
Is Consultation Everything? The Influence of Interest Groups on Parliamentary Working Bodies in Slovenia

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Abstract: Empirical data gathered from surveys of MPs and interest groups in Slovenia reveal that the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia is a relatively powerful and accessible political institution. Parliamentary working bodies are perceived by MPs and interest groups as the focal point of their contacts. While MPs find interest groups to be both valuable sources of input into the legislative process and relatively influential policy actors, interest groups are relatively happy with how accessible MPs are, though they are less happy with their own impact on parliamentary decision-making. Despite the direct exchange between MPs and interest groups, political parties still play an important gate-keeping role. The identified factors of the impact of interest groups on the legislative process include the formally defined roles and competencies of parliamentary working bodies, policy sector variations, European interest-group networking, and the leadership styles of those who chair the working bodies.

Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review, 2005, Vol. 41, No. 3: 401–421

Introduction

Consultation between policy-makers and interest groups is usually seen as an important part of democratic politics. Still, the question remains of whether this is sufficient for ensuring its truly democratic character. Mattila [1999: 21] stressed that “it is not enough that public actors ‘listen’ to various actors – they should also give attention to views that differ from their own opinions”. This article focuses on the relationships between interest groups and parliaments (especially their working bodies) in the policy-making process.

Parliamentary openness (its accessibility) is usually understood as a pre-condition for successful interest group activities. However, is it simultaneously a necessary and sufficient pre-condition for interest groups’ impact on parliamentary decision-making? In the case of Slovenia a preliminary answer to this question may be

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based on findings from the following empirical research conducted within the framework of the Centre for Political Science Research at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Ljubljana:

- a) a survey of all MPs in 1991, 1994 and 1998;¹
- b) a survey of MPs who were members of parliamentary working bodies² in 1992;³
- c) a survey among the leaders of parliamentary party groups and the chairs of parliamentary working bodies in 2000;⁴
- d) a survey conducted in 1996 among the 70 most active interest groups in 11 policy fields;⁵
- e) a survey to determine the influence of interest groups on parliamentary working bodies that was conducted in 1996 among chairs, secretaries and experts–advisers to working bodies;⁶
- f) sectoral and other case studies;⁷

¹ The head of the 1991 survey (of MPs in the old assembly) was Danica Fink-Hafner, and the response rate was 55%. The 1994 (81.1% response rate) and 1998 surveys (57.7% response rate) in the newly established National Assembly were headed by Drago Zajc.

² Committees and commissions are established in the Slovenian parliament and the name commonly used for both is a parliamentary working body. While committees are established according to the policy fields covered by an individual ministry or for policy fields covered by two or more ministries, commissions are established for the purpose of investigating common questions (for example, the Commission for the Rules of Procedure, the Commission for Mandates and Elections), or to investigate certain affairs (for example, the Commission for Supervision of the Security and Intelligence Services, the Commission for Budgetary and Other Public Finance Control).

³ A survey by Drago Zajc et al., with a 81.6% response rate. The total number of respondents was 26.

⁴ The head of the survey was Drago Zajc, the research results were presented by Drago Zajc and Damjan Lajh [2000]. The response rate was 90.3%.

⁵ The research was conducted in June 1996 and encompassed 70 interest groups in the following policy fields: economic and social policy, housing, agricultural policy, the disabled, ecology, health care, education, culture, sport, marketing and PR. In the field of economic and social policies, interviews were conducted with all employer organisations and all the main trade unions. In other policy sectors, interest groups were selected that had been identified in other research (e.g. a survey of MPs who were members of parliamentary working bodies conducted by Zajc in 1992; a survey of all MPs by Zajc in 1994) as very active in the field or had been suggested by other respondents in the same field as very important interest groups. Therefore, the respondents represent the most active interest groups in the chosen policy fields and are not a representative sample of all interest groups in Slovenia.

⁶ A survey headed by Danica Fink-Hafner of key people in the leadership of all twenty-three parliamentary working bodies (of twenty-three interviewees, 30.4% were the presidents of working bodies, 60.9% were secretaries and experts – advisers to the working bodies, and 8.7% did not clearly define their roles).

⁷ Fink-Hafner 1995; Patek 1996; Vončina 1996.

- g) a survey among members of selected parliamentary working bodies and representatives of interest groups, supplemented by interviews with three lobbyists and a representative of one big interest group in 2003.⁸

This examination of the impact resulting from formal changes to the role of parliamentary working bodies (the Slovenian National Assembly's statutory rules were amended in 2002) will also test a hypothesis about the importance of the policy-making competencies of formal working bodies for the impact of interest groups on parliamentary decision-making.

Policy-making processes and actors

Policy-making processes are usually longer, institutionally and procedurally defined processes in which, as a rule, many policy actors are involved. Normally, policy actors with formally and legally defined policy-making competencies are part of these processes. Alongside them, other policy actors are often included, or they at least try to gain access to these processes in an effort to influence decision-making processes and consequently also public policies.

