequency of contact with organisations for the elderly and with trade unions (percentages and cumulative percentages) (N= 1871)

	Organisations for the elderly		Trade Unions	
	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
at least once a week	7,2	7,2	11,2	11,2

at least once a month	35,9	43,1	32,1	43,3
at least every three months	33,1	76,2	32,2	75,5
at least once a year	16,7	92,9	16,1	91,5
(almost) no contact	7,1	100	8,5	100
Total	100		100	

From Table 1 it appears that contacts between MPs and elderly organisations exhibit a comparable picture to that of contacts between MPs and trade unions. About 43 % of the MPs in the European countries which participated in this survey indicate that they have at least once a month (or more often) contact with that kind of organisations. Also on the other side of the spectrum (having less frequent contacts), the percentages are more or less the same: about 16 % of the MPs have only once a year contact with both trade unions and elderly organisations, and 7-8 % does not have any contact with these organisations.

At first glance, there are no large differences between these two groups. It might be that the same MPs have contacts both with trade unions and elderly organisations. In the next sub-section, we will investigate which variables explain the contacts that MPs have with trade unions and elderly organisations, and whether they differ between these two kinds of organisations.

Explanatory analysis

We first recode the dependent variables in two dummy variables indicating whether or not an MP has monthly (or more frequently) contacts with trade unions (first variable) and elderly organisations (second variable). This allows us to run a binomial logistic regression.

Table 2: Binary logistic regressions, with as dependent variable respectively 'at least once a month contact with trade unions' and 'at least once a month contact with elderly organisations' (N= 1871)

	Model trade unions		Model elderly organisations	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Intercept	-41,410		33,407	
Individual variables				
Party affiliation (soc-dem = ref)	***		***	
Christian-democratic party	-,706***	,493	,286**	1,331

Conservative party	-,580***	,560	-,145	,865
Extreme right party	-2,006***	,135	,060	1,062
Green party	-,710***	,491	-1,090***	,336
Liberal-democratic party	-1,419***	,242	-,801***	,449
Regionalist party	-,588*	,555	-1,037***	,355
Other party	-,142	,868	-,469	,626
Government (vs opposition)	-,361***	,697	,031	1,032
Membership of social group ³	,002	1,002	-,264	,768
Parliamentary function ⁴	,174	1,190	-,012	,988
Age (year of birth)	,021***	1,021	-,017**	,983
Sex	,143	1,154	-,017	,983
Political system variables				
PR system	,022	1,022	-,688***	,503
Regional parliament	,121	1,128	,420***	1,522
Nagelkerke's R²	0,103		0,085	

* p < 0.1 ; ** p < 0.05 ; p < 0.01

We will first discuss the effect of party affiliation on the contacts MPs have with trade unions. From Table 2, it appears that the old cleavage structures are very persistent in determining these contacts. Social-democratic MPs are more likely than MPs from all other parties to have monthly contacts with trade unions. The chance to have a monthly contact with trade union representatives is for Christian-democratic MPs only 0,493 of that chance for social-democratic MPs. This chance is for Conservative MPs 0,560 of the chance of social-democratic MPs ; for extreme right parties, this chance is 0,135 of the chance social-democratic MPs have ; and so on. The only exception is the diverse group of 'other parties' (which include amongst others communist parties) whose MPs have no significant lower chance to have monthly contacts with trade unions (compared to social-democratic MPs). All this proves that there still exists a strong link between social-democratic MPs and trade unions. Despite the waning of traditional class cleavages, this link seems to be still present and strong today.

³ Respectively MPs whose last profession before becoming MP was a working class occupation and MPs who are above 60 years old.

⁴ Either speaker of the House or leader of a parliamentary party

As for the contacts with elderly organisations, we expected that MPs from leftist parties would be more likely to have contacts with such a subordinated social group than MPs from rightist parties. Table 2 exhibits significant differences between parties, but they do not really confirm our expectations. Social-democratic parties are more likely to have frequent contacts with elderly organisations than MPs from liberal-democratic and regionalist parties, but also compared to MPs from another leftist party, i.e. the green party. Moreover, there is no significant difference in the chance to have contacts with elderly organisations between social-democratic MPs and MPs from conservative parties and even MPs from extreme right parties. On top of that, Christian-democratic MPs are more likely than social-democratic MPs that have monthly contacts with elderly organisations. The odds that Christian-democratic MPs have regular contacts with elderly organisations is 33,1 % higher than these odds for social-democratic MPs.

In sum, nor social-democratic MPs nor MPs from leftist parties are more likely to have monthly contacts with elderly organisations.

Let us now turn to the other variables included in the models.

