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Exploring corporate lobbyists' perceptions of prospective coalition partners in Brussels

Andrew Barron

University of Toulouse, Toulouse Business School, 20, boulevard Lascrosses—BP 7010, 31068 Toulouse Cedex 7, France; e-mail: a.barron@tbs-education.fr

Peter Hultén

Umeå School of Business and Economics, ESC Rennes School of Business, Rennes, France; and Umeå universitet, SE-901 87 Umeå, Sweden; e-mail: peter.hulten@usbe.umu.se

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Abstract. Using original data from a survey conducted in 2012, we apply theoretical insights from the literature on strategic alliances to explore Brussels-based corporate lobbyists' perceptions of prospective political partners. We find these perceptions to be driven primarily by strategic considerations. We also uncover instances where the size and nationality of respondents' firms influence their partner evaluations. Surprisingly, we find little evidence that respondents' assessments of lobbying partners are shaped by EU institutional arrangements. Whilst extant literature suggests information and relationships are important preconditions for successful EU lobbying, we expose the specific circumstances when seeking access to these—and other political resources—that can influence corporate lobbyists' perceptions of their partners. Combined, our findings respond to a concern that scholars of interest coalitions focus on why firms lobby in coalitions whilst overlooking how they select their lobbying partners.

Keywords: European Union, lobbying, coalitions of interest, strategic management

Introduction

In 2002 the European Commission drafted a directive aimed at harmonising member state legislation governing patents for software-related products and services. Following three years of animated discussions, the directive was ultimately defeated in the European Parliament in 2005 following the lobbying efforts of an unlikely alliance of opponents, including small software firms, nongovernmental organisations, and open-software organisations (Webber and Gehlen, 2006). This example illustrates the role that ad hoc coalitions can play in policy making.

Defined as short-term collectives formed to address specific policy issues (Berry, 1989), such alliances have received increased scholarly attention in the EU context (eg, Pijnenburg, 1998). Compared with formal business associations, such coalitions are more focused and flexible, and equipped with more streamlined decision-making processes. They also provide members with more autonomy and are less susceptible to what Olson (1965) identified as the freerider problem of collective action. Prior research is useful for uncovering firms' motivations for forming and joining ad hoc political alliances in Brussels, but is less helpful in elucidating how lobbyists—once having taken the strategic decision to bypass European business and trade associations—select their alliance partners. One notable exception is Jacomet (2005), whose study of trade negotiations during the Uruguay Round suggests that lobbyists favour and select partners with whom they can create unique, collective political resources that they are unable to develop alone.

Against this background, we aim to extend existing understandings of ad hoc political coalitions in the EU context by exploring the criteria used by corporate lobbyists to evaluate

potential lobbying alliance partners. Rather than providing definitive answers, our intention is to provide preliminary insights into lobbyists' perceptions of their prospective lobbying partners, and use those insights to propose more in-depth research capable of providing more sophisticated understandings of how they assess and select their coalition partners. This modest objective notwithstanding, our research nonetheless makes two important contributions.

Empirically, our paper is based on a unique dataset: to our knowledge, no researchers have previously interrogated EU-based corporate lobbyists specifically about the criteria they use to judge potential partners. Moreover, our survey includes a number of variables—including strategic orientation, firm size, and country of location—which are somewhat unexplored in the existing EU literature. Theoretically, we apply insights from research addressing how managers select their partners for strategic alliances (eg, Glaister and Buckley, 1996). As such, we draw on Vogel's (1996, page 20) observation that management scholars can provide political scientists with "useful concepts ... to better understand the sources, purposes, and results of business political activities." We thus contribute towards reconciling the management and political science literatures which, despite their historically separate development trajectories, have considerable potential to learn from each other.

In making these contributions, we begin by critically reviewing existing literature relevant to our study and presenting our research framework. We then use our framework to develop broad propositions for exploring how different variables—including institutional pressures, firms' strategic orientations, firm size, and nationality—can potentially affect lobbyists' perceptions of political partners. These propositions guide our analysis of original, primary data collected through an online survey of Brussels-based lobbyists conducted in 2012. We round off by discussing the implications of our research and suggest potentially fruitful avenues for future scholarly enquiry.

Prior research

Business associations have historically occupied a prominent position in the European system of interest representation (eg, Coen, 1997). Some, such as the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industry Associations (eg, Greenwood, 1995), have been shown to play an important role in the formulation of EU policy. However, they are increasingly presented as weak, 'paper tiger' lobbies as ad hoc interest coalitions have emerged as an alternative channel for interest representation in the EU context (eg, Pijnenburg, 1998). As Berry (1989) notes, such coalitions are commonly established in the short to medium term to address single legislative issues. Given their comparatively short lifespan, they do not establish direct membership or organisational structure, yet they may elect a coalition leader to coordinate common lobbying efforts. Ad hoc coalitions differ from advocacy coalitions (Sabatier, 1988), which are a much broader theoretical contrast compared with our understanding of coalitions as discrete sets of actors who organise themselves to fight single policy issues.