Parliaments are among those policy actors that have formally and legally defined competencies. Still, it should be stressed that parliaments in various countries have different roles in policy-making processes. According to Mezey [1979] and Norton [1994] there are three types of parliaments: parliaments with strong policy-making power; parliaments with moderate policy-making power; and parliaments with little or no policy-making power.

In many countries interest groups are frequently involved in policy processes in pursuit of their interests. This is primarily why they try to influence powerful policy-makers in particular. For estimating the power of specific policy-makers it is clear that formally defined competencies are important [Ippolito and Walker 1980;

⁸ The research was headed by Alenka Krašovec. Three parliamentary working bodies and their members were included in the survey: the Committee on Infrastructure and the Environment, the Committee on Health, Labour, the Family, Social Policy and the Disabled, and the Committee on Finance and Monetary Policy. They were selected on the basis of previous research on how open (the Committee on Infrastructure and the Environment, the Committee on Health, Labour, the Family, Social Policy and the Disabled) or closed they were (the Committee on Finance and Monetary Policy) to consultations with interest groups. In addition, an effort was made to avoid parliamentary working bodies with more or less the same MPs comprising their members. The response rate varied among different working bodies. In the case of the Committee on Infrastructure and the Environment and the Committee on Finance and Monetary Policy it was 44.4% and in the case of the Committee on Health, Labour, the Family, Social Policy and the Disabled it was 37.8%.

A sample of interest groups was created on the basis of answers gathered in the survey among members of selected working bodies on the most active and/or most influential interest groups.

Etzioni-Halevy 1983; Richardson 1993]. "Since government, parliament and bureaucracy have necessary formally defined policy-making competencies" [Ippolito and Walker 1980: 270] they are, as a rule, the main targets of interest groups' activities. But this is not the only criterion used when interest groups select their targets. The openness (accessibility) of potential targets is also important [Presthus 1974; Grant 1989; Richardson 1993; Howlett and Ramesh 1995]. Policy actors with the most influential role in policy-making processes are not necessarily at the same time the ones most open (accessible) to interest group activity, and vice versa [Ippolito and Walker 1980; Howlett and Ramesh 1995]. Given that interest groups want to maximise their interests, they seek to influence various policy actors at the same time [Richardson 1993]. In order to maximise their interests they present their ideas, views and policy solutions to policy makers. Nevertheless, in each case lobbying targets are selected according to the specific circumstances.

Parliament as a lobbying target

Parties, government, bureaucracy and interest groups usually have ties to parliament [Olson and Mezey 1991]. The interest of these actors in becoming involved with parliament greatly depends on parliament's role in policy-making processes [Norton 1999]. Where parliament does not play even a modest role in the policy process, other actors tend not to have any substantial interest in it. Usually, interest groups are most interested in establishing links with parliament because they have no formally defined policy-making competencies themselves [von Beyme 1998].

On the other hand, parliament also needs connections with other actors and this is reflected in its openness or accessibility [von Beyme 1998]. Parliament is usually interested in gathering additional and various types of information, knowledge and expertise [Grant 1989; Patzelt 1997; Norton 1999]. For parliaments, interest groups are among the richest sources of information, knowledge and expertise [Norton 1999: 12; Patzelt 1997: 59], which may be partial or incomplete. But it is up to MPs to decide how, to what extent and what kind of support, knowledge and expertise delivered by interest groups to use in their own work. Norton [1999] has pointed out that interest groups and their information, knowledge and expertise also help MPs control the work of the government. As a rule, parliament uses interest group support to legitimise its actions and decisions [Grant 1989].⁹ In fact, parliaments and interest groups have mutual interest in co-operation [Norton 1999].

⁹ In 1994 Patzelt conducted a survey among MPs in the German Bundestag. His results indicated that two kinds of support were the most valuable: expertise and moral support, while just a few MPs answered that interest groups offered them help in organising political events and even fewer answered that interest groups had offered them financial support [Patzelt 1997].

Parliamentary working bodies as the focus of interest group activity within parliament

Connections between parliaments and interest groups have most frequently been established in: a) the working bodies of parliaments, as they are usually the main target of interest group activity [Olson and Mezey 1991; Norton 1994; von Beyme 1998], especially if working bodies have a great influence or significant role in policy-making processes; and b) public hearings organised by parliamentary working bodies [von Beyme 1998]. Since parliaments in the modern world have many functions and obligations, it was necessary to introduce a division of labour and legislative specialisation [Norton 1994]. This is primarily expressed in the establishment and activities of parliamentary working bodies.

