

Analyzing Access of Interest Groups to Governmental Arena: A Comparative Study of Mariano Rajoy and Pedro Sánchez's Administrations (2012-2021)

Acceso de los grupos de interés a la arena gubernamental: un estudio comparativo de los gobiernos de Mariano Rajoy y Pedro Sánchez (2012-2021)

Iván Medina and Laura Chaqués-Bonafont

Key words

- Agendas
- Business Associations
- Government
- Interest Groups
- NGOs
- Unions

Palabras clave

- Agendas
- Asociaciones empresariales
- Gobierno
- Grupos de interés
- ONG
- Sindicatos

Abstract

This article analyses the access of interest groups to the governmental arena using an original database based on 2409 bilateral meetings that took place during the mandates of Mariano Rajoy and Pedro Sánchez and covering the period from 2012 through 2021. The analysis, based on exchange theory and agenda dynamics, finds that business groups meet more frequently with government agents than any other types of interest group, with significant differences by policy areas and the ideology of the governing party. The study also reveals that the governing PSOE-UP coalition had more interactions with interest groups and gave more access to trade unions and NGOs than governments led by the Partido Popular.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza el acceso de los grupos de interés a la arena gubernamental a partir de una base de datos original compuesta por 2409 reuniones bilaterales bajo los mandatos de Mariano Rajoy y Pedro Sánchez durante los años 2012 y 2021. El análisis se construye a partir de los estudios de la teoría del intercambio y de la dinámica de la agenda y demuestra empíricamente que los grupos empresariales se reúnen con el Gobierno con más intensidad que cualquier otro tipo de grupo de interés, con diferencias significativas entre áreas políticas y la ideología del partido en el gobierno. El estudio también pone de manifiesto que el gobierno de coalición PSOE-UP interactúa más con los grupos de interés para discutir sus propuestas, y da más acceso a sindicatos y ONG que los gobiernos del Partido Popular.

Citation

Medina, Iván; Chaqués-Bonafont, Laura (2024). "Analyzing Access of Interest Groups to Governmental Arena: A Comparative Study of Mariano Rajoy and Pedro Sánchez's Administrations (2012-2021)". *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, 186: 123-142. (doi: 10.5477/cis/reis.186.123-142)

Iván Medina: Universidad de Valencia | ivan.medina@uv.es

Laura Chaqués-Bonafont: Universitat de Barcelona | laurachaques@ub.edu



INTRODUCTION

This study looks at what types of interest groups met with members of the Spanish government over the period from 2012 to 2021. We focus on informal bilateral meetings that ministers and ministries held with business groups, trade unions, NGOs, professional organisations and other interest groups of an institutional character. According to an exchange approach (Bouwen, 2004), the access interest groups have to government is explained by their capacity to contribute needed technical information (Hall and Dearthoff, 2006; Binderkrantz, Christiansen and Pedersen, 2015; Dür and Mateo, 2016). These studies emphasize that organizations of an economic character —business associations and trade unions— have greater access than other interest groups (for example, civic and humanitarian associations) to the governmental arena because they provide information to members of government that they do not have and can do so throughout the public policy cycle (Beyers and Braun, 2014). Business associations and trade unions contribute specialized technical information during the agenda defining stage and in formulating policy alternatives. They contribute to the process of drafting legislation as well as to the implementation and evaluation of concrete policies. In addition, studies of political agendas find that access to the governmental arena varies in function of the capacity of interest groups to provide ideas and ways of understanding problems that are in line with the preferences of the government and contribute to legitimizing its political positions in the media and before public opinion (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2009).

This study is based on studies of exchange theory and agenda dynamics and aims to explain variations in access to the governmental arena by type of interest group, issue area and over time. Do business groups meet more often with mem-

bers of the government led by the Partido Popular? Do the number of meetings between members of the government and NGOs increase under governments led by the PSOE? Are differences by issue area significant? Our empirical strategy is based on an original database compiled by the Research Group on the Quality of Democracy (Q-Dem) that includes 2409 bilateral meetings between successive central governments and interest groups from 2012 through 2021. The database was developed using data from the agendas of government members that the central government publishes daily on its website.

Our study fills an existing gap in the literature on the representation of interests in Spain and comparatively. We analyse the informal dynamics of interactions between interest groups and government, an important contribution to current studies, which have primarily focused on interest group participation in formal and stable arenas, such as government advisory committees (Balla and Wright, 2001), government agencies (Golden, 1998; Jordana, Pérez-Durán and Triviño-Salazar, 2021) and citizen and group participation in government led citizen consultations (Lundberg, 2013). This study is also innovative in its use, not of survey results, but of data from bilateral meetings over a period of a decade, which permit us to look at the importance of changes in government and partisan dynamics.

The results reveal that business groups met more frequently with members of government than any other type of interest group; we also find significant differences by policy areas and the ideology of the governing party. These differences are explained by the capacity of interest groups to contribute resources and information that ministries and ministers need to establish and carry out public policies. In addition, the results show that members of the governments led by Pedro Sanchez —from the socialist party— met with a greater number of inter-

est groups —particularly trade unions, civic and identity-based associations and NGOs in general, with the exception of environmental groups— than the previous Mariano Rajoy governments. They did so in order to learn about their policy proposals and make decisions based on consensus and negotiation. These differences reveal a change in the way of understanding the role of interest groups in the process of developing public policy and, in more general terms, in the governance of the Spanish political system.

This article is organised in the following manner: first, we discuss the access of interest groups to government from the perspectives of exchange and the impact of the political agenda; secondly, we explain the methodological strategy used in this study, detailing the process of compiling and classifying the data, as well as a discussing the political situation that characterizes the period studied; third, we analyse the access of interest groups to the central government following the order of the hypotheses raised in the theoretical discussion, and lastly, in the conclusions, we discuss the state of the question and future directions for research on interest group access to government in Spain.

INFORMATION AND ACCESS TO THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Based on a theory of exchange, the access of interest groups to the governing arena is explained by their capacity to contribute goods and information that members of government need (Beyers, Bruycker and Baller, 2015). The complexity of leading and managing public affairs makes it necessary for politicians and governments to interact with private organisations —such as trade unions, professional and business associations, NGOs and *think tanks*— to resolve public problems (Chaqués-Bonafont, 2004). To regulate and implement policies that af-

fect different economic sectors, from the cultivation of flax to new information technologies, members of government depend on the information that producer and business associations provide to understand problems, develop policies and design strategies for their efficient implementation. In addition, the definition and management of any welfare policy —such as healthcare, education or family policy— requires the participation of organisations that represent the public and the professionals involved, such as the professional associations representing healthcare workers, teachers and social workers.