Motivations behind creating and joining coalitions are well documented. For some (eg, Lenway and Rehbein, 1991), they are formed to overcome the freerider problem of collective action identified by Olson (1965). Olson argued that individual organisations are rational actors with strong incentives to freeride on the political actions of others. Whilst the mobilisation of large groups can be difficult to initiate and maintain, collective action is possible when a few larger organisations are prepared to shoulder the costs of a smaller interest coalition because they have a bigger stake in the outcome of the policy. Others claim that coalitions are formed around common policy positions. In this way, coalitions can be used by their members to signal to policy officials that their positions are supported by large and varied groups of interests (eg, Heclo, 1978; Hula, 1999). Coalitions can therefore gain

more political support for their common policy positions by indicating that a large set of interests already supports the position.

Still others suggest that coalitions are created to secure access to selective, members-only benefits. In line with Olson's by-product theory, which states that people will join in collective action only if they receive selective benefits, coalition membership provides exclusive access to information and network relationships (eg, Beyers and Braun, 2014). For his part, Berry (1989) claims that coalitions help share the burdens of interest representation by saving their members time and money. Most recently, scholars have investigated the extent to which institutional arrangements draw coalition partners together. For example, Mahoney (2007) specifically finds attraction of coalitions to be strongest in democratically accountable systems where policy makers are most attuned to messages from coalitions about public support for their policy proposals.

By contrast, much less is known—especially in the EU context—about how groups and individuals actually select their coalition partners. Exceptions include Cram (1998), who finds that choices of lobbying allies are influenced by past experience and political expedience. Pijnenburg (1998) indicates that symmetrical concerns and the pragmatic search for advantage—rather than shared beliefs and common policy positions—are the key drivers behind coalition partner decisions. This finding is echoed by Warleigh (2000, page 238), whose study of NGO lobbying in Brussels finds that, in the search for lobbying allies, “anybody useful will do: there is no need for a common *Weltanschauung*, just complementary objectives.” For his part, Jacomet (2005) suggests that the selection of coalition partners is essentially driven by a desire to pool and create new resources. These studies notwithstanding, there is in our view a need for more research to uncover specifically how business lobbyists—once having taken the strategic decision to bypass formal business associations in favour of informal interest coalitions—actually evaluate and select appropriate coalition partners.

Research framework and development of propositions

We thus propose a research framework for exploring in-house, corporate lobbyists' perceptions of lobbying partners. In keeping with our exploratory research objectives, it incorporates different theoretical perspectives. It draws on resource-based perspectives in assuming that lobbying requires specific resources. Since firms' endowments with political resources can vary, lobbyists may need to acquire additional resources that they do not possess. Their resulting search for additional resources can directly drive their perceptions of what constitutes appropriate lobbying partners. However, the ‘search for additional resources’ provides little guidance on the specific resources that lobbyists seek in their partners. We therefore apply theoretical insights from the literature on strategic alliances (specifically, institutional, strategic behaviour, transaction cost, and organisational learning perspectives) to expose variables for explaining differences in firms' political resource profiles and needs, and consequently their perceptions of prospective lobbying partners. We consider these theoretical perspectives to be compatible with the resource-based view. Including them in our framework helps us determine how lobbyists' assessments of potential partners might be affected by pressures to conform to institutional demands, and by their firms' strategic political orientations, size, and nationality. Without claiming to be exhaustive, our framework—presented in simple form in figure 1 and unpacked below—provides a helpful starting point for exploring when lobbyists give primacy to different resource types when evaluating alliance partners.

Figure 1. A research framework for exploring lobbyists' perceptions of alliance partners.

Political resources and lobbyists' perceptions of potential partners

We depart from a central assumption that lobbyists' perceptions of prospective partners are driven by their assessments of partners' resource endowments. According to strategic management thinking, securing access to resources can be a primary reason why firms enter alliances (eg, Glaister and Buckley, 1996). Managers form alliances specifically with partners possessing the assets and capabilities that they themselves lack (eg, Doh, 2000; Gulati et al, 2000). Some scholars (eg, Hitt et al, 2000; Ireland et al, 2001) demonstrate how managers choose to partner with allies owning superior information and technology assets. Inspired by this work, we specifically assume that lobbyists' assessments of prospective partners are driven by the search for additional political resources. As political resources are unevenly distributed amongst firms (eg, Bonardi et al, 2006), lobbyists will essentially seek to join forces with allies whose political resource endowments they consider superior to their own.

