Chapter 1
Viral Lobbying and the Influence Production Process

When the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the state of *pandemic* on 11th March 2020, the extreme gravity and scope of the COVID-19 crisis became increasingly apparent. 'This is not just a public health crisis, it is a crisis that will touch every sector,' said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director-general, at a press briefing. 'So, every sector and every individual must be involved in the fights' (TIME 2021).

And they did, indeed, become involved: across all sectors and types of social and economic interests, groups mobilised to take part in the political debates about the consequences of COVID-19. In the face of tragically high numbers of human lives at stake, combined with vast economic, social and psychological consequences, a countless number of interest groups took part in suggesting different policy options to limit the spread of the virus, as well as to address the adverse effects of both the disease and the government interventions to fight the pandemic.

The peak association BusinessEurope, for instance, wrote in a position paper on March 16th 2020 that many businesses were 'already facing, or will face, severe financial pressures during the coming months' (BusinessEurope 2021). Moreover, the group urgently called for a set of policy measures 'to help maintain confidence across the business community, protect the business eco-system, and ensure that as many companies as possible survive the present difficulties and are able to help drive the economic recovery when restrictions related to the virus are lifted.' Other groups voiced different concerns, such as the vulnerable position of the elderly and people with pre-existing health conditions, or of children with learning difficulties and their psychological health when subject to social distancing rules.

All these efforts to express the interests of different social and economic groups during the pandemic and, ultimately, attempts to influence resulting policies, are a crucial part of *viral politics* (Chari and Rozas 2021). At the same time, an explicit focus on *interest groups* and *lobbying* is largely absent from recent studies of pandemic politics.[1] Typically, studies of pandemic politics focus on

1 Exceptions are a few studies that assess the effects of the pandemic on lobbying positions, biases in lobbying, and political access (Bonafont and Iborra 2021; Eady and Rasmussen 2021; Fuchs and Sack 2021; Junk et al. 2021).

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other aspects, such as policy evaluations of and variation in government responses (Altiparmakis et al. 2021; Engler et al. 2021; Chari and Rozas 2021), power imbalances between political institutions (Bolleyer and Salát 2021), authorities' crisis communication (Petersen et al. 2021), and public support or political trust (Devine et al. 2021; Bol et al. 2021; Jørgensen et al. 2021; Lindholt et al. 2021).

Why 'Viral Lobbing'?

In this book, we give centre-stage to another important perspective by studying *viral lobbying*, which we understand as *all attempts by non-state organisations to influence public debates or policies during the COVID-19 pandemic*. This definition includes a diverse set of organisations, which *lobby* i. e. use strategies to pursue their political interests (cf. Baroni et al. 2014), including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), labour unions, associations of professionals, think tanks, business associations and individual firms. We label these non-state organisations engaging in influence attempts, *interest groups*. We are both interested in how these groups pursued their interests with respect to *COVID-19-related policies*, as well as their general ability and practises in *lobbying during the pandemic*.

With this definition of *viral lobbying* in mind, our aim is to contribute in two main ways with our analyses. First, we hope to help analysists, scholars and practitioners interested in pandemic politics to understand the role of interest groups. Input from different social and economic groups is vital for designing policy interventions that take the needs of various actors into account. Therefore, *viral lobbying* has the potential to play a vital and conducive role in designing viral (and other) policies. Yet, it can only do so, if major imbalances in the mobilisation of different interests, as well as in the consultation practices and responsiveness of decision makers can be avoided – despite the severe challenges that the pandemic posed for both interest groups and political gatekeepers. As we show throughout the book, inequalities in the ability to contribute to policies during the pandemic occurred at several stages of what we call the *influence production process*.