These organisations provide information and knowledge obtained through their direct experience in a concrete policy area, or from their production of specialized technical studies. Members of government meet with interest groups to obtain data and information that contributes to the technical quality of legislative proposals, to monitor the implementation of policies and to define possible strategies for action in the face of changing contexts. At times, such meetings serve members of government by providing information about the populations interest groups represent, or in their search for support, contributing to legitimising policy decisions and avoiding conflicts during policy implementation.

Existing studies emphasise that not all interest groups have the same capacity to contribute information that governments need (Coen, Katsaitis and Vannoni, 2021). Economic interest groups, such as employer associations and trade unions, contribute information on the dynamic of sectors that are vital to the functioning of the economy; they can identify concrete problems regarding the implementation of regulations and contribute ideas about how to solve them based on their interests (Compston, 1997; Yackee and Yackee, 2006). Employer associations and trade unions participate as advisors throughout the

public policy process, from entry of the problem onto the political agenda to the development of proposals, as well as in the decision-making process and the implementation and evaluation of policies. In some cases, for example, the regulation of the energy market or pharmaceuticals, the interaction between members of government and economic agents has a permanent character. Since the 1970s, for example, the pharmaceutical industry and Spain's Health Ministry have regularly interacted to deal with issues on regulating drug prices and public spending on pharmaceuticals (Chaqués-Bonafont and Palau, 2009). At other times, this interaction is of an occasional nature related to concrete changes in regulations or the political situation. Based on this interaction, members of government learn firsthand the political position of private organisations and are able to reduce uncertainty regarding the implementation of policy decisions.

Citizen groups, such as NGOs, also contribute political and technical information on concrete problems. These organisations have the objective of influencing the political agenda and decision making, and they occasionally directly participate in policy implementation. Organisations such as Greenpeace, Transparency International, Spain's Consumers and Users Organisation (OCU) and Federation for Rare Diseases (FEDER) generate data and reports on the characteristics of specific problems and alternatives for dealing with them. However, in contrast to employer associations and trade unions, in many cases this type of interest group does not participate in policy implementation, with important exceptions such as the case of Spain's National Organisation for the Blind (ONCE), the Catholic charity Cáritas and certain NGOs focused on international cooperation for development (Muñoz, 2016). Therefore, once their viewpoints have been heard, government members can consider it less of a priority to continue interacting

regularly with these organizations during a legislative period.

In contrast to NGOs, business associations and trade unions are recognized as instruments in the management of socioeconomic affairs in the majority of advanced democracies (Siaroff, 1999). Their institutionalised recognition as valid and legitimate partners in representing preferences in the political process is concretised in collective bargaining, as well as in direct and institutionalized interactions with members of the government through different mechanisms, such as the creation of special commissions. The institutionalization of this relationship limits the possibilities of the government excluding the most representative economic groups from the political process. The recognition of NGOs as valid partners in the political process is, in contrast, less common and less institutionalized in the majority of countries.

Interest group access to the governmental arena is also explained by the strategies they use to maintain their survival as organisations (Wilson, 1995). The majority of feminist, humanitarian and youth associations prioritise "open" (or outsider) mobilization strategies aimed at maximizing their political visibility (Binderkrantz, Pedersen and Beyers, 2017). The aim is not only to have direct interaction with members of government, but to specifically gain visibility through demonstrations, protests and campaigns that capture the attention of the media, political elites and the population in general (Klüver and Pickup, 2019). Through these open strategies, these types of interest groups look to increase their members and sympathizers, and, as a result, their economic resources for reaching their organizational objectives and their legitimacy for representing concrete interests to public powers (Binderkrantz, 2005). In contrast, business groups prioritise direct access to government over other strategies, with

their essential intention being to influence regulation and resource allocation (Medina, 2022). Strategies of an open character play a secondary role, especially in the case of business groups, basically because they do not need them to guarantee the survival of their association and, in some cases, they may even be counterproductive in achieving influence.

In short, interest groups' access to the policy development process is explained by their capacity to provide information to political representatives during a legislature, as well as to the incentive for these interest groups to provide this information through mobile strategies for direct (or *insider*) interaction. In this sense, we would expect that (H1) economic interest groups (employer associations and trade unions) would meet more frequently with members of government than any other type of interest group organization.

The studies carried out until now also find that the privileged position of employers and trade unions in access to government appears significant in economic sectors such as agriculture, industry and labour market regulation, and not in areas linked to social policy and civil rights (Coen and Grant, 2006; Pakull, Marshall and Bernhagen, 2020). For the Spanish case, Chaqués-Bonafont and Medina (2021) show that during the COVID-19 pandemic business groups interacted with members of government responsible for economic and labour market affairs more frequently than any other type of interest group due to the urgency of managing issues related to food and medical supplies, as well as the regulation of working conditions, the provision of services during the confinement and restrictions on mobility. However, meetings between business associations and ministries with responsibility for social rights, equality, domestic affairs and justice were limited in number. These studies also emphasise that in is-

sue areas in which conflict and a high level of polarization exist, members of government tend to interact with a greater and more diverse number of interest groups, particularly those that have a broad social support. As a result, we expect that (H2) interest groups of an economic character would more frequently interact with members of government that manage economic and labour market policies.

An exchange perspective generates broad agreement among researchers on interest group participation in the political process. Some interest groups have more access than others to the public policy development process because they are capable of mitigating information failures by members of government (Salisbury, 1969). From this position, authors such as Baumgartner *et al* (2009) have analysed the extent to which the participation of interest groups varies in function of the political leaning of the government. Based on this perspective, the information that employer and business associations, trade unions and NGOs generate is not politically neutral (Daviter, 2009). No single way of understanding political problems exists; all issues can be understood from different perspectives, based on different interests and values, often conditioned by electoral competition between parties or the entrance of new problems on the agenda (Berkhout, 2008; Chaqués-Bonafont and Jordana, 2022).

These differences in the way of understanding problems determine the interactions between interest groups and government agents over time (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Politicians and governing authorities want to interact with those groups that share similar perspectives on political problems and to exclude from the decision-making process those that defend positions that differ from those of the government (Klüver, 2020). In other words, governments tend to interact with their natu-

ral allies in the political arena, avoiding their adversaries to strengthen their negotiating capacity in policy debates (Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017).

On occasion, these alliances between interest groups and political representatives become institutionalized through formal and informal agreements that are perpetuated over time. For decades, members of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) and the Spanish Communist Party (Partido Comunista and subsequently the Izquierda Unida) formed part of the governing boards of Spain's two largest trade unions – the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) and Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO.). In turn, trade union leaders from these two unions formed part of the Spanish parliament, and in the case of the UGT, they even occupied positions in governments led by the PSOE (Fishman, 1990). Overlapping of leadership between members of the Partido Popular and members of the Spanish Confederation of Business Organisations (CEOE) also occurred, as well as with religious groups and professional associations, especially those related to the judiciary and private healthcare.