Given the division of labour, specialisation, and the establishment of parliamentary working bodies, interests groups and MPs with interests in the same policy fields are usually the main actors in these bodies. Working bodies are the key venues for interest group activity and link the two actors, especially if the following conditions are met:

a) If parliamentary party groups have introduced a division of labour at a relatively advanced level. Individual MPs are responsible for certain policy fields, and other MPs from the same parliamentary party group are willing to listen to them and adhere to the notion of party discipline.

b) If working bodies operate on a relatively permanent basis. This means that individual working bodies are established consecutively in many legislative periods and are responsible (repeatedly) for almost the same policy fields, while the composition of members does not change much [Olson and Mezey 1991]. The continued duration of working bodies helps them accumulate expertise and knowledge from a particular policy field and to establish connections with (neutral) suppliers of such support. This also enables MPs who are not specialists in a certain policy field to accumulate and upgrade their knowledge [Olson and Mezey 1991]. In addition, it encourages the development of a common spirit within the working body [Norton 1994]. Olson and Mezey [1991: 15] added that all of this can lead to the increasing independence of a particular working body and consequently to its enhanced role in policy-making processes.

c) If working bodies are created according to the policy fields of ministries. Since the Second World War working bodies have been created more and more in accordance with the policy fields of individual ministries [Zajc 2000: 176]. Consequently, individual working bodies work in the same policy fields as the individual ministries of a government. Laws are mainly proposed by the government, but they are subjected to a more in-depth examination by working bodies. This usually allows working bodies to have a greater role in policy-making processes.

d) *If working bodies have important formal competencies in parliamentary decision-making.* In modern parliaments, parliamentary working bodies are usually the venues where the majority of parliamentary policy-making processes take place [Olson and Mezey 1991]. Several authors [Polsby 1975; Olson and Mezey 1991; Norton 1994; Von Beyme 1998] have linked the performance of working bodies and their role in policy-making processes with parliament's role in these processes. According to these authors, when working bodies occupy a more important role in policy-making processes this also indicates that parliament has a more important role in such processes. The most important formal competencies of working bodies include: the capacity to amend proposed laws (to change laws proposed by the government) and the right to submit laws.

General perceptions of the importance and accessibility of the Parliament of Slovenia

Common perceptions

As defined in its Constitution Slovenia is a parliamentary democracy. In practice the Slovenian parliament has succeeded in developing a reactive and even a substantial initiating capability [Zajc 1996]. Interest groups usually select lobbying targets according to their estimate of the potential target's power in specific policy-making processes. Slovenia's lower chamber (the National Assembly – mostly referred to as the Slovenian parliament) is usually regarded as relatively powerful in relation to the executive and other state actors, including the upper chamber (the National Council). The survey conducted among the 70 most active interest groups in 11 policy fields (1996) revealed that they perceive the government to be the most powerful public policy actor (80.9% estimated that the government is very powerful), but at the same time 73.9% stated that the National Assembly also holds a very significant amount of power. The mass media was ranked third, but not that far behind parliament (72% of respondents thought it has a very significant amount of power).¹⁰

MPs' viewpoints

Data from the 1994 parliamentary survey (headed by Zajc) reveal MPs to be relatively open to consultative politics. In general, MPs thought that interest group involvement could improve the quality of their policy-making.

Up to 59.7% of respondents in the 1998 parliamentary survey declared that contacts with interest groups are very useful for MPs. In this respect interests

¹⁰ The same scale of measurement was used for all policy actors: a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning 'no power at all' and 5 meaning 'very big power'. The percentages quoted are the sums of answers indicating a 4 and 5 on that scale.

Table 1. Frequency of contacts between MPs and interest groups (% of MP-respondents)

	1994	1998
Daily	11.0	11.5
Weekly	37.0	59.6
Monthly	35.6	17.3
Less than monthly	9.6	11.5
No answer	6.8	0.0

Sources: The 1994 and 1998 surveys of MPs headed by Drago Zajc.

groups are comparable to the importance of parliamentary materials for the work of MPs (60.8% of respondents regarded these materials as very useful).¹¹ According to the 2000 survey by Zajc and Lajh, conducted among the chairs of parliamentary working bodies and leaders of parliamentary party groups, contacts with professional associations, economic organisations and trade unions are the most useful. It is interesting that while 76.9% of MP-respondents regarded contacts with the specified interest groups as useful to an important extent,¹² only 57.6% of respondents shared the same view when only the general name 'interest group' was used in the question instead of a specific list of interest groups.

In spite of some negative experiences, 69.9% of MPs surveyed in 1994 did not agree with the statement that the influence of different organisations, associations and groups could jeopardise democratic policy-making, although 9.2% still thought it could. The chairs and secretaries of parliamentary working bodies interviewed in January 1996 (a survey headed by Fink-Hafner) almost unanimously agreed with the idea that consultation with interest groups should be encouraged in the work of parliamentary bodies in the future.