Second, we aim to introduce new students of interest group politics to a more broadly applicable framework for understanding lobbying activities and influence on specific (new) policies, based on the case of the pandemic. While the pandemic has been unprecedented and historic on all accounts, it is also a useful example of a highly salient *focussing event* (Kingdon 1984; Birkland 1997), which simultaneously hits existing interest group communities and sets the *in-*

fluence production process in motion on a new set of issues. By analysing viral lobbying after the pandemic hit, we can exemplify the steps involved when interest groups seek to influence new issues, as well as the potential challenges and constraints they face. In this sense, *viral lobbying* can even be interpreted more broadly and denote the situation where a highly salient (set of) issue(s) attracts high levels of lobbying activity (i. e. 'goes viral'), meaning that a large number of interest groups jump on the bandwagon (Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Halpin 2011) and (try to) have a say on the(se) issue(s).

In the rest of this chapter, we unpack the key concepts for our account of viral lobbying that can inform both perspectives: *focussing events* and the *influence production process*. Subsequently, we introduce the structure of the book.

The Spread of COVID-19 as a Focussing Event

In his seminal work on *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, Kingdon (1984, 94 f) describes focussing events as a 'push' that can help 'get the attention of people in and around government'. A focussing event, he continues, is 'a crisis or disaster that comes along to call attention to [a] problem, a powerful symbol that catches on'. In his theory of multiple streams, focussing events can, therefore, help open a *window of opportunity for policy change*. Although Kingdon's theory constitutes a broad 'garbage can' model of the agenda setting process (Kingdon 1984, 86 f) and his focus does not lie on interest groups, we deem the 'focussing event' concept useful to study 'viral lobbying' after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Arguably, the outbreak of COVID-19 can be seen as a textbook example of a focussing event that has dominated the political agenda and initiated far-reaching policy change. As Kingdon (1984, 95 – 100) himself notes, some events, such as those that aggregate harm through a high number of human casualties, are more powerful than others when it comes to attracting attention. Other scholars have added that there is, in fact, a *diverse* set of *potential* focussing events (Birkland 1997; Birkland and DeYoung 2012), meaning only *some* events unfold actual effects on the policy agenda. Moreover, focussing events can vary strongly in their causes (Best 2010): some are non-actor promoted (NAPE), like the spread of COVID-19, whereas others are actor promoted (APE), such as the January 6th Capitol attack. In addition, there are combined cases, sometimes labelled 'triggering events' (van der Brug and Berkhout 2015), where actors such as political parties become important 'issue initiators', that turn an arising problem into a political issue (Cobb and Elder 1983).

All this means that *any* example of a focussing event will share only some features with other events. Furthermore, most *actual* focusing events that fulfil their *potential* in playing a central role in agenda and policy change are likely to seem like outliers, not least because policy (sub)systems tend to be characterised by stability most of the time (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). The spread of COVID-19 surely is an anomaly in this sense: The global spread of the virus and steep increase in serious infections throughout 2020 and 2021 overburdened hospitals and involved over 5 million deaths globally (as reported to WHO 2022). As a result, the pandemic completely dominated the public and media agenda. At the same time, it attracted the full attention of policymakers, policy professionals, experts and interest groups, all trying to come up with potential policy solutions. This means that problem-definition, the search for available policy solutions, and the urgent political will to employ these, coincided. Hence, the spread of COVID-19 marks a 'successful' focusing event that opened windows of opportunity for a number of policies to be introduced, including policies to increase resources in the health sector, to limit personal freedoms, such as the freedom of movement through (international) travel regulations, and policies to pause, but also support, many economic activities. Notably, the pandemic both called attention to *pre-existing* problems, such as understaffed hospitals, as well as causing *completely new* problems, such as turning all physical meetings and interactions into a health hazard.

Yet, despite the uniqueness when it comes to the urgency and agenda-dominance during this pandemic, we see it as a highly fruitful case to study what happens when crises and other events place an issue, or set of issues, on the agenda of interest groups *and* policymakers at the same time. Such an alignment of the agendas allows studying how interest groups attempt to exert influence on the (new) issue(s). In our case, a strong focus lies on COVID-19 related policies, including health and safety measures, sector-specific restrictions and economic rescue packages. Examples of such health and safety measures include regulations regarding the use of masks in public and private settings, social distancing, rules on testing and testing facilities, as well as those introduced in the second phase of the pandemic with vaccination and recovery passes, such as the EU COVID Green Pass. Sector specific measures are regulations, which refer to the definition of essential and non-essential services, as well as all lockdown measures put in place to pause economic activities or allow them to operate at limited capacity. Finally, economic rescue packages entail all stimuli and support mechanisms put in place to counter the negative economic effects of the virus and lockdown measures.

