

Who gets a seat at the table? *Understanding the lobbying landscape by analyzing the agendas of Dutch ministers*

Master thesis

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Acknowledgment

For a long time, I have been interested in studying political economy, first throughout the lens of international relations, but recently my attention shifted towards the Dutch decision-making process. Inspiration of this thesis came about during my internship at a public affairs bureau in The Hague. Working in the midst of political decision-making, on the cutting edge of Dutch politics and the corporate sector motivated me to study the Dutch lobbying landscape and the role of corporations as political actors that remained underexposed in academic research.

How can lobby and government activities be researched when transparency remains limited? In order to effectively study this topic, I cooperated with Open State Foundation, a non-governmental organization that promotes digital transparency by creating tools to make public information open and accessible for the public. By doing my research internship at Open State Foundation, I learned to elaborate on my own ideas regarding transparency of lobby activities and to connect this into active plans, papers and research to improve this. My gratitude goes out to the entire team at Open State Foundation. I want to thank Serv Wiemers and Tom Bolsius for brainstorming with me, Brian Ernsting for assisting me with the data collection, and Jesse Renema for his feedback.

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Abstract

Moving away from its classic representation model of employers, employees and the government, the Dutch lobbying landscape has transformed under the influence of interest groups and businesses as political actors. Engagement by external actors is stimulated by economic liberalization and the strong ties of firms to the institutional system, intensifying the relationship between the public and the private. The rise of corporations, and so-called corporate lobbying, has resulted in new questions about network structures, equality of access and representation. This research studies the extent of privileged access of the business sector to the decision-making process in the Netherlands through a mixed methods approach. Both quantitative and qualitative data is gathered by means of web-scraping ministerial agendas and conducting expert interviews. The results that derive from the registered meetings demonstrate that corporations are the group with the most access. Findings of this study suggest that the business sector has privileged access, but that this is not structural for every corporate actor. Through a combination of taking a closer look at specific actors as well as looking at the entire opportunity structure through network analysis, differences within the business sector are noticeable. External conditions prove to influence the embeddedness of actors in economic and political affairs, and thereby also their (central) place in the network. As business associations continue to be key actors and a decline of collective action in this group remains absent, two strategies can be recognized that is characterized by individual corporate lobbying as well as representation through business associations. Looking beyond the reported meetings, it continues to remain difficult to draw conclusions on trends in the lobbying landscape. Beyond this research, attention should be given to the discussion of other lobbying strategies, differences between ministries and the lack of available data, that advocates for enhancing transparency on lobby activities in the Dutch decision-making process.

Keywords: corporate lobbying, interest groups, business, access points, opportunity structure, Dutch lobbying landscape, ministerial agenda's

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Abbreviations

BV:	Private Limited Company (<i>Besloten Vennootschap</i>)
BVPA:	Professional association for public affairs (<i>Beroepsvereniging voor public affairs</i>)
CNV:	Christian National Trade Union Federation
CME:	Coordinated Market Economy
DNB:	<i>De Nederlandsche Bank</i> (the central bank of the Netherlands)
EU:	European Union
FNV:	Federation of Dutch Trade Unions
GRECO:	Group of States against Corruption
KLM:	Royal Dutch Airlines
LME:	Liberal Market Economy
NGO:	Non-governmental organization
OEP:	Open Economy Politics
SER:	Social Economic Council
UN:	United Nations
URL:	Uniform Resource Locator
VNO-NCW:	Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers

1. INTRODUCTION

“Like an iron ring, they surround the Binnenhof”, describes the outcome of a recent research project and news series that is used to describe the amount of interest groups in the Netherlands (Vrij Nederland & Berkhout, 2017; Broer, 2017). The act of lobbying, the systematic exercise of influence over policymakers in administrative bodies, has become more important and professionalized in the way public policy is formulated in the Netherlands (Transparency International, 2015). This is demonstrated by the rapid growth of public affairs bureaus, the expansion of the BVPA (the largest association of lobbyists) and the strong lobby activities by business associations, for example the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW) (Transparency International NL, 2018). As access to the decision-making process has increased, the discussion on the degree of democratic accountability and representation gained new interest in parliament. Under the influence of access of external actors, policies on overarching policy topics on marketing issues, privatization, liberalization and corporatization have been shaped (Tweede Kamer, 2017). Although Dutch representatives continue to argue that lobbying is an essential part of political decision-making, voices in parliament arise that the provision of information should be made more balanced (Tweede Kamer, 2017). This is in line with research on democratic politics and the importance of creating a level playing field between parties to achieve representation of different interests in society (Klüver, 2011; Lowery, 2007). Thus, if more information about these access points and the Dutch lobbying landscape become known, a better image on the representation of all interests can be designed.

Which organizations actually have the best access to politicians and shape the Dutch political agenda? In 1965, Mancur Olsen already stated that the idea of perfect pluralist representation of every actor in society should be refuted to understand the influence of special interests on government policies (Olsen, 1965). Research dated from the 1990s also failed to find evidence for the success of organized interest in shaping public policies (Lowery, 2007). In line with this work, most recent academic research demonstrates a trend in the increase in representation of concentrated economic interests of individual corporations in politics (Bauer, 1972; Salisbury, 1984; Gray et al., 2004). In a recent study conducted

by Aizenberg and Hanegraaff (2020) findings suggest that business is relatively overrepresented in their access to parliamentary venues than other interest groups (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020). According to this study, the rise of corporate lobbying led to an increase in accessibility of individual firms to the Dutch political system. Moreover, recent controversial cases of the presence of corporations on influencing the Dutch political decision-making process have drawn new attention to businesses as political actors. Specifically, the dividend tax in the Netherlands and the perceived lack of the Dutch government in tackling tax avoidance is a widely used example to demonstrate the dominating role of large corporations, in this case Shell and Unilever, in the policy formation process (Van de Streek, SOMO, 2018). According to Aizenberg and Hanegraaff (2020) this has resulted in a decline of the access of large business associations. On the other hand, Dutch politicians continue to stress the role of vested interests such as the VNO-NCW that represent a large scale of organizations with private interests. Voortman (GroenLinks) stated that “the law [open government regulation] would never come into being if VNO-NCW did not agree with it”, to highlight the role of these “big guys” as representative organizations in Dutch politics (Tweede Kamer, 2017). Thus, as lobbying has become increasingly professionalized and corporations arguably have exceeding access to the political arena, new insights in the relationship between business and government are necessary.

Partnerships between the private and public sector have taken new forms that create new challenges upon the idea that government represents society, and that public officials make objective policy decisions (Transparency International NL, 2018). However, regulation on lobby activities in the Netherlands is lacking. According to research conducted by Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) and Transparency International, the Netherlands scores low (34%) on transparency, integrity and equality of access compared to other EU member states (GRECO, 2018; Scheltema Beduin & Ter Weele, 2015). The growing presence of corporations in politics have resulted in new questions about the legitimacy of ministries and deals, and the transparency on ruling practices (SOMO, 2018). On the other hand, lobbying by external actors, including the business sector, can have a positive influence on society and improve aspects of democracy such as representation. It provides decision-makers with information and shed light on problem areas that can increase the effectiveness of legislation. New

questions regarding representation, transparency and the rise of lobbying by private actors demonstrate the urge to gain better insights in the presence of corporations, and the private sector in general, in the Dutch political arena and their role in the lobbying landscape.

The discussion of these trends also spilled over to Dutch politics. The political debate on “bringing Dutch lobbying into daylight” that spiked in 2017, Minister Blok refuted the idea of a mandatory lobby paragraph stating that “not every contact with external parties needs justification” (Tweede Kamer, 2017). Nonetheless, the House of Representatives initiated a directive that obligates Dutch ministers to make their agenda’s public ([Uitvoeringsrichtlijn Openbare agenda’s](#), 2018). Through an analysis of the data derived from these agendas, the nature and contradictions about the role of external actors in Dutch politics can be bridged. The purpose of this thesis is to gain a better understanding of the access of different interest groups against the background of the public-private relationship that is present in Dutch politics. By comparing the data with the insights gained from existing literature and in-depth interviews with different actors, this thesis aims at answering the following research question:

To what extent do businesses have privileged access to the political decision-making process in the Netherlands when looking at the external interaction between Dutch ministers and private actors?

Several sub-questions that are taken into consideration:

- a) What is the role of lobbying in the contemporary Dutch public-private landscape?
- b) What kind of actors can be distinguished that play a role in shaping the agenda?
- c) Which differences and patterns in access can be found when comparing different organizations and ministries?

In order to answer the research question, the constructed theoretical framework utilizes different approaches to look at the construction of the public-private relationship. By analyzing and including existing research on this matter, the theoretical framework is the first step in assessing the role of

business as political actors and opportunities of accessing Dutch politics. Chapter 3 presents the mixed methods approach and explains the quantitative method of web-scraping in detail, to enhance generalizability and applicability of this method in the future. Chapter 4 consists out of a presentation of the results and descriptive analytics derived from scraping the Dutch ministerial agendas. Chapter 5 analyses and discusses the findings with the support of expert interviews. Chapter 6 discusses the limitations of this research. Chapter 7 functions as a concluding chapter that also discusses recommendations for future research in this field of study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to effectively study the extent of privileged access of business in Dutch politics, this theoretical framework focuses on the private public nexus and business as political actors. First, the current Dutch public-private landscape is studied wherein the government and business sector meet. Secondly, the role of business as political actors and the relationship between business and the Dutch government is analyzed. To do this effectively, a multi-faced theoretical framework is developed that includes an analysis of the Dutch lobbying landscape and the theory of structural power as coined by Culpepper (2011; 2015). Formal relations between business and state are studied drawing upon elite network structures and the study of interlocks. Based on the discussion of literature and the changing features of the public-private landscape, this thesis looks at how business as political actors are organized in the public sphere. This includes the discussion of how the various forms of businesses are present; through established groups as the VNO-NCW, but also the rise of corporate lobbying. The latter highlights the importance of discussing the notion of corporatism and theories on corporate governance. Thirdly, lobbying as an act for unofficial political actors to engage in politics is conceptualized. Lobbying is discussed in an academic context applying the earlier work of Baumgartner (1998) and research on the (effective) influence of lobbying. In the context of studying ministerial agendas, access points in politics are discussed. The amount of access to the national government shape the influence of business, and provide so-called opportunity structures. By focusing on access points as underlying opportunity structure, a strong foundation is provided in researching access of interest groups during the agenda formation phase in the Dutch political decision-making process.

2.1 Defining the public-private landscape

“Brainwork for public support” read the title of the report on the Dutch economy and society for the 60-year anniversary of the Social Economic Council (SER). The report described the “culture of consultation” in the Netherlands that led to creating more public support, and thereby enhancing the fast implementation of policies (Dankers et al., 2010). Before the turn of the century, the Netherlands has been described as an example of a pure consensus democracy (Lijphart, 1968). As parties need other

parties to form majority coalitions, politicians tick and twist every decision to secure this support as much as possible. This Dutch model of that is based on policy-making through consensus, broadly known as “the polder model” (Willemsen, 2018). The concept is described by politician Maarten Keune (2016) as a place where “associations of employers and employees and the government negotiate on socio-economic policy and working conditions with the aim of reaching compromises on the content of a certain policy and to coordinate the subject among themselves” (p. 7). Its main characteristic refers to the process of finding compromises between different actors with different interests. Moreover, one of the corner stones of this model is the principle of representation connected to the sharing of public responsibilities by large (umbrella) interest groups (Keune, 2016, p. 39). This contrasts with the idea of pluralism that is well-known in the United States and the traditional theory of interests that accept that group struggle results in less majoritarian results. Thus, from a representative democratic perspective, the embedding of interest groups is an important part of the Dutch democratic decision-making process.

However, under the globalization and international finance trends of the 1990s, new partnerships between government and private sectors came into place. In order to understand how this changed the public-private nexus, this research discusses trends in the economy as well as politics: moving away from a coordinated market economy because of the rise of open economies (1) and the changing role of institutions (2), that arguably also led to a change of the role of “classic” interest group representation. As the Netherlands moved away from its active industry policy, an example of a Coordinated Market Economy (CME), to a Liberal Market Economy (LME) that is defined by a more liberal, supply-side economic policy. This part of a broader trend in the world economy as countries started to open up their economies (Sluyterman, 2010). In an open economy, wherein entities in other countries engage in trade of products, businesses take a more present role in politics. Several studies have made a strong case in arguing that business have gained a substantial position in countries with an open economy (Culpepper, 2015, Gourevitch, 2013). Peter Gourevitch is one of the researchers that contributed to open economy politics (OEP) by stating the importance of domestic determinants in OEP such as the role of institutions and the state’s relationship with its business sector (Katzenstein & Nelson, 2013, p. 235). Room for new economic incentives in an open economy stimulate the making of strategic

decisions, and thereby also form an acceptable element in the Dutch political discourse. The rhetoric of deregulation explains how the growth of the world economy and the revival of national economies increased the reward to market opportunities (Gourevitch, 2013, p. 261). This liberalization spurred over to the finance sector and deepened market fluidity, and in sum, created a world economy that is defined by a strong orientation on the functioning of the market. The research by Heemskerk et al. (2012) demonstrates how the Netherlands moved from a neo-corporatist state in the decades after World War II, to a liberal state with a limited role for the state. Liberals as Horwitz (1986) already found that deregulation did not lead to democratization of industry, blaming various institutional shortcomings, including the close relationship between agencies and regulated (client) industries (Horwitz, 1986). Supported by the idea of Susan Fainstein and Norman Fainstein (1980), debureaucratization only provides space for more market rationality and thus for business opportunities. The free market rhetoric together with the process of financial deregulation has shed new light on the role of business in politics, wherein corporations are studied as a separate actor in the political arena and decision-making process (Baumgartner and Leech, 2001; Gray et al., 2005; Berkhout et al., 2018). Thus, the context of movement from CME and LME demonstrates how companies have become inherently political actors.

