



# How do policy-makers engage with lobbying registers? Evidence from Ireland and France

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## Abstract

Lobbying registers are publicly searchable interfaces that publish information on the lobbying landscape. An emerging body of research has explored how lobbyists strategically consume lobbying register data to inform their advocacy. However, we know exceedingly little of how those on the demand side of the process—policy-makers—engage with these regulatory tools. Employing novel survey data on policy-makers in Ireland and France, this paper explores how policy-makers engage with lobbying registers and their data, and if differences exist between national contexts in how they view the effects of transparency or informally ‘enforce’ the rules. Our results highlight that a large cohort of policy-makers actively and strategically engage with lobbying registers for a variety of purposes, and that state-level differences exist in how policy-makers perceive the impact of lobbying register transparency on their engagements with interest groups. State context also matters for policy-makers engaging with known previously non-compliant groups. Our findings not only shed light on the consultation habits of policy-makers, but signal a greater need to understand how lobbying registers are realised in practice in alternative states, rather than just exploring their on paper differences.

**Keywords** Lobbying · Regulation · Transparency · Information · Policy-making

## Introduction

Lobbying regulations have proliferated rapidly since the turn of the century, increasingly so in states that are considered to be non-pluralist in their structures of interest intermediation (Crepaz 2017; Chari et al. 2019; O’Neill and Chari 2024). A key

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element of any credible lobbying regulation is the establishment of a lobbying or transparency register, which renders the actors and actions of lobbying both transparent and accountable (Bunea and Gross 2019; Chari et al. 2019; Crepaz 2020; Năstase and Muurmans 2020). In essence, lobbying registers provide *information* about who lobbies whom about what, constituting directories or maps of the lobbying landscape (De Bruycker 2019). An emerging literature addresses how lobbyists perceive, leverage, consume, or deploy the information published on lobbying registers as part of their advocacy (Bunea 2018; Crepaz 2020; Năstase and Muurmans 2020; Coen et al. 2024). More recent scholarship has also explored how citizens perceive lobbyists in the wake of these policies (Crepaz 2024), asking how lobbying regulations have shaped the external view of the process. However, research has not yet addressed how policy-makers—actors who stand on the demand side of the lobbying process—either engage with the information published on lobbying registers or consider such regulatory tools when acting in their roles as state officials that engage with non-state actors. In this paper, we directly tackle this gap, focussing on lobbying registers’ dimensions of transparency and accountability from the policy-maker perspective.

The underlying principle that lobbying registers establish *transparency* and *accountability* implies that lobbying regulations provide both information and consequence functions. As the information published on lobbying registers renders the process of lobbying more transparent, the media and citizens (Fung et al. 2007), researchers (Halpin and Warhurst 2015; Crepaz and Chari 2023), other lobby groups (De Bruycker 2019; Crepaz 2020), and policy-makers (Newmark 2005) are now able to ‘consume’ previously private information pertaining to the landscape of lobbying. Lobbying registers, therefore, provide increased clarity to the composition of those involved in the process, allowing previously private or difficult to obtain information to be ascertained from public sources. With research underscoring how such information is employed for strategic ends by lobbyists (Crepaz 2020), our paper explores if the same is true for their demand-side contemporaries. Acknowledging that registers can vary greatly in their design and quality (Coen et al. 2024), we look to two registers that are *as similar as possible* in their stringency and interface design in order to explore the utility of lobbying registers as a source of information for policy-makers.

Beyond information utility, our paper explores whether policy-makers consider lobbying regulations when engaging with interest groups or considering the reputation of these groups and their engagements with them. As lobbying register data can be employed to hold officials or others involved in lobbying to account (Bunea 2018; Chari et al. 2019), we explore if informal accountability structures such as one’s likelihood of engaging with interest groups that have previously not complied with lobbying rules, exist from policy-maker perspectives. As existing research has underscored the perceived reputational benefits of lobbying registration for interest groups (Năstase and Muurmans 2020), informal forms of accountability and enforcement may also exist through the knowledge of lobbying relationships (Newmark 2005), or compliance with rules. Additionally, perceptions of one’s interactions with groups may be perceived as different in light



of the transparency established by lobbying regulations, with the potential costs of accountability now involved with such relationships being judged as different.

By taking note that lobbying is undertaken and perceived differently in states with alternative structures of interest intermediation (Schmitter 1977; Baumgartner 1996; Allum 1997; Coen 1998; Yee 2004; Mahoney 2007; Eising 2008; Büsken and Eising 2024; Coen and Katsaitis 2024; Fitzpatrick 2024; Fukumoto and Inatsugu 2024), our research adopts a comparative approach. While research has glanced towards the strategic information (Crepaz 2020) or reputational (Bunea 2018; Năstase and Muurmans 2020) utility of lobbying registers and their data, this scholarship has focussed only on singular cases. To that end, there is a lack of comparative research that examines how such data and regulatory tools are engaged with by actors that are operational in different state contexts. Looking to France as a case characterised by relative statism and Ireland as one defined by relative pluralism, our research employs a comparative approach to understand how the in-practice functioning of lobbying regulations and registers differs between contexts.

Employing unique survey data gathered from over 400 policy-makers in Ireland and France, this paper explores both the transparency and accountability dimensions of lobbying registers from the demand-side perspective. Firstly, the informational utility of lobbying registers is addressed in a descriptive sense. This analysis highlights the general lobbying register consultation patterns of policy-makers as well as the specific purposes for which they claim to engage with lobbying register data. We show that many policy-makers make use of the information published on lobbying registers to gather information about lobbyists as a background checking tool, or for purposes of learning about the broader landscape of lobbying. Much like their supply-side contemporaries, our analysis paints policy-maker consultations of lobbying register data as infrequent undertakings, signalling that this public information constitutes a secondary source of data on the lobbying process. We also show that policy-makers active in Ireland and France view the legitimising effect of lobbying regulations on their engagements with groups differently. As such, state context appears to inform how policy-makers perceive the effects of informational transparency on the lobbying process.

On the accountability dimension of lobbying regulations, we show that state context matters when expressing one's likelihood of engaging with interest groups that are known to have previously not complied with lobbying regulations. As such, state context appears to have a role in guiding policy-makers' relative enforcement of lobbying regulations, with differential 'weight' afforded to complying with the rules across all three conditions of engagement modelled. To that end, these results signal that the in-practice functioning of lobbying regulations is differentially experienced in alternative states, underscoring the need to look beyond one-size-fits-all models of lobbying regulations when states or institutions consider the establishment of their own. For researchers, these findings also signal the importance of considering factors beyond robustness scores, such as those deployed or developed by Opheim (1991), Newmark (2005), Holman and Luneburg (2012), Coen et al. (2024), Chari



et al. (2019), and O'Neill and Chari (2024) when considering how lobbying regulations and registers are realised beyond their on-paper existence.