As early as in 1994 MPs were reporting close contacts with interest groups (11.0% had daily contact, 37.0% weekly and 35.6% at least monthly). They indicated especially links with organised interests in their profession, place of residence and personal interests (such as culture, sport, and hobbies). In a spring 1994 survey, MPs listed only eighty-six interest groups they considered important in their own specific policy fields. Among the most frequently named were trade unions, farmers, the disabled, the Chamber of Commerce, health care institutions and organisations, local communities, the retired, economic organisations and universities.

On the one hand, the number of interest groups the MPs cited as influential is

¹¹ MPs estimated the usefulness of specific information sources for their work on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 meant 'the source is not useful at all' and 7 meant 'the source is very useful'. The quoted data include answers indication 6 and 7.

¹² In the 2000 parliamentary survey a scale from 1 to 5 was used, where 1 meant 'the source is not useful at all' and 5 meant 'the source is very useful'. The quoted data include answers indicating 4 and 5.

very small in comparison with the 52 179 organisations and enterprises officially registered¹³ in December 1993. On the other hand, 71% of MPs felt that the number of organisations, associations, societies and groups seeking to influence parliamentary decision-making was growing. A January 1996 survey of the chairs and secretaries of parliamentary working bodies (research by Fink-Hafner) confirmed that representatives of certain interest groups were regularly invited to participate in meetings and that other interest groups occasionally asked if they could participate in working sessions. But even though the intensity of mutual contacts between interest groups and MPs was perceived by both MPs¹⁴ and interest groups as growing, political parties (at least according to some research¹⁵) remain the gate-keepers, which can selectively strengthen or weaken the voice of interest groups in policy-making.

Interest group viewpoints

It is no surprise that the data indicated above show that interest groups in the 1996 survey regarded the government (specific ministries within it) as the most important and the National Assembly as the second-most important lobbying target. Nevertheless, differences in the level of accessibility of the two political institutions help define the practical strategies of interest group lobbying. According to the 1996 survey among the 70 most active interest groups in 11 policy fields the government was seen as the least accessible institution (36.8% of respondents thought it was – almost – inaccessible).¹⁶ In fact, in Slovenia a negative correlation between power and accessibility can be seen in the case of the executive. The parliament is perceived to be both a relatively powerful and relatively easily accessible public policy actor.¹⁷

Obviously, co-operation between parliament and its working bodies on the one hand and interest groups on the other is not important for interest groups alone. In the 1996 survey 10.3% of interest group representatives answered that co-operation was established on the basis of the initiative of parliament or its working bodies, while 19.1% of those surveyed indicated that co-operation had been established at the interest group's initiative. The majority (47.1%) of interest group representatives answered that who actually initiated co-operation between the two actors depended on the particular case.

¹³ Official data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia.

¹⁴ In 1994 71.0% of the surveyed MPs judged that the number of interest groups trying to influence policy-making processes was growing [Fink-Hafner 1996], while in 1998 73.1% of the surveyed MPs thought so [Zajc 1999].

¹⁵ For example, research in the field of agricultural policies [Fink-Hafner 1995] and the survey among 70 interest groups in eleven policy fields [Fink-Hafner 1996].

¹⁶ The scale used in the survey was from 1 to 5, where 1 meant the 'actor is easily accessible' and 5 meant the 'actor is not accessible'. The data cited in the text represent answers 4 and 5.

¹⁷ A total of 36.8% of the surveyed representatives of interest groups saw the parliament as relatively easily accessible (answers 1 and 2).

The 1996 survey of interest groups conducted by Fink-Hafner also shows that international networking (especially European) and support for Slovenian interest groups do in fact make a difference in the Slovenian policy arena, including the parliamentary arena. In many cases, it is precisely the support from the EU that makes Slovenian interest groups significantly more successful in asserting their interests than interest groups without any European links.¹⁸

The impact of interest groups on parliamentary decision-making

The formal role of parliamentary working bodies in the Slovenian legislative process

Formally, parliamentary working bodies have had a key role in the inclusion of interest groups in parliamentary decision-making since the first mandate of the National Assembly was established on the basis of the 1991 Constitution. Already in the first Statutory Rules of the National Assembly (1993) working bodies were assigned many important formal roles and competencies, such as the capacity to amend bills, to put issues on the parliamentary agenda, to take issues off the parliamentary agenda, to issue opinions on amendments by other actors, and to issue reports on bills in different stages of the legislative process.

The 2002 Statutory Rules added some formal competencies to working bodies in the legislative process, while simultaneously shortening it. According to the majority of parliamentary experts these new Statutory Rules have significantly empowered the parliamentary working bodies. However, at first sight comparisons between the old and new rules (Table 2) do not really reveal any big changes.