Secondly, the explanation of the transformation to an open economy also has implications for the role of institutions in which lobbying takes place. Many studies in political economy have looked at the institutional structure in order to judge the political influence of business (Geddes, 2000; Dür, 2015, p. 974). According to Gourevitch (1986) institutions are deformable and therefore can be utilized for different political purposes, as he states that “the impact of rules and institutions depends on who tries to use them” (Gourevitch as cited by Katzenstein & Nelson, 2013, p. 237). Dür and Bièvre (2007) looked at how socio-economic circumstances such as the development of the Single Market Program and liberalization of EU trade policy impacted the formation of trade policies and the involvement of new type of actors with other policy objectives, in this case NGOs, that started to gain access to public decision makers (p. 80). In their research, economic liberalization is the strong determinant factor that caused a “regulatory race to the bottom” and facilitates business success (Dür et al., 2015, p. 953). Heemskerk et al. (2012) looked specifically at the changing role of corporatism and economic

coordination against the background of state transformation in the Netherlands. Specifically, literature in the field of comparative politics suggest that institutions play an important role in the protection of the power of corporates. In his 7th chapter of business power and democratic politics, Culpepper (2011) states with his theory of quiet politics that “the political power of organized business is insensitive to differences among the political institutions of advanced democracies” (p. 179). Moreover, he argues that the protection of Dutch firms by the state is politically constructed, and that “the battles over them take place in the formal arena” (Culpepper, 2011, p. 22). An example of this is the so-called “take-over protection” which is inherent to the running of the Dutch economic system. Large Dutch firms continue to win in the formal institutional arena to keep measures that support the system from takeover protection. Even the Dutch government is preparing legislation to prevent these take-overs that are against the national interest, as was the case with the attempt of a Mexican investor to bid on KPN a few years ago (Schenk, 2020). According to Culpepper (2011) large companies are successful in their lobby activities because participants in Dutch politics as well as voters do not care much about these issues that involve corporate control (p. 22). Therefore, these low salience issues demonstrate the durability of the institutions of takeover protection in the Netherlands (Culpepper, 2011). Hence, by looking at changes in the structure of the domestic economy of the Netherlands and its institutions, the one goes not without the other; changes in the economy affect political institutions and vice versa. This is an important argument for the relevance of economic and institutional conditions in affecting the relationship between the state and the business sector. *It is therefore also predicted that these conditions will influence the design of the lobbying landscape and the position of different external actors.*

Changes in this relationship can be further analyzed through the theory of networks. The study of elite networks helps us to understand how the transformation to an open economy resulted in effective management of large corporations to gain access to policy makers (Davis, 1997, p. 34; Baumgartner and Leech, 2001); Heemskerk, 2012). An important starting point of this theory is that individual firms are tied to broader network structures. These network structures play an important role in shaping government practices and coordinating economic activity in certain industries (Davis, 1997, p. 5). In studying the effect of interlocks, he associates individual action with collective outcomes to gain a better

understanding of government decisions and adaption of innovation. Davis (1997) proposes an evident association by explaining how private actors bring their experience to the table as they bear the consequences of the decision that will be made (p. 12). This notion of social embeddedness and network proximity play an important role in determining the diffusion of government's decisions. However, literature differs on the links between large private organizations and public administration. The study of elite networks by Heemskerk et al. (2012) discusses the retreat of the role of the state in the economy, that led to a decline in corporate board interlocks (p. 270). The transformation of 'private life', that was characterized by the fading of the Dutch active industrial policy to more privatization, resulted in a greater distance between private companies and government and also to a decline of the overall corporate network. However, elite network literature emphasizes how the "institutional architecture of state power" gave way to business to redistribute social policies (Heemskerk, 2012, p. 254; Cárdenas, 2019).

2.2 Structural privileged access for business?

The understanding that business is inherently connected to politics can be further understood through the theoretical application of the structural power theory. In review of the analysis of the Dutch public-private landscape, characteristics of the Dutch open economy give space for the lobby sector to flourish, but also provide a structural basis for business to gain a notable position (Culpepper, 2015, Gourevitch, 2013). The theory of structural power can be widely used to connect corporate power to mechanisms inherent to the open economy (Gourevitch, 2013). Subsequently, research on this theory has recently enjoyed a so-called 'renaissance' in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 (Culpepper, 2015, p. 392). The literature on corporate power has moved beyond looking at political advocacy and are now primarily focused around the systemic features of the open market, that favors the presence of the business sector. Hence, research suggests that business has a structurally privileged position in the political decision-making process (Lindblom, 1977; Dür et al., 2015). However, this has not yet been applied to research the position of business actors in the Dutch political landscape, wherein lobbying has gained a substantial role. As accounts of structural power identify that the organization of the economy affects

the influence of businesses, it is useful to apply this to the earlier described changes in the Dutch political landscape (Brady, 1943; Lindblom, 1977).

The theory of structural power was already discussed by Susan Strange (1988), and later on applied from a macro-perspective, looking at the international system wherein structural power is a trait of only a few nations such as the United States. Culpepper (2015) further elaborated on structural power by applying the theory on national economies to explain the dependency of nations on the financial sector. Moving away from the traditional class-theoretic focus in literature, Culpepper (2015) observes that a new wave of structural power theorists is more attentive to “how the structure of capitalism creates opportunities for some companies vis-à-vis the state at the same time that it creates leverage for some states” (p. 391). What this means is that depending on the regulatory environment, as well as economic conditions, the dependency of the state on the business sector can differentiate, and therefore also the space of the business sector to gain privileged access. A widely used example to illustrate the structural power of business is the financial crisis of 2008, wherein domestic banks were bailed out (Culpepper, 2015, p. 393). These bank bailouts took place due to the strong dependency of states on their financial institutions and the problem of them being “too big to fail” (p. 392). This has become evident in the case of the Netherlands, where banks were supported with capital injections and state guarantees. In 2008, the Dutch government acquired the Dutch branch of ABN AMRO Bank, and in 2013 SNS REAAL was nationalized to prevent major financial instability in the Dutch economy (Rijksoverheid, 2013). Structural power entails a certain degree of internalization, meaning that policy makers are making business values and standards part of their own in such a way that this is no longer perceived as externally imposed. This would then result in an opportunity structure wherein less active lobby and the use of networks would be necessary.

Although this reciprocal dependence between state and business becomes evident, Culpepper (2015) hedges from stating that business “wins all the time” or that business always has the same structural advantage (p. 395). This suggests that contact with policy makers is still necessary through these access points, wherein a detailed view on the opportunity structures that offer room for private

companies to access politics will contribute. Structural power has also studied why business is more present on certain issues than on others, and why business is more likely to organize their own lobby instead of through the coordination of associations. Earlier on, this study already mentioned Pepper D. Culpepper's theory on "quiet politics" that advocates for the privileged access of business to decision-makers under conditions of low political salience. These are low salience political issues that are not of interest to citizens and therefore firms have the change to prevail. As soon as political salience on an issue increases, business power will decrease (Culpepper, 2011, p. 177). In line with this research, Dür et al. (2015) finds that the dividing line is most present on issues such as the environment, labor and health interests, but that on low salience issues where less interest groups are participating, business groups pursue inside strategies to gain privileged access (Dür et al., 2015, p. 958). Although their study focusses on EU legislation, it refers back to the conditions of an open economy and competition, as business strongly competes on market-regulating issues and trade policy of which they take advantage (Dür and De Bièvre, 2007). Moreover, the current structural power framework can be used to analyze corporations and organizations as individual political actors, rather than grouping and interpretate all business actors against non-business actors (Culpepper, 2015, p. 406). Hereby this research gives nuance to a debate that is largely structured around business versus non-business. Existing research have compared the role of business in relation to other external groups by portraying business as one homogenous group in politics (as done by Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020). Acknowledging the presence of different kind of private interest groups helps to also differentiate the analysis of this study that primarily focusses on situations wherein specific companies and other private actors have a certain interest. Through this approach, it helps to discuss in-depth the role of several different actors that play a role in the Dutch political arena.

2.3 A new boys network?: collective groups vis-à-vis individual firms

The context of a more advanced liberal and open market economy demonstrates the need for a theoretical-based perspective on the organization of state-business relations that offers possibilities for different kind of actors. In Anderson's (2003) policy conceptualization the policy process is not only dominated by official policy makers, but also by "unofficial policy makers" (p. 59). These are

participants that may influence political decisions, but cannot rely on a legal jurisdiction to make policy decisions (Anderson, 1979). Examples of unofficial policy makers include political parties that are not governing, interest groups, stakeholders and individuals (Anderson, 2003). Literature has often centralized the role of collective interest groups vis-à-vis individual corporations in political systems to understand this. Interest groups are broadly defined as “formally organized groups that seek to represent and promote the interests of their constituency in the policy process” (Yoshioka, 2010). Beyond the political foundation, it can be expected that there are differences in access ability and lobby efforts between concentrated and diffuse interests. Large umbrella interest organizations formed the corner stone of the Dutch “polder-model”. Central to this structure of industrial relations, is the interrelations between trade unions, employers and the state. The central conflict between employers and employees in this model have led to diverse forms of institutional arrangements, such as new voice mechanisms and collective union groups. Literature is divided on the current role of these interest groups as Dutch politics has become more directed towards the market generated by more open economy. Part of the scholars have argued that, because of this, the presence and representation of these unions is declining (Keune, 2016, p. 39). On the other hand, theories of interest-group pluralism state that concentrated interest groups thrive in an open and competitive pluralist environment (Rommetvedt et al. 2013; Culpepper, 2011). By separating several groups within ‘business as political actors’, such as corporations and business associations, a better understanding of the role of specific groups in the political arena can be established.

2.3.1 (Re) evaluating the decline of groups

Visser and Hemerijck’s (1997) argued that (trade) unions and employers’ associations still continue to shape social and economic policies in comparison to other European countries. In line with these findings, research by Rommetvedt et al. (2013) found that there is a decline of traditional corporatist arrangements to represent the interests of businesses (Rommetvedt et al., 2013). A Dutch example of the prevalence of large collective business groups is the lobby of the largest Dutch employers’ organization; the VNO-NCW. Dutch scholars as Heemskerk (2007) argued that the Dutch “old boys network” of many different interest groups has fallen apart, and that lobby is concentrated

around the VNO-NCW (Heemskerk, 2007, p. 98 & p. 106). In comparison to other countries, the Netherlands has a dense interest group system (Hanegraaff, 2017). Dutch politics researcher Joost Berkhout explains this phenomenon because of the central organization of interest groups, as VNO-NCW represents a large number of companies and industrial organizations (Berkhout et al., as reported by Broer, 2017). Additionally, in the analysis of politics of trade unions, scholars as Cox notice an emerging “policy of symbiosis”; instead of nation states, unions substitutable can function as the main opposing force against corporations in ruling outside the domestic borders (Nye & Keohane, 2017, p. 338). On the other hand, Culpepper’s (2011) research differentiates on several issues; the unions did not play a significant role in the politics of takeover protections. Whereas his research minimized the role of unions, his research did find evidence for the direct interaction and negotiation between government and the VNO-NCW (p. 95). Therefore, the predominant role of the VNO-NCW in broad economic interests predicts to also be present at the point of access towards decision-makers.

Although the VNO-NCW has been present in Dutch politics for a long time, studies argue that large collective groups are in decline (Smith, 2000; Woll, 2016). Reinforcing the importance of political economy, Mizruchi (2013) explains that business coordination declined as the labor movement weakened in the United States (US). This shifted the focus of corporate organizations towards shareholder value and creating individual benefits (Mizruchi, 2013). In the United States, this led to a decline of board interlocks (directors that hold seats on several boards at the same time) of 30% between 2000-2010. Mancur Olson’s argument is one of the most prevailing arguments that contradicts the notion of collective action and the formation of large groups (Olsen, 1965). According to Olson (1965) concentrated economic interest outweigh the presence of majority interests because of the well-known free rider problem (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020). Mancur Olson argues that firms are hesitant to support lobby organizations or form (large) groups, because these organizations cannot exclude people from benefiting, hence are not willing to make the sacrifices, compared to smaller groups (Olsen, 1965, p. 3). This resonates with academic research findings that have shown that there is decline of organized business groups (Mizruchi, 2013; Woll, 2016, Smith, 2000). Stalled efforts because of this free riding problem, Olson (1965) argues that diffuse interests are not able to organize themselves, stagnating lobby

efforts (Dür & De Bièvre, 2007). This, then explains a trend for the creation of more specialized interest groups that only focus on a specific issue (Lowery, 2007; Lowery et al., 2012; Keune, 2016). It is a sign that larger umbrella organizations have found it difficult to represent all interests in an industry and give rise to other type of competitors. This idea is strengthened by the divestment of member organizations that have been part of large umbrella organizations, and rather start lobbying themselves (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020). Their study makes a distinction between several organized interests when arguing a decline of business associations and unions but a significant increase in the presence of corporations at parliamentary hearings (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020).

First of all, this re-enforces the idea that diffuse interests find it hard to get organized, and thereby formulates an argument for the fact that other interest groups, such as NGOs, find less success in their lobbying efforts. Dür & De Bièvre (2007) explains this through the difficulty of diffuse interests to organize themselves and the necessity to ask for resources needed for political activity (p. 82). Moreover, NGOs often represent more general principles such as a greener economy or social justice, rather than proposing specific policy adjustments (Dür & De Bièvre, 2007). Hanegraaff (2014) reinforces this argument, by stating that corporations represent an easily demarcated target group for which the benefits, and also the costs, of policy outcomes are well-defined. Their niche orientation is in contrast with that of NGOs that represent a diffuse set of actors and often also lack overlap between a constituency that benefits from their actions as well as providing them with resources. Subsequently, NGOs and corporations are often placed opposed to each other in their lobbying efforts by academic literature. In the Netherlands, this is exemplified by case-studies stating that the WNF struggles with adopting a generic focus on for example environmental issues that will lead to the highest impact on their issue, but also presents business with a more competitive advantage as individual companies have a more tailored focus. Another example is the case-study by Bas van der Sande (2016) that argues that KLM (Royal Dutch Airlines) and environmental NGOs seem to be in a deadlock on finding common ground because of interest differentiation. Here, KLM already enjoys a privileged access position that prevents them from including NGOs in their lobby strategy (Van der Sande, 2016). In relation to these

differences, it led NGOs to draw on different strategies in their attempt to influence policy outcomes in comparison to corporations.