The initiation, design and implementation of these different regulatory and distributive policies has had important consequences for various types of inter-

est groups, which is why they had strong incentives to start or increase their lobbying activities. A (potential) focussing event can, in this sense, trigger the *supply side* of lobbying: interest groups become active and try to affect decision-making related to the event. At the same time, a (potential) focussing event can affect the *demand side* of lobbying when an event draws policymakers' attention to a set of policy problems, so that they begin consulting relevant stakeholders in order to gather input for designing policy interventions. While, in Kingdon's terms, such push and pull forces would be reflected in the 'multiple streams', which potentially overlap, we focus instead on the sequence of steps required for the supply and demand side of lobbying to meet after a focussing event. As we will argue in the following, we study this as a chain of strategic decisions and potential outcomes, which we term *the influence production process on (new) policy issues*. The steps in this process cover the attempts by interest groups to influence policies after a focussing event (i. e. the supply side of lobbying), the reactions of political gatekeepers (i. e. the demand side), as well as the potential result of these forces (i. e. lobbying influence).

The Influence Production Process

We build on existing work, which addresses different phases in organising and expressing political interests. Notably, Lowery and Brasher (2004) have used the term influence production process to cover a diverse set of phases including 1) the formation of interest groups, 2) the size and structure of interest group communities, as well as 3) the activities and 4) influence of existing groups (see also: Lowery and Gray 2004). There are some clear advantages to taking such an encompassing view of influence production, which includes the full life-cycle of interest groups and their populations: Other than seeking policy influence, interest groups need to ensure their *survival* as organisations, which means they compete for members and/or funding and need to protect their reputation (Berkhout 2013). These aims are important ends in themselves and intertwined with their attempts at securing influence (Lowery 2007). Put differently, the processes of group formation, organisational maintenance and political influence are not independent from each other, so a mere focus on political influence might underestimate other key motivations for the strategies of interest groups.

At the same time, however, not all phases in such a model of influence production are equally central when we want to understand (viral) lobbying in concrete situations. In March 2020, when the state of the pandemic was announced and governments all over the world were devising complex sets of policy re-

sponses to anticipate contingency plans, contain the virus and/or control its spread (Chari and Rozas 2021, 38 ff), a set of complex challenges hit *existing* interest groups and the *existing* group community. Very concretely, existing groups needed to decide how to position themselves on these issues, and what strategies to use to express their interests to relevant decision makers.

Mahoney (2008, 3) describes the 'advocacy process' as a sequence of strategic decisions starting with deciding whether to mobilise on a political debate and ending with potential lobbying success. Our adjusted model of the influence production process builds on her approach: We focus on the decisions and outcomes involved when existing interest groups in the group community try to influence policies on new issues on the political agenda. Although group formation and organisational community dynamics are not focal in our model, we discuss their implications in some of the other stages, given the important links between them (Berkhout 2013; Lowery 2007).

Figure 1 summarises our four-step model of these processes, where a focussing event or other trigger for agenda change kick-starts a sequence of strategic choices among interest groups and leads to potential outcomes in terms of their political access and influence on these issues. Notably, in case of the pandemic, the focussing event can be seen as an *external* shock hitting the community of interest groups (solid arrow in Figure 1.1). In other cases, however, parts of the interest group community might take part in *triggering* agenda change (dotted arrow), for instance in actor-promoted focussing events (Best 2010), such as successful information campaigns, or when groups act as 'policy entrepreneurs' ensuring that the potential symbolic power of a focussing event catches on (Kingdon 1984). Irrespective of these drivers of agenda setting, we argue that once issues are high up on the political agenda, lobbying influence on these issues is a potential outcome of a sequence of steps (1–4).

