



Article

Measuring the size and scope of the EU interest group population

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Abstract

We present a new data set enumerating the population of organizations listed and/or registered as lobbyists in the European Union. In the first part of the paper we describe how we arrived at the population data set by drawing on three independent sources (CONECCS; Landmarks; European Parliament registry). We briefly discuss the validity of these registers in the context of recent substantial changes to each of them. In the second part, we present descriptive information on the number and type of groups as well as their territorial origins. In the final section, we outline potential research questions that can be addressed with the new data set for further research on the role of groups in the EU policy process.

Keywords

EU, interest groups, quantitative data set

Introduction

Groups representing a large variety of interests, from countries within and outside of Europe and geographically rooted at the regional, national, supranational and

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international levels are active in European Union (EU) politics. In this paper we introduce a new data set that tries to capture the number and diversity of groups active at the EU level. A number of public registries and commercial sources on actors that engage in EU politics exist. Yet each of these sources is characterized by particular insufficiencies regarding the representativeness of the sample of groups they contain (for a comprehensive discussion and empirical comparison, see Berkhout and Lowery, 2008; Berkhout and Lowery, 2010a). Our goal is to establish the most complete population list of EU-registered interest groups based on a variety of sources. This can then form the basis of better generalization and higher-quality research among scholars interested in representation and lobbying in the EU. Our data set will be made freely available to the public in spreadsheet format through our website.¹ The goal of this paper is to explain the process of compiling the data set, to consider the general contours of the interest group population listed there, and to discuss the research that this new resource will make possible.

In the next section we outline the sources that were used in creating the data set and the decisions we took when merging these sources to the ‘EU interest group population data set 2007–8’. We then provide a description of the make-up of the EU interest group population along two dimensions: first, the type of interest a group represents and, second, a group’s level of territorial affiliation, i.e. the level at which a group is organizationally rooted. After comparing the data set introduced here with the CONECCS database previously used by Mahoney (2003), we sketch the kind of research questions for which scholars might want to draw on the new data set. Following an assessment of the issues of maintaining the database into the future, in the conclusion we summarize our goals for this long-run collaboration.

The EU interest group population dataset 2007–8

The EU interest group population data set introduced here draws on three different sources:

1. The Commission’s CONECCS database, in which groups participating in Commission committees or hearings register on a voluntary basis. For our data set we drew on the August 2007 version of the CONECCS database.²
2. The European Parliament’s (EP) accreditation registry in which all groups and their representatives are listed that obtained the EP’s special entry pass that is, according to Rule 9 of the EP’s Rules of Procedure, needed for lobbyists to access the EP’s buildings and to interact with members of the EP. Our data set contains the April 2008 version of the EP registry.
3. Landmarks’ ‘European Public Affairs Directory,’ a commercial register of groups, firms, national and international institutions as well as regional actors active in EU politics in Brussels. The Landmarks directory used here was published online in July 2007.

As the information in Table 1 shows, the sources that went into our data set vary considerably in size. The Landmarks directory is the largest, listing 2522 different organizations active in EU politics. As mentioned above, Landmarks covers not only national, supranational and international interest groups but also businesses, international organizations, law firms, consultancies and public actors such as regional representations to the EU. This inclusive quality distinguishes Landmarks most strongly from CONECCS, whose focus is on EU collective actors, that is, membership associations organized at the EU level. In addition, it registers only Euro-groups that are ‘considered representative by the Commission’. This is not surprising given the European Commission’s consultation policy to preferentially involve and interact with EU-level organizations representing a common EU position (for example, Greenwood, 2007: 343). Not least as a result of this restricted scope, the CONECCS database is considerably smaller than Landmarks, covering only 749 organizations. In addition, whereas the EP registry seems to be as inclusive as Landmarks with respect to the types of actors covered, Landmarks is numerically more encompassing than the EP registry, which covers 1534 organizations in the version used here (Berkhout and Lowery, 2008: 505–6). In sum, the three data sources do not cover the same populations. Landmarks is much broader; CONECCS is focused on EU-level associations (as opposed to, say, corporations that might have a significant lobbying presence in Brussels); and the EP registry includes simply any organization that has a door pass to enter the Parliament building. In a nutshell, our data set is as inclusive as Landmarks and the EP registry and much more representative as regards the territorial origins of groups than CONECCS. Since it avoids biases and/or omissions of any of the three individual data sources, it is much more encompassing than any of these individual sources. A direct side-by-side comparison of the territorial and functional composition of the individual data sets to evaluate their respective coverage could not be done, because the three data sources vary considerably in the information provided, such as how they categorize the various groups by type. Thus, for example, data limitations in the original source material make it impossible to directly compare each source by the number of groups of each type included.³ Still, by putting these three sources together and deleting the duplicate entries, we have created the most inclusive and accurate list of lobbying organizations in the EU yet compiled. Table 1 summarizes the sources from which the data come.