Parliamentary function nor sex does have an effect on the contacts that MPs maintain with trade unions and elderly organisations. The same is true for membership of the social group at stake: workers nor people above 60 years old are more inclined to have contacts with respectively trade unions or elderly organisations. Probably, they are convinced that their own experiences are sufficient as source for defending the interests of their group, making frequent contacts with organisations of that social group less relevant for them as source of information.

Age does have a significant effect both for trade unions and elderly organisations, but in opposite directions. The younger an MP is, the higher the chance that (s)he will have monthly contacts with trade unions ; whereas the older an MP is, the higher the chance of having regular contacts with elderly organisations. It is, however, not the case (as indicated above) that MPs older than 60 years have significant more contacts than their younger counterparts.

For the variables related to the political system, the picture is mixed. For trade unions, there is no significant effect of the electoral system nor of the policy level (regional-federal). But for elderly organisations, both variables do show a significant effect. For the regional parliament, this effect runs in the expected direction: the chance that regional MPs will have regular contacts with elderly organisations is higher than the chance of MPs active at the national level. The fact that this variable is not significant for trade unions also corresponds with our expectations that stated that regional parliaments offer interesting opportunities for new social groups (including the elderly).

For the electoral system, however, we see that MPs elected in majoritarian systems are more likely to have frequent contacts with elderly organisations than MPs elected in systems of proportional representation (PR). This is at odds with what we initially expected. We explained earlier that in PR systems a division of labor can take place between MPs (of the same party) and that consequently, there would be more room for group representation. But apparently, this division of labor in PR systems leads to specialization and a rather considerable amount of MPs that do not have regular contacts with elderly organisations. In majoritarian systems, MPs have to take care of all inhabitants of their district, and perhaps because elderly organisations are especially active at the local level, more MPs than in PR systems have contacts with them. This latter element could also be an explanation for the lack of effect of the electoral system for contacts with trade unions, who air their grievances mostly at the national level.

Finally, there is the effect of government participation. For elderly organisations, this variable has no effect. For contacts with trade unions, there is a significant effect, but in the opposite direction as expected. MPs from opposition parties are more likely to have contacts with trade unions than MPs from government parties. Trade unions often have intense direct contacts with government ministers, which apparently renders contacts with MPs from the same parties less relevant for them. They nevertheless see merit in contacts with MPs, probably not so much as target but rather as channel for influence. Opposition MPs are interesting in order to influence the political agenda. For the same purpose, trade unions contact directly ministers (and only to a lesser extent MPs from government parties).

6. Conclusions

With the aim to achieve change in public policy outcomes and thus to represent the policy preferences of particular social groups, interest groups are increasingly building up a network with MPs. Directly targeting parliamentary actors, such as MPs, becomes more and more important in the overall strategy of influence pursued by interest groups. This paper examined to what extent the political affiliation of individual MPs determines the contacts interest groups engage in. Two interest groups were subject of our research: trade unions and organisations for the elderly. This selection embeds our research in the recent debate on the fading away of traditional cleavages and the arising of a new value-based cleavage.

The present analysis illustrates that, for trade unions, the traditional cleavages are still persistent in determining the contacts between trade unions and MPs. Since social-democratic MPs are more

likely than MPs from all other parties to have contacts with trade unions, our research shows that party affiliation remains important to the considerations of trade unions in building up a network with MPs. Therefore, the historical link between trade unions and the social-democratic party seems to stand firm. Next to party affiliation, also MPs from opposition parties play a prominent role in the contacts trade unions invest in. MPs from opposition parties are more likely to have contacts with trade unions than MPs from government parties. Although this is surprising at first glance, it fits the broader finding that bureaucratic actors are also important targets for interest groups when it comes to establishing changes in public policy. When trade unions have already intense direct contacts with government ministers, contacts with MPs from the same parties are less relevant to them. Opposition MPs, on the contrary, remain interesting in order to influence the political agenda.

For organisation of the elderly, the role of party affiliation in the contacts with MPs gives a mixed picture. Although, as according to our expectations, social-democratic MPs are more likely to have frequent contacts with elderly organisations than MPs from liberal-democratic and regionalist parties, they also outclass MPs from another leftist party, i.e. the green party. Moreover, Christian-democratic MPs are more likely than social-democratic MPs to have monthly contacts with organisations for the elderly. Since elderly organisations often belong to the catholic pillar, this might point out the importance of the traditional denominational cleavage, characterized by conflicts between church and state. Clear is, however, the important role of the political system in determining the contacts between organisations for the elderly and MPs. Our analysis proves that regional MPs are more likely to have regular contacts with elderly organisations than MPs active at the national level. This confirms our expectation that regional parliaments offer interesting opportunities for new social groups, including the elderly.

Striking is, finally, the finding that for both trade unions and organisations for the elderly membership of the social group at stake, does not have an effect on the contacts they engage in. Belonging to the working class or being above 60 does not reflect onto the contacts MPs have with respectively trade unions or elderly organisations.

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