Issue mobilisation here refers to what is sometimes termed 'second order mobilisation', meaning the question of 'whether organised groups participate in policymaking once formed' (Rasmussen and Gross 2015, 345). An interest group might here face *issue mobilisation problems*, for instance because it lacks resources to prioritise an issue, which means an early halt for the potential influence process (e. g. Fraussen, Halpin, and Nownes 2021). In other situations, the lack of mobilisation might also be a strategic choice, for instance when the issue is contentious and divides members or the public (cf. Bolleyer 2021), so that mobilisation could have negative effects on the reputation, maintenance or even survival of the group (Berkhout 2013; Lowery 2007; Lowery and Brasher 2004). Or else, a group might decide to remain inactive when it knows that its interests will be expressed anyway through other actors. This could be due to 'free-riding' (cf. Olson 1965) or a division of labour with other groups, such as

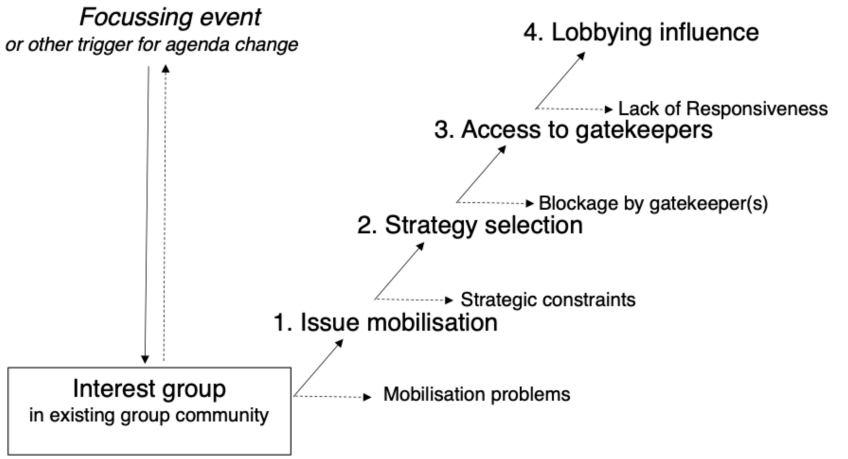

Figure 1.1: Influence production process on a new (set of) policy issue(s).

umbrella organisations, taking on the task of mobilisation (cf. Junk 2019). In case of 'viral lobbying', however, the stakes were so high for all involved actors that mobilising, in one way or the other, on Coronavirus-related issues is likely to have been strategically useful for most if not all groups. This is why we study *issue mobilisation* primarily as the *ability* to mobilise, and to mobilise *early* and *intensely* after the focussing event. Understanding these mobilisation patterns is relevant in and of itself, given that inequalities in the ability to voice different societal interests is undesirable from a normative standpoint that values civil society participation on an equal footing (cf. Habermas 1997; Dahl 1956). Moreover, it is the first step in which eventual biases in political influence might take root.

Second, once an interest group has managed to mobilise on an issue, it faces a number of decisions regarding what *strategies* to employ, while subject to constraints, such as resource shortages. These decisions can include how much to lobby, in which political venues and with what arguments (Mahoney 2008). More broadly speaking, available strategies can be divided into *inside* and *outside* strategies (Dür and Mateo 2016; Hanegraaff, Beyers, and De Bruycker 2016; Junk 2016; Weiler and Brändli 2015), which can be used individually or in combination with each other. *Inside strategies* here mean all tactics employed to interact directly with policymakers with the aim of influencing policy, whereas *outside strategies* target the media and/or public opinion, and thereby potentially also affect policymakers indirectly (Kollman 1998). Yet, as Lowery and Brasher's (2004) model usefully highlights, not all considerations in strategy choice

are aimed at seeking influence (also see: Lowery 2007). A main concern of interest groups is securing stability and survival for their organisation by attracting attention, member support and/or funding, not least in crisis situations. In relation to *viral lobbying* during the pandemic, we therefore carefully study both lobbying strategies aimed at affecting Coronavirus-related policies, as well as strategies aimed at securing organisational stability.