Taken individually, the three sources list a total of 4805 individual organizations. In order to delete duplicate entries we first merged them all into the same electronic format. Afterwards, the Landmarks entries were electronically reordered alphabetically. In a further step the Landmarks entries were made grammatically compatible with the CONECCS and EP register entries by, for example, replacing abbreviations (for example, ‘Ass.’) with full words (for example, ‘Association’). After the data sets were brought into a common grammatical/spelling format, we first merged the Landmarks with the CONECCS data set, ordered them alphabetically and then deleted duplicates, of which there were 489 in this step. Finally, the combined Landmarks/CONECCS data set was merged with the EP register and

again ordered alphabetically to delete duplicates, of which we discovered an additional 487. Additional duplicates were identified through manual searching, generally from slightly different names or spellings used for the same organization. In all, we deleted 1105 duplicates out of 4805, or 23 percent of the total, resulting in a final data set with 3700 lobbying organizations.

Of course, 3700 organizations is certainly an underestimate of the actual population of all interest groups, institutions, businesses, think tanks, law firms, local governments and other actors that engage in EU politics. However, given the quality of the data sources on which we drew to establish our data set, we are confident to have included virtually all important actors that are regularly involved in EU lobbying (for a more extensive discussion of the quality of Landmarks, CONECCS and the EP accreditation registry, see Berkhout and Lowery, 2008). Our estimation of the EU interest group population is certainly low, however, because some entities may be only occasionally involved in EU lobbying or exert their influence through indirect means, and we do not capture those actors here. Considering the multi-level structure of the EU political system, a considerable share of EU lobbying activities can be expected to be directed at politicians and bureaucrats in national institutions and taking place in the national political arena (Beyers, 2002; Eising, 2004; Pappi and Henning, 1999; Wonka, 2008). These would escape our attention. Although Landmarks and the EP accreditation registry contain national actors, their focus is on those actors active at the EU level in Brussels. We do not think that it is possible to systematically compile a list of all such actors in a general data set. By contrast, a research approach focused on a particular policy debate or a sample of issues would certainly identify organizations active in an indirect manner or with a national-level focus for their lobbying efforts. These groups would be engaged in EU lobbying but not in lobbying the institutions of the

Table 1. Sources of the EU interest group population data set 2007–8

<i>Dataset</i>	<i>Type of organization included</i>	<i>Number of organizations</i>
CONECCS	EU-level private actors	749
Landmarks directory ^a	National, EU-level and international private and public actors	2522
EP accreditation register	National, EU-level and international private and public actors	1534
Total groups listed in the three sources		4805
Minus duplicates		–1105
Final data set		3700

^aThe Landmarks directory lists organizations in different categories (trade organizations, professional organizations, etc.). Some organizations are listed in more than one category. The figure of 2522 in the table refers to the number of unique organizations listed, after deleting duplicates.

EU in Brussels. When interpreting and using the data in our data set, one should keep in mind that the groups included are those regularly active in lobbying the institutions of the EU in Brussels, not necessarily the individual member states.

A description of the EU interest group population

The data set presented here provides information on (1) the name of the organization, (2) the data source, (3) the type of organization (see also Table 2), (4) whether the organization is a liaison office of a national office and (5) whether the ‘mother’ organization is also registered, the organizations’ territorial origin (see Table 4) and, where applicable, an organization’s country of origin (Table 3). Table 2 presents the breakdown of organizations by the set of group types used in the Landmarks directory. Note that the directory distinguishes between organizations organized at the EU level and similar organizations or federations of organizations from the national level.