Scholars increasingly judge it important to consider firms' political resources when studying their lobbying activities (eg, Baron, 1995; Oliver and Holzinger, 2008). Inspired by Dahan (2005), we highlight six particular types of political resource. Informational resources relate to firms' specialist expertise, including their knowledge of social, environmental, and technological issues facing their industries. Political expertise relates to firms' knowledge of their administrative and regulatory environments. Relational resources are the formal and informal relationships between firms and policy officials. Organisational resources are formalised structures (eg, government affairs units) that facilitate the practice of corporate political action by bringing together professionals on behalf of firms (eg, Rehbein and Schuler, 1999; Schuler, 1999). Reputations are also a political resource. As Dahan (2005) argues, political reputations are accumulated through repeated interactions with policy makers who eventually conclude whether or not a firm is credible and trustworthy. Keim and Baysinger (1988) link reputation and credibility to successful lobbying. Finally, firms can also deploy financial resources in the political arena, either directly as monetary contributions to policy makers (eg, Hillman and Hitt, 1999) or indirectly to finance the development of other political resources (Dahan, 2005).

Antecedents of firms' political resource needs

We acknowledge that the 'need to acquire additional political resources' provides little insight into the specific resources that lobbyists might seek from potential partners. Our framework therefore includes contextual variables to help understand firms' specific resource needs and explain when certain political resources might become more important than others for specific lobbyists. Inspired by previous research on strategic alliances that focuses on partner selection issues (eg, Shah and Swaminathan, 2008), we suggest that firms' own political resource profiles—and consequently their lobbyists' perceptions of prospective partners—can be driven by lobbyists' exposure to pressures from the EU institutions, and by their firms' strategic political orientations, size, and nationality.

Exposure to institutional pressures

We first suggest that firms' political resource needs, and subsequently their lobbyists' perceptions of potential partners, can be driven by institutional pressures. In line with North (1990), we understand institutions as formal and informal rules that shape human interaction. Institutions—including regulatory structures, governments, and their agencies—exert isomorphic pressures that encourage actors to conform to certain behavioural patterns (eg, DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The longer that organisations are exposed to institutional pressures, the more likely they will understand the rules of the game and adapt their behaviours accordingly (eg, Stein, 1997).

Institutional pressures impact upon managers' strategic choices (eg, Delios and Henisz, 2000; Peng, 2003) and perceptions (eg, Scott, 2001). Extending this research, Hitt et al (2004) study Russian and Chinese firms, illustrating how their respective institutional contexts affect managers' perceptions of alliance partners. For example, because the Chinese government provides local firms with more incentives than the Russian government to acquire technological and managerial capabilities through strategic alliances, Chinese managers place a stronger emphasis than their Russian counterparts on technological and managerial assets when appraising alliance partners.

In a similar vein, our framework suggests that lobbyists' perceptions of prospective partners can be driven by the extent of their exposure to pressures from the EU's institutional arrangements. Descriptions of the EU system of interest representation abound [see, for example, Beyers et al (2008)]. Some point to the emergence of elite pluralism, defined by Coen (1997, pages 98–99) as an institutional arrangement where “access is generally restricted to a few policy players, for whom membership is competitive and strategically advisable.” Information and network relationships have been extensively discussed as important resources for gaining access to EU policy makers in the system of elite pluralism (eg, Bernhagen and Bräuninger, 2005; Bouwen, 2004; Klüver, 2012). Indeed, elite pluralism involves a resource dependency between policy officials and lobbyists, which incentivises lobbyists to use their technical expertise and know-how as a means of accessing policy officials in the EU's closed decision-making arenas (eg, Bouwen, 2004).

Assuming that extended exposure to institutional arrangements increasingly incentivises individuals to adopt particular behavioural patterns, and assuming elite pluralism in particular encourages lobbyists to develop technical expertise and network relations, we first proposed that:

PI: *There is a positive relationship between the institutional pressures that lobbyists experience in Brussels and the importance they attach to potential partners' informational and relational resources.*

Strategic political orientations

Strategic behaviour perspectives of alliances (eg, Glaister and Buckley, 1996) state that managers give preference to alliance partners whose resource endowments compensate for their own perceived weaknesses in resources needed to achieve the benefits of a particular strategy. Our framework applies insights from this research to the specific case of firms' lobbying strategies. As suggested by Meznar and Nigh (1995), firms can enter the political arena in pursuit of bridging and buffering strategies. Bridging involves monitoring policy developments to ensure compliance with new regulations, whilst buffering is concerned more with influencing and shaping the content of those regulations. Scholars (eg, Dahan, 2005; Oliver and Holzinger, 2008) suggest that these two distinct strategic orientations necessitate different political resources. For example, bridging requires in-depth knowledge of the political environment, including an understanding of key actors and policy developments.