In the case of NGOs, formal connections with political parties are more diffuse, basically because NGOs do not seek close ties to traditional political organisations, such as political parties. Corruption and a public lack of trust in political parties contribute to NGOs search for autonomy and independence in their relations with them. Despite this, studies have found that a significant number of NGOs, particularly those that work in areas related to rights, inequality, gender violence and international cooperation have connections with left-wing political parties. Based on surveys of interest groups, Chaqués-Bonafont *et al.* (2021) found for the case of Spain, and Marshall (2015), for the case of the EU, that NGOs interact significantly more with left-wing parties than with right-wing parties.

However, there are important exceptions to this. This is the case of critical platforms connected to right-wing formations, such as HazteOir and Abogados Cristianos, created in a context of political change regarding civil and social rights, and the Fundación Danaes and Societat Civil Catalana linked to extreme right positions regarding territorial conflict. The Partido Popular has also had the support of associations of victims of terrorism, such as the Asociación Víctimas del Terrorismo (AVT). In addition, some conservation organisations have adopted ideological positions increasingly different from left-wing parties (Muñoz, 2021).

Based on this, we expect significant variations in the types of interest groups that interact with members of government in function of party ideology. We also expect that these variations will be significant for the case of organisations of a non-economic nature, such as NGOs, but not in the case of economic organisations. This is because the institutionalization of the access of business organisations and trade unions limits the ability of governments to exclude them. In contrast, the recognition of NGOs is more diffuse and less institutionalized, which permits governments greater discretion in deciding which organisations have access. Therefore, we expect (H3) the interactions between members of government and non-economic organisations such as NGOs to be reduced under conservative governments.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

To explain interest groups' access to the governmental arena, we have created a database that contains information on all the meetings that members of government had with interest groups from 2012 through 2021. We have identified 2409 bi-

lateral meetings in this period. The data was gathered through an analysis of the daily agenda of the presidency of the government and of each of the Ministries, which are published on the La Moncloa website (www.lamoncloa.gob.es). Each agenda provides a detailed list of the daily activities of each member of government, including bilateral meetings with interest groups and the specific issues discussed in the meetings. Considering the objective of this article, we have excluded certain events that ministers or the president of the government participated in, such as conferences, trade fairs and visits to firms.

The agendas of members of government became available beginning in 2012, although their publication was only formally regulated with the passage of Law 19/2014, 29 December, on transparency, access to public information and good government. This law requires members of government to publish their agendas, but does not specify a format for doing so, nor does it establish any mechanism to centralize the information. Therefore, to acquire the information on the names of the interest groups that each minister, vice-president and president met with, it is necessary to analyse the agendas one by one on the corresponding webpages. The agendas provide the names of the interest groups, the place where they met and the subject of the meeting, but they do not provide information on the content of the meeting, or on the reasons for it. In addition, contacts with levels below minister, such as secretaries of state, sub-secretaries or directorate generals, are not made public. This is a significant difference with what we find in certain of Spain's autonomous regional governments, such as Catalonia and the Valencian Community, which publish detailed information on meetings, including all those held by persons with senior positions in the regional government.

Each interest group is classified by type, similar to the classification used in the EU's Transparency Register. In concrete, interest groups are classified into six categories: 1) business associations and businesses, 2) trade unions, 3) civic groups and identity groups, 4) professional associations, 5) religious organisations, and 6) other associations, which includes municipal associations and universities. In addition, with the aim of developing a qualitative analysis, each one of these groups is classified into different sub-categories adapting the classification of the INTERARENA project (Binderkrantz, Christiansen and Pedersen, 2020) to the Spanish case. The main difference is the inclusion of the sub-categories "victims of terrorism associations" and "women's associations" in the classification of interest groups in Spain (see Table 1).

To carry out the analysis we have also classified the ministries based on their policy areas —using the methodology of the Comparative Agendas Project— for each legislature from 2011 through 2021, as can be seen in Table 2. Between 2012 and 2021, the number of ministries increased from 14 under the governments led by Mariano Rajoy to 21 during the period of PSOE-Unidas Podemos coalition government. The Partido Popular governments were of a technocratic nature and reflect the intention to concentrate executive competencies in mega-ministries. For example, José Ignacio Wert was responsible for the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport; José Manuel Soria was in charge of the Ministry of Industry, Energy and Tourism, and Ana Mato was head of the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality. In contrast, the governments led by the PSOE reflect their commitment to specialization in ministerial portfolios, as well as to political negotiations and the distribution of power among the political forces that formed the government.

TABLE 1. Meetings between members of government and interest groups by type 2011-2021

Type of interest group	Sub-group	N	%
Civic associations, identity groups and NGOs	Civic Associations	63	2.6
	Consumer groups	20	0.8
	Student associations	10	0.4
	Women's associations	39	1.6
	Patients' associations and Disability associations	72	3.0
	Sporting associations	12	0.5
	Humanitarian associations	95	3.9
	Environmental associations	179	7.4
	Associations of victims of terrorism	39	1.6
	Foundations	57	2.4
	Other citizen associations	26	1.1
	Total	612	25.4
Professional organisations	Teachers associations	10	0.4
	Other professional associations	312	13.0
	Associations of healthcare professionals	52	2.2
	Total	374	15.5
Business organisations	Chambers of commerce	29	1.2
	Firms	175	7.3
	Agricultural organisations	117	4.8
	Multisectoral business organisations	166	6.9
	Sectoral business organisations	455	18.9
	Other business groups	53	2.2
	Total	995	41.3
Religious organisations		29	1.2
Other organisations	Local government associations	64	2.7
	University associations	39	1.6
	Other associations of public institutions	22	0.9
	Total	125	5.2
Trade unions		274	11.4
Total		2,409	100.0

Source: By authors.