When comparing the corporate sector opposite to the civil sector, this is not only based on their stance on issues but also by analyzing their lobbying efforts. As previously discussed, the notion of “quiet politics”, as coined by Culpepper (2011), is closely linked to the strategy businesses adopt to receive attention from policy makers. Businesses often adopt a strategy that is not visible to a broader audience, making “inside lobbying” the core of the privatization of lobbying. Inside lobbying compromises the “direct exchanges with policymakers through private communication channels, meetings, and calls (...) out of view of the public” (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2018, p. 2). Hanegraaff et al. (2014) notices that this strategy is avoided by NGOs as their diffused constituency and relatively broad ideals, makes developing expert information that subsequently is shared with policy makers very costly. Rather through the tactic of outside lobbying, they try to indirectly address policy makers by mobilizing and raising awareness through public communication. This theory does not per se argue that interest groups have become less present in politics in general, but rather, that their strategy of the socialization of conflict differ from that of individual firms (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2018; Hanegraaff et al., 2015; Beyers, 2004). These opposing characteristics and advocacy strategies provide a basis for expecting noticeable differences in the access-to-politics-efforts of NGOs and business. Given the outlined public-private landscape and the parallel discussion of business vis-à-vis NGOs, this research expects a greater presence of the business sector in their interactions with Dutch ministers than interest groups in the civil sector. *Within this scope of research, this study predicts that access points in the Dutch political decision-making process are positively organized towards the business sector.*

Secondly, and closely related to the above-mentioned traits of corporations and the increase of business to gain access to policy makers can be further understood through a framework of corporate governance (Baumgartner and Leech (2001); Berkhout et al. (2018); Gray et al. (2005); Aizenberg, 2019). As research became interested in studying private corporations as important political actors, various authors have looked at the corporations as an individual actor in political arena and decision-

making. Smith's work on interests of individual corporations (2000) argues that corporations tend to "wage their own political battles on particularistic issues" (p. 41). Grant (1982) and Bouwen (2004) explain this phenomenon by arguing that large firms have more resources and rely less on collective action. The outlined comparison between corporations and NGOs explains why it is easier for corporations to engage in the policy problem at stake as they have a direct incentive because of their highly concentrated interests and niche orientation. Together with their large(r) size, this further explains the rise of individual firm lobbying (Berkhout et al., 2018; Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020).

2.3.2 The rise of corporate lobbying

The discussion of corporations as a separate group in the political sphere led to a re-emphasis on the trend of "corporate lobbying", the expansion of corporations in accessing the political process. Baumgartner and Leech (2001), Berkhout et al. (2018), Aizenberg & Hanegraaff (2020) and Gray et al. (2004) are examples of research that indicate that "corporations constitute of the largest set of actors that gain access to politics" (p. 182). Overall, Berkhout et al. (2018) found that the largest lobbying group in the EU consists out of firms. In numbers, corporations outnumber NGOs and unions in the European Parliament by 60% (Cann, 2017). In a study of the influence of financial markets in the realm of the financial crisis of 2008, Wolf et al. (2014) studied consultations of the European Commission, which is one of the main forms of external communication. Results demonstrated that from all the organizations that were consulted, 55% came from the financial industry and only 13% from trade unions and NGOs (Wolf et al., 2014). As the presence of business associations has decreased, and the number of corporations that gain access to policy makers have increased, this creates an argument for the structural advantages of the corporate sector over others.

Moving away from the EU, the study of Aizenberg & Hanegraaff (2020) indicates that individual corporations form the largest group participating in the Dutch decision-making process (see Figure 1 below). Clearly demonstrated in their research, corporations are not only the largest set of actors to gain access, but also succeeded to increase their access while the access of associations decreased. This is in line with arguments on the structural positions of individual corporations and the

idea of corporate lobbying. Moreover, their research supports the idea of a decline of traditional corporatist arrangements. This does not mean an overall decline of corporatism, but rather a decline of the traditional corporatist set-up (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020, p. 196). The increase in individual corporate lobbying has important consequences as it contributes to a more fragmented interest group landscape and handing in on representation of all interests (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020; Gray et al., 2005). Hence, it this study expects to find a skewed representation in favor of business interests in the analysis of the data concerning the interaction between ministers and external actors. In short, the previous mentioned studies and comparisons highlight the size, positional and economic power, clear constituency of corporations, inside lobbying channels to decision-makers and their structural role in policy formation. Hence, their individual lobbying efforts provide corporations with additional advantages to access the governmental policy process. Although the established role of the VNO-NCW cannot be ignored, the rise of “corporate lobbying” and the general trend of a diffusive curve of collective interest groups lead to the expectation that: *(Individual) corporations dominate the legislative agendas of ministers in comparison to other forms of business organizations.*

Figure 1: Aizenberg & Hanegraaff (2020). “Is politics under increasing corporate sway? A longitudinal study on the drivers of corporate access”. *West European Politics*, 43(1).

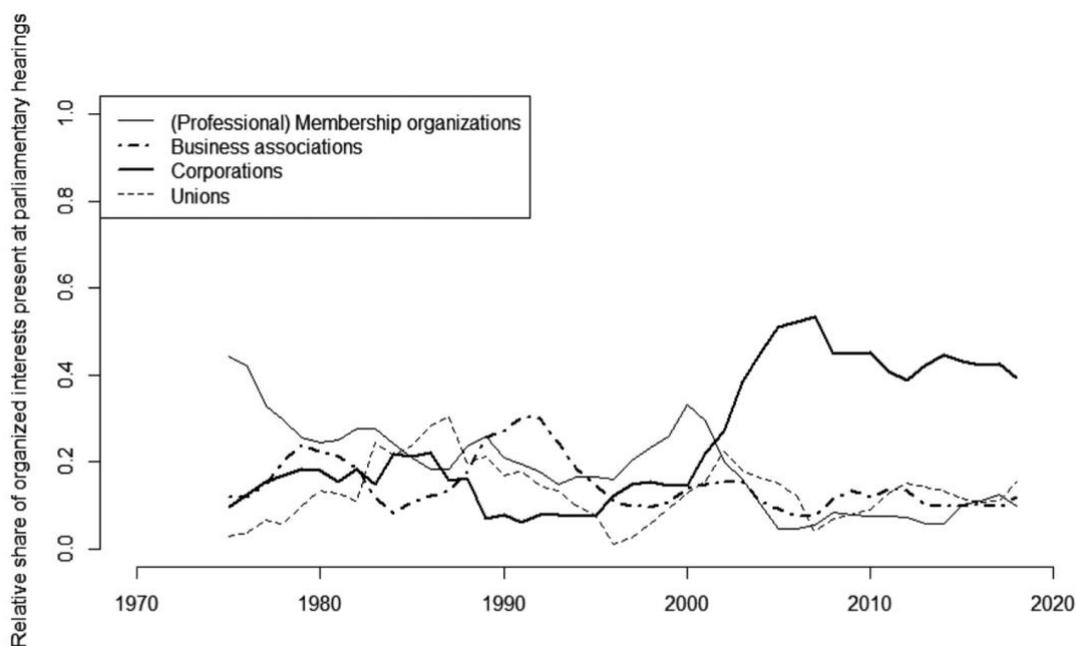


Figure 1. Moving average of relative share of organised interests, including corporations, present at parliamentary hearings over time in the Netherlands.

Note: Moving average is calculated as the means of non-overlapping groups of five.

2.4 A conceptualization of the act of lobbying

“The Netherlands is more a city than a country”, stated Morris Tabaksblat, chairman of the 2003 Corporate Governance Committee (Culpepper, 2011, p. 83). Hereby he referred to the small environment in which individuals have the ability to come close to politics and create strong ties between corporate governance actors and legislators. After discussing the presence of different interest groups, it is important to further discuss the act of lobbying to create reasonable predictions on the Dutch lobbying landscape. In his chapter “Netherlands and the Myth of the Corporatist Coalition” Culpepper reasoned how not necessarily corporate governance but “managerial lobbying” is defining the Dutch political landscape (Culpepper, 2011). According to the political scientist, Dutch politicians grant significant agenda-setting capacity to the managerial elite by inviting them to take part in informal working groups and meetings with administrators (Culpepper, 2011). Other scholars also argued that lobbying is a big part of everyday politics in the Netherlands (Scheltema Beduin & Ter Weele, 2015; Willemsen, 2018). This first and foremost demonstrates the need for defining the act of lobbying and its use by different interest groups.

Although the study of lobbying is of high interest to many political science scholars, lobbying has been defined in different ways, in different contexts. Franck Baumgartner and Beth Leech have defined lobbying as “an effort to influence the policy process” (1998, p. 34). The notion of influence in this definition implies behavior, that has already been explained by Dahl (1961) in saying that “in response to the lobbying of A, policymaker B moves the policy outcome closer to a position that corresponds better with A’s objectives” (De Bruycker & Beyers, p. 4). Moreover, in their legal explanation the Council of Europe has add that it is “structured and organized action” that distinguish lobbying from other acts of influence (Council of Europe, 2017). Besides it is important to note that the actor with the specific interest can be presenting a private interest or a more public concern, and that this can be performed by individual organizations as well as organized interest groups. Hereby, the definition moves away from other notions that stress that this is solely performed by large organized groups (Yoshioka, 2010). It is important to note that much research regarding the act of lobbying is indeed focused on measuring the *influence* of lobbying through *policy outcomes*. Academic literature,

and especially empirical literature, show mixed results on the influence of organized interests in influencing public policy (Lowery, 2013). This is early on summarized by Baumgartner and Leech (1998): “the unavoidable conclusion is that PACs and direct lobbying sometimes strongly influence Congressional voting, sometimes have marginal influence and some- times fail to exert influence” (p. 134). Although the influence is repeatedly assumed, Lowery (2013) also concluded that this influence is not substantial. Additionally, the act of lobbying does not solely have the purpose of seeking influence nor can lobbying therefore be easily categorized as successful or unsuccessful. This is an important footnote in understanding that the act of lobbying does not imply influence nor success.

2.5 Access points as opportunity structures

Although drawing upon the same theories as other academic studies researching the act of lobbying, this study focusses specifically on the privileged access point. In reconsidering the effectiveness of lobbying, Hanegraaff (2014) takes into account the competition for organizational resources and gaining access to the political process. A few years later, Aizenberg and Hanegraaff (2019) continued to look at access in relation to corporate lobbying. Still academics continue to differ about the extent and role of privileged access: results from the study by Baumgartner et al. (2009) imply that special interests often not get their issue across to policy makers (Lowery, 2013). In contrast, Dür & De Bièvre (2007) reasoned that although actors, in this case NGOs, have gained access to policy-makers, they have failed to shift policy outcomes in their favor. The relatively divided and scarce material on this topic is making “points of access” as a measurement the central focus of this study to interpret the role of business as political actors. Moreover, concentrating on this specific point contributes to a better understanding of the public-private landscape in the Netherlands, rather than the success of lobbying.

Within the structural power debate, the role of actors needs to be placed in relation to political opportunity structure. Opportunity structure can be seen as a framework wherein different exogenous factors limit or empower collective actors. Hence, the actions of actors are dependent on the existence, or the lack, of political opportunity (Meyer, 2004). Tarrow (1998) defines “political opportunity” as “consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political struggle that

encourages people to engage in contentious politics" (Meyer, 2004, p. 134). Tilly (1995) names examples such as economic shifts, for example opening up the economy, and the development of democratic political institutions, that result to "moving politics indoors" (Meyer, 2004, p. 128). In this context, political opportunity theory can affect mainstream institutional politics and policy (Meyer, 2004). In the twentieth century, the concept is largely applied to analyze the success of actors in relation to collective protests. Charles Tilly (2004), Sidney Tarrow (1996) and Douglas McAdam (1996) have used opportunity structure theory to describe division in elites and the success and failure of social movements, for example the protest movements in the 1960s in the United States. Comparisons of social movements demonstrated that political opportunity structures influence the adopted strategy of influence and the ultimate effect of a protest movement on their environments (Kitschelt, 1986). The key aspect of "the political opportunity perspective is that activists' prospects for advancing particular claims, mobilizing supporters, and affecting influence are context-dependent" (Meyer, 2004, p. 126). Therefore, this research directs much attention to the public-private landscape in which business as political actors are situated, hence taking into account these external developments.

The four main components of this theory have been stressed by McAdam (1996) and relate to the openness of the political system (1), the stability of elite alignments (2), the presence of elite networks (3) and the capacity of the state to suppress (4). The component in this structure that is related to the amount of popular access to the political system is key in this analysis. By looking at these access points as opportunity structures, political opportunity structure provides a broader context of assessing the role of business as actors. The theory states that the amount of access to politics, as one of the variables, ultimately shape the role and influence of a group of actors. Goodwin (2002) even noted that political opportunities were mostly expanded in terms of increased access, making political access an important variable in expanding political opportunity. Important are also institutional aspect that refers to the challengers' access to the institutionalized political system (Giugni, 2009). Access point theory directly relates to this, as this theory sees access points (i.e. a policy maker's who has power in a policy area) as a crucial institutional feature (Ehrlich, 2007). It assumes that the more access points that institutions provide to interest groups, the more (competitive) lobbying occurs. In short, more access points lead to

more opportunity for lobbying, wherein political opportunities are also defined by the broader socio-economic and political context.

In sum, this theoretical framework discusses several concepts and theories concerning the role of business as political actors. Academic literature has suggested, using different approaches, that business has gained a structural advantage for private actors in getting access to ministers. More specifically, it suggests that the current public-private landscape creates an opportunity structure that would give rise to corporations in accessing politics, at the expense of other groups. Therefore, this research is designed around the study of legislative agendas of Dutch ministers to research these expectations and gain further knowledge on the density and diversity of the interest group system and where these access points come into place. As opportunity structures are heavily context dependent, it is also expected to notice differences between policy areas (in this case ministries). It has been hard to falsify the role of business with the techniques that are mostly used, especially for measuring influence. By focusing on the point of access, a phase wherein business is highly influential, this analysis would capture the struggle over who gets a seat at a table early on in the policy process.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to effectively research the role of business as political actors in shaping the Dutch political agenda this study uses a mixed methods approach: by using quantitative and qualitative data the Dutch lobbying landscape through (privileged) access is analyzed. This research is designed around the web-scraping of political agendas of Dutch representatives that undergo a descriptive analysis (1)¹. Additionally designed in such an order that the results are discussed by different kinds of experts in the form of semi-structured interviews (2). This way, the qualitative research phase builds directly on the results that derived from the quantitative research phase.