As has been observed in earlier analyses of interest group populations in the USA, the EU and various national systems, professional associations and corporations (that is, groups representing business interests), provide the largest share of groups mobilized for political action, and Table 2 shows that the current EU interest representation population is no exception to this trend. Combining the

Table 2. Types of organization registered to lobby the EU

<i>Group type</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
1. Professional associations and interest groups	1848	50.0
2. Corporations	493	13.3
3. Chamber of Commerce	37	1.0
4. Consultants	220	6.0
5. National employers’ federations	58	1.6
6. International organizations	118	3.2
7. Law firms	124	3.4
8. National trade and professional organizations	252	6.8
9. Regions (including municipalities)	269	7.3
10. Think tanks and training	146	4.0
11. Labour unions	30	0.8
12. National associations of Chambers of Commerce	27	0.7
14. Political parties ^a	7	0.2
13. Other	9	0.2
Missing	62	1.7
Total	3700	100.2

^a‘Political parties’ is not a Landmark category.

Table 3. Country of origin of organizations registered to lobby the EU

<i>Country</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
EU-15 states		
Germany	380	17.2
UK	294	13.3
France	292	13.2
Belgium	171	7.8
Netherlands	152	6.9
Italy	139	6.3
Spain	78	3.5
Austria	59	2.7
Sweden	47	2.1
Denmark	44	2.0
Finland	19	0.9
Portugal	16	0.7
Ireland	15	0.7
Luxemburg	12	0.5
Greece	5	0.2
New EU-27 states		
Poland	30	1.4
Czech Republic	18	0.8
Slovakia	13	0.6
Hungary	13	0.6
Romania	7	0.3
Latvia	4	0.2
Estonia	4	0.2
Slovenia	3	0.1
Lithuania	2	0.1
Cyprus	2	0.1
Malta	2	0.1
Bulgaria	2	0.1
Selected non-EU states		
USA	173	7.8
Switzerland	73	3.3

Note: The table lists the country of origin for those organizations that list it. For non-EU states, we include only the two (quantitatively) most prominent home countries.

Table 4. Territorial origin of organizations registered to lobby the EU

<i>Territorial origin</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Subnational	157	4.2
EU branch of subnational organization	140	3.8
National	1380	37.3
EU branch of national organization	161	4.4
EU level	1366	36.9
European, not EU (Brussels based)	308	8.3
International, not European	127	3.4
Missing	61	1.7
Total	3700	100.0

categories associated with business interests (for example, all those except international organizations, regions, think tanks, political parties and other), and taking into account that not all those listed as 'professional groups and interest groups' are business groups, a very large proportion represent business interests.⁴

We can also assess the national origin of the national and regional groups present in the data set. Table 3 presents this distribution and shows, as expected, that representatives from large member states dominate the scene. Given the French étatiste tradition (Eising, 2004), it is perhaps surprising that there are almost as many French as British groups. Moreover, Benelux groups clearly profit from their geographical proximity to the EU capital Brussels, as actors from these countries are clearly overrepresented given their relative sizes. In addition, organizations from Eastern Europe so far seem to be hesitant to enter the Brussels scene, or at least by 2007–8 they had not made the transition to sustained activity in the EU capital. This is, perhaps, most remarkable for groups from Poland, which is one of the biggest member states of the EU and one of the economically most powerful of the East European member states. At the same time, given the 2007–8 period covered by our data set, it might not be very surprising for groups from Eastern Europe, particularly groups from Romania and Bulgaria, which entered the EU only in 2007, to be only scantily represented in Brussels. The picture might, however, change considerably in future versions of our data set, which will cover time periods that allowed interest groups from East European member states more time to adapt to and represent their interests in the EU's political arena. We also note a large number of organizations from non-member states present in Brussels. We have not reported all of them here but restricted ourselves to organizations from the USA and Switzerland, both of which have more domestic organizations active in Brussels than the typical EU member state, even restricting the analysis to the long-established EU-15 members. Switzerland, which is comparable in size to Austria, Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary and Greece, is represented by considerably more organizations than these member states. The USA ranks fourth in its

national contingent of interest groups in Brussels, behind only Germany, the UK and France.

Table 4 shows the territorial level at which groups present in the EU interest population organizationally originate. National and subnational organizations represent approximately 2 percent of the population, rising to 50 percent with the inclusion of EU branches of national groups. EU and European groups together represent 45 percent, with the remainder being international organizations or of unknown origin. Although the EU has been conceptualized as a highly integrated multi-level political system (Grande, 1996; Kohler-Koch, 1996; Marks et al., 1996), the numerical strength of regional and national organizations and the degree of political integration this expresses might still be surprising. Clearly, about half of the population of groups active in Brussels have their primary organizational roots in the nation-state or the regions.