TABLE 2. *Classification of ministries by issue areas, 2012-2021*

Issue area	Ministry	N	%
Agriculture and Environment	Agriculture, Food and Environment	450	18.7
	Agriculture, Fishing and Food	194	8.1
	Ecological Transition	25	1.0
	Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge	45	1.8
Foreign Affairs	Foreign Affairs and Cooperation	16	0.7
	Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation	22	0.9
Commerce, Banking and R&D	Science and Innovation	55	2.3
	Consumer Affairs	31	1.3
	Energy, Tourism and the Digital Agenda	5	0.2
Culture	Industry, Commerce and Tourism	93	3.9
	Industry, Energy and Tourism	53	2.2
Defence	Culture and Sport	98	4.1
Rights	Defense	30	1.2
	Social Rights and Agenda 2030	25	1.0
Economy and Finance	Equality	33	1.4
	Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation	32	1.3
	Economy and Competitiveness	3	0.1
	Finance	11	0.5
	Finance and Public Administrations	58	2.4
Education and Universities	Finance and Civil Service	9	0.4
	Science, Innovation and Universities	26	1.1
	Education and Vocational Training	75	3.1
	Education, Culture and Sport	83	3.4
Government	Universities	46	1.9
	Territorial Policy and Civil Service	33	1.4
	Presidency	59	2.4
	Presidency, Parliamentary Relations and Equality	1	0.0
	Presidency, Parliamentary Relations and Democratic History	18	0.7
	President of the Government	35	1.5
Interior	Vice-president of the Government	6	0.3
	Interior	108	4.5
Justice	Justice	230	9.5
Health	Health Care	28	1.2
	Health, Consumer Affairs and Social Welfare	75	3.1
	Health, Social Services and Equality	89	3.7
Labour	Employment and Social Security	16	0.7
	Employment and Social Security	33	1.4
	Inclusion, Social Security and Migration	41	1.7
	Labour and Social Economy	76	3.2
Transport	Labour, Migration and Social Security	22	0.9
	Public Works	15	0.6
	Transport, Mobility and Urban Agenda	6	0.2
Total		2,409	100.0

Source: By authors.

The period covered is characterized by political instability (see Table 3). The analysis begins with the first government led by Mariano Rajoy and the Partido Popular, which gained a solid absolute majority at the end of 2011, and ends in 2021, during the first coalition government in Spain since the approval of the Spanish Constitution in 1978. During this period, five general elections were called (2011, 2015, 2016 and April and November

2019), and in two of those cases the Congress of Deputies was unable to install a candidate in the presidency, which means that a good part of the years 2016 and 2019 were led by interim governments. In addition, in June 2018, the opposition party (PSOE) passed a motion of censure for the first time in Spain, which led to a change in the governing party in the middle of the legislature (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020).

TABLE 3. *Main characteristics of the governments during 2011 through 2021*

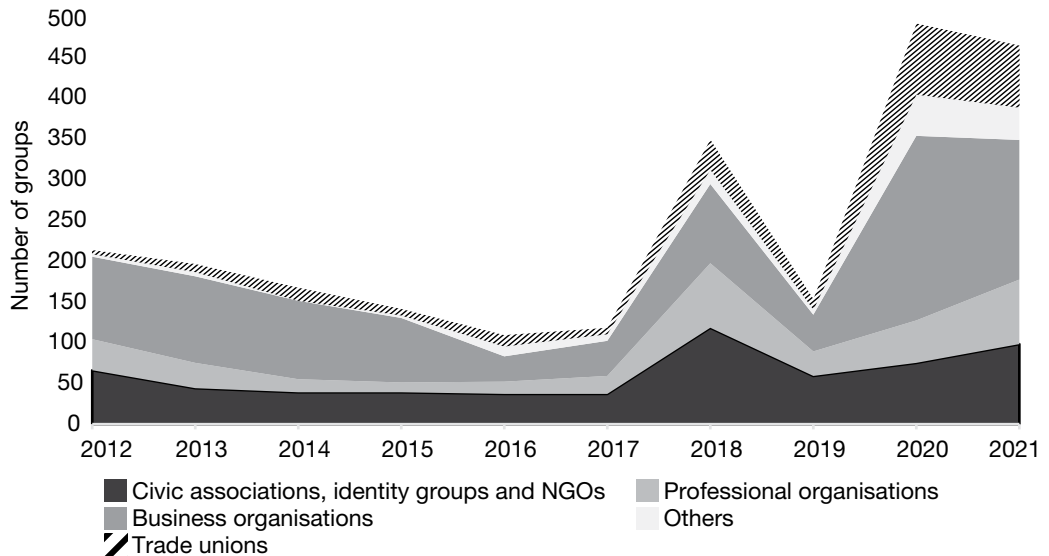
Period	Presidency	Investiture	Governing party	% of votes	Date of elections
2011-2015	Mariano Rajoy	Yes	PP	45.0	20/11/2011
2015-2016	Mariano Rajoy	No, caretaker government	PP	27.0	20/12/2015
2016-2018	Mariano Rajoy	Yes (29/10/2016)	PP	31.0	26/06/2016
2018-2019	Pedro Sánchez	Yes (1/06/2018)	PSOE	19.5	June 2018 (censure motion)
2019	Pedro Sánchez	No, caretaker government	PSOE	28.9	28/04/2019
2019-2023*	Pedro Sánchez	Yes	PSOE-Podemos	38.2	10/11/2019

Note: President Sánchez ended the 14th legislature by convoking general elections for 23 July 2023. Our study analyses data up until 31 December 2021.

Source: By authors.

This dynamic in the formation of the government had a direct impact on interest groups' access. On the one hand, when there is an interim (or caretaker) government, the number of meetings is reduced because there are no new legislative initiatives or budgetary changes. This reduces the government's need for information, as well as the incentive of interest groups to dedicate time and resources to influencing the political process. On the other hand, starting with the change in government in 2018, the number of meetings increased from an average of 160 annually between 2012 and 2018, to 398 between 2018 and 2021 (see Graph 1). This increase reflects the change to a government led by Pedro Sánchez, which was characterized by an interest in social dialogue and consensus with economic and social organisations. Other factors, such as the change in ministerial

structure, also contributed to the increase in meetings between members of government and interest groups. The fragmentation of ministerial structure increased the points of access to the political process and reduced competition among interest groups for access to members of government (Chaqués-Bonafont, 2004). It also affected the government's ability to develop concrete policy and legislative proposals, such as draft bills or the development of secondary legislation (Parrado, 2022). However, the change in ministerial structure is not the only factor that affected the number of meetings between members of government and interest groups. As an example, with the separation of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment into two or more ministries starting in 2018, the number of meetings between members and governments and environmental organisations actually declined.