To explore these questions, an original data set was created from a comparative survey of French and Irish policy-makers. The findings indicate a need for greater research on the information-gathering patterns of policy-makers, and the relative role that transparency policies and public information play in this process. Furthermore, as the first demand-side analysis of the informational utility of lobbying regulations, this research contributes significantly to infilling the knowledge gap in public policy and interest group research whereby we know less about how lobbying regulations are engaged with and perceived by state actors that receive lobbyists, rather than those that undertake lobbying. Complementing the emergingly rich supply-side and citizen perspective literatures, this research works towards establishing a holistic understanding of how the regulatory tools of lobbying regulations are engaged with or perceived by actors on both sides of the policy-making table.

## Information, policy-making, and lobbying registers

Lobbying regulations are transparency policies that govern the relationships between state actors and non-state actors, namely interest groups. In this light, lobbying regulations are a set of 'rules which interest groups must follow when trying to influence government officials and the nature of public policy outputs' (Chari et al. 2019, 2). Scholarship has examined the contents and specific requirements of individual lobbying regulations that one must follow when seeking to influence policy outcomes via lobbying, including the state's establishment and upkeep of a lobbying register (Chari et al. 2019). Lobbying registers are searchable, usually online interfaces, that allow individuals to see who is engaged in the lobbying process. Common fields of information published include the identity of lobbyists, who they represent, and some details about their individual lobbying actions. While relatively top-line in nature, when one considers that lobbying is a profession governed by private information (Potters and Van Winden 1992), the publicising of the identity and interactions of interest groups is a compellingly fruitful resource for those active within the lobbying process (De Bruycker 2019; Crepaz 2020), as well as those that research it (for example, Halpin and Warhurst 2015; Crepaz and Chari 2023).

Literature has noted that beyond the 'armchair scrutinisers' of the public and media (Fung et al. 2007), lobbying register data may most likely be consumed by those that disclose the information itself, namely lobbyists (Heald 2006; Crepaz 2020). This paper posits, however, that those on the demand side of the lobbying process—policy-makers—may also have an incentive to consult lobbying registers as a source of information when acting in their capacity as state actors. This is because policy-making is a complex process that requires information and knowledge (Radaelli 1995), with policy-makers requiring both technical and political information from various sources in order to effectively execute their roles (Chalmers 2011, 2013; Albareda et al. 2023). A significant body of research has explored how information and evidence are incorporated into the policy-making process (for example, Head 2016) and how this knowledge is gathered by policy-makers



(Radaelli 1995; Dunlop and Radaelli 2018). For the lobbying process itself, the importance of information should not be underestimated (Mahoney 2008), with scholarship noting how lobbying registers function as a source of data for actors on the supply side of this process (Crepaz 2020). Unlike complex technical information which may stem from experts, reviews, or research, for example, policy-makers also require ‘lay’ knowledge which can be gathered from more common sources, such as the broader environment within which one operates (Radaelli 1995). Such lay knowledge may include background information on interest groups that have approached them or other such information about the landscape of the lobbying environment, both of which can be obtained from lobbying registers.

The transparency of data established by lobbying registers may also appeal to policy-makers because they have been shown to engage with interest groups in ways that demand information (Holyoke 2009; Lucas et al. 2019). For example, policy-makers have an active role in mobilising interest groups to accommodate the passing of legislation (Crombez 2002; Hall and Deardorff 2006; Lucas et al. 2019), demanding that policy-makers first construct a stakeholder map of which actors may have a stake in the domain. Understanding which actors have undertaken advocacy or have yet to mobilise, or the interactions that they have had so far, may present as signals of where groups stand on a given issue area or their alliance with other actors in the process. For this, the transparency created by lobbying registers may provide a service that grants access to such data.

Concerns for exposing oneself to the risks of scandal may also drive policy-makers’ demand for information on interest groups, as the introduction of transparency via disclosures may instil caution and an elevated desire of information about groups before engagements are undertaken (Newmark 2005). Indeed, recent scholarship has highlighted that transparency shapes policy-makers’ willingness to cooperate with groups (Martinsson 2025). Having elevated knowledge about the identity and actions of interest groups that have approached them, or specific groups that policy-makers are uncertain of, may help to determine whether or not policy-makers engage with specific groups as stakeholders. In order to make such decisions, lobbying registers may serve as fruitful sources of information, reducing potential information asymmetries that can stem from the de facto private nature of information in the lobbying process, broadening the bounds of one’s knowledge. As such, lobbying registers may function as informational background checking tools for policy-makers when engaging or seeking to engage with interest groups. With the above in mind, we would expect to see some policy-makers engage with lobbying registers for information-gathering purposes.

## **State interest intermediation structures and lobbying**

State context by way of national structures of interest intermediation has been noted to result in interest groups being treated differently in alternative states (Schmitter 1977; Baumgartner 1996; Allum 1997; Yee 2004; Mahoney 2007; Eising 2008; Fitzpatrick 2024). To that end, interest groups are not a monolithic construct with respect to their inclusion in policy-making or perceptions as actors in the



policy-making process, but rather, national-level norms and histories produce alternative environments that see groups included and formalised to a larger or lesser extent. Alternative patterns may not only produce alternative environments within which interest groups act, but may also contribute to how those subject to the regulation of lobbying view the effectiveness, necessity, and impact of lobbying regulations on the lobbying process.

One typology of interest intermediation structures sees that the differences between state contexts can be framed upon the relative inclusion of interest groups within the policy-making process, and the relative equality of how this inclusion is applied (Fitzpatrick 2024). In this respect, states are understood to have a more or less porous structure of interest intermediation, with groups having alternative abilities to transcend barriers to entry in order to actively and meaningfully engage in the policy-making process. In more pluralist contexts such as Ireland (Murphy 2005) or the USA (Dahl 2005), for example, groups are considered to be competing, active, and relatively equally engaged in policy-making, with outcomes understood to be the result of the discourse and competition that takes place (Dahl 2005; Murphy 2005; Grant 2024). Contrastingly, statist nations like France (Brown 1956; Wilson 1983, 1989; Schmidt 1996, 2006a; Eising 2004) or Britain (Schmidt 2006b; Woollen and Chalmers 2024) see the authority of the state dictate the shape of policy and the direction of the national interest, with groups relatively sidelined in the process of policy-making (Brown 1956; Wilson 1983, 1989; Eising 2004). In some cases, groups are included, but only once the shape and design of policy has already been decided upon (Eising 2004). Corporatist states like Germany, with its structured integration and prioritisation of peak associations, see the inclusion of some groups at the expense of others (Schmitter 1977; Büsken and Eising 2024; Christiansen 2024), sitting somewhere in between the extremes of pluralist and statist structures (Fitzpatrick 2024). The relations that groups have with the state under each have perhaps been most eloquently defined by Eising (2008, 1169) whom noted that

Pluralism highlights the competition among interest organisations, corporatism points to negotiations among state institutions and peak associations, and statism stresses the element of hierarchy among state and society as well as interest organisations.