3.1 Web-scraping & quantitative data collection

To effectively study the Dutch lobbying landscape at the ministerial level, this research maps the meetings of the Dutch representatives of all ministries since the Implementation Directive Public Agendas of Ministers ([Uitvoeringsrichtlijn Openbare agenda's](#), 2018). This Directive forces departments to publish their agendas on the parliamentary website, in order to make their working visits, appointments and speeches publicly available. Parliamentary meetings and appointments of these various ministers as well as round table meetings can give insights into priorities of the Dutch government and *who gets a seat at the table*. While parliamentary meetings do not give a complete representation for the entire degree of access for external actors, it has become an increasingly important point of access for private corporations in the Netherlands (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020). In addition, several studies on lobbying have looked at the public agenda to yield in-sights on the role of business in the decision-making process (Dür, 2015). Moreover, the operationalization of this research also contributes to the broader literature on the role of interest groups non-business actors (Dür, 2015). Thus, these meetings between ministers and private actors can give systematic insights in the access and affiliation of corporations with certain policy terrains, and on the other hand, identify the external orientation of Dutch ministers.

¹ This form of data collection is done in collaboration with Open State Foundation, a non-profit organisation that advocates for digital transparency by opening up public information as open data and making it accessible.

Through a method called web-scraping, all data from websites can automatically be retrieved. It is a widely applied method to analyze political data and in comparative politics to compare trends and actors. For example, political scientists divide texts into categories and compare them amongst each other on the frequency of appearance. In this way, this technique can help to identify and acknowledge differences between positions or specific actors over time (Provalis Research, 2020). For example, the “Syria Conflict Resolution” project of the Carter Center uses web-scraping to constantly monitor the relationship between conflicting groups (The Carter Center, 2020; Klüver, 2015). This is made public and applied in order to effectively make policy. Hence, web-scraping provides a way of looking at (unequal) political participation and power relations on a methodological level within the social science field (Klüver, 2015). Broadly, web-scraping tools are used for quantitative text analysis that refers to the systematic method of processing text as (statistical) data. In this case, this does not imply analysis of large bodies of text, but rather to extract the (external) actors that were present in a meeting which are named in the agenda-item. Quantitative text analysis has already been used in analyzing lobbying phenomena, interest groups and patterns of access (Klüver, 2015; Aizenberg, 2020; Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020). Especially since the increase of public documents and registers, such as the transparency register of the European Union, text analysis has been used more often by political science scholars (Aizenberg, 2020). Klüver (2011) applied text analysis to measure the lobbying success in the European Union and the policy positions of interest groups through the assessment of legislative consultations that they have sent in (Klüver, 2009; 2011; 2013). Additionally, Aizenberg & Hanegraaff (2020) have used this method to gain a better understanding of the organized interests in the Netherlands through an analysis of parliamentary hearings (Aizenberg, 2020). Thus, this method does not only help to analyze certain actors, but also place these actors and their characteristics in a broader context, in this case the lobbying landscape, in which they operate.

In studying the presence of business in the political process, this methodological approach is a new introduced tool that has not yet been applied in political science research to extract information from the agendas of ministers in the Netherlands. The use of web extraction and quantitative text analysis presents a novel approach to specifically study access points through these ministerial agendas.

The data extraction has two purposes; all available data of the meetings between Dutch ministers and external actors is collected and made available in one database²(1). By extracting this data through Python (programming language) and storing this data on a new designed website, the data is made more accessible and transparent, for researchers, journalists and individuals. As the tool continues to constantly retrieve data, it continues to analyze, hence it allows the current and future monitoring of this data. Secondly, in light of this research, the purpose of this data collection is to extract information and subsequently gain insights on the access points that provide external actors with opportunities to take part in the Dutch political decision-making process. Therefore, all the meetings, in the form of extracted data, is stored and coded in excel format to reprocess the data and make the information readable for systematic analysis (2).

Following the data collection, this data is organized in descriptive analytics that maps important corporate actors in the Dutch political environment. In this way, Patterns are appointed and differences between ministries and policy areas can be recognized. This is made visible through tables and graphs. Additionally, the constructed network analysis demonstrates relations and the relative amount of accessibility and importance. Through the analysis of prominent directories that registers the identity and composition of ministerial directorates, Heemskerk et al. (2012) was able to find different results between ministries. For example, the empirical findings from this study found highly concentrated links with a small number of actors in the Ministry of Finance, arguing that it can reflect the financial orientation of these large corporations, and their important role in policy-decisions in Dutch financial affairs (p. 262). On the other hand, looking at state-business interlocks, the ministry of Economic Affairs the study of Heemskerk (2012) noticed a decline in corporate interlocks with education and science (Heemskerk et al., 2012). Through these observations, trends in the Dutch public-private landscape can be found, refuted and reinforced. These examples demonstrate the diversity of conclusions that can be gained from such a network analysis.

² The website that makes this data visible and available is called 'OpenLobby' and can be accessed through: <https://www.openlobby.nl/embed.html>

Although this method systematically analyses content, studying the role of any type of “unofficial” policy actor in the political sphere can be challenging as their presence and strategy is not always noticeable and public (Aizenberg, 2020). Therefore a few limitations need to be highlighted: first, the amount of data is limited to the amount of information that is made available through these agendas on the government website, which is not covering all meetings (1)³. Second, the fact that the data does not capture the content of the meetings (2). Therefore, this thesis does not imply to provide a causal relationship nor the “success” of lobbying in attaining their [private actors] policy goals and thereby implying influence (Dür, 2008). Moreover, it provides a new approach for studying this point of access in the Netherlands, which relates to the opportunities for external actors to take part in decision-making, in a quantitative manner. Thus, it rather contributes to the understanding of the current Dutch public-private landscape, business as political actors and existing academic research on the rise of corporate lobbying.

3.2 Qualitative research through expert interviews

In addition to collecting and analyzing quantitative data, qualitative research in the form of interviews is conducted⁴. From the understanding that lobbying does not only take place through official meetings with ministers, the reports of these meetings remain scarce. Lobbying continues to be an activity that is hard to solely represent in data. Therefore, expert interviews contribute to provide a nuanced perspective on the role and access of different organizations in the Dutch political landscape. Additionally, experts can create new meaning based on the derived data by providing their vision on the meaning of the presented data and filling in the gaps and questions that arise from the data-set.

In order to gain a comprehensive view on the topic, semi-structured interviews with different interest group representatives are conducted, based on the categorization of the data. This includes

³ Scanning the agendas of ministers on the official website of the government (<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/agenda>) are viewed as incomplete as only a few meetings a day can be observed, while it can be assumed ministers have more meetings. This is possible because the exceptions in the Directive ([Uitvoeringsrichtlijn Openbare agenda's](#), 2018) state that departments can make use of certain grounds for exemptions (such as the safety, economic or financial risks). Additionally, appointments with companies or organisations of which public disclosure could result in demonstratable damage for the external party or the negotiation process, are not included.

⁴ The conducted interviews are recorded and in possession of the writer. The audio file can be sent upon request. An overview of the five interviews with name and date are also included in Attachment 2. Correspondingly, this thesis refers to these interviews in text as *Last name* and *Interview number*.

speaking with a corporate actor, in this case the director of the public affairs department of KLM, Klaas-Jeroen Terwal (Interview 3). To better understand the view from business associations, an interview with a policy secretary at VNO-NCW was conducted; Feroz Amirkhan (Interview 2) is policy secretary on economic affairs and digital economy, and also co-founder of the AI coalition. In order to include a social perspective, Arnold Merkies (Interview 1) was interviewed, Merkies is the coordinator of the Dutch branch of Tax Justice, a network organization that wants to raise awareness of the negative consequences of tax evasion. Before this Merkies was a member of the Dutch parliament as a spokesman on financial affairs. Additionally, an interview with Paul van den Berg (Interview 4), political advisor at Cordaid (NGO) was conducted. To study the public-private landscape, the importance of not only speaking with private actors, but also interviewing Dutch ministers cannot be underestimated. The adopted approach was to focus on getting an interview with an (ex-)minister in the financial or economic sector, as these ministries are important for external (private) actors. Therefore, an interview with ex-minister of financial affairs, Jeroen Dijsselbloem (Interview 5) was scheduled and conducted. As minister of finance during the cabinet of Rutte II (2012-2017) Dijsselbloem focused on fiscal discipline, stability of the Eurozone and solidarity towards countries in need of financial support. Moreover, Dijsselbloem advocated during his time as minister for increasing the transparency of lobby activities involving ministers, and already made his agenda public before the initiated Directive in 2017. Conducting an interview with an ex-minister contributes to interpreting the data-set and taking his experiences into account add great value to this research.

The purpose of the interviews is two-folded; on the one hand, the semi-structured questions focus on the broad Dutch lobbying landscape and the interviewee's perception on their role in it. Secondly, and more elaborately, the extracted data is discussed to enhance the ability to make interpretations. Especially because the data is expected to remain scarce on this topic, the view of public affairs experts of different organizations contributes by filling in the gaps and give a nuanced answer on the existence, and amount, of privileged access of different interest groups. In relation to the limited amount of data, explanations for the (limited) use of reporting these meetings and the level of transparency at ministerial level is discussed.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter gives an overview of the operationalization that formed the basis for the statistics and associated descriptive analysis. First, the extracted data in excel is filtered by focusing on the category “gesprek” (conversation) as the Dutch government (Rijksoverheid) labels external meetings in this category⁵. This resulted in 2242 entries that were all given a unique meeting ID. These were automatically broken down into columns specifying the date, subject, appointed minister, ministry, location, categorized as person or organization, location, including the relevant URL. Appointments with more than one minister and/or external organization dissected and displayed as separate appointments, additionally the data of the meetings were doubled, once with the person (minister) as subject, and once with the interest group (organization) as actor. This resulted in a database of 4858 separate rows in excel. After this distinction it was easier to filter the data on the category “organization” (column H) and get an overview of the organization involved (column I), as the focus of this study to compare the access of different organizations. Therefore also meetings between independent individuals and ministers were disregarded. As follows, the organizations were manually scanned to ensure there were no organizations that appeared double or under an abbreviation or another form of error. This prevented that organizations could be counted twice as two separate organizations, and thus ensured reliability. Additionally, as this study aimed to examine corporate access compared to other “unofficial” actors, organizations that have a formal tie to the Dutch government, EU or UN institutions or intergovernmental organizations are perceived as irrelevant and therefore excluded from this study⁶. Additionally, outliers such as De Rekenkamer but also independent institutions such as De Nederlandsche Bank that regularly meets with ministries to ensure price stability were excluded from the study as these were exceptions and did not fit in an appropriate category without giving a skewed effect. This resulted in a new dataset of 709 meetings⁷ that provide the basis for the descriptive analysis of this study.

⁵ Date of extraction is set on 24 November 2020. Hence this study is based on a timeframe of more than three years; from the start of these records (07 November 2017) until the analysis of this study (24 November 2020).

⁶ For justification of the deleted, combined or otherwise not included organisations, see the table in the attachment of this study (appendix 4).

⁷ The total amount of meetings between Dutch ministers and external organizations can be sent upon request (Excel format).

4.1 Categorical data analysis

The relatively clear dataset (for example in comparison with Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020) allowed for manual categorization of the meetings. Based on the list of 305 unique organizations that were found by the database, these organization were manually categorized to identify each interest group organization⁸. This category is the response variable and ordered into a set of mutually exclusive unordered categories. The different categories are based on Aizenberg & Hanegraaff (2020) that uses a similar methodological approach in studying corporate access focusing on parliamentary hearings. The dataset includes the categories: corporations, (professional) membership organizations, business associations, (trade) unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), institutions (including universities and central banks) and research institutions. This study does not make a cut-off point of a minimal number of employees, as this dataset already only captures the organizations that have gained a seat at the table, and thereby represent their interests. Through the VLOOKUP function the uniquely identified organizations were defined as VLOOKUP formulas, making it possible to translate the categories of these organizations to the list of appointments and code them accordingly. For some meetings, the organization was not correctly selected by the automatic method, therefore resulting in an error while categorizing through the VLOOKUP method. This would have been difficult to prevent, as all meetings are formulated in different ways on the government website, complicating any form of data-analysis. The rows of meetings that provided an error in the automatically categorization process, were manually labelled in the right category.

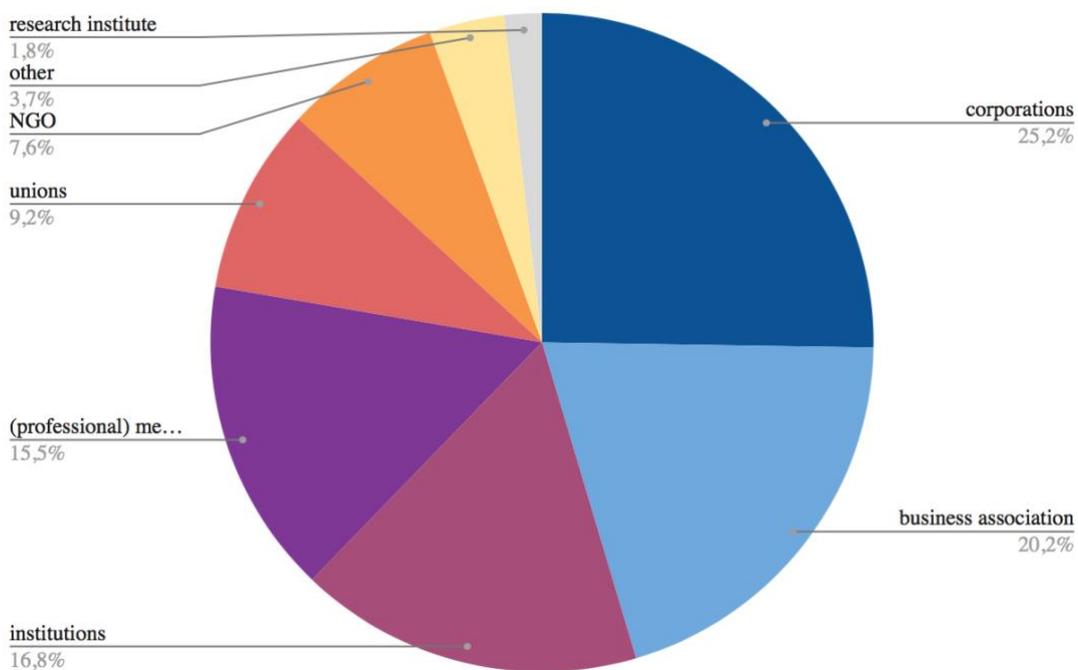
In total, 179 meetings with corporations were identified, which are compared to other types of organizations⁹. Figure 2 displays a pie chard of the division between different types of organizations. This demonstrates that corporations make up 24,7% of the total amount of organized interest groups, business associations followed with 20,2%, institutions make up 16,8%, (professional) membership organizations (15,5) unions 9,2% and NGOs 7,6%. Comparing the categories, it shows that corporations

⁸ The list of organisations and their categorisation can be sent upon request (Excel format). This list is also used to code the list of meetings (see footnote 7) using Vlookup in Excel.