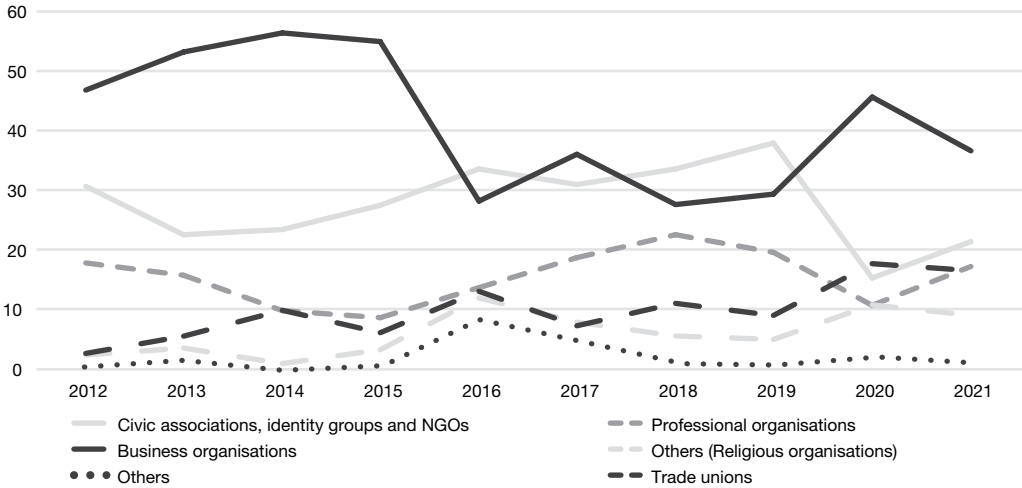
GRAPH 1. Evolution of the number of interest groups that met with members of government, 2012-2021

Source: By authors.

INTEREST GROUP ACCESS TO THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

To test our first hypothesis, we have calculated the difference in the annual averages for the number and percentage of meetings between members of government and type of interest group for the period from 2012 through 2021. The results show that business organisations held a predominant position in the policy development process of the Spanish government. In concrete, business associations and firms met an average of 99.5 times a year with government members (accounting for 41.3 % of the total meetings), in comparison to 61.2 meetings a year in the case of NGOs (27.7 %), 37.4 meetings a year for professional organisations (15.3 %) and 27.4 meetings a year for trade unions (9.5 %). The differences in the number and percentage of annual meetings between business groups and the rest of the groups are significant for all the cases with a 95 % confidence level.

Graph 2 shows that business groups were dominant throughout the period examined, except when there were interim governments (2016 and 2019) and in 2018 when there was a censure motion won by Pedro Sánchez. This representation of the interests of business organisations was particularly intense during the first government of the Partido Popular (2011-2015), during which more than half of the bilateral meetings between members of government and interest groups were with employer associations and businesses. In fact, in 2014 the two accounted for over 55 % of the meetings that year —47 % were with business associations and 8.3 % were with individual firms. Members of the coalition government led by Pedro Sánchez also met frequently with business groups and individual businesses, though slightly less so— accounting for a bit more than 40 % of meetings between ministers and interest groups from 2019 through 2021.

GRAPH 2. *Percentage of meetings with members of government between 2012 and 2021, by type of interest group*

Source: By authors.

Meetings between government and trade unions followed the opposite dynamic. Between 2011 and 2015, the percentage of meetings between ministers of the first Rajoy government with trade union organisations was never above 6 % of the total, which reveals the erosion of the tripartite model of social pact in Spain during this time (González and Luque, 2014). The PP government abandoned the model of social dialogue and adopted a unilateral strategy in support of their economic agenda, to a great extent defined by EU institutions (Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau and Baumgartner, 2015). As a result, trade unions abandoned their strategy of direct access to government through bilateral meetings with members of government, adopting a strategy of open mobilization characterized by a higher level of conflict —they called for three general strikes— and multiple other protests (Romanos and Sábada, 2022).

This situation changed beginning in 2018 with the arrival of the PSOE government, and especially under the coalition government. Thereafter, the percentage of government meetings with trade unions increased exponentially, reaching more than

17 % of the total of bilateral meetings with interest groups from 2019 through 2021. The coalition government fostered the participation of the largest trade unions —the Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT) and Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO.)— and business associations —the Spanish Confederation of Business Organisations (CEOE)— to foster proposals for the labour market, pensions and the restructuring of economic sectors in a changing technological and social context. The participation of social agents is a way of obtaining specialized technical information, of fostering dialogue among actors with different ways of understanding problems, and of seeking support and legitimizing decisions, especially when they have a high social cost.

Meetings between members of government and civic associations, identity groups and NGOs also varied significantly over the period examined (see Graphs 1 and 2). The percentage of bilateral meetings with these types of groups remained somewhat more stable during the governments led by Mariano Rajoy —22.3 % in 2013 and 33.6 % in 2016— than during the governments led by Pedro Sánchez —in 2018,

38.8 % of the meetings were with these types of interest groups, although this number declined to 15.2 % during the pandemic. The organisations that met most often with the government were environmental groups (7.4 % of the total), followed by humanitarian organisations (4 %), associations for patients and persons with disabilities (3 %), civic associations (2.6 %), foundations (2.3 %), associations of victims of terrorism and women's associations (1.6 %). The rest of the groups accounted for 1 % of the bilateral meetings.

The rest of the bilateral meetings were with members of government and professional organisations (15 % of the total), other organisations formed by local governments and universities (5.2 %) and religious organisations (1.2 %). The meetings with professional organisations followed a stable dynamic during the period, from 8.4 % in 2015 to 22.6 % in 2018. It is noteworthy that during the pandemic, the percentage of meetings between government and health professionals was 1 % of the total, significantly below the average of 2.16 % from 2012 to 2021. Lastly, the meetings with other associations increased significantly over the period examined, especially for local government associations (the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces) and university associations, particularly the Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades Españolas (CRUE).

Issue areas

As put forward in the second hypothesis, we find that the predominant position of economic interest groups (business associations and trade unions) is greater in policy areas related to the economy (see Table 1). As shown in Graph 3, the ministers that lead and manage areas of an economic character —Trade, banking and R&D (65.8 % of the meetings), Agriculture (57 %), Economy and Finance (55.8 %), Employment (43.6 %)

and Transport (42.9 %)— meet more with business groups than with any other type of interest group. Trade unions predominate in the ministries that manage governance issues (29 % of the meetings with interest groups in the ministry dealing with land policy and civil service were with trade unions), Employment (29 %), Interior (26 %) and Economy and Finance (20 %). Altogether, business and trade union groups accounted for 73 % and 76 % of the bilateral meetings between interest groups and the ministries that deal with economic and labour related matters. In contrast, business organisations play no role in meetings on defence issues.