Comparing CONECCS and the new data set

For years CONECCS was taken as the universe of groups active in Brussels (and we provide 2003, 2004 and 2007 versions of the database online for scholars interested in exploring changes over time⁵) but our new database has much broader coverage. Mahoney (2003) constructed a database from the information available on CONECCS for nearly 700 civil society organizations active in the EU in 2003. The data set includes information on group type, membership size and spread across the European states, organizational character, creation date, founding state, policy area concentrations, Commission funding, positions on consultation committees and relations with Commission Directorates General (DG). Further, from this information she coded: the type of group from self-reported organizational objectives, the level at which the group is organized, and whether or not the organization maintained a Brussels office. We can compare the characteristics of the CONECCS database with the broader one and do so beginning in Figure 1, which reports on the types of groups listed in CONECCS.

As Figure 1 shows, business dominates the CONECCS database, just as Table 2 showed was the case for the broader database. Comparison is made slightly difficult because the two data sources do not use the same classification system, which is why we cannot present a simple side-by-side comparison. However, both tell a similar story of business dominance. Trade, professional and business groups combined comprise 68 percent of the 685 groups in the Civil Society Group data set. These sectors are able to garner larger stores of resources and consequently exhibit higher levels of mobilization. This is not to say that the interests that would likely counterbalance business are negligible in size; combining citizen, worker, youth and education groups results in nearly a quarter (24.1%) of the interests active at the EU level, but they remained in the minority.

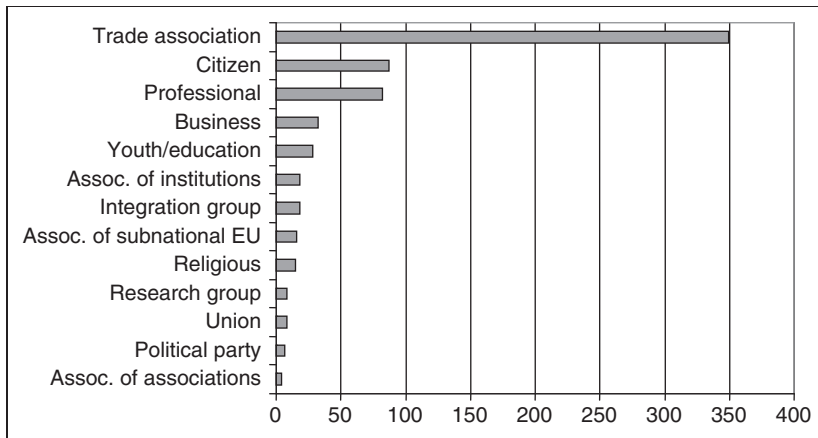


Figure 1. Distribution of group types in the EU interest group environment: CONECCS database (2003).

Source: Mahoney (2003).

Possible uses of the new data set

We plan to make the database we have created freely available to scholars worldwide by posting it on a website once it is fully cleaned and checked for accuracy (see the Introduction). It should be helpful to researchers with quite different research interests. First, the data set can be used to draw a sample of organizations active in EU politics. The data set allows a researcher to restrict the population of groups to draw a sample of groups with particular territorial origin and/or a certain type of actor. For example, scholars interested exclusively in consultants' and law firms' activities in EU politics could select only those actors and draw their sample from this sub-population. To compare the level of activities by groups of particular type but embedded in different national contexts, the sub-population from which a sample is drawn can be restricted to a particular type of organization and specific countries. The sampling of organizations might serve two quite different research interests. First, scholars might want to study the extent to which organizations deal with EU politics and which strategies they apply when engaging in EU politics. Such a sampling strategy would thus be attractive for scholars with an interest and focus on organizational studies. Secondly, researchers might sample a number of groups and use the sampled groups to identify a set of policy issues. These issues might be identified via groups' home pages or by telephone interviews enquiring after the most recent issue they have been dealing with and then investigated more closely (for an application of such a research strategy, see Baumgartner et al., 2009).

Whatever the exact research interest and thus sampling strategy might be, using the data set presented here to sample a number of groups will help to avoid introducing a systematic bias in the groups investigated, which might result, for example,

when sampling from media sources or EU institutions' official hearings, consultations or committees. Sampling issues or groups from media sources can be expected to lead to a bias towards issues and groups that have generated a degree of conflict that makes them newsworthy. Moreover, selecting groups through the media might lead to a systematic bias towards organizations that are conceived as important and influential players. Sampling from official (hearings, consultations and/or committee) documents might introduce a bias towards particularly active groups or groups institutionally privileged by a particular EU institution, such as EU-wide organized interest groups by the Commission.