⁹ Table 1 in the appendix shows a frequency table of the amount of meetings per category.

have the most reported meetings. Indicating that based on these meetings, corporations are the group of actors that have the most access to Dutch ministers. Looking at access in relation to corporate lobbying, these data aligns with existing research on the presence of corporate lobbying (Gray et al., Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020; Berkhout et al., 2018). In contrast, the groups consisting of NGOs as well as (trade) unions do not have a substantial number, demonstrating that based on the reported meetings, their access to ministers remains relatively low. Thus, the level of corporate access, measured through the number of meetings of individual corporations, is relatively certainly higher.

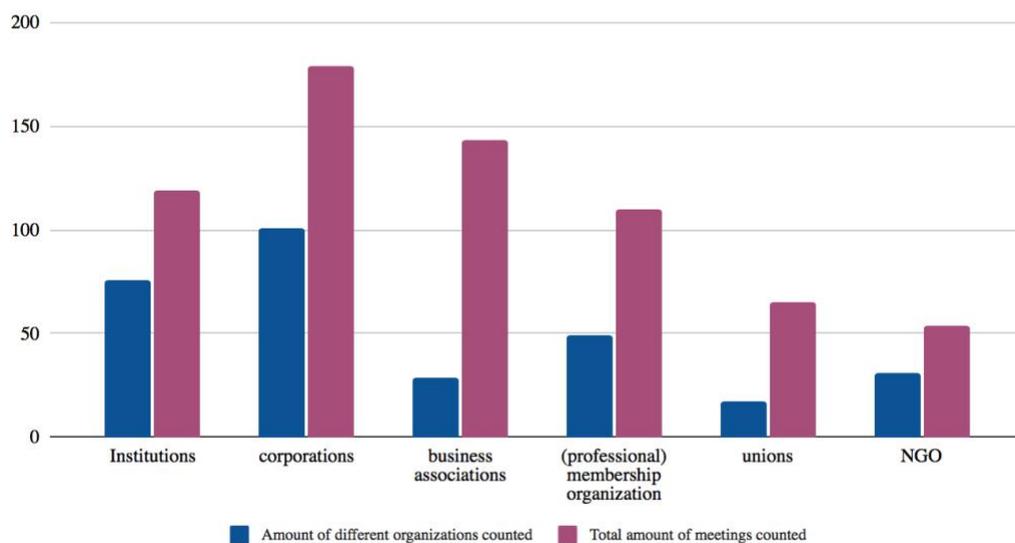
Figure 2: Division of agenda appointments of Dutch ministers based on type of organization



Following this information, it is evident that as a sector, corporations have a lot of access. By zooming in on this category, it is possible to bring more nuance in which firms actually have more structural access, that is important for drawing up conclusions on the amount of privileged access of corporations. Looking at figure 3, it demonstrates that of the 179 meetings that are covered by corporations, more than 100 different organizations were identified. At first glance this does not suggest that a small network of corporate elites is covering all the meetings for this sector. However, a closer look at the data within this category show a clear differentiation between corporations; whereas many corporations have only one reported meeting in the database, a small number of corporations have four

or more meetings. These corporations consist out of; Ahold, Airfrance-KLM, Akzo-Nobel, ABN-AMRO, Facebook, KPN, NS, PostNL, Pensioen Zorg & Welzijn, Rabobank and TenneT. In total this small ‘elite’ of 6,15% of the total amount of corporations that were identified covered 53 meetings. In perspective, 6,15% of the corporations cover 29,6% of the meetings in this category. Thus by zooming in, a certain difference between different corporations in their amount of privileged access comes to the surface.

Figure 3: Ratio between the total amount of meetings and the amount of uniquely identified organizations (displayed per category)



Zooming out and studying the access of business in general, considering that corporations and business associations both are representatives of the business sector (according to Aizenberg and Hanegraaff, 2020), the business sector takes up almost half of the reported appointments (figure 2). This shows the presence of business in the Dutch political arena, and their strong position in gaining access to ministers. In contrast with findings of the decline of business associations in existing research, this chart shows that business associations still make up a significant part of the lobbying landscape in the Netherlands. With 20,2%, their presence exceeds the presence of other collective interest groups such as (professional) membership groups and (trade) unions. The group of business associations consists of Dutch employers and entrepreneurial federations such as the VNO-NCW, MKB-Nederland, LTO Nederland and Bouwend Nederland. These large organizations represent business interests of a large

sector or multiple sectors, representing the interests of a large group of entrepreneurs, (smaller) trade organizations and companies. The fact that the meetings in this categorization are dominated by a small amount of associations is brought in perspective in figure 3 as well. By both unions and business associations the difference between the amount of *unique* counted organizations and the total amount of meetings is noticeable. This means that the interests of their constituency are highly concentrated in a few associations. This number greatly differs from the amount of different organizations compared to the corporate sector. Looking into the data more closely within this category, a small number of associations can be identified. For example, VNO-NCW has 40 reported meetings, MKB-Nederland 33. Thus, business associations do not only have a lot of access to the political decision-making process, it is also defined by only a few actors.

Besides the significant difference between type of organizations and the amount of different organizations represented, there are also substantial differences when the data is organized per ministry. First to mention, the reported meetings by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment are the highest, the ministry of Finance follows (this number is lower as the De Nederlandsche Bank is excluded from this study). Additionally, the results on the reported meetings by the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food, and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport are very low. These opposing results raise questions on how these differences can be explained, especially if its due to the sector or rather the limited reporting of meetings.

Secondly, this overview per ministry provides an opportunity to zoom-in on the different contacts per ministry. The high level of appearances of corporations within the ministry of Economic Affairs and Financial Affairs is explainable, as these ministries rely on economic and financial actors from the business sector for their input on economic issues and policy-making. Nonetheless, it also implies that business has more substantial access to some ministries than others. As for other ministries, the unifying approach of collective groups is most visible in the department of Social Affairs and Employment and secondly the department of Education, Culture and Science, showing relatively high rates in the category of (trade) unions and (professional) membership organizations. When looking at

these numbers from a more public actor perspective, institutions also have a certain level of access. This can be explained through the large amount of educational institutions and universities that are part of this group. This is also demonstrated in table 1, which shows that de Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has 52 meetings, almost half of the number of meetings. In this case, access is not equally distributed but highly concentrated, and thereby also limited, to one ministry. This becomes clearer in the conduct of a network analysis that is displayed and explained in the next section.

Table 1: an overview of the meetings divided per ministry and per type of organization

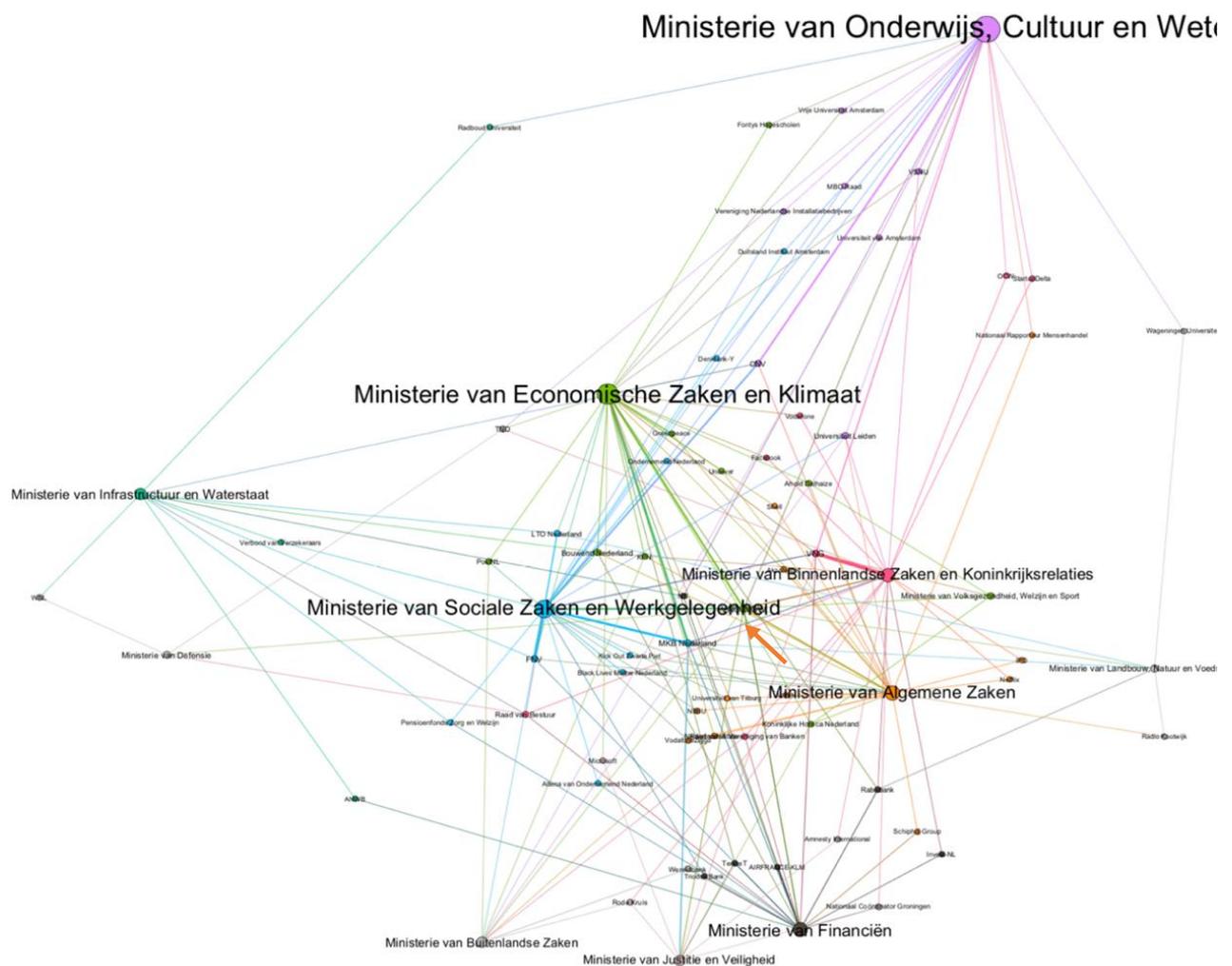
Ministry	Type of organization								Total
	membership organization	business association	corporations	institutions	NGO	other	research institute	unions	
M. of General Affairs	6	13	20	6	5	3		6	59
M. of Interior and Kingdom Relations	17	18	9	14	2	2	1	2	65
M. of Foreign Affairs	2	3	4	11	5	2		1	28
M. of Defense	1	1	6	2	1				11
M. Economic Affairs and Climate	5	27	48	8	15	2		7	112
Ministry of Finance	5	12	36	9	1	4		1	68
M. of Infrastructure and Water Safety	4	8	11	2	2		1	4	32
M. of Justice and Safety	5	11	4	3	4	4	1	1	33
M. Agriculture, Nature and Food	1	3	2	2		2			10
M. of Education, Culture and Science	43	8	15	52	8	7	8	19	160
M. of Social Affairs and Employment	19	35	21	9	11		2	24	121
M. of Health, Welfare and Sport	2	4	3	1					10
End total	110	143	179	119	54	26	13	65	709

4.2 Network analysis

The above-mentioned findings can be better understood through network analysis: this form of analysis provides to be a useable way of integrating, connecting and contextualizing on these findings. In this research context, network analysis is applied to better explain the lobbying landscape in the Netherlands through an overview of access points, and relations among entities. In figure 4, ministries are presented in different colors and their nodes are connected to nodes of organizations that are presented in the same color as the ministry that it is connected to. The edges between an organization and a ministry are representing the relationship between these nodes, in this case meetings. In this graph the edges are weighted on a degree of two or more meetings. The more frequently a reported meeting

between a minister and organization finds place, the “thicker” the edge appears, contributing to assessing the level of access. Additionally, the absence of a relationship can be understood through the fact that nodes do not have a connecting edge. Therefore, patterns become clearer and variables that are highly interconnected appear more central. Organizations (or ministries) that have a limited number of meetings, or are only connected to one or a few other ministries (or organizations), are presented more outward, as outliers. This resulted in the graphical representation of the network structure below.

Figure 4 Network analysis of the meetings between ministries and external actors (>1 meetings)¹⁰¹¹



¹⁰ Because of the registration of meetings in Dutch, the ministries are also reported in Dutch, that have been used for this analysis. A translation of ministries was conducted for other tables, but for as this figure is based on the entire data set, this was not possible (due to the time that translating the entire dataset would cost).

¹¹ The orange arrow in the figure points to the VNO-NCW that is exactly placed behind the word “Werkgelegenheid”.

When looking into this network from a macro perspective, the global structure is sparse, with clusters of structures surrounding every ministry, and proving a more central role for the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. Considering the size and centrality of certain nodes help to get an indication of the relative importance of the nodes. Although the ministry of Education, Culture and Science has the most meetings, it is a “node” with many weak connections, as well as connections with many institutions that are not interconnected to other ministries. Many universities (for example the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam – University of Amsterdam) are clearly actors that seek to meet with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (and vice versa) as they find their interest in this demarcated field. As this ministry and actors in particular only meet with each other, they do not take a central position in the network.