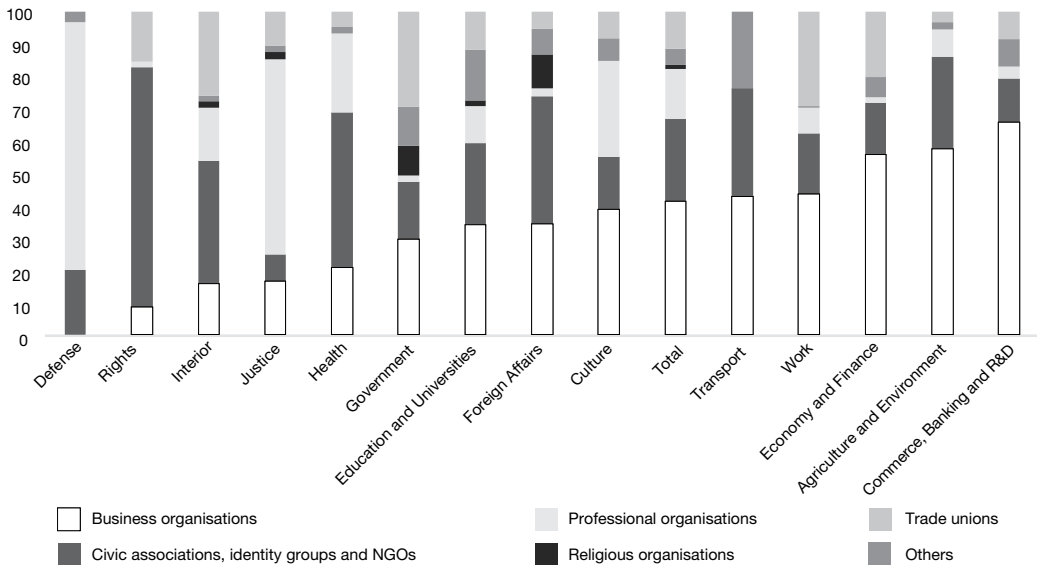
Civic associations, identity groups and NGOs are predominant in areas regarding rights (74 %), health (47 %), foreign affairs (39.5 %), the interior (38 %) and the environment (29 %). The majority of the meetings in the rights sphere (with the Ministry of Equality and the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030) were with associations connected to gender issues. Meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were in their majority with humanitarian groups involved in international cooperation, while the majority of meetings with the Ministry of the Interior were with organisations of victims of terrorism. In the area of health, patients' organisations predominated, followed by humanitarian groups. Lastly, environmental groups were the NGOs that most often met with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment.

Professional organisations primarily meet with members of the ministry of defense and justice. In concrete, 76.6 % of Ministry of Defense bilateral meetings were with military organisations, such as the Association of Spanish Troops and Seamen [Asociación de Tropa y Marinería Española], the Professional Association of Non-Commissioned Officers of the Armed Forces [Asociación Profesional de Suboficiales de las Fuerzas Armadas], the Unified Association of Spanish Military [Asociación Unificada de Militares Españoles]

and the Association of Defence Journalists [Asociación de Periodistas de Defensa], which met with the minister Margarita Robles four times. Sixty percent of the meetings of the Ministry of Justice with interest groups were with professional organisations such as the Association of Prosecutors [Asociación de Fiscales], the Professional Association of Judges [Asociación Profesional de la Magistratura] and Judges for Democracy [Jueces y Jueces para la Democracia]. Professional organisations also play an important role in health-related areas (25 % of bilateral meetings) and culture (29.6 %).

Lastly, Graph 3 shows the marginal role played by religious organisations, who primarily met with the ministries of Foreign Affairs (mainly the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain and the American-Jewish Committee), of Education (the Spanish Episcopal Conference) and the presidency. Associations of local governments, universities and other associations representing public institutions also occasionally met with members of government, especially those responsible for transport and education. These results confirm the second hypothesis: economic interest groups have a predominant role in economic sectors.

GRAPH 3. Meetings between interest groups and government by issue areas. 2012-2021



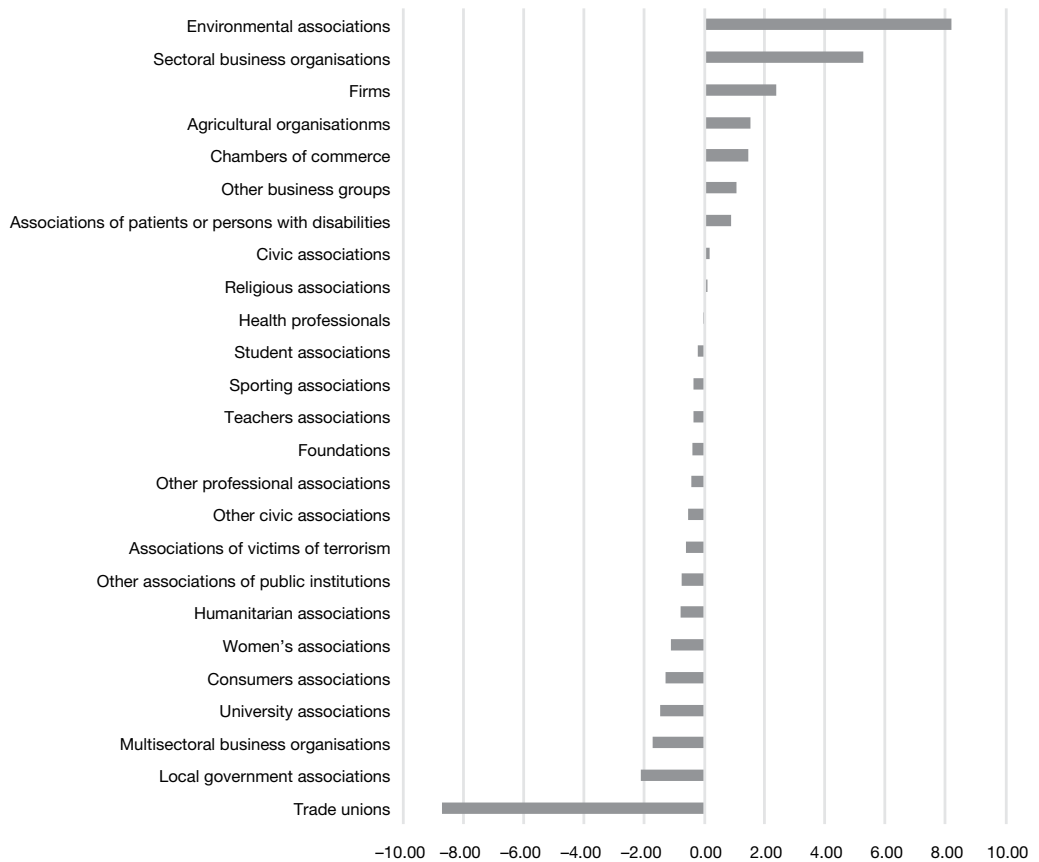
Source: By authors.

In what follows we analyse if significant differences exist in the type of interest groups the PP and PSOE governments interacted with.

Ideology

To test our third hypothesis, we compare the average percentage of annual meetings between each type of interest group and mem-

bers of government led by Mariano Rajoy with those led by Pedro Sánchez. Graph 4 shows that significant differences exist between the two periods. Civic associations, identity-based groups and NGOs in general increased their weight in the total number of meetings that interest groups held with government members during the governments led by Pedro Sánchez, with the exception of environmental groups, revealing support for our hypothesis.