However, it also needs to be noted that in 2002 working bodies received some very important competencies in the first and second stages of the legislative process. According to the new rules the first stage of the legislative process is complete when parliamentary materials are distributed to both MPs and working bodies. The only exception is if MPs in a certain period demand a plenary session. In the second stage working bodies are (according to the new rules) entities that have

¹⁸ The research also showed that European 'empowerment' is not equally dispersed among various types of interest groups. Economic groups get more information, analysis and expert help from their EU counterparts. They are also more successful in employing representatives of their European counterparts to advocate their interests in communications with Slovenian decision-makers.

Another survey, focusing on economic interest groups (the 2000–2001 survey by Fink-Hafner, Krašovec and Stanonik) revealed that there are important differences even within that cluster (between employer and employee organisations). At first glance it may be said that employer organisations have better resources of their own and privileged access to and influence on Slovenian policy actors in the area of EU integration policy-making than do employee organisations. The empowerment employee organisations get from the EU does not seem to make a big difference in this respect (although there are also important variations between employer organisations). For more on all these findings see Fink-Hafner [2001].

Table 2. Comparative view of the role of parliamentary working bodies according to the 1993 and 2002 National Assembly Statutory Rules

	1993 Statutory Rules	2002 Statutory Rules	Working bodies' gains? 1993–2002	Working bodies' losses? 1993–2002
Standard procedure of the legislative process	three-stage	three-stage	yes	no
Putting issues on the parliamentary agenda	yes	yes	no	no
Taking issues off the parliamentary agenda	yes	yes	no	no
Issuing reports on bills in separate stages of the legislative process	yes	yes	no	partly*
Proposing amendments to bills	yes	yes	no	no
Issuing opinions on amendments proposed by other actors	yes	yes	no	no
Control over implementation of decisions made by parliament	yes	yes	no	no

* The working body does not have the right to issue a report on a bill in the third stage of the legislative process.

to create opinions on proposed bills first. After the discussion, working bodies can propose that parliament continue a legislative process or stop it. If working bodies propose that parliament stop a legislative process MPs can at a plenary session merely vote on the proposal; they cannot discuss the proposal. In fact, the new Statutory Rules replaced the consultative status of working bodies in all three stages of the legislative process with the decisive role they are given in the first two stages (with some exceptions).

After the 2002 Statutory Rules were put into practice, in the 2003 survey conducted by Krašovec the majority (85.4%) of respondents from the three selected working bodies and from the representatives of selected interest groups believed that the working bodies had sufficient formal powers. However, there are relatively large differences between the opinions of MPs (members of selected working bodies) and those of interest groups. While 92.6% of MP-respondents thought that working bodies had enough formal powers, 'only' 69.2% of respondents representing interest groups held this opinion.

The practical role of parliamentary working bodies in the legislative process

Our research found that working bodies are focal points where interest groups and MPs meet. According to the 1996 survey among the 70 most active interest groups in 11 policy fields, interest groups are more focused on specific working bodies than on individual MPs or parliamentary groups. The 2003 survey of members of three selected working bodies and of representatives of selected interest groups also shows there is almost no difference between the predominant view of MPs and interest groups that working bodies are the focal points of co-operation between MPs and interest groups.

Although the majority (75.6%) of the respondents from the selected working bodies and from the interest groups in the 2003 survey thought that the practical role of working bodies in the legislative process was sufficient, there is an obvious difference between their formal roles and their practical roles. In addition, there are still some visible differences in the views held by various policy actors. As much as 88.9% of the respondents from the three selected working bodies thought the practical role of working bodies was sufficient, while the interest group-respondents who participate in the activities of these working bodies were more sceptical – only 46.2% of them thought the practical role of working bodies sufficient, even though 69.2% of them estimated their formal powers as large enough.

As the data in Table 3 show, in 1998 and 2000 the two specific populations of MPs surveyed mainly assessed the strength of the influence of parliamentary working bodies on the legislative process as ‘medium’, while extremely low or high estimates were very few. For methodological reasons we cannot say whether the posi-

Table 3. Practical parliamentary working bodies’ influence on policy-making processes (answers in %)

Practical PWB influence on policy-making processes	All MPs survey 1998	PWB presidents and PG leader survey 2000	Selected PWB* survey 2003
No	2.0	0.0	0.0
Little	25.0	19.2	22.0
Medium	50.0	57.7	41.5
Big	17.3	15.4	29.3
Very big	5.7	7.7	7.3

Sources: Zajc [1999]; Zajc and Lajh [2000]; Krašovec [2004].

Note: PWB = parliamentary working bodies.

PG = parliamentary groups.

* The three selected PWB were: the Committee on Infrastructure and the Environment, the Committee on Health, Labour, the Family, Social Policy and the Disabled, and the Committee on Finance and Monetary Policy.

tive shift in the average estimate of working bodies' influence as shown in the 2003 by Krašovec (only three selected working bodies were investigated) applies to all parliamentary working bodies.

