

Lobbying in Brussels

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Brussels, the capital of Europe, is home to a concentration of highly organised interest groups, clustered around the key European Union institutions. Large multinationals, law firms, trade associations, NGOs, regional and local authorities and think-tanks are all actively engaged in lobbying: attempting to influence legislators in order to shape policy on behalf of a particular interest. They all recognise that the decision-making process in Brussels, frequently perceived as remote and bureaucratic, has important implications for Europe. They also understand that EU developments can be influenced to their advantage through lobbying activities.

All EU legislation is concluded by some combination of the European Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The European Commission is the only EU institution that can formally propose legislation. Interest groups have a greater chance of success if they can influence the content of prospective legislation during the proposal-drafting stage. They can do this if invited to sit on an external expert committee, chaired and serviced by the Commission where their role will be to guide and offer specialist technical advice to the Commission officials drafting detailed proposals. Commission officials are easily contacted and many lobbyists maintain good relationships with them by inviting them to speak at conferences and events. As a main source of expertise, specialists from interest groups can therefore play an important role in shaping future policy in their area.

Later on in the legislative process, the Commission sets up consultative committees made up of professional associations and interest groups. This is a good opportunity for lobbyists to influence the content of legislation but evidently there is less scope for change at this stage. The proposal may have been drafted over a three or four year period and officials will be reluctant to modify the text significantly.

The Council of Ministers represents national governments but interest-group representatives may also sit on the Council of Ministers' working group that evaluates legislative proposals when formally submitted by the Commission.

Over the last decade, lobby organisations have taken advantage of the European Parliament's new powers to amend legislation. Lobbyists target parliamentarians who can table amendments to legislative proposals. Lobbyists provide a valuable service by informing MEPs in great detail about upcoming legislation. During a short meeting with an MEP or his assistant, they can thoroughly brief the parliamentarian, offering a condensed overview of the issues concerning a certain legislative proposal, albeit from one point of view. This can affect the way an MEP will vote on that proposal. A targeted approach is best with many lobbyists contacting MEPs who are members of a relevant parliamentary committee or who have an interest in the issue at hand.

There is some debate surrounding lobby organisations and their influence. Some view lobbyists as an undemocratic and unregulated element of the legislative process. An interest group's influence appears to be proportionate to its financial backing, with big business and industry, having more power than the charitable and not-for-profit sector. However additional factors such as public opinion and the state of the current political climate are also important. Others highlight the role well-informed lobbyists play in bringing specialist knowledge to the political decision-making process. The fact is that almost every particular interest is represented in the Brussels lobbying landscape and that lobbying is a universal phenomenon. If you don't want to lose out, take part in it.