Moreover, the data set can be used to identify the EU interest group population, that is, those groups that are regularly active in EU politics and lobbying in Brussels. The data set could be further developed to see how the number of groups and the types of groups vary in different policy areas or in the different Directorates General of the European Commission, or what types of groups are more active in intervening with the Commission, the Council and the Parliament. One could assess whether some policy areas are characterized by a strong overrepresentation of business groups whereas others show a more balanced representation of groups representing specific and diffuse interests. Moreover, some policy areas, such as agriculture, might have a strong supranational organization, COPA in this case, enjoying something like a representational monopoly at the EU level and therefore being part of a relatively small EU sector group population. Another question that is interesting from a population perspective is the relative representation of groups from the different member states. National groups play an important role in Brussels, yet the extent to which producers, workers, consumers, etc. from different member states see their interests represented directly vis-à-vis the EU institutions might vary strongly for reasons related to the structural make-up of national interest intermediation and state traditions – French *étatisme*, British pluralism and German corporatism (Beyers, 2002; Eising, 2004; Wonka, 2008) – or to a lack of resources or experience in Brussels, as might be the case for groups from the economically less developed member states in Eastern Europe. Differences in the composition of the (sector-specific) group populations can be expected to affect the dynamics of politics and policy outcomes and should therefore be of interest to interest group scholars. Moreover, from a democratic theory perspective, the composition of EU interest group population(s) might be the starting point for reflections on possible deficiencies in the representation of particular societal groups and interests in EU politics.

Finally, our data set might allow the identification of 'issue populations' – groups for which we have theoretical reasons to assume that their members and constituencies are affected by a specific EU decision. These 'issue populations' might considerably diverge from 'sector populations' because a sector might be composed of different branches and only some of them might be directly affected by an EU decision. Having thus identified the potential 'issue population', one might go about comparing it with the population of groups being active in that issue to see to what extent the mobilization potential was actually realized.

Investigating the realized mobilization potential avoids the pluralist fallacy of taking mobilization of groups affected by a decision for granted. Given that groups do not focus exclusively on activities to influence policy decisions, but spend considerable resources on membership services (Grote et al., 2008), such an analysis of realized mobilization potential is promising. A number of very interesting questions could be addressed this way: (How) does mobilization vary across different issues (and which factors could possibly explain this)? Do the groups that mobilized represent heterogeneous interests or do we rather see activities of groups with very similar preferences forming homogeneous ‘policy communities’? And, finally, how does mobilization affect the relative success of interest groups in exerting influence on a particular policy (Mahoney, 2008)? So far, large parts of EU interest group research focuses on ‘interesting’ cases, that is, cases where groups mobilized heavily and that showed strong political conflict (for example, Bouwen, 2004; Pappi and Henning, 1999; Sandholtz, 1998; Schneider et al., 1994; Wonka, 2008; for a more general discussion of these points, see Beyers et al., 2008: 1108; Lowery et al., 2008). Although interesting and of great use in explaining the outcome of the respective policy decisions, such a sample can hardly be expected to be representative of the large number of decisions taken at the EU level and thus does not lend itself to generalized statements about the quality and character of interest group politics and interest group influence on EU decisions.

Assessing the development of the EU interest group population over time

We plan not only to make this database available to scholars to use for a variety of purposes, but also to update it periodically to allow studies of the dynamics of organizational activities in Brussels. As discussed by Berkhout and Lowery (2010a), given that the EU is still a polity in the making, varying both in the extent to which policy competencies are delegated to the EU level and in its territorial scope, it presents an almost ideal ground for testing how changes in the political environment affect the size and the composition of interest group populations. Drawing on a ‘patched-up’ measure from different sources, these authors found that the EU’s interest group population grew in size during the early 1990s and, although in the period between 1996 and 2005 the population size stagnated, the composition of groups has changed markedly in favour of groups representing public interests and to the detriment of corporations and commercial consultants (Berkhout and Lowery, 2010a: XX). These long-term changes in the population of organizations are complexly related to the entry and exit of organizations over short time periods (Berkhout and Lowery, 2010b).

The future continuation of our data-gathering efforts to create time-series data on the EU interest group population will help to reduce the problems resulting from assessing changes in the EU interest group population over time while relying, at least to some extent, on different data sources for these different time periods. At the same time, however, it presents some particular research problems because

there is no guarantee that the source materials on which our database is constructed will remain stable in their format and procedures or even that they will continue to exist.