Bridging also requires organisational resources: routine monitoring of political developments is easier when firms have government affairs units or run dedicated representative offices.

Buffering is dependent on political contacts (Dahan, 2005). Longstanding connections with policy makers helps lobbyists build the trust needed to influence policy outcomes to their advantage (eg, Inkpen and Tsang, 2005). For Oliver and Holzinger (2008), buffering also depends on reputation: lobbyists leverage their reputational credentials to influence policy outcomes by appearing more legitimate than their political rivals. Firms use their social legitimacy (eg, Aldrich and Foil, 1994; Oliver, 1991; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) to persuade policy makers that their “practices and interests are an ideal match with public policy standards and expectations” (Oliver and Holzinger, 2008, page 511).

Assuming that managers favour alliance partners whose resources compensate for their own perceived weaknesses in resources needed to achieve the benefits of a particular strategy, and assuming that different types of political strategy require the acquisition and deployment of different types of political resources, we next proposed that:

P2: *There is a positive relationship between lobbyists’ use of bridging strategies and the importance they attach to potential partners’ political expertise and organisational resources.*

P3: *There is a positive relationship between lobbyists’ use of buffering strategies and the importance they attach to their potential partners’ relational and reputational resources.*

Firm size

Others view alliance partner selection through the lens of transaction cost theory. Developed by Williamson (1985), this perspective is concerned with the costs associated with internalising a particular corporate function, or externalising it through an alliance arrangement. Transaction costs include the costs related to finding and vetting partners. Transaction cost theory suggests that managers’ assessments of alliance partners are driven generally on financial considerations, and specifically by a need to reduce costs (eg, Robson et al, 2002). Crucially, partner selection is derived from a comparative assessment of whether the costs of developing a corporate function in-house outweigh the costs of performing them in collaboration with particular external partners.

Scholars applying transaction cost theory to firms’ lobbying activities (Blau and Harris, 1992; Kaufman et al, 1993; Schaffer, 1992) suggest that managers’ decisions to internalise or externalise their political actions are driven by their assessments of the costs associated with individual and collective political action. Firms are most likely to externalise their political actions (through partnerships and alliances) when they engage infrequently in lobbying, because the costs of developing internal political resources are greater than the cost of acquiring them through collaboration with external partners.

This focus on cost minimisation casts light on how the size of firms impacts on their political resource endowments and subsequently their lobbyists’ assessments of potential partners. Because they have fewer financial resources, small firms lobby less frequently than their larger counterparts (eg, Mezner and Nigh, 1995; Schuler, 1996; Schuler and Rehbein, 1997; Schuler et al, 2002). Their scarce financial resources, coupled with their infrequent recourse to political action, mean that smaller firms are less likely to possess organisational resources, including dedicated lobbying staff working in dedicated government affairs units (eg, Rehbein and Schuler, 1999; Schuler, 1999).

Assuming that managers’ appraisals of potential alliance partners are driven by financial considerations, and assuming that small firms in particular have an interest in minimising the costs associated with developing corporate political functions, we next proposed that:

P4: *There is a positive relationship between a firm’s size and the importance its lobbyists attach to potential partners’ financial and organisational resources.*

Nationality: being headquartered in the EU

Finally, our framework suggests that a firm's nationality—and specifically whether it is headquartered inside or outside the EU—might influence its endowments with political resources and consequently drive its lobbyists' assessments of potential lobbying partners. Here, we draw inspiration from scholars (eg, Nielsen, 2005) who investigate the role of learning in alliances, and assert that acquiring know-how is an important rationale behind the identification of appropriate partners.

The learning requirements of non-EU firms lobbying in Brussels can be daunting: they have to familiarise themselves with a complex, multilayered policy-making environment, study how it works, and understand its impact on their firms and operations. Lobbyists representing firms based outside the EU are more likely than their EU-based rivals to suffer from a liability of foreignness (McGuire et al, 2012), understood as the costs incurred by firms when doing business abroad on account of unfamiliarity with foreign market environments (Zaheer, 1995).

In this context, organisational learning perspectives suggest that alliances give firms platforms for accessing partners' knowledge. Extant research into international alliances suggests that, when selecting alliance partners, managers single out those who can best