Third, a potential outcome of the use of different lobbying strategies is access to relevant gatekeepers. Lobbying access can here be defined as the situation when an interest group has passed a 'threshold controlled by relevant gatekeepers' (Binderkrantz and Pedersen 2017, 307). Relevant gatekeepers can here (like for strategies) be categorised as *inside* arenas, such as the government, parliament or the bureaucracy, and *outside* arenas, such as the media (cf. Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015; Junk 2019; Fraussen and Beyers 2016). When it comes to *viral lobbying*, after the outbreak of the pandemic different gatekeepers have faced extreme pressures to act swiftly and effectively, while navigating a situation with extreme uncertainties when it comes to anticipating and controlling (new variants of) the virus (Chari and Rozas 2021). Moreover, some gatekeepers, such as members of parliament, experienced a weakening of their position vis-à-vis the executive (Bolleyer and Salát 2021). In other words, there are different reasons for why access to gatekeepers might be blocked to an interest group: 1) the inability or unwillingness of gatekeepers to consult it and/or 2) the inability of the interest group to contribute, for instance because it faced mobilisation problems, or chose less effective lobbying strategies. In our study, we include these strands of explanations for (un)successful access at the 'demand' and 'supply' side of lobbying.

Fourth and finally, lobbying influence is a *potential* outcome of this sequence of steps: when a group has mobilised and has chosen strategies that have helped it secure access to relevant gatekeepers, decision makers *might be responsive* to the interest group. Lobbying influence can here be seen as the holy grail of interest group scholarship and practice: it is eagerly pursued, but very hard to fathom. Understood causally, it means that a different outcome would have prevailed, had the interest group not become involved (cf. Dahl's (1957) definition of power). This is extremely difficult to ascertain (Dür 2008; Leech 2010; Lowery 2013). We therefore combine three complementary perspectives to the study of lobbying influence to gauge variation in influence of *viral lobbying*. Our underlying assumptions are that influential groups 1) see themselves as impactful throughout the pandemic, potentially even increasingly so over time, 2) attain their policy preferences on Coronavirus-related policies, and 3) are more satisfied with the resulting government policies. In studying different *proxies* for influence at different times, we are especially interested in un-

derstanding how patterns in influence vary compared to the other steps in the interest production process, i.e. mobilisation, strategies, and access.

With this framework in mind (Figure 1.1), we trace for each step in the influence production process, whether there are inequalities favouring certain types of groups, such as better resourced organisations, or groups that represent business and other economic interests. In more 'pessimistic' strands of lobbying theory, such biases are a key concern (cf. Schattschneider 1960; Olson 1965). Other, more 'optimistic' theories of lobbying underline the plurality of types of groups that mobilise, get access and potentially influence on public policies (cf. Truman 1951). According to such theories, a key expectation is that the degree to which an organisation is affected by a focusing event should be a driver of lobbying involvement. Throughout the book, we theorise in more detail about these explanatory factors and assess their importance throughout the influence production process. In this way, we hope to provide an empirical assessment of *viral lobbying* that is theoretically rooted and can inform a normative evaluation of the role of interest groups in *viral politics* (see Chapter 8).

Structure of the Book

In sum, throughout the book, we shed light on the elements of our model of the influence production process to explain *viral lobbying* after the outbreak of COVID-19. After presenting our project and the novel data sources we employ to cover lobbying in eight European polities (Chapter 2), the chapters focus on the above stages of the influence production process starting with *issue mobilisation* (Chapter 3), *strategy selection* (Chapter 4), *access to gatekeepers* (Chapter 5), and *lobbying influence* (Chapter 6). In addition, we reflect further on our quantitative findings based on interest groups' *experiences with lobbying during the pandemic*, which they shared in a series of qualitative focus group interviews (Chapter 7). Finally, our concluding chapter sums up our main findings and reflects on the rich evidence provided in the different chapters to help evaluate the workings of *viral lobbying* (Chapter 8).

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Online Appendix

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