As such, it becomes evident that groups active in alternative states with alternative interest intermediation structures are included and treated differently in the policy-making process.

Looking towards how interest groups as non-state actors are viewed within alternative structures of interest intermediation, it becomes clear that the sentiment in statist contexts perceives lobbying as a negative presence, in some respect presenting as a threat to the concept of the state's authority, as is the case in France (Sallé and Marchi 2017; Fitzpatrick 2024). This is contrasted, for example, with the functional integration of interest groups in corporatist contexts, with the formal inclusion of sectoral groups within the apparatus of the state affording legitimacy to the notion of interest group integration in the policy-making process (Christiansen et al. 2010). Under pluralism, the perception of interest group's procedural and substantive legitimacy stems from the sense that such groups are representative of societal interests



that provide a voice and debate in the policy-making process (Dahl 2005; Eising 2008). To this end, we may understand that interest groups *in general* are not viewed monolithically across national contexts, but rather, are viewed with alternative perspectives from one state to the next, in part informed by the structure of interest intermediation in place.

As differences exist between national structures of interest intermediation and the way in which interest groups are both viewed and included in the policy-making process, policy-makers active in alternative states may view both the need and utility of lobbying registers differently. In this light, the transparency established by lobbying regulations may be differentially experienced by policy-makers. While research on the determinants of lobbying regulation establishment highlights that corporatism has no significant relationship with the establishment of lobbying regulations (Crepaz 2017), it cannot be doubted that the interest intermediation structures likely inform policy-maker perceptions of groups overall, as well as the interactions one has with these organisations, especially considering the alternative structures of integration afforded to groups (Eising 2008).

H1: Policy-makers in Ireland and France will view the effect of lobbying registers on their engagements with interest groups differently.

H2: Policy-makers in Ireland and France view the effect of lobbying registers on the reputation of interest groups differently.

## Non-compliance and lobbying engagements

Reflecting back on the accountability function of lobbying regulations, it is also possible that policy-makers may see prior interest group compliance with lobbying rules as a signal that informs whether or not they engage with specific groups. The enforcement of regulatory compliance is formally handled by the regulatory oversight bodies that manage and administer lobbying regulations, usually resulting in fines or other such consequences (Chari et al. 2019). However, informal avenues of enforcement may also be open to policy-makers, such as their choosing not to engage with groups that they know to have previously not complied with lobbying rules. As the common terminology of corruption and lobbying are often conflated with one another (Harstad and Svensson 2011; Năstase and Muurmans 2020; Crepaz 2024), policy-makers may look to reduce their exposure to risky engagements, an example of which could be not engaging with interest groups that have previously not ‘followed the rules’.

Engagement with previously non-compliant groups may reasonably be assumed to pose a reputational risk for the policy-maker. While research underscores that citizens afford greater procedural legitimacy to the inclusion of non-state actors in policy-making when transparency is established (Bernauer et al. 2016; Beyers and Arras 2021), it is also shown that transparency can open doors of scrutiny and critique (Newmark 2005; Fung et al. 2007). As such, policy-makers are likely to be aware of the ‘perils of transparency’ to the extent that transparency renders information public that can result in electoral or reputational





costs for the policy-maker (Fung et al. 2007). To that end, policy-makers may view interest groups' prior non-compliance with lobbying rules as a risk or barrier to engagements that are deemed potentially too costly.

Understanding lobbying to be a process of information exchange (Chalmers 2011, 2013), however, forces us to consider that policy-makers may in fact choose to engage with previously non-compliant groups conditional upon these engagements supplying specific benefits to the policy-maker. For example, given that lobbying is a process characterised by information asymmetries (Potters and Van Winden 1992), we may imagine that policy-makers may view the utility of such engagements as outweighing the potential costs of engagement. Similarly, with research highlighting the political importance of balanced group integration in policy-making processes (Aizenberg et al. 2023; Rasmussen and Reher 2023), we may also imagine that engaging with politically important groups may also been deemed to outweigh the potential costs. If knowledge of past group behaviours is that the group in question has *usually* complied with lobbying rules, policy-makers may be willing to forgive non-compliance as a mistake that may not repeat.

However, as mentioned, interest groups are viewed differently between alternative structures of interest intermediation, with groups given a more or less legitimate or integrated role in the policy-making process dependent upon their national context (Schmidt 2006b; Eising 2008; Fitzpatrick 2024). Where pluralism sees open competition and free integration of groups, statism sees groups largely excluded from policy-making and associated with negative ideas of undermining state authority. As such, policy-makers in alternative structures of interest intermediation, therefore, may be more or less willing to look past prior non-compliance given their differently assigned roles for groups in the policy-making process. State context, therefore, may guide one's decision to engage (or not) with groups, with policy-makers in statist contexts less willing to engage with non-compliant groups given the relatively low standing that interest groups hold compared to the more normalised or institutionalised role of these non-state actors under structures of pluralism and corporatism, respectively.

Looking to the particulars of the cases of Ireland and France, a point should also be made with regard to the ability of the state to function independently of interest groups. While Ireland sees groups involved in the formulation of policy, the French state has developed to have a high capacity for information gathering and policy development absent the influence of groups, namely via the professionalised nature of the *Corps D'état*. As such, one result of French statism, is that the exclusion of groups has forced the state to be more self-sufficient, lowering their need for interest group information and support (Schmidt 1996; Fitzpatrick 2024). This contrasts with the Irish system of policy-making which, given its pluralist traits, has developed in ways to provide opportunities for interest group consultation and information provision to the state (MacCarthaigh 2012).

**H3 Good Information:** Policy-makers in Ireland will be more likely to engage with non-compliant groups relative to their French contemporaries, conditional upon them providing useful information.





H3a Politically Important: Policy-makers in Ireland will be more likely to engage with non-compliant groups relative to their French contemporaries, conditional upon them representing politically important groups.

H3b Prior Compliance: Policy-makers in Ireland will be more likely to engage with non-compliant groups relative to their French contemporaries, conditional upon them being believed to have usually complied with lobbying rules in the past.