GRAPH 4. Mean differences in the % of meetings between interest groups and members of government by type of group, 2012-2021

Note: Positive result indicates more meetings with PP led governments.

Source: By authors.

During the PP governments, environmental groups met on average 19.2 times annually with members of government, versus 15.4 times annually with the PSOE government and the PSOE-UP coalition government. In concrete, the PP ministers Miguel Ángel Cañete (2012-2013) and Isabel García Tejerina (2014-2018) met an average of 15 times a year with environmental groups, while, under progressive governments, the Minister of Ecological Transition (Teresa Ribera) and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Luis Planas) met on average 8 and 4 times respectively each

year with these organisations. These differences are due to a commitment of the minister Arias Cañete to reduce the tension generated with these groups after the fusion of the Ministries of Agriculture and the Environment¹. Lastly, the PP governments also met more often with associations of victims of terrorism, but in this case the differences are not significant.

¹ On 17 January 2012, Europapress published an article entitled "Arias Cañete promete a las ONG ecologistas que se reunirá con ellas cada 45 días", after criticisms of said ministerial fusion.

Graph 4 also shows the greater weight that business groups and individual businesses had during PP governments, with the exception of meetings with multi-sectoral business associations, which include the CEOE and the CEPYME — the peak-level SMEs association—. In concrete, the CEOE had 34 annual meetings on average with PP governments, in comparison to an average of 45.5 with progressive governments. The governments led by Pedro Sánchez were committed to social dialogue, which involved maintaining regular meetings with business leaders and trade unions to generate social pacts. In fact, the most significant differences between the governments led by Rajoy and Sánchez are seen in the frequency of meetings with trade unions (on average 10 annual meetings between unions and the Rajoy government, versus 27 between unions and the Sánchez government).

The socialist governments also met more often with local government associations and consumer and women's groups. In the case of local governments, the increase in meetings was connected to the issue of population loss in rural areas of Spain entering the political agenda and to the development of renewable energy. In the case of universities, there was a change in university policy led by Manuel Castells and the need to manage university policy in times of a pandemic, while the increase in meetings with women's groups had to do with the priority that gender policy had on the agenda of the Sánchez led governments.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examines the interactions between interest groups and members of government in Spain from 2012 through 2021. It finds that economic interest groups —business associations and trade unions— met more often with members of govern-

ment than any other type of interest group. According to an exchange approach, economic interest groups provide information that governments need to define their policy approaches, and to legitimize the decisions they make, as they look for support and to avoid conflict as they implement their policy choices. In addition, we also show that the predominant role of economic interest groups is greater in policy areas directly linked to the economy, where these groups accounted for more than 70 % of the meetings government members held with interest groups. In contrast, in issue areas related to social, education, health and environmental policies, NGOs have a predominant role. This is significant in that access can be understood from a demand perspective: the balance in access between economic and social interests is conditioned by the government's agenda and the structure of the executive.

In this study we argue that the ability to provide information is not a sufficient condition to explain the interaction between interest groups and members of government. Our empirical analysis shows how, starting in 2018, the participation of interest groups in the governmental arena increased significantly as a result of a change in the policy priorities of governments led by Pedro Sánchez. The members of the socialist/coalition government met more often with interest groups than in the prior stage, with the aim of learning about their policy proposals and making decisions based on consensus and negotiation. These changes reveal a change in the way of understanding the role of interest groups in the policy development process. In this sense, the most important changes were the increase in meetings with trade unions, which had practically disappeared during the governments led by Mariano Rajoy, and the commitment to a social pact and tripartite negotiations with the CEOE, CC.OO. and UGT. Lastly, the formation of progressive governments facilitated the participation of civic groups, identity groups

and NGOs, with the exception of environmental groups, and the relative loss of weight of economic groups as a proportion of the total.