In addition, the different organizations represented in this network show that some have stronger ties with certain ministries than others. For example, trade union FNV shows to have stronger ties to the ministry of Social Affairs and Employment rather than to the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Safety. From this analysis, it can be stated that the FNV has a higher level of privileged access at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. If an organization has strong ties with multiple ministries, it can be viewed as a central symptom that has many connections in the network. In this case, such an organization takes up a central place in the network, and is therefore relatively more important to the network than other organizations on the outside. It is remarkable that most of the business organizations, such as the VNO-NCW and MKB-Nederland have a central role, together with corporations such as KPN, NS and AkzoNobel. Contrastingly, KLM represents a less central node in the network, as it has strong ties with the ministry of Finance, but not with other ministries. This shows that the access of corporations differs, and needs to be explained in more detail. Moreover, the importance of an organization also refers to the way the clusters of networks surrounding every ministry are organized. The Ministry of Finance does have a substantial number of meetings but they are dispersed only among a few organizations. By looking at this network, it already suggests that this ministry has created privileged access points for relatively (a few) specific business actors. In comparison, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (which has less meetings than many other ministries) positions a relatively

central place, as it is connected to important nodes in the network, such as Ahold Delhaize, VNO-NCW and Koninklijke Horeca Nederland. As follows, the conducted network analysis demonstrates the importance of these different “unofficial” actors.

5. EXPLANATORY ANALYSIS

The explanatory analysis tries to make interpretations through connecting the results of this data back to the established theoretical framework with the use of expert interviews. Through the descriptive analytics new insights and follow-up questions arose, such as: “is there actually privileged access or not? What is the level of transparency actually?” Through a range of following sub-sections this thesis continues to bring nuance to a debate that has proven to be more complicated than just portraying the business sector versus the civil sector. This research has already shown that different unofficial actors play a role in the Dutch political arena, but that there is also differentiation among actors within organizations as well as differences across ministries. By speaking with experts from different organizations as well as (ex)ministers, alternative interpretations are considered. At the same time, these are compared with the results and views in existing research to effectively reflect upon, and in the end, answer the research question.

5.1 Reconsidering (the importance of) access points

Although Lowery (2013) stressed the importance of focusing on policy outcomes to gain a better understanding of lobbying. By looking at access points in a comparative way, the importance of the role and opportunities of different organizations in the Dutch lobbying landscape can be analyzed. The current established network demonstrates that some corporations have more access than others, and that the amount of access for certain groups differs per ministry. According to the theory of opportunity structure, these access points provide an organization with a political opportunity to lobby for their interests, or at least get their message across to a minister. By looking at the overview of these access points broader conclusions can be made about representation of different interest groups and create an assigned meaning to it. The differences in the amount of access points between NGOs (7.6%) and corporations (25.2%) is not only stressed by this data. Whereas Paul van den Berg (Cordaid) stresses that this division in access is “very skewed”. Contradictory, Klaas-Jeroen Terwal (KLM) says that in his opinion “this should have been even more”, as multi-nationals provide many jobs and that are

important for the Dutch society as a whole. This stimulates further analysis of these access points, as a better understanding of the public-private relationship in the Netherlands can be achieved.

The importance of having structural access is stressed by Amirkhan, as policy secretary at VNO-NCW, he emphasizes how important it is to build up and preserve good relations with the ministers that make the policy: a relationship of trust and the provision of useful information when they need this is of great importance (Interview 2). Amirkhan acknowledges that when structural access points are in place, it provides the opportunity to gain a seat at the table in an early stage of the political decision-making process (Interview 2). By giving input at an early stage, the more room an organization has to shape the process. Several actors recognize a certain repetition in the formation of these relationships; organizations that have had access in the past and are embedded in the network, will also in future be more often invited because of their information and opinion, which then again strengthens the relationship, and thus reinforces their privileged access (Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 4). Arnold Merkies, coordinator of the Tax Justice network states *“these organizations also portray themselves at ministries like this: ‘We will explain it’, of every construction and rule they know the drill”* (Interview 1). Having a structural good relationship with departments, it provides an organization with the possibility to fall back on this point of access.

5.2 Analyzing business as political actors

5.2.1 Corporations as political actors

In line with the in literature acknowledged upward trend of “corporate lobbying”, the data based on these reported meetings between ministers and external organizations show that corporations constitute the largest set of actors that gets access to Dutch ministers. First, 25,2% of all reported meetings comprise meetings with corporations demonstrating that this group has more access overall compared to other groups. Secondly, the diversity in the number of corporations demonstrate that the threshold is relatively low to gain access to decision-makers. This suggests that there is privileged access for the corporate sector, but differences in place, size and centrality in the network demonstrate the necessity of analyzing this group in greater detail.

The findings of this research suggest that some corporations have more access than other corporations, laying-out a counterargument for existing corporate power analyses that deal with business as one homogeneous group. Moreover it refutes the idea that systemic features of market economies have provided a structural role for all corporations to participate in the decision-making process. The network demonstrates this by depicting only a limited number of corporations in the center, reinforcing the importance of network structures. Instead of them being clustered here, not all corporations have the same sort or level of structural access. Secondly, this is reinforced by the calculated numbers within this categorization that showed a gap in the level of access between different corporations. An “elite group” of corporations covered 29,6% of the meetings in this category. Although the business sector as a whole has privileged access, only a small group of large listed firms arguably have structural privileged access, according to the reported meetings. This divides the group into different groups with various levels of access. Dividing groups was also part of Tilly’s work (2004) amongst others, who used opportunity structure theory to describe the division in elites. In addition, taking structural power theory into account, it is not the case that all private actors have structural access. Nonetheless, the distinct characteristics of the business sector outlined in the theoretical framework proves that it is useful to further analyze corporations as individual political actors (Levy & Egan, 1998).

This analysis continues by looking closer at this “elite group” of corporations that gain more often a seat at the table (sometimes multiple tables, i.e. multiple ministries) to assess their level of privileged access. As mentioned earlier, this “elite group” includes corporations that have four or more meetings registered¹². Looking closer at this group, most corporations have meetings with at least two different ministries. According to Terwal this is not surprising for corporations like KLM:

“Because we are so big, we have a strong position within the Dutch economy and therefore we are also more recognized and acknowledged (...) and do we have more access, which will also be the case for other large Dutch companies such as Ahold and Heineken” (Interview 3).

¹² These corporations consist out of; Ahold, Airfrance-KLM, Akzo-Nobel, ABN-AMBRO, Facebook, KPN, NS, PostNL, Pensioen Zorg & Welzijn, Rabobank en TenneT.

KLM has seven listed meetings, but according to Terwal this number is actually much more. Firstly, because it often involves an interaction on a lower level in the public service domain, or it can be registered as a standard working visit. Thirdly, because it is sometimes not a scheduled agenda meeting but a phone call; “they have each other’s phone numbers”. (Terwal, Interview 3). The structural access of KLM is manifested in “monthly meetings between the CEO of KLM and the minister that is responsible” (Terwal, Interview 3). The economy in which KLM is situated highlights the importance of economic trends such as deregulation and globalization, proving that these are important conditions that give KLM the opportunity to get structural access to decision-makers (Gourevitch, 2013, p. 261).

Amirkhan (VNO-NCW) also elaborated on the increased access of these large firms in comparison to other corporations and the creation of a vicious circle: large companies have a direct lobby going on, compared to smaller companies or industry organizations (Interview 2). Amirkhan compares large companies such as KLM and Shell with smaller corporations – smaller corporations are less powerful, and therefore also have less access points, and therefore are also less interesting to talk to, according to Amirkhan (Interview 2). The NRC also reported that “KLM has an intensive political lobby to stop taxes on tickets and kerosine. Elbers continues to state that this is also relevant for Schiphol and that without growth from 2021 onwards, Schiphol will lose its position to competing airports (Duursma, 2019; Dijsselbloem, Interview 5). Moreover, KLM prioritized, and heavily lobbied through continuous conversations, the prevention of an air passenger transfer tax that would have had consequences for not only KLM but also Schiphol, labor and airplanes (Terwal, Interview 3). Ultimately this was taken of the table, demonstrating the effect of maybe not direct interlocks but interconnectedness and how individual action can lead to broader government decisions. Often large businesses are invited to bring their experience to the table, as the decisions will consequently have a large impact on them. In this case, it highlights the structural embeddedness of KLM in economic and political affairs and the strong orientation on the functioning of the market. Whereas KLM is not placed as central in the network as other corporations, the interaction between the state and KLM, demonstrate not only the importance of elite networks, but also of the corporate network; there is not per se greater distance between private companies and the government (Davis, 1997). A repeatedly made observation

by both Terwal and Dijsselbloem is that this high level of access is based on mutual interaction. Because of the embeddedness of large corporations in the economy or the formal relationship through shares, ministers frequently reach out to corporations as well (Interview 3 and Interview 5). Hence, it is indeed important to bear the social embeddedness in mind when determining the relationship between ministers and corporations.

Secondly, the relationship intensifies when new (economic) issues arise (2), or changing corporate governance relations. Direct meetings between ministers and a corporation such as KLM often finds place in relation to a current political or economic issue. If the commotion increases, the access increases as well; “if the commotion is really high, it’s possible the minister just calls the CEO of KLM” (Terwal, Interview 3). The reported meetings show that when the Ministry of Finance became a shareholder of the mother company Air France-KLM, more meetings found place. Dijsselbloem also confirms there was intense contact in this period (Interview 5). Hence, this provided a new opportunity structure for KLM to get access and strengthen their relationship with the Ministry of Finance, again showing how this ministry is highly connected to certain companies. Thus, different (exogenous) factors create or limit political opportunity for external actors. This reinforces the importance of using the framework of opportunity structure to assess how advanced interdependence in the public-private landscape thus influences the engagement of political actors in contentious politics (Meyer, 2004; Tarrow, 1998).

Critically evaluating the privileged access cases of other firms, it needs to be recognized that also in other cases access is connected to a certain crisis or problem that aligns the interests of the government and the corporation. These battles do, partially at least, take place in the formal arena (Culpepper, 2011, p. 22). This provides an argument for the importance of dependency of the state on the business sector, as mentioned by Culpepper (2015) to demonstrate the rescue operations of the government to save domestic banks during the financial crisis of 2008. Nonetheless, also other banks were held accountable, assigning part of the responsibility to the sector itself (Dijsselbloem, Interview 5). The previous example of KLM has already shown the importance of taking into account the regulatory environment and economic conditions, as a complement to a corporation’s place in the

network. In alignment with the new generation of structural power, this highlights that the space of the business to gain access towards the state can differentiate (Culpepper, 2015). Studying these access points, many of these points are often connected to damage control, creating an argument for the fact that corporations do not always have the same structural advantage. This is in line with Culpepper's argument (2015) that withdraws from saying that business "wins all the time" (p. 395), and provides a counter-argument for the structural power belief that corporations by default have structural access. The latter would suggest that this entails a certain degree of internalization, meaning that policy makers are integrating business standards to such an extent that they are internally imposed by the government itself. According to the theory, this would then result in an opportunity structure for business that would survive without active lobbying and the use of networks. The frequent moments of contact and the intensive maintained relationship with ministers and other actors demonstrate that this is not the case. Additionally, the differentiation in the structural role of corporations is context and firm- dependent, thus proving the importance of the institutional and economic environment that can influence the embeddedness and proximity of a company in the network.

Continuing to focus on corporations, the differences between ministries also show differences between ministries. As noted in the results section, corporations have the most intensive contacts with the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy and the Ministry of Finance, this indicates that especially at these ministries corporations have privileged access. This is in line with research that argues that business strongly competes on market-regulating issues and trade policy of which they take advantage (Dür and De Bièvre, 2007). Nonetheless, this access is only structural for a few firms, which only becomes evident in the reported meetings when there is a crisis or other issue that aligns the interests of the Dutch government with this firm. This brings nuance in answering the research question; corporations have more access in the Dutch political decision-making process based on this analysis, but many corporations have one-time access and do not structurally dominate the legislative agendas of ministers. Only a few corporations prove to have a form of structural privileged access but this context dependent. In this case, it is a combination of their structural embeddedness with specific ministries and

the urgency of the government to solve certain issues, that provides them with an opportunity structure in their advantage.

5.2.2 Business associations as political actors

The interests of the business sector are not only represented through the lobbying of individual corporations but also through business associations. Therefore, this category is analyzed in the next section to explain the role of business as political actors in the Dutch lobbying landscape. When interpreting the results of this category it can certainly be argued that business associations have high access to Dutch ministers. This category constitutes 20,2% of all reported meetings, mostly involved in the department of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy and Social Affairs and Employment. The small number of associations that this group consists of play a central role in the entire network. Nodes representing VNO-NCW, MKB-Nederland and LTO Nederland take up a central place in the network, having access to multiple ministries and have at least a strong relationship with one ministry. This demonstrates that within the business sector, business associations also have privileged access, and are relatively more important for the network than other forms of organizations.

Given the established public-private landscape and the significant role that business associations play in the network, it can be argued that the level of access of business associations to the Dutch political decision-making process should not be underestimated. Nonetheless, the theoretical framework showed a division on the role of large interest groups in shaping the lobbying landscape. Theory of corporatism and collective action have suggested that there has been a shift from collective groups to individuals when it comes down to privileged access (De Vries, 2000; Hemerijck, 1995; Binderkrantz, 2012). An explanation for this difference is the strong focus on the US in existing research: research by Mizruchi (2013) and Woll (2016) strongly focus on the fracturing of the American corporate elite, and the diffusion of interests. However, organizations such as Cordaid and KLM confirm that by uniting forces or delegating an issue to a business association, can place an item on the agenda faster (Interview 3 and 4). Additionally, analyzing access points in the Netherlands suggests that business associations continue to have a structural relationship with the government. Culpepper (2011) created a similar

argument by saying that organized business is insensitive to changes in political institutions (Culpepper, 2011, p. 179). This is also stressed by Amirkhan of VNO-NCW, who describes the relationship with ministries in The Hague as “durable”; the VNO-NCW provides a basis on which ministers can rely when a new issue is at hand (Interview 2). In addition, through the representation of different interests, VNO-NCW also maintains good relationships with every department, on all levels (Amirkhan, Interview 2; Terwal, Interview 3). Other actors that have a more “niche” focus (including corporations such as KLM as well as social organizations such as Cordaid) are also more restricted to one domain in the political arena (Interview 3 & Interview 4). Because of these fixed characteristics, an NGO will also not seek access to, for example, a Ministry of Finance (Dijsselbloem, Interview 5). This adds to the explanation in the theoretical framework suggesting it is for the entire business sector easier to engage than for NGOs.