## Data and methodology

### Research design

The central component of our research is a non-experimental survey of policy-makers in Ireland and France. The survey consisted of twenty eight questions. With the objective of understanding how policy-makers engage with lobbying registers (if at all) for information, the survey design drew inspiration from supply-side studies of the informational utility of lobbying registers, namely that of Crepaz (2020) and Chari et al. (2010). The survey asked respondents about whether they have consulted their national lobbying register, as well as if they had done so for specific purposes such as learning about groups that have approached them, seeing which other actors had been lobbied, or which issues are being mobilised on (Table 1). The choice to provide these options derived from research which highlights both policy-maker demand for information to make policy (Radaelli 1995; Dunlop and Radaelli 2018; Albareda et al. 2023), as well as information about the groups they engage with (Lucas et al. 2019) to produce policy outcomes.

Additionally, our survey sought to measure policy-maker beliefs about the impacts that the transparency established by lobbying regulations have had on their perceptions of interest groups, their engagements with them, and also their engagements with previously non-compliant groups. On non-compliance, respondents were asked of their intention to engage with groups known to have previously not complied with lobbying rules dependent upon the group ‘providing good and useful information’, ‘being politically important’, or ‘being believed to have usually complied with the rules’ (Table 2). These questions were arrived at based upon Truman’s (1951) notion of groups providing either technical or political information, as well as the concept of information exchange in lobbying (Chalmers 2013), whereby interactions with non-compliant groups may provide benefits that outweigh the potential risks of such engagements.

To ensure clarity on what was meant by an ‘interest group’, respondents were provided a definition based upon that of Chari and Kritzinger (2006), defining interest groups as:

Any group, organisation, set of actors working collectively, or individual acting on behalf of an entity, that have a set of mutual interests, which they aim to see reflected in policy outcomes and political decisions via lobbying.





**Table 1** Wording of dependent variables that measure lobbying register consultation

Variable name	Question wording	Options available
Consultation	Have you ever visited or consulted the [National Lobbying Register Name] website?	Yes (1) No (0)
Consultation Frequency	How often do you visit or consult the [National Lobbying Register Name] website?	Never (1) Once or Twice a Year (2) Once Every Two to Three Months (3) Once or Twice a Month (4) Weekly (5) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To see which issues are being lobbied on</li><li>• To learn more about an interest group that has contacted me</li><li>• To see which policy-makers have been lobbied by interest groups</li><li>• Another use [Open Field]</li><li>• None of the above</li></ul>
Consultation Use	Have you ever consulted the information published on the [National Lobbying Register Name] for any of the following purposes?	

**Table 2** Wording of dependent variables that measure the role and impact of lobbying regulations

Variable name	Question wording	Options available
Reputation	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following set of statements? "Having the activities of interest groups publicly registered on the [ <i>National Lobbying Register Name</i> ] has ...improved the reputation of interest groups."	Strongly disagree (−2) to Strongly agree (2)
Justify	..allowed me to justify my interactions with interest groups to a greater extent."	
Legitimise	...has legitimised the interactions I have with interest groups." Based on the following scenarios, how likely are you to engage with a representative of an interest group that has previously not complied with lobbying regulations/registration? Non-compliance can include not registering on time, failing or avoiding to register lobbying activities, providing incomplete or missing information etc The interest group provides you with good and useful information for policy- making	Extremely Unlikely (−2) to Extremely Likely (2)
Good Info		
Important	The interest group is politically important in your [constituency/office/department]	
Prior Compliance	The interest group is believed to have usually complied with lobbying regulations	



The collection of relevant control variables were prioritised such that policy-maker experience/tenure, their perception of a range of interest groups, and one's elected/unelected status were collected over others. Regarding partisanship, we feel that policy-maker perceptions of interest group reputation stand as a superior measure that directly addresses one's viewpoint of interest groups, rather than attempting to draw such conclusions based upon one's political ideology, such as those on the right being pro-business and those on the left being pro-NGO. As such, our survey asked respondents to rank the reputation of a range of interest group types that were then clustered into economic, public, and professional categories (as categorised by Chari and Kritzing (2006)). Furthermore, considering the *de jure* political neutrality of civil servants and many unelected policy-makers, we felt that questions of partisanship could greatly reduce response rates among these actors, further justifying our approach. The measurement of *tenure* was measured as the number of terms served in office or years working in the public sector (dependent on policy-maker type). This control does double to account not only for experience in the public sector, but also one's likely level of exposure to interest groups, with those in office longer likely to have greater levels of exposure to groups over time, and thus perhaps likely to engage with lobbying register data more or less, respectively.

Table 1 outlines the measurement of our outcome variables that relate to the transparency function of lobbying registers, while Table 2 outlines those that pertain to the accountability function of these policies. For the majority of our models, a standard OLS regression approach was undertaken. For models that have as their outcomes *Consultation Use*, however, the binary measurement of these outcomes led us to employ a bivariate logistical regression approach.

The measurement of our outcome variables that tackle the transparency dimension of lobbying registers took inspiration from the work of Crepaz (2020), with an uneven ordinal variable approach measuring one's frequency of lobbying register consultation. For variables that addressed the accountability dimension of lobbying register data, five-point Likert scales were employed. The choice of five-point scales was taken so as to ensure an ease of understanding by respondents which can sometimes be lost when considering the differences from one category to the next when the number of choices expands (Alabi and Jelili 2023).

Given the multi-state nature of our research, translations were undertaken, with the French language version of our survey translated using *DeepL*, an AI-powered translation software. Native speakers that research political science proofread the final draft of this translation and provided any necessary adjustments. It should be said that only two adjustments were required given the high level of accuracy of *DeepL*, highlighting its utility for those wishing to field comparative multi-lingual survey research. The survey was constructed using the Qualtrics survey platform.

## Data collection

The data for our research was gathered via a self-fielded survey among elected and unelected policy-makers in Ireland and France from late 2022 to early 2023. Irish policy-makers were surveyed from November 7th, 2022, until January 2nd,



2023, with their French contemporaries surveyed from April 3rd, 2023, until May 30th, 2023. Survey recipients received two reminders over the course of their respective data collection period to participate in the study. Policy-makers received an email invitation to participate in the research along with a personal link to our survey. The use of personal links reduced the risk of duplicate or multiple responses by policy-makers and enabled any potential duplicates to be identified prior to our data analysis being undertaken. Given the specific population of concern and funding restraints, a self-fielding approach was adopted akin to studies that research lobbyists’ utility of lobbying register data (Crepaz 2020) or lobbying strategies more generally (Coen 1997, 1998; Crepaz and Chari 2023).

Our objective was to conduct *as close to a census approach as possible* when looking to understand how those policy-makers covered by lobbying regulations engage with them and their data. To that end, policy-makers that are considered ‘designated public officials’ (DPOs) (i.e. the public actors that when an interest group lobbies them, the interest group must register on the lobbying register) were deemed to be an appropriate population as they are the actors listed as being targets of lobbying in their respective lobbying regulation laws. This approach ensured that we surveyed actors that actually participate in the demand side of the lobbying process.