First, the good news: although the Landmarks *Public Affairs Directory* after 2007 is available only through an online subscription, it is now published by a new publisher, Dod's (2010), and thus likely to continue to exist into the near future. It should therefore be available to update the database. Second, the largest challenge to the consistent continuation of our database seems to be the replacement of CONECCS with the Register of Interest Representatives from June 2008 onwards. The Register of Interest Representatives could be an important new data source. At the moment, after a slow start-up, the register lists about 1700 organizations. However, the quality of the data is disputed (for example, Tait and Chaffin, 2009; ALTER-EU, 2009). These criticisms are twofold. First, owing to vague instructions or categories, organizations provide non-comparable information on, for instance, finances related to lobbying. Second, and more importantly, the voluntary character of the register and the absence of criteria on the side of the Commission (such as 'entering the building', as is the case for the EP registry) have led to large numbers of seemingly irrelevant registrations. The quality of the new register in terms of the registration of 'relevant' interest representatives might therefore not be the same as in CONECCS. The use of this list in future versions of our database will thus require intensive checks of the validity of the information provided. Third, the registry of the European Parliament may be abolished during the next couple of years, not least because, in the up-coming evaluation of the new Commission register, the Commission will examine a possible merger with the EP registry.⁶

The combination of the Landmarks *Public Affairs Directory* with the more time-sensitive EP registry should make it possible to continue updating the data set introduced here. Depending on its future development and quality, we will also draw on the new Register of Interest Representatives. To do so we will closely monitor the developments and check the quality and validity of changes in the above-mentioned data sources. In case the new Commission register indeed turns out to be a source of questionable validity, we might exclusively rely on Landmarks and the EP registry for the continuation of our database, given that these two sources cover most (around 90%) of the organizations listed in CONECCS. Needless to say, in this regard we would of course welcome a true EU interest representatives' registration system with encompassing information on, for example, which EU institutions the particular representative interacted with in its efforts to influence EU policies. In any case, we need regular assessments of the size and shape of the EU interest group population and will continue work to establish these databases into the future.

Conclusion

This paper has given an overview of a newly created database. We expect that scholars in a variety of areas will be interested in using it for their own research

purposes. Rather than each construct a new population list from which to sample, it seems preferable for the research community to have some shared infrastructure, which is why we propose to break from typical scholarly practice and make these databases freely available, without limitations, to the academic community. For our own purposes, we expect to be conducting projects based on a sample of issues drawn from assessments of the activities of a sample of groups drawn from this database. Others, however, might want to use the database for other purposes, which we encourage. Finally, we hope to be able to maintain and update the database regularly in the future. In conclusion, we hope that the creation and maintenance of new research infrastructure such as this might encourage the development of an increasingly vibrant research community studying lobbying and the mobilization of interests in the EU.

Notes

1. We thank the participants in the panel on 'Interests Groups in the EU Policy Process' at the ECPR General Conference in Potsdam and the three reviewers for helpful comments on our paper, as well as Marja Freudenberg for research assistance. The dataset can be downloaded here: http://www.bigsss-bremen.de/index.php?id=awonka_data.
2. In March 2007 the Commission adopted a Communication on the Greenbook dealing with the 'European Transparency Initiative' (COM 2007, 127) and, as a result, closed the CONECCS database and replaced it with a new voluntary Register of Interest Representatives in June 2008 (<http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regrin/>).
3. We could not directly compare the make-up of our different data sources owing to differences in the original information provided, but we estimated the territorial origin of organizations and their type in a reconstructed version of the three original data sources. The results confirm some of the known differences between the sources such as CONECCS' focus on European associations (96% of EU organizations in CONECCS), the similarity between Landmarks and the EP registry (both register about 50% professional associations and interest groups) and the somewhat larger proportion of national/regional organizations in the EP registry compared with Landmarks (respectively, 20% and 12%). More detailed results are available from the authors upon request.
4. One caveat to this is that large numbers of citizen groups are listed in the Landmarks category 'professional associations and interest groups.' In future analysis, we plan to separate these out in order to have a more accurate assessment of the distribution of bias in the EU interest group population.
5. The data can be found at <http://www.ua.ac.be/SGIG>
6. See http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/kallas/doc/joint_statement_register.pdf.

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