Continuing to connect theory on collective groups to interest groups in this study, it becomes evident that certain large groups do not take such a central part in the network as most business associations. The few trade unions (FNV and CNV) that do take a central role still continue to be relatively small compared to business associations. What can explain the high amount of access of these large business associations compared to other organizations? Firstly, developments at the side of employers’ associations have followed a trend of further concentrations and reorganizations that has increased the capacity. Both Merkies and Dijsselbloem confirm the importance of capacity and the influence of resources such as money to spend on their own lobby campaigns (Interview 1 and 5). Whereas KLM has three public affairs specialists, NGOs often rely on a network of collective action. Additionally, this development has also further increased their already high level of support (“draagvlak”) which proves to be enlarging their opportunities for access.

In relation to small branch organizations, the VNO-NCW continues to represent a large amount of companies and sectors (Amirkhan, Interview 2; Berkhout, 2017). Amirkhan stresses that the broad representation of VNO-NCW makes them an interesting actor for ministers, as they bring with them a load of support. As a large support base in society is important to ministers, this is easy provided by sitting around the table with VNO-NCW (Interview 2). The theoretical framework highlights that in

Dutch politics, VNO-NCW remains an important actor, and proves that conclusions on collective action cannot be easily made, but are context dependent. In line with the earlier observation of certain corporations; the VNO-NCW has gained space to inform and discuss issues with ministers as they [in this case their large constituency] bear the consequences of these decisions (Davis, 1997). Berkhout (2017) states that because of the central organization of groups such as VNO-NCW, a large amount of companies and industrial organizations are represented (Broer, 2017). Accordingly, their increase in their support base has also made them more important for decision-makers. Paul van den Berg (Cordaid) confirms that this makes the access for the business sector even easier than for NGOs: “business have a more convenient story to tell that fits more with the story that ministers try to carry, based on ‘BV The Netherlands’ and the earning model of the Netherlands” (Interview 4). Also providing an appealing alternative for smaller branch organizations; these are more likely to affiliate themselves with a larger network, such as the VNO-NCW, for their lobby (Interview 2).

“Small business will not gain access”, Amirkhan (VNO-NCW) takes the butchers' associations as an example; they will not be invited as the Minister does not have the possibility to make time for these small interest group organizations (Amirkhan, VNO-NCW, Interview 2). While interest-group pluralism has suggested that small concentrated interest groups thrive, this research finds that, by separating different kind of organized groups, large business associations continue to have structural access (Rommetveldt et al., 2013; Culpepper, 2011). This becomes not only evident by looking at numbers and network structures, but also in the several interviews conducted in which business associations, such as the VNO-NCW, mentioned the important spill that business associations had in connecting the public and private sector (Interview 1, 2 and 4). Thus, this proves the limited role for smaller associations and unions, but proves the remaining presence of the VNO-NCW (Heemskerk, 2012). These findings are in contrast with research that stated that the presence of business associations has decreased as corporations have managed to gain access (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020). In the case of the VNO-NCW effective lobbying strategies and new economic incentives that arose from a more open economy, prevented the association from losing its central role to individual corporations, and still noticed a steady number in their number of members (Amirkhan, Interview 2). For example through new established partnerships,

extended established forms of the direct interests that business associations represented. An example of this is the initiated AI Coalition by VNO-NCW that resulted in structural meetings with the government on this issue (Amirkhan, Interview 2). In this case, political opportunity structures are created through the adopted strategy of influence (Kitschelt, 1986).

5.2.3 Temporary conclusion on business as political actors

As corporations have the most access, and specific corporations and business associations take a central role in the network compared to other organizations, the hypothesis that the Dutch political decision-making process is positively organized towards the business sector is confirmable based on the provided data. According to ex-minister of Finance, Jeroen Dijsselbloem, this would even be a higher percentage during his term (Interview 5). This is closely linked to earlier observations in this study such as the rise of corporate lobbying (1), the distinct characteristics of the corporate sector that give them an advantage over others in gaining access (2), and the embeddedness of the business sector in the public-private landscape (3). Lindblom (1977) and Dür et al. (2015) even argued that business enjoys a structural privileged position. However, in part opposed to these findings, business has privileged access but this is not structural for the entire sector. Through a combination of taking a closer look at specific actors as well as looking at the entire network structure, differences within the business sector are noticeable. There is not in particular a structural privileged position in the political process for most of these corporations, and for certain large firms this role is limited to one or two ministries. Secondly, according to an argument provided by Aizenberg & Hanegraaff (2020) the noticeable rise of corporations can be explained because of the lack of support for these large umbrella organizations, as they find it hard to represent all interests. According to their research, this would lead to a divestment of large umbrella organizations, and rather that membership organizations and corporations start lobbying themselves. Moreover, Bouwen (2004) has argued that large firms have more resources and rely less on collective action, but the findings out of the data set, and the confirmation of KLM that business associations are also still part of their lobby strategy, do not suggest that the rise of corporate lobbying leads to a decline of large business associations (Terwal, Interview 3). Specifically, business associations continue to be key actors in the network and decision-makers continue to rely on this group

for information (Amirkhan, Interview 2). Therefore, this study finds that business associations such as the VNO-NCW remain to have privileged access.

5.3 Looking beyond reported meetings: what do we not see?

By interpreting the data with the use of expert interviews, interpreting the Dutch lobbying landscape moves beyond conclusions drawn from the quantitative data collection. Different numbers across departments and the knowledge that the number of reported meetings remain limited give rise to the question: what can we, in addition to analyzing these numbers, say about the Dutch lobbying landscape? Through discussing the importance of these reported meetings as a gateway to the political-decision making process and critical reviewing the level of transparency with experts, important new insights are examined.

5.3.1 Discussing gaps

The contrast in numbers between ministries can be for some part explained by the earlier mentioned observation that corporations and business associations are more present around the ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy and the Ministry of Finance. At the latter department, sectors with whom this ministry has close (official) ties, such as banks and insurance companies, are more important for information than others (Dijsselbloem, Interview 5). Conditions in the economy, especially during crises and smaller issues, further intensifies contact with these corporations. To compensate for this, the ministry of Finance also often asks advice from institutions such as De Nederlandsche Bank (DNB), resulting in an increase with this sort of institutions. Additionally, Dijsselbloem explains that the ministry of Finance is less preoccupied with many different external actors, as one of its main function is also to control other ministries and their expenses (Interview 5). This demonstrates the less central role of the ministry of Finance in the network.

Although the business sector is most involved with ministries in field of economic and financial affairs, based on the data there remains a noticeable gap in the number of listed appointments; the ministry of Social Affairs and the ministry of Education, Culture and Science have displayed high

numbers in the total amount of meetings. According to Amirkhan this could for some part be explained because of the low salience around issues that for example the ministry of Finance is concerned with (Interview 2). Amirkhan states that the issues that are closer to the direct interest of citizens, such as social affairs and education related issues, will result in a higher request for information about these meetings, for example through the Dutch Public Access to Government Information Act (*Wet Openbaarheid van Bestuur*)¹³. Therefore, there are more reported meetings on these issues. This is consistent with the theory of quiet politics; Dutch citizens are not as much involved, and therefore care less, about issues of corporate control (Culpepper, 2011, p. 22). Low salience issues have demonstrated the durability of the institutions of take-over protection, but it also serves as a practical theory to explain why corporations continue to “win” in the formal arena of ministries as Economic Affairs and Finance. This is partly demonstrated by the more frequent meetings with corporations such as KLM, Akzo Nobel and KPN. According to Arnold Merkies (Interview 1) the issue of quiet politics is significant, and goes beyond these one-on-one meetings;

“Often the regulations you see, which are of enormous benefit to multinationals, are quite technical things and they are often discussed a bit casually in meetings where they sit with Shell and others. This has quite an impact, but it never makes the news. They also know this; as long as it is complicated and tucked away, we can achieve a lot.” (Merkies, Interview 1)

5.3.1 Discussing other access points

Besides gaps between ministries, the significant statistical difference between NGOs and the business sector deserves additional attention as well. The competitive advantage of corporations over NGOs is also highlighted in existing research: the privileged position of KLM is placed opposite to that of NGOs (Van der Sande, 2016). However, NGOs find less success in their lobbying efforts through these access points, their lobbying strategy often also differs from that of large corporations (Interview 1 and 4). Merkies recognizes that SOMO and Tax Justice often choose a different path:

¹³ The Dutch Public Access to Government Information Act (*Wet openbaarheid van bestuur*, WOB) regulates the right of citizens to receive information from the government with regard to administrative matters.

“We will more often choose the route of the public debate, because we believe that policies should be publicly supported. (...) An example is the dividend tax; a few years ago, nobody knew what this was about, but at a certain point public resentment started to grow and made it a “hot topic” within politics.” (Merkies, Interview 1)

This is according to Terwal also one of the reasons of the limitations of such a data-analysis; it does not include other forms of lobbying such as reaching out through the media, and the “publicity stunt” of the lawsuit initiated by Greenpeace against KLM (Interview 3).

Choosing to gain attention on an issue through gaining large public support is a well-known example of “outside lobbying”. By raising awareness through public communication, ministers are indirectly becoming concerned with the issue. Another example is the presence of non-profit movements that are concerned with social topics such as racial justice, for example Black Lives Matter and Kick-Out Zwarte Piet. The increased public attention for this issue places them on the agenda of ministers; “if it gets the public moving, it also gets politics moving”. Thus, the opposing advocacy strategies that are adopted by Cordaid and KLM confirm that the strategy of socialization between NGOs differs from that of large corporations. On the other hand, this also provides an argument for the lack of direct meetings of NGOs with policy makers. The strategy of outside lobbying pressures public officials more indirectly through public and political debates.

5.3.2 Discussing the level of transparency

In addition to the discussion of gaps between ministries, experts have shown difficulty in explaining the difference in reported meetings between ministries, for example the low number of reported meetings within the ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. According to Dijsselbloem the scarce number of meetings cannot be accurate: “this ministry is being trampled underfoot with the lobby by farmers’ organizations, horticultural organizations, the agro-industry and with less success green organizations” (Interview 5). The low number of registered meetings can be partially explained because

many organizations meet as a collective (which is only registered as sector), and partially because the ministry does not have a “reflex” to be transparent about this (Interview 5). The idea is that there is no structural enforcement in place for regular updating agenda’s and reporting meetings, becomes clear throughout the conversation with Dijsselbloem, an issue that does not get the same level of attention as for example in the United States or at the European Union. A number of concrete examples passed by during these interviews; an example are the meetings of KLM with the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water that are not present in the quantitative data analysis, whereas these meetings are most frequent (Terwal, Interview 3). Taking this into account, the network analysis would look differently if the total number of moments of contact would be taken into account.

“The CEO also meets a few times with ministers that work on the highest level [of the political decision-making process], with minister Hoekstra and minister Van Nieuwenhuizen, and sat around the table to see how we can prepare the aid package for KLM that has been granted last summer.” (Terwal, Interview 3)

According to Dijsselbloem all these phone calls should be registered and summarized, as well as increasing awareness that also during a soccer game, to which a minister is invited by a corporation, ideas are exchanged and access is enlarged (Interview 5). In contrast, Terwal states: “Sometimes conversations find place, especially with KLM on for example state aid, which are particularly sensitive, also for the stock price, that you do not want that explicitly in an agenda.” (Interview 3). Dijsselbloem recognizes that this not only counts for companies, but that political parties, especially VVD, has provided resistance in making the agendas of ministers more transparent (Interview 5).

Secondly, the Implementation Directive Public Agendas of Ministers is focused on specifically ministers, excluding appointments with other public officials in other segments of the decision-making process (Terwal, Interview 3). Many other types of meetings shape the agenda, such as meetings with other officials. “There have also been cases that were very complex, and as a result I would sit down with public officials two times a week, for multiple months in a row” (Terwal, Interview 3).

Additionally, Paul van den Berg highlight that the reported meetings often do not highlight the subject of the conversation (Interview 4). Assigning a certain weight to these meetings in therefore not possible. “Not every conversation results in a positive outcome for that actor, the same applies for critical conversations” (Van den Berg, Interview 4). Dijsselbloem confirms this; not every meeting is initiated at the behest of an organization, sometimes a corporation is also held accountable for their actions. Therefore connotating a certain success to lobby activities is not possible (Interview 3 and 5). Nonetheless, it does say something about access and who gets the listening ear of a decision-maker.

6. LIMITATIONS

Building upon the last section that looks beyond the given quantitative data, this section gives an overview of the limitations of this study. Although the method of web-scraping and categorizing the meetings of ministers has resulted in a new systematic way to look at the lobbying landscape in the Netherlands, limitations remain. The first limiting feature lies in the nature of the dataset that is used to measure the access of business; the meetings that are recorded and displayed in the agendas of ministers found on the official website of the government. Although this resulted in a useable dataset, it certainly does not include all meetings, as ministers as well as private actors can withhold the public disclosure of a meeting. Additionally, a substantial part of the meetings could not be included for analysis because it did not specify the name of the interest group, but merely stated the sector¹⁴. Partially, this could explain the low amount of results for certain ministries. At the same time, certain registered companies were aggregated that have fused in the same (business) group or interest groups that are registered with different names or abbreviations but are actually the same group¹⁵. In retrospect, the systematic analysis proved to remain difficult and time consuming. This was mainly caused by the fact that ministries do not formulate these agenda items in unified manner, complicating any form of data-analysis. Many agenda items are published using different orders of, for example date, interest group and subject, but also the level of completion of information differs. This resulted in a database that for many rows, representing meetings, provided a systematic error in the automatically categorization process. Because of this error, a large part of the data set had to be checked and categorized manually. Although this official source provides useful and quantitative data about the subject, more transparency about these meetings as well as displaying them in a structural way, is necessary to gain a complete understanding of the lobbying landscape in the Netherlands. This research notices room for policy improvement on this topic, suggesting regulation and transparency guidelines on lobby activities. Structural reporting the meetings between ministers with external actors, of which the EU transparency register can be seen as an example, can be a start here.