As shown in Table 3, the response rate for Irish participants was 12.4%. The response rate of French policy-makers was just below half of this, standing at 6.1%. While this is a low return, two points of note should be made. First, the statist structure of interest intermediation in France produces an attitude of non-engagement with lobbyists (Fitzpatrick 2024), and other studies have noted that the French case proves difficult to research as a result (see, for example, Junk et al. (2024)). Secondly, given the over-representation of pluralist states in interest group research, the insights provided by our data are useful given the novelty of the data and case itself. As such, while we would have enjoyed a much higher response rate in both instances, as a first step for the field, we feel that our research presents a key insight into the ways in which policy-makers engage with lobbying register data. Furthermore, as Table 4 highlights, the proportion of elected versus unelected policy-makers in our sample closely resembles the proportions of such actors in our DPO population, indicating that the data are broadly representative along these lines.

**Table 3** Distribution summary and response rates

	Ireland	France
Mailing List N	1962	3814
Successfully Sent N	1675	3431
N Responses	207	210
Response Rate	12.4%	6.1%





**Table 4** Proportion of elected and unelected policy-makers contained in the population and sample, as well as completion rate summaries

	Population <i>N</i>	Population %	Sample <i>N</i>	Sample %	Sample (–NA) %	Mean Completion Rate	1st Quartile	Median	3rd Quartile
<i>Ireland</i>									
Sample	–	–	–	–	–	86.7%	87%	100%	100%
Elected	1106	65.3%	113	54.6%	57.9%	89.3%	93%	100%	100%
Unelected	588	34.7%	82	39.6%	42.1%	94.4%	100%	100%	100%
NA	–	–	12	5.8%	–	–	–	–	–
Total	1694	100%	207	100%	100%	–	–	–	–
<i>France</i>									
Sample	–	–	–	–	–	69.2%	50%	81%	100%
Elected	921	23.7%	47	22.4%	26%	70%	50%	81%	100%
Unelected	2960	76.3%	134	63.8%	74%	70.4%	50%	81%	100%
NA	–	–	29	13.8%	–	–	–	–	–
Total	3881	100%	210	100%	100%	–	–	–	–

## Case selection

Ireland and France were chosen because of their relatively similar structures of lobbying regulation, similar timing of lobbying register establishment, and the similar searchability of their respective lobbying register interfaces. As Chari et al. (2019) note, both states score closely on the CPI scale of regulatory robustness regarding their lobbying regulations, with Ireland scoring 37 and France 42, with both being considered as having lobbying regulations of ‘medium robustness’. This graded similarity renders them among the *most comparable* in terms of their relative stringency. Additionally, both states are members of the EU, meaning that their interest groups and policy-makers would have equal exposure to EU-level lobbying laws. The regulation of lobbying is also mandatory in both states.

In terms of timing, Ireland established its current lobbying regulations in 2015, with the establishment of a French national register in 2016. While France had some experience with lobbying regulations since 2009, these were in-house affairs managed by individual parliamentary chambers (Chari et al. 2019). Both lobbying registers appear as relatively easy to use ‘search engine-like’ interfaces, similar to the EU’s transparency register. In terms of their comparability, from a user perspective, they fall within what may be deemed as ‘user friendly’ lobbying registers when compared to other more out-of-date interfaces, like Germany’s pre-2021 *Lobbyliste*.

Both registers publish rather wide sets of data on registered groups, with the name of registered lobbyists, the organisations they represent, as well as relevant contact information being provided for each organisation. Additionally, both registers provide details about the actions of interest via regular publicly published returns, outlining in basic terms the actions of the group, whether third party clients were represented, the levels of government intervention undertaken via lobbying, as well as broad subject areas or policy domains addressed. Being slightly more robust, the French register includes some basic financial information about interest groups, while the Irish register does not publish financial data.<sup>1</sup>

Given this project’s desire to analyse the effect of policy-makers’ national interest intermediation structure on the transparency and accountability functions of lobbying registers, varying this between cases was key. With France noted to have a structure of interest intermediation that is more statist (Schmidt 1996, 2006a; Fitzpatrick 2024) and Ireland presenting as more pluralist (Murphy 2005; MacCarthaigh 2012; Crepaz and Chari 2023),<sup>2</sup> both states have structures that provide the necessary variation needed to analyse the role that this key environmental variable plays.

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<sup>1</sup> Chari et al. (2019) provide an excellent comparative overview of the register’s development and enforcement.

<sup>2</sup> While it is debated as to whether or not Ireland presents as more pluralist or corporatist (Murphy 2005), the practice of lobbying in Ireland and the nature of sectoral competition and overlap among groups leads one to argue that pluralism is more the case in Ireland than corporatism. While there are some corporatist tendencies, such as the strange ‘subterranean election’ and structure of Ireland’s upper house (Gallagher and Weeks 2003), these do not necessarily function as one would expect under corporatism. Furthermore, the demise of institutions such as the social partnership further implores is to consider the lack of corporatism *in practice* in Ireland today (see, for example Donaghey (2008)).





Additionally, when looking to the topology of interest intermediation introduced by Fitzpatrick (2024), both structures of interest intermediation present at opposite ends of the spectrum of inclusion, with pluralist structures being the most porous and statist structures the most exclusive, providing the strongest theoretical foundation for exploring differences in policy-maker behaviours.

## Results and discussion

Our analysis follows that we first outline our results that relate to the transparency function of lobbying registers—that of policy-makers' utility of lobbying register data. Thereafter, we present findings on policy-makers' stated role of transparency in guiding their perceptions of interest groups, and their interactions with such actors, as well as the role of accountability regarding their engagement with previously non-compliant organisations. Together, these latter sections directly address the accountability function of lobbying regulations.