This is an innovative study from an empirical perspective. The creation of a new database based on meetings between interest groups and government ministries during the period from 2012 through 2021 has made it possible to provide a comprehensive analysis of the patterns in the relationships between interest groups and government and to compare the participation of interest groups under different governments by policy areas. This study also helps us to understand interactions between members of government and interest groups and the impact of different leadership profiles, as well as to evaluate changes in governance in advanced societies. In this sense, this article broadens our knowledge of an area of the discipline traditionally lacking empirical evidence due to the absence of official data and the technical difficulties in obtaining that data. Based on this, future research can improve our understanding of the participation of interest groups in the public policy development process, the relationships between these groups and other actors in the political system (such as political parties, members of government and the parliament) and the consequences that different models of representation have on the quality of democracy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balla, Steven J. and Wright, John R. (2001). "Interest Groups, Advisory Committees, and Congressional Control of the Bureaucracy". *American Journal of Political Science*, 45(4): 799-812. doi: 10.2307/2669325
- Baumgartner, Frank R. and Jones, Bryan D. (1993). *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Baumgartner, Frank R.; Berry, Jeffery M.; Hojnacki, Marie; Leech, Beth L. and Kimball, David C. (2009). *Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who*
- Loses, and Why*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berkhout, Joost (2008). "The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems". *Acta Politica*, 43: 504-507. doi: 10.1057/ap.2008.26
- Beyers, Jan and Braun, Caelesta (2014). "Ties That Count: Explaining Interest Group Access to Policymakers". *Journal of Public Policy*, 34(1): 93-121. doi: 10.1017/S0143814X13000263
- Beyers, Jan; Bruycker, Iskander de and Baller, Inger (2015). "The Alignment of Parties and Interest Groups in EU Legislative Politics. A Tale of Two Different Worlds?". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 22(4): 534-551. doi: 10.1080/13501763.2015.1008551
- Binderkrantz, Anne S. (2005). "Interest Group Strategies: Navigating between Privileged Access and Strategies of Pressure". *Political Studies*, 53(4): 694-715. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00552.x
- Binderkrantz, Anne S.; Christiansen, Peter M. and Pedersen, Helene H. (2015). "Interest Group Access". *Governance*, 28: 95-112. doi: 10.1111/gove.12089
- Binderkrantz, Anne S.; Pedersen, Helene H. and Beyers, Jan (2017). "What Is Access? A Discussion of the Definition and Measurement of Interest Groups". *European Political Science*, 16(3): 306-321. doi: 10.1057/eps.2016.17
- Binderkrantz, Anne S.; Christiansen, Peter M. and Pedersen, Helene H. (2020). "Mapping Interest Group Access to Politics: A Presentation of the INTERARENA Research Project". *Interest Groups and Advocacy*, 9(3): 290-301. doi: 10.1057/s41309-020-00095-9
- Bouwen, Pieter (2004). "Exchanging Access Goods for Access: A Comparative Study of Business Lobbying in the European Union Institutions". *European Journal of Political Research*, 43: 337-369. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.2004.00157.x
- Chaqués-Bonafont, Laura (2004). *Redes de políticas públicas*. Madrid: Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas.
- Chaqués-Bonafont, Laura and Palau, Anna M. (2009). "Comparing the Dynamics of Change in Food Safety and Pharmaceutical Policy in Spain". *Journal of Public Policy*, 29(1): 103-126. doi: 10.1017/S0143814X09000981
- Chaqués-Bonafont, Laura; Palau, Anna M. and Baumgartner, Frank R. (2015). *Agenda Dynamics in Spain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Chaqués-Bonafont, Laura; Cristancho, Camilo; Muñoz, Luz and Rincón, Leire (2021). "The Contingent Character of Interest Groups–Political Parties' Interaction". *Journal of Public Policy*, 41(3): 440-461. doi: 10.1017/S0143814X20000082
- Chaqués-Bonafont, Laura and Medina, Iván (2021). "The Representation of Business Interests During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Spain". *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 57: 21-44. doi: 10.21308/recp.57.01
- Chaqués-Bonafont, Laura and Jordana, Jacint (eds.) (2022). *Policy Analysis in Spain*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Coen, David and Grant, Wyn (2006). Business and Government: Introduction. In: D. Coen and W. Grant (eds.). *Business and Government*. London: Edward Elgar.
- Coen, David; Katsaitis, Alexander and Vannoni, Matia (2021). *Business Lobbying in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Compston, Hugu (1997). "Union Power, Policy Making, and Unemployment in Western Europe, 1972-1993". *Comparative Political Studies*, 30(6): 732-751. doi: 10.1177/0010414097030006004
- Daviter, Falk (2009). "Schattschneider in Brussels: How Policy Conflict Reshaped the Biotechnology Agenda in the European Union". *West European Politics*, 32(6): 1118-1139. doi: 10.1080/01402380903230595
- Dür, Andreas and Mateo, Gemma (2016). *Insiders versus Outsiders: Interest Group Politics in Multilevel Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fishman, Robert M. (1990). *Working-Class Organization and the Return to Democracy in Spain*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Golden, Marissa M. (1998). "Interest Groups in the Rule-Making Process: Who Participates? Whose Voices Get Heard?". *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 8(2): 245-270. doi: 10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024380
- González, Sergio and Luque, David (2014). "Goodbye to Competitive Corporatism in Spain? Social Pacting and Conflict in the Economic Crisis". *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, 148: 79-102. doi: 10.5477/cis/reis.148.79
- Hall, Richard L. and Deardorff, Alan V. (2006). "Lobbying as Legislative Subsidy". *American Political Science Review*, 100(1): 69-84. doi: 10.1017/S0003055406062010
- Jordana, Jacint; Pérez-Durán, Itchel and Triviño-Salazar, Juan C. (2021). "Drivers of Integration? EU Agency Board Members on Transboundary Crises". *Comparative European Politics*, 19(1): 26-48. doi: 10.1057/s41295-020-00221-6
- Klüver, Heike (2020). "Setting the Party Agenda: Interest Groups, Voters and Issue Attention". *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(3): 979-1000. doi: 10.1017/S0007123418000078
- Klüver, Heike and Pickup, Mark (2019). "Are they Listening? Public Opinion, Interest Groups and Government Responsiveness". *West European Politics*, 42(1): 91-112. doi: 10.1080/01402382.2018.1483662
- Lundberg, Erik (2013). "Does the Government Selection Process Promote or Hinder Pluralism? Exploring the Characteristics of Voluntary Organizations Invited to Public Consultations". *Journal of Civil Society*, 9(1): 58-77. doi: 10.1080/17448689.2013.771086
- Marshall, David (2015). "Explaining Interest Group Interactions with Party Group Members". *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 53: 311-329. doi: 10.1111/jcms.12163
- Medina, Iván (2022). Business Associations and Policy Analysis. In: L. Chaqués-Bonafont and J. Jordana (eds.). *Policy Analysis in Spain*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Muñoz, Luz (2016). Las ONG en la política de cooperación al desarrollo. In: J. M. Molins; L. Muñoz and I. Medina (eds.). *Los grupos de interés en España: la influencia de los lobbies en la política española*. Madrid: Tecnos.
- Muñoz, Luz (2021). "La pandemia de la COVID-19 en el radar de las ONG ecologistas: entre lo global y local". *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 57: 139-164. doi: 10.21308/recp.57.05
- Otjes, Simon and Rasmussen, Anne (2017). "The Collaboration between Interest Groups and Political Parties in Multi-Party Democracies: Party System Dynamics and the Effect of Power and Ideology". *Party Politics*, 23(2): 96-109. doi: 10.1177/1354068814568046
- Pakull, Dominic; Marshall, David and Bernhagen, Patrick (2020). "Shop till You Drop? Venue Choices of Business and Non-Business Interests in the European Union". *Interest Groups & Advocacy*, 9: 520-540. doi: 10.1057/s41309-020-00092-y
- Parrado, Salvador (2022). Policy Analysis in Central Government: Still in its Infancy. In: L. Chaqués-Bonafont and J. Jordana (eds.). *Policy Analysis in Spain*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Rodríguez-Teruel, Juan (2020). "Polarisation and Electoral Realignment: The Case of the Right-

- Wing Parties in Spain". *South European Society and Politics*, 25(3-4): 381-410. doi: 10.1080/13608746.2021.1901386
- Romanos, Eduardo and Sádaba, Igor (2022). "The Evolution of Contention in Spain (2000-2017): An Analysis of Protest Cycles" / "Evolución de la protesta en España (2000-2017): un análisis de sus ciclos y características". *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, 177: 89-110. doi: 10.5477/cis/reis.177.89
- Salisbury, Robert H. (1969). "An Exchange Theory of Interest Groups". *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 13(1): 1-32. doi: 10.2307/2110212
- Siaroff, Alan (1999). "Corporatism in 24 Industrial Democracies: Meaning and Measurement". *European Journal of Political Research*, 36: 175-205. doi: 10.1023/A:1007048820297
- Wilson, James Q. (1995). *Political Organizations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Yackee, Jason W. and Yackee, Susan W. (2006). "A Bias Towards Business? Assessing Interest Group Influence on the U.S. Bureaucracy". *Journal of Politics*, 68: 128-139. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2508.2006.00375.x

RECEPTION: December 16, 2022

REVIEW: May 24, 2023

ACCEPTANCE: September 12, 2023