¹⁴ An example of such an agenda appointment is the meeting of Carola Schouten “Kennismaking met Topsector Tuinbouw en Uitgangsmaterialen” (Introductory meeting with the Top sector of Horticulture and Starting Materials). Retrieved from: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/agenda/2017/11/29/kennismaking-met-topsector-tuinbouw-en-uitgangsmaterialen>

¹⁵ A complete list of these exceptions and merges can be found in the appendix under the name “appendix 3”.

Secondly, this study focusses on providing information on the *access* of different interest groups. Through the review of existing research and the use of expert interviews the interpretation is helped. Yet this does not make it possible to make implications on the success of influence of the lobbying activities of certain groups. First, it needs to be recognized that the success of these meetings is hard to identify as not enough information can be derived from these meetings. A second point that needs to be recognized is that lobbying efforts contain a large amount of activities and are not limited to the official meetings with ministers. Moreover, it is inherently part of the tactics regarding lobbying that it is not very visible, and often consists out of multiple activities. The policy process can be accessed in different ways, through lobbying consultancy firms or through the use of outside lobbying tactics that are often applied by NGOs. Besides several ways through which access can be achieved, interest groups can participate and influence the decision-making process through various different activities. Examples of how business has created opportunities to influence the decision-making process constitute of the creation of business trips, distribution of gifts and “the revolving door mechanism”¹⁶ (Dijsselbloem, interview 5). Dijsselbloem has noticed the presence of the revolving door mechanism within the Ministry of Finance. Most ministers of Finance have this function for a short period of time [approximately two years], wherein they regulate and supervise banks, just before they move on and start to work for these banks (Dijsselbloem, interview 5). “Then you [financial organizations] do not even need a lobby association, these ministers are then almost your lobbyists”, states Dijsselbloem (Interview 5). In conclusion, this research lays out one possible way of analyzing the role of different interest groups, but the multiplicity of activities and complexity of the decision-making process do not make it possible to make claims involving causality or draw conclusions on the amount of access in relation to the success of lobbying activities.

¹⁶ This term is a refers to administrators or ministers that move from their public sector work to a job in the private sector (and vice versa). The revolving door mechanism can lead to conflicts of interests. An example is when a former Minister of Finance would start working for a bank, that used to be in close contact with that department.

Lastly, although the mixed methods approach of this study brings nuance to the study of access points, it has proved to be time and labor consuming. Through these constraints, decisions on the approach of analysis had to be made. Because of the limited amount of data and time constraints, an overtime analysis was not possible. Additionally, as the business sector was the main focus of this study, this study placed emphasis on these results. As a consequence, less attention has been given to explaining the role of trade unions, institutions, NGOs and other interest groups. Studying access points from another framework can certainly contribute to a comprehensive view on the Dutch lobbying landscape.

7. CONCLUSION

The findings in this research have proven to shed new light on access points, and thereby on the act of lobbying in Dutch politics. Through the established theoretical framework, the collection of quantitative data and interviews, the relationship between business and the government have been put into perspective. The discussion of various interest groups linked to the changing features in the Dutch economy and institutions, demonstrate the important role that lobbying has obtained in the public-private landscape. This is most definitely demonstrated by the privileged access of the business sector (1) and their embeddedness in the political arena (2). The descriptive analytics based on registered meetings have strongly suggested that corporations, followed by business associations, have the most access to ministers. Additionally, by analyzing specific cases through expert interviews, this research showed that the interests of the Dutch government and the corporate sector were often aligned, enhancing the opportunity structure for business to access politics.

The mixed method of this study has proven to be a useful method to study different “unofficial” political actors in more detail. From different modes of analysis, an overview of the lobbying landscape has been sketched, as well as differentiation within groups has surfaced throughout this analysis. Changing features in the Dutch political economy such as a more open economy with many market opportunities and a strong orientation on the functioning of the market, as well as institutional structures such as the protection of Dutch companies which are politically structured, fitted within the findings of this research. In line with these trends, it is not surprising that this study finds that business corporations and business associations are the largest categories. Additionally, the attention that has been given to the act of lobbying by other scholars have proven to be a useful basis to discuss this topic in the context of the Dutch decision-making process. Subsequently in the analysis of data, this study found that the lobbying landscape in the Netherlands consists out of several different interest groups that have access the political decision-making process. Studying this in greater detail demonstrated that certain specific corporations and business associations take a central role in the network. This suggests that corporations and business associations have in general more often privileged access ministers compared to other

groups. These findings are confirmable with scholarly work that has argued that corporations have increased their participation and have become important actors in the political arena (Aizenberg and Hanegraaff, 2020, Gret et al., 2004, Lowery et al., 2005). Thus, this advances the already strong case that has been made about the strong overrepresentation of the business sector when it comes to political access. Based on a careful study of academic work and own data collection, the overarching theme and conclusion of this study is that access is statistically positively organized towards the business sector.

Specifically focusing on private actors, the fact that corporations cover most meetings and have become unthinkable by several experts strengthens the phenomenon of corporate lobbying. Nonetheless, findings of this study illustrate that the amount of privileged access differs within the corporate sector. A closer analysis of this category shows that there is a great diversity of corporations that gain access. However, for many corporations this is based on a “one-time access” opportunity. The access of these corporations is not based on a structural advantage, and are therefore also more placed in the outskirts of the network. Juxtaposing the argument made in literature that business enjoys a structural privileged position (Lindblom (1977, Dür et al. 2015). Reconsidering the structural power of corporations in detail illustrate that only an “elite group” of corporations have repeated access. Through qualitative analysis, these moments of access are often based on the mutual dependency between state and big firms to resolve issues, aligning their interests. This also gives new attention to the ‘economic stress mechanism’; according to Aizenberg and Hanegraaff (2020) corporations generally interact with politicians more often when the economy weakens. This has become possible through current trends of opening up the economy and reshaping institutions, creating an opportunity structure for corporations to gain access. As a result, their embeddedness in the network creates a valid argument for the structural relationship that provides the foundation of these access points.

Although the largest group consists out of corporations, the assumption that this has led to a “every man for himself” situation (Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020, p. 187) cannot be reinforced based on this analysis. Existing political science literature states that the rise of corporate lobbying has led to a stagnation of business groups, resulting in the “so-called decline of traditional corporatist set-ups”

(Aizenberg & Hanegraaff, 2020, p. 196). The constructive part that both corporations and business associations cover does not suggest a divestment of large business associations. Rather that corporations started individual lobbying as an additional way of gaining access (Amirkhan, Interview 2; Terwal, Interview 3; Bouwen, 2004). Thus, the rise of corporations in the lobbying landscape does not per definition leads to a decline of business associations but can be better seen as a “two-paths” strategy by (large) corporations; the simultaneous adoption of two strategies at the same time. On the one hand, organizing an individual lobby strategy and on the other hand, consulting business associations.

7.1 Future research

By applying a quantitative approach through the use of ministerial agendas, this research provides a useful tool to research the lobbying landscape in the Netherlands and the representation of interests. This approach can also be applied to larger-scale interest group populations or for example the interest group representation during the handling of certain issues or crises. Especially in the Netherlands, these tools remain scarce, restraining possibilities for more transparency on interest group representation and lobbying activities. Based on the process of this analysis, recommendations can be made that involve the further development of quantitative tools to study access points (1) and the improvement of the structure in the way information by the government is displayed (2). This research provides a start for researches and journalists to further investigate who plays a role in the political decisions that are made and who specifically have become political actors. By focusing on additional external factors that influence opportunity structures and the amount of access, a complete image of the lobbying landscape in the Netherlands can be achieved. Part of this future research could therefore also focus on different interest groups and the use of specific case-studies, in order to compare differences in access on specific policy issues, that proved to be difficult to do in this study with the collected data.

In addition, through the database “Open Lobby”¹⁷ as well as this research, data has become more accessible, but the amount of data remains limited and unstructured. The limited availability of data has

¹⁷ The earlier mentioned website that makes this data visible and available is called ‘OpenLobby’ and can be accessed through: <https://www.openlobby.nl/embed.html>

restricted the generalizability of these findings. Therefore, future research and advocacies should focus on recommendations to make lobbying activities and in specific, these meetings, more public, structured and transparent. In line with recommendations by GRECO, a joined code of conduct for top public administrators and further guidance on integrity related issues need to be developed (including lobby activities) and made more accessible to the public (GRECO, 2018). This will provide a basis for new comparative in-depth studies on corporate lobbying and interest group representation.

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Attachment

Appendix 1: List of organizations and amount of meetings

Type of organisation	Amount of meetings
corporations	179
business association	143
institutions	119
(professional) membership organization	110
unions	65
NGO	54
other	26
research institute	13
Eindtotaal	709

Appendix 2: List of interviews

Interview reference	Interview date	Name	Organization	Job-title
Interview 1	10 December 2020	Arnold Merkies	Tax Justice	Coordinator
Interview 2	11 December 2020	Feroz Amirkhan	VNO-NCW	Policy secretary on economic affairs, digital economy and AI
Interview 3	18 December 2020	Klaas-Jeroen Terwal	KLM	Director Public Affairs
Interview 4	18 December 2020	Paul van den Berg	Cordaid	Political Advisor
Interview 5	18 December 2020	Jeroen Dijsselbloem	Dutch Safety Board	Chairman of the Dutch Safety board ¹⁸

¹⁸ Since 1 May 2019, Jeroen Dijsselbloem is the Chairman of the Dutch Safety Board, but is mainly interviewed for his former function as Minister of Finance in the cabinet of Rutte II from 2012-2017.

Appendix 3: Interviewing method & questions

- In the interview invitations the candidate was informed about the aims and purpose of the research, including its use for Open State Foundation. Moreover, it included the duration of the interview, its structure and how it would be used.
- The interviews were held through video connecting (Zoom application).
- Upon the start of the interview, the interviewee was asked permission to record the interview and use the name of the interviewee in the research.¹⁹
- The interviews were conducted in the Dutch language and translated accordingly.
- The questions were personalized per interviewee but focused on asking open high-quality questions in order to gain information that would not be possible otherwise.
- The questions for the interest groups were structured into two parts²⁰:
 - 1. Questions relating to the lobbying activities of the expert and organization
 - How is your lobby directed towards the national government organized? (Structural/network approach etc.)
 - Where are the contact points between businesses and the government?
 - Could you give me an example of a project or issue and how you brought it under the minister's attention?
 - What your perception on the amount of access towards ministers?
 - Have you encountered difficulties in your lobby towards ministers/Second Chamber?
 - With which ministries do you meet specifically? How often do you meet?
 - Meetings are registered partially in the agendas of ministers but because of the exception clausulae sensitive issues are not always reported. Can you help me understand if there are additional meetings that have not been reported?
 - What is their importance in relation to the meetings that are registered?
 - 2. Questions relating to the derived data (were shown through screensharing):
 - Looking at figure 2 (the division of agenda appointments of Dutch ministers based on type of organization): does this make sense to you? How would you interpret/explain this division?
 - Looking at table 1 (an overview of the meetings divided per ministry and per type of organization) differences between ministries are noticeable. What do you notice?
 - How do you explain the low reported numbers for some ministries (in relation to others)?
 - Looking at figure 4 (Network analysis of the meetings between ministries and external actors): some ministries take a more central place in the network, does this correspond with your perception of the role and connections of different ministries?
 - The same applies for certain companies, business associations, NGO's, do you experience this in a similar or different way?
 - What could explain the central role of for example certain business associations and companies?
 - What do we not see if we look at these numbers and graphs?

¹⁹ All candidates approved to record the interviews and use their full name and job. In the case of Feroz Amirkhan (Interview 2), it was not desirable that he was directly quoted.

²⁰ The questions drafted for dhr. Jeroen Dijsselbloem consisted of different questions in part 1, focusing on how appointments were registered by him and his colleagues, the considerations that were made to invite certain external actors and his view on the importance and role of different actors in the decision-making process.

Appendix 4: Data cleaning strategy

- This data-set was extracted on 24 November 2020. Hence this study is based on a timeframe of more than three years; from the start of these records (07 November 2017) until the analysis of this study (24 November 2020).
- In the beginning, the data-set consisted out of 2242 entries, that in Excel resulted in 2242 rows.
- After this the data was upgraded for analysis by separating actors in one meeting by displaying them in different rows. An example: a meeting with minister Rutte and Unilever and Shell would result in two rows; one where Rutte meets with Unilever and where with Rutte meets with Shell (this could also be vice versa with multiple ministers). This resulted in 4838 rows.
- These rows were filtered on **only** “gesprek” (conversations), as most of the meetings with external actors are categorized in this way on the government website. This, however, excludes travels, working visits etc.
- These rows were filtered on **only** meetings with organizations, not with persons.
- These rows were filtered on **only** meetings with an external actor with a separated interest, not institutions or organizations officially linked to the government because these actors would not be completely external and could have more access in general.
- Certain companies existed under a different name during the time of the meeting compared to the time of analysis, these are adjusted, other companies merged and are displayed under one name.
- Organizations are sometimes displayed in different ways, using abbreviations, these are consistently changed in the same name, for example: NVG = Nederlandse Vereniging van Gemeenten.
- Some meetings did not specify a specific company or organization, but only a topic or sector, these were excluded from the analysis. Rows with missing values were also dropped.
- In total this resulted in 709 entries, thus 709 separated meetings.
- The categorization is based on Aizenberg & Hanegraaff (2020) and coordinated with dhr. Eelke Heemskerk and Mw. Ellis Aizenberg but continues to be subjected to interpretation.
- Many entries were not appropriately categorized through VLOOKUP and therefore changed manually.
- The categorization of institutions mainly consists out of universities.
- The categorization of “others” consists out of organizations that were hard to define, for example soccer clubs, local radio stations and orchestra’s.

overview of considerations in reprocessing the data

Amalgamations	Ahold	Ahold Delhaize
	CNV Collectief	CNV
	Amnesty NL	Amnesty International
	KLM	Airfrance-KLM
	NL Digital	ICT Nederland
	FB public policy NL	Facebook
Excluded	Nationale Ombudsman	
	De Rekenkamer	
	De Nederlandsche Bank	
	UN Institutions	
	EU Institutions	