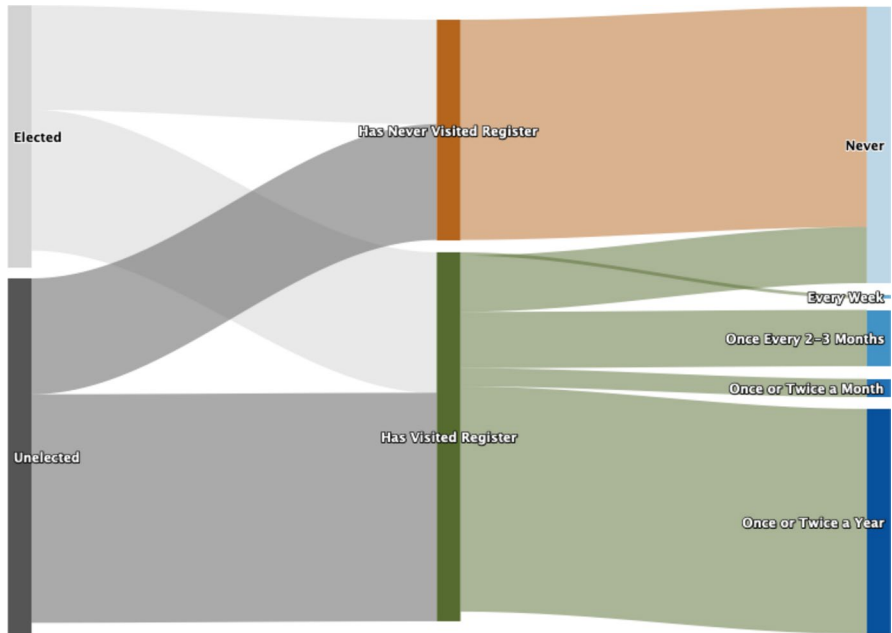
### Lobbying register transparency functions: registers' informational utility

Turning our attention first to the general consultation patterns of policy-makers, the Sankey plot displayed in Fig. 1 highlights that a majority of policy-makers have engaged or consulted their lobbying register. Disaggregating this by policy-maker type, 66% ( $N=138$ ) of unelected policy-makers state that they have consulted their lobbying register website, with this figure standing at 57% ( $N=85$ ) for their elected contemporaries. Overall, general consultation of the register appears at first glance to be a relatively widespread action. As such, the transparency function of lobbying registers to provide clarity on the lobbying process appears to have been met with interaction by those on the demand side of this process.

Figure 1, however, also highlights that policy-maker consultation of lobbying registers is an infrequent undertaking. Around 61% of policy-makers ( $N=136$ ) claim to only consult their national lobbying register once or twice a year, with just two claiming that such consultations take place weekly. As the categories of frequency increase, the relative proportion of policy-makers claiming to consult with said fervour reduces accordingly. As such, while policy-maker consultation of lobbying registers is a widely experienced activity, such activities appear to be infrequent. This finding is in line with that of Crepaz (2020) who addressed the consultation patterns of interest groups, with policy-makers appearing to engage with lobbying registers in similar patterns as their supply-side contemporaries.

Considering policy-maker's purposes of lobbying register consultation, Fig. 2 provides a visual plot of these patterns. As shown, a majority of policy-makers (57%,  $N=191$ ) do not engage with lobbying registers as a source of information on lobbyists or the broader lobbying environment. As such, we can conclude that this majority do not see lobbying registers as useful information sources and may browse the interfaces out of curiosity or as part of irregular and unimportant tasks. However, Fig. 2 provides evidence that engaging with lobbying register data for specific

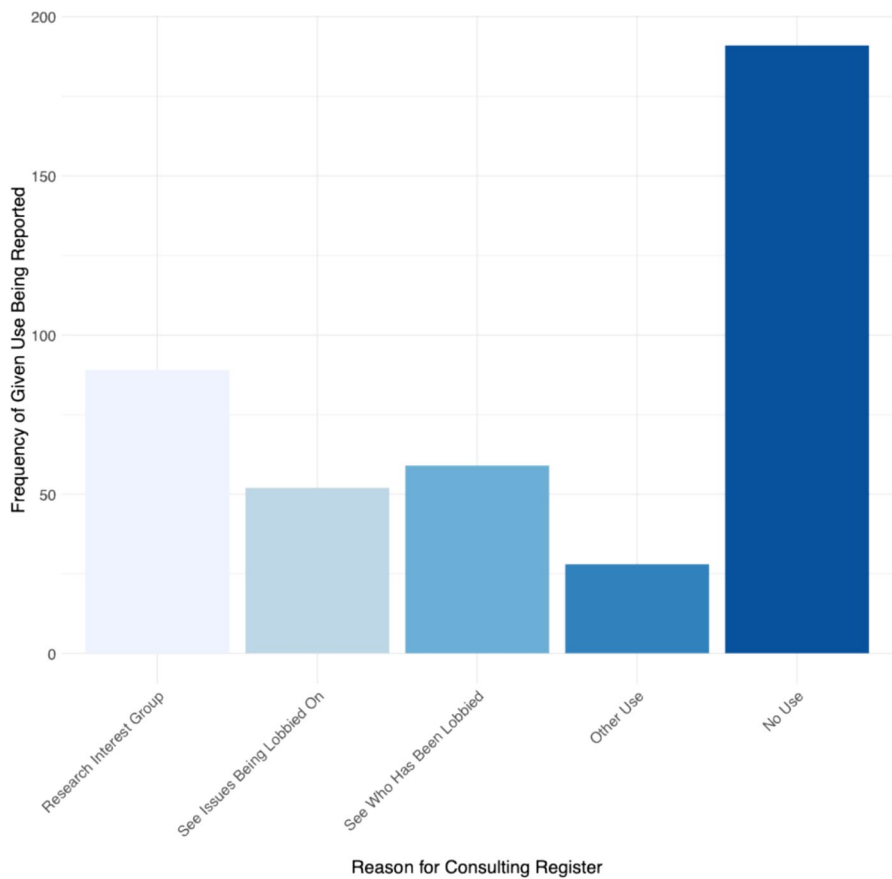




**Fig. 1** Sankey chart depicting the proportion of elected and unelected officials that have consulted their lobbying register website, and the frequency with which they do visit it

information purposes is rather widespread, attesting to the transparency function of lobbying registers. To that end, while a ‘small minority’ of lobbyists engage with lobbying registers as an informational tool (Crepaz 2020), it is not the case that the minority of policy-makers that actively engage with lobbying registers as a data source is that small. 27% ( $N=89$ ) of policy-makers, for example, stated that they use lobbying register data to learn more about an interest group that has contacted them. To that end, a large chunk of policy-makers engage with public lobbying register data as a background checking tool for learning about interest groups when they are engaging with them, speaking to the notion that policy-makers require lay knowledge in order to effectively execute their roles (Radaelli 1995).

Policy-makers stated that they engage with lobbying register data to a lesser extent for more process-oriented functions. For example, 18% ( $N=59$ ) stated that they consult lobbying register data for seeing which policy-makers have been approached by interest groups, while 16% ( $N=52$ ) state that they engage with register data to see which issues are currently being lobbied on. As such, beyond the background checking function for learning of specific groups, a small cluster of policy-makers appear to see lobbying registers as an informational tool to understand the lobbying landscape more fully. This speaks broadly to the notion of lobbying as an industry marked by private information and informational asymmetries (Potters and Van Winden 1992). The public nature of lobbying register data appears to in-part rebalance these asymmetries regarding broader environmental information on the lobbying and policy-making process.