General estimates of the impact of interest groups on parliamentary decision-making

According to the research findings from the 1996 survey among the 70 most active interest groups in 11 policy fields (as presented above), the National Assembly is relatively open and accessible to interest groups and is a quite important target of practical lobbying. As noted above, within this broader picture interest groups are somewhat more critical than MPs in their evaluation of the openness (accessibility) of working bodies. The 2003 survey of members of three selected working bodies and interest groups involved in the activities of the three selected working bodies shows that almost all MPs assessed the openness of the working bodies to the activities of interest groups as sufficient, whereas interest groups were slightly more sceptical (Table 4).

In either case, the number of interest groups trying to influence the legislative process, and the frequency of contact between interest group representatives and MPs have been growing. While MPs consider interest groups an important source of information necessary for parliamentary work, the question of the impact interest groups have on parliamentary decision-making remains open.

The survey among chairs of working bodies' and leaders of parliamentary party groups' in 2000 and the survey among interest groups in 1996 reveal certain differences between the perceptions of the 'influence' of interest groups' and the perceptions of their 'effectiveness'. In the 2000 survey a large majority assessed interest group influence as strong (15.4% of respondents thought it was very strong and 57.7% as strong¹⁹). Data from the 1996 survey also confirm the relatively impor-

Table 4. Are working bodies sufficiently open (accessible) to the activities of interest groups? (according to members of working bodies and interest group representatives, answers in %)

	Working bodies	Interest groups
Yes	92.6	69.2
No	7.4	30.8
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Krašovec [2004].

¹⁹ Given that the survey population consisted of 26 respondents, 15.4% actually means four respondents and 57.7% fifteen respondents.

Table 5. Estimates of the influence of interest groups on policy-making processes (according to members of working bodies and interest group representatives, answers in %)

	Working bodies	Interest groups
Very big	4.5	0.0
Big	59.1	15.4
Little	36.4	76.9
No influence	0.0	7.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Krašovec [2004].

tant influence of interest groups. These findings show interest groups have been particularly efficient when trying to put issues on the parliamentary agenda or taking issues off that agenda.²⁰

However, it is evident from the 2003 survey among members of three selected working bodies and selected interest groups that there are still important differences between the quite optimistic views of MPs and the very critical estimates of interest group representatives regarding the influence interest groups have on policy-making processes (Table 5).

As the survey shows, even after the 2002 Statutory Rules provided working bodies with formal empowerment no significant changes occurred in the influence of interest groups on policy-making processes.

Sectoral differences

Meso-level empirical research on the emerging policy networks in Slovenia shows that civil society is still relatively weak compared to other policy actors (especially the executive, parliament and political parties). However, in certain sectors more powerful segments of civil society (above all economic groups) have succeeded in establishing themselves as partners in institutionalised forms of consultative politics. In other policy fields, the emerging policy networks differ considerably and have less stable structures.²¹

²⁰ A total of 64.7% of respondents answered that they had been successful in efforts to put issues on the parliamentary agenda, while only 45.6% of interest groups had been successful in such efforts. On the other hand, 29.4% of respondents reported success in their efforts to take issues off the parliamentary agenda and 25.0% had been successful in taking issues off the government agenda.

²¹ The factors that led to the disintegration of the old policy networks and various practices when policy networks were being (re-)created during the transition to democracy in Slovenia

For example, the 2003 survey confirmed that the working body responsible for finance and monetary policy has been much more closed off to interest group activity than the working body responsible for infrastructure and the environment or the working body responsible for health, labour, the family, social policy and the disabled.

The data in Table 5 reveal the differences in opinion between the members of the three selected working bodies and the interest group representatives. Therefore, the findings presented in Table 6 are not too surprising. It is evident that almost all interest groups think their influence should be bigger, whereas just 42.3% of the members of working bodies hold this opinion.

However, there are also differences between the selected working bodies. Since the Committee on Finance and Monetary Policy is much more closed to interest groups than the other two working bodies, it would be possible to expect that the interest groups involved in work with the Committee on Finance and Monetary

Table 6. What influence should interest groups have on policy-making processes? (according to members of working bodies and interest group representatives, answers in %)

	Working bodies	Interest groups
It should be bigger	42.3	92.3
It is appropriate (should remain the same)	57.7	7.7
It should be smaller	0.0	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Krašovec [2004].

include the following [Fink-Hafner 1998; Mandič 1998]: the old socialist political system and to a significant extent the planned economy was replaced by a multi-party system and a market economy; political elite changes brought about discontinuity in government attitudes towards consultation with interest groups; especially the new elite which came into power in 1990 deeply distrusted some of the old well-established interest groups; during the transition many important systemic changes had to be put into place (introducing many new laws, including the new Constitution, and establishing all the institutions necessary for a newly independent state), which were predominantly issues of party politics and to a lesser extent policy issues the new elite wanted to consult interest groups about; the oppositional society of the 1980s partly transformed itself into political parties, partly into civil society interest organisations and partly disappeared; some old interest organisations adapted themselves to changes in the environment; new interest groups appeared during the process of many reforms (especially privatisation and denationalisation); given that many previously existing policy networks ceased to exist the newly emerging ones first started mainly as personal networks; interest groups with more independent resources and greater power (especially economic interest groups) have succeeded more in their pressure to create more institutionalised policy networks with an important influence on behalf of non-state actors.