**Fig. 2** Bar plot depicting policy-makers’ strategic utilisation of lobbying register data

A small minority of policy-makers provided additional answers as to their purpose of lobbying register consultation. Some policy-makers noted that they consult their national lobbying register in order to check if a lobbying return that mentioned their name was accurate, or that an engagement was registered. As the onus of registration falls upon the lobbyists, not the policy-maker, the consultation of lobbying registers data in this manner highlights policy-makers’ awareness of the potential reputation risks that inaccurate filings could have on them. Policy-makers, therefore, are aware of the risks of accountability established by lobbying register transparency, with some engaging with registers to ensure they are not caught without notice if something that concerns them personally is mis/not registered. Checking the register following contact from the media, or following a freedom of information request were also among some of the additional uses listed, further capitulating this notion. Additionally, some policy-makers noted that they engage with the register in order to learn about the bounds of registration in order to understand if some of the interactions they have with groups are lobbying or not under the law. As such, a



**Table 5** Regression models estimating the relationship between policy-maker characteristics and policy-makers' specific uses of lobbying register data

	Contacted Me	Which PM	Issues Lobbied	No Use	Other Use
(Intercept)	0.16 (0.15)	0.30* (0.13)	0.16 (0.13)	0.56*** (0.16)	0.11 (0.10)
Elected Policy-Maker	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.07 (0.06)	0.26*** (0.08)	-0.11* (0.05)
Ireland (ref. France)	-0.05 (0.07)	0.04 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	-0.20** (0.08)	0.18*** (0.05)
Tenure	0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Reputation of Economic Groups	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.02)
Reputation of Professional Groups	0.08 (0.06)	0.04 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.06)	0.02 (0.04)
Reputation of Public Groups	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.09* (0.04)	0.04 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.03)
AIC	319.29	243.12	226.31	352.72	116.83
BIC	347.26	271.10	254.28	380.70	144.80
Log Likelihood	-151.64	-113.56	-105.15	-168.36	-50.41
Deviance	49.51	36.24	33.83	56.79	21.60
Num. obs	244	244	244	244	244

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$

small handful of policy-makers may engage with lobbying registers not as an informational tool, but rather as a tool to understand the bounds or requirements of one's professional role when engaging with non-state actors.

The models presented in Table 5 signal that while state context does not appear to have a significant relationship with any of the specific uses of lobbying register data, Irish policy-makers are significantly more likely to engage with lobbying registers for some strategic or informational purpose relative to their French contemporaries. An exact explanation for this is lacking, with the two competing positions being that the relatively more porous system of Irish pluralism demands greater amounts of information about groups given their higher likely engagement with them, while the counter would note that the more exclusive setting of France demands more information because of the greater exclusion (and thus, lower socialisation between policy-makers and interest groups). Additional research that garners a greater understanding of the information-gathering practices of policy-makers based in both cases would serve well to address these results more concretely.

Like their supply-side contemporaries, therefore, some policy-makers *actively* and *strategically* engage with lobbying registers as an information source. However, consultations are infrequent and are likely to constitute secondary sources of information rather than performing as primary sources of data that replace existing information sources.



## Lobbying register accountability functions: policy-maker perceptions

Addressing Hypotheses 1 and 2, we now turn our attention to understanding the relationship between policy-makers' state context and the way in which they feel the transparency established by lobbying registers has shaped their view of these actors, and their interactions with them. Table 6 presents the coefficients of models that have as their outcomes policy-makers' perceptions that lobbying registers have *legitimised* their interactions with groups, have improved the *reputation* of interest groups, and have allowed them to *justify* their interactions to great extent. As presented, only in model *Legit (3)* do we see a significant effect of state context when relevant controls are included. To that end, policy-makers in Ireland are associated with being more likely to state that they feel the transparency established by lobbying registers has improved the legitimacy of their engagements with interest groups. We may accept Hypothesis 1, therefore, so far as we speak to this aspect of policy-maker perceptions. Concerning policy-maker differences by state context on the ability to justify these engagements as a result of transparency, we cannot be so certain. Additionally, there are null results for the impact of transparency on one's perception of interest group reputations, signalling that policy-makers in both states are likely to view the effects of transparency on group reputation in a similar manner.

We acknowledge that while not experimental in nature, these observational findings signal clear differences in the mindset of policy-makers in Ireland and France, respectively, when considering transparency's effect on the 'black box' of lobbying. The results speak to the entrenched exclusion and negative attitudes towards lobbyists in statist France (Schmidt 1996, 2006a; Fitzpatrick 2024), relative to those in more pluralist Ireland. As such, French policy-makers may find it more difficult to legitimise their interactions with groups *in any case* as these interactions are considered broadly illegitimate as dictated by the structure of interest intermediation. It could be that the 'perils of transparency' (Fung et al. 2007) that lobbying registers enable (by rendering such engagements public) prevent policy-makers in more statist France, for example, from experiencing meaningful positive differences in this regard.

It is likely that transparency's null effects on one's ability to justify engagements with interest groups, or their perceptions of groups themselves, stem from the notion that reputation may draw from the information or 'value' that a group can provide. As such, with lobbying often framed as an exchange of information that leverages group access (Chalmers 2013), one's justification for engaging with groups may more heavily be premised on the service they provide to the policy-maker, rather than upon state context or interest intermediations structure. Additionally, while transparency effects ones' willingness to cooperate with interest groups (Martinsson 2025), it is likely that transparency has no effect on one's perception of interest group reputation when the registration requirements of lobbying regulations are mandatory, as is the case of both Ireland and France. Given that interest groups perceive reputational benefits of registration under voluntary regimes (Nästase and Muurmans 2020), research that explores policy-maker perceptions between voluntary and mandatory contexts may shed greater light on this dynamic.



Table 6 Regression models estimating the role of policy-maker characteristics and policy-makers' perceptions on the effect

	Legit. (1)	Legit. (2)	Legit. (3)	Rep. (1)	Rep. (2)	Rep. (3)	Justify. (1)	Justify. (2)	Justify. (3)
(Intercept)	0.43*** (0.07)	0.29** (0.09)	-0.19 (0.29)	0.52*** (0.07)	0.47*** (0.08)	-0.34 (0.26)	0.35*** (0.07)	0.35*** (0.09)	-0.08 (0.28)
Elected Policy-Maker	0.16 (0.12)		-0.00 (0.13)	0.18 (0.10)		0.14 (0.12)	0.04 (0.11)		0.02 (0.13)
Ireland (ref. France)		0.32** (0.12)	0.37*** (0.13)		0.21* (0.10)	0.14 (0.12)		0.04 (0.11)	0.05 (0.13)
Tenure			-0.07 (0.04)			0.00 (0.04)			-0.03 (0.04)
Reputation of Economic Groups			0.08 (0.07)			0.07 (0.06)			0.11 (0.07)
Reputation of Professional Groups			0.18 (0.11)			0.18 (0.10)			0.15 (0.10)
Reputation of Public Groups			0.03 (0.09)			0.08 (0.08)			-0.03 (0.09)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.03	0.09	0.01	0.02	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.04
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.03	0.06	0.01	U.01	0.05	-0.00	-0.00	0.02
Num. obs	243	243	238	243	243	238	243	243	238

mp < 0.001; \*mp < 0.01; \*\*p < 0.05



**Lobbying register accountability functions: non-compliance**

The results presented in Table 7 indicate that for all three conditions, Irish policy-makers are more likely to engage with interest groups that are known to have previously not complied with lobbying regulations. As such, we may confidently except Hypotheses 3, 3a, and 3b. As expected, state structure and the negative weight of lobbying in France appears to restrict French policy-makers in affording a ‘benefit of the doubt’ with regard to engaging with groups known to have skirted lobbying laws. French policy-makers, therefore, appear to provide greater informal accountability enforcement to lobbying rules via access, relative to their Irish contemporaries. As such, the notion of lobbying regulations providing accountability to the process beyond the formal regulatory structures of enforcement, sees informal accountability appear to be differently experienced dependent upon the state context in which one is a lobbyist.

Regarding the conditions of groups providing useful information or being politically important for an office/constituency, it may also be that the relatively greater self-sufficiency of the French bureaucracy (Schmidt 1996; Fitzpatrick 2024) results in French policy-makers reducing their risk of engaging with known non-compliant groups, as information or political support can be gathered from within the structures of the state. It is not necessarily the case that the explanations of state context guiding the provision of a benefit of the doubt *or* reducing the need to gather information externally if it can be avoided, are mutually exclusive. Additional research

**Table 7** Regression models estimating the relationship between policy-maker characteristics and their likelihood of conditional engagement with an interest group that has previously not complied with lobbying regulations

	Good Info	Important	Prior compliance
(Intercept)	−0.75* (0.38)	−1.12** (0.38)	−0.65 (0.36)
Elected Policy-Maker	−0.12 (0.17)	−0.22 (0.18)	−0.16 (0.17)
Ireland (ref. France)	0.81*** (0.17)	0.60*** (0.18)	0.76*** (0.17)
Tenure	−0.01 (0.05)	−0.02 (0.05)	−0.09 (0.05)
Reputation of Economic Groups	0.08 (0.09)	0.11 (0.09)	0.08 (0.08)
Reputation of Professional Groups	0.06 (0.14)	0.24 (0.14)	−0.03 (0.13)
Reputation of Public Groups	0.12 (0.12)	0.01 (0.12)	0.27* (0.12)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.12	0.09	0.12
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.10	0.07	0.10
Num. obs	244	244	244

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$





on the French case, and statist cases more broadly, would do well to provide even greater clarity on the process of policy-maker engagements with interest groups, contextualising these patterns further.

## Conclusion

Lobbying registers are examples of public data sources on the lobbying environment. In a practitioner focussed paper, De Bruycker (2019) highlighted that these policy tools function as maps or directories of the lobbying landscape, with others showing that those on the supply side of the lobbying equation strategically engage with these databases as information sources (Crepaz 2020). In this paper, we show that policy-makers—those on the demand side of the lobbying process—are also aware of the potential informational utility of lobbying registers. A significant cohort of policy-makers look to lobbying registers as a background checking tool to learn more about interest groups and the lobbying environment more broadly in their capacity as state actors that engage with non-state actors. Policy-makers, therefore, *actively* and *strategically* engage with lobbying registers as information sources.

While the lobbying register consultation patterns of policy-makers are infrequent, it is acknowledged that lobbying registers likely serve as a secondary information source for policy-makers in their accumulation of what Radaelli termed ‘lay’ knowledge (1995). In an industry marked by private information and information asymmetries (Potters and Van Winden 1992), lobbying registers appear to have done their task in opening the black box of lobbying, allowing those within it (and not just beyond it) to comprehend the landscape and those that populate it with greater clarity.

Our analysis has also presented evidence that state context matters when considering how policy-makers perceive the relative impact of lobbying register transparency on their interactions with groups, as well as their willingness to engage with known previously non-compliant organisations. To that end, our research not only provides meaningful insights into the cases of France and Ireland, but justifies the broader conduction of comparative lobbying research that leverages state intermediation structures as key independent variables.

Looking at the more micro-level, the models we present show a largely insignificant relationship between policy-maker type and the use of lobbying register data as an information source, as well as something that may guide one’s interactions with non-compliant groups. As elected policy-makers are exposed to broader reputation costs or concerns relative to their more insulated unelected contemporaries (Fearon 1994), and given the different information demands of policy-makers (Albareda et al. 2023), differences among these actors may not have been surprising. This is especially the case when one considers that the terms lobbying and corruption are often conflated ((Harstad and Svensson 2011). As such, we see an opportunity for further research to expand upon our findings and more deeply explore the role of transparency in shaping alternative policy-maker actions, engagements, and perceptions in new contexts and via new data.



Looking ahead, the interoperability and quality of lobbying register data should also be considered by research that seeks to address how these policy instruments are differentially experienced across contexts. As scholarship has highlighted that not all lobbying regulations are created equal (Chari et al. 2019) and that the quality and type of data published on alternative registers differs (Coen et al. 2024), future research that attends to the utility of lobbying registers, or the role of state context in guiding behaviours, should also consider differences among lobbying register designs. While we have held as constant as possible the interfaces and quality of the lobbying registers addressed in this paper, research that varies the interoperability, quality, or structures of lobbying registers in addition to state interest intermediation structures would benefit the field in understanding how the fullness of registers themselves contribute to their use as a public data sources. Doing so would build upon the findings presented in this paper, enabling a more complete understanding of how lobbying regulations function *in practice* rather than just *on paper*.

In practical terms, our contribution also underscores opportunities for the regulators of lobbying registers to more widely advertise the utility that these transparency policies may hold for actors that receive lobbyists. Communicating that lobbying registers have potential benefits rather than existing as regulatory burdens could have positive impacts on the lobbying process for policy-makers. While often understaffed, non-costly efforts to communicate the ‘directory-like’ nature of lobbying registers could improve the rates of engagement among policy-makers, especially for those that may be newly elected, lack prior understanding of interest groups, or have yet to develop strong networks with stakeholders. Doing so may be especially important, given that the onus of registration falls on interest groups rather than those lobbied. For those that are not required to visit lobbying registers, therefore, regulators may seek to proliferate the informational utility of transparency policies as a means to solicit, background check, and understand more fully groups that may complement their work in the provision of public policy.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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