Policy have less influence than those interest groups involved with the other two working bodies. Surprisingly, there appear to be no significant differences in the influence of interest groups on the work of the three committees. Nevertheless, for 50% of the survey respondents the Committee on Health, Labour, the Family, Social Policy and the Disabled clearly stands out, as they estimated the influence of interest groups on that body as very strong or strong.

When the members of the three selected working bodies and of the interest groups involved in their work were asked whether interest groups should have more or less influence, then the expected differences between working bodies did emerge. A total of 75.0% of respondents estimated that the interest groups should have 'more' influence in the Committee on Finance and Monetary Policy, while 'only' around 50.0% of those surveyed believed the interest groups should have more influence in the other two working bodies.

The leadership style of the chairs

Formal rules are not the only variables that can determine the quality and intensity of collaboration between interest groups and parliamentary working bodies. The respondents from the three selected working bodies and the selected interest groups in the 2003 survey by Krašovec²² unanimously agreed that the quality and intensity of co-operation between MPs and interest groups also depend on the leadership style of the chair of a given working body.

In interviews conducted in 2003 with three lobbyists and a representative of one big interest group the above-mentioned opinions of members of selected working bodies and selected interest groups on the importance of the chair's leadership style were confirmed. According to four respondents, the dependence of interest groups on the chair's leadership style is most obvious in the chair's decisions about who is ultimately invited to a working body session, and who receives the opportunity to speak. One respondent shared his experiences from the mid-1990s and indicated that, while at the time the same legal rules applied for all working bodies, there were nonetheless differences between them and it was the chairs of the bodies who were the sources of these differences. All working bodies had the opportunity to invite representatives of interest groups to working body sessions. However,

²² Three parliamentary working bodies and their members were included in the survey: the Committee on Infrastructure and the Environment, the Committee on Health, Labour, the Family, Social Policy and the Disabled, and the Committee on Finance and Monetary Policy. The response rate varied between individual working bodies. In the case of the Committee on Infrastructure and the Environment and the Committee on Finance and Monetary Policy the response rate was 44.4%, while for the Committee on Health, Labour, the Family, Social Policy and the Disabled it was 37.8%. A sample of interest groups was created on the basis of answers gathered in the research among members of selected working bodies on the most active and/or most influential interest groups.

this practice was only adopted in some working bodies and not all. Some working bodies were sending parliamentary materials to the interest groups, others were not. Given that the system allowed for both options, the decisions to deliver parliamentary materials or to invite interest groups to participate in working body sessions clearly depended on the individual working body's chair.

The consequences of changes to the formal role of working bodies for the impact of an interest group

The National Assembly's Statutory Rules were amended in 2002. As already noted, these changes included enhanced formal competencies of working bodies in the legislative process and a shortening of that process. The shorter legislative process allows less time and fewer opportunities for interest group activities in parliamentary decision-making.

According to the 2003 survey (including MPs in the three selected working bodies and the interest groups involved in their activities), 45% of all respondents estimated that the influence of working bodies on the legislative process had increased, while 50% thought it had remained the same (despite frequent differences between the opinions of MPs and interest groups no significant differences were detected between them in this respect). It was expected that the above-mentioned change would be reflected in the number of interest group attempts to influence parliamentary decision-making and in their greater impact.

a) Number of active interest groups

The majority (65.9%) of the MPs in the three selected bodies and interest group representatives involved in their activities responded that the number of active interest groups had approximately remained the same, whereas 29.3% thought the number of active interest groups had increased.

As the data in Table 7 show, the interest groups especially noted an increase in the number of active interest groups. This can at least partly be explained by the fact that they are more sensitive to (new) competition.

The majority of those who believed the number of active interest groups had increased saw the main reason for this as lying in the boosted formal and practical competencies of working bodies. On the other hand, those who estimated that the number of active interest groups had stayed approximately the same were for the most part convinced that changes merely to formal roles cannot significantly affect the activity of interest groups. For them those interest groups that wanted or endeavoured to co-operate with working bodies had already established co-operation before the mentioned changes.

Table 7. Number of active interest groups after the new Statutory Rules were introduced (according to members of working bodies and interest group representatives, answers in %)

	Working bodies	Interest groups
The number has increased	25.9	38.5
The number is approximately the same	70.4	53.8
The number has decreased	3.7	7.7
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Krašovec [2004].

Table 8. The impact of interest groups before and after the new Statutory Rules were introduced (according to members of working bodies and interest group representatives, answers in %)

	Working bodies	Interest groups
Bigger before the change	11.5	8.3
Stayed approximately the same	69.2	83.3
Bigger after the change	19.2	8.3
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Krašovec [2004].

b) Interest group impact

The majority (74.4%) of all surveyed members of three selected bodies and the selected interest groups estimated that the impact of interest groups had stayed at approximately the same level. Only 15.4% of them thought the impact of interest groups had increased, while 10.3% thought they had a bigger impact before the new Statutory Rules were introduced.

MPs are obviously more sensitive, as 19.2% of them believed that interest groups had a bigger impact after the new Statutory Rules were introduced, while 11.5% thought their impact was bigger before the new rules were introduced.

c) The intensity and quality of co-operation between working bodies and interest groups

The amendments to the Statutory Rules have not brought any important changes to the intensity and quality of co-operation between working bodies and interest groups. In 2003, 35% of all surveyed members of the three selected working bodies and the interest groups involved in their work assessed the mutual co-operation prior to the changes to the Statutory Rules as good, while 41% also assessed their co-

operation after the introduction of the new Statutory Rules as good. More in-depth analysis of the intensity and quality of co-operation between the two actors revealed that members of selected working bodies are the ones who tend to be more satisfied with the intensity and quality of the co-operation. MPs from the majority of working bodies judged the co-operation to be very good or good, while the majority of interest groups assessed the co-operation as acceptable or poor. The difference between the two actors is probably not a big surprise.

d) The relevance of interest group activities

Data on the openness (accessibility) of working bodies, on the impact of interest groups on policy-making processes, and on the intensity and quality of mutual co-operation between working bodies and interest groups are obviously (at least) partly also connected with the perception of the importance of co-operation between the two actors in policy-making processes. In 2003, 56.1% of all surveyed members of three selected working bodies and interest groups thought that co-operation is very important, and 39% thought that co-operation is important. The fact that none regarded co-operation as unimportant is telling. MPs and interest groups revealed some of the reasons why co-operation is (very) important: it is a way of searching for consensus when important questions have been raised; MPs are not necessarily experts in all policy fields and interest groups can usually supply their expertise, knowledge and information; interest groups are able to warn MPs about practical aspects or issues that remain unresolved, and this usually leads to the easier implementation of decisions made by MPs; co-operation with interest groups can introduce different aspects and possibilities into policy-making processes; interest group activity can de-politicise some issues.

Intensive consultation with a mid-range impact

The rich variety of research presented in the discussion above points to the following key findings:

- a) The mutual exchange of information, knowledge, legitimacy and influence between Slovenian MPs and interest groups does occur to a significant extent.
- b) Despite the predominant view that the Slovenian parliament is relatively powerful²³ and at the same time relatively easily accessible to interest groups, these phenomena do not directly translate into the relatively big impact of interest groups on parliamentary decision-making.

²³ Zajc [2000] found that the Slovenian parliament can be primarily described as a parliament with moderate policy-making power. Nevertheless, it can sometimes also be regarded as a parliament with strong policy-making power.

- c) While parliamentary working bodies are the key venues for MPs and interest group representatives to meet, and they have relatively important formal competencies and roles, their practices are still not in line with the expectations of interest groups.
- d) Although the formal powers of parliamentary working bodies are also important factors in the influence of interest groups on parliamentary decision-making, the formal empowerment of parliamentary working bodies does not automatically result in interest groups having a bigger impact on the legislative process.
- e) Despite the fact that MPs tend to view interest group expertise and information as the second-most important source of information and knowledge used in their decision-making (nearly as important as parliamentary materials), the respondents from interest groups had the impression that they are not very influential.
- f) In addition to the general impression that interest groups have a 'mid-range' impact on Slovenian parliamentary decision-making, and alongside the discrepancies between the views of MPs and interest group representatives, there are several other variables that add to the variety of experiences in parliamentary working bodies, specifically, sectoral variations (variations between specific policy sectors covered by different working bodies), variations in interest group empowerment via European networking, and the leadership style of the chairs of working bodies.

While Slovenian MPs consider interest groups to be active and influential, interest groups believe their interests should be even further incorporated into parliamentary decision-making. In order to obtain a clearer picture, however, international comparisons with the experiences in Slovenia are necessary. However, the fact should not be overlooked that the role of MPs is complex. They need to take into account the many determinants of their decision-making behaviour apart from interest group activities, such as ideological beliefs, and in addition to party policy and the interest in winning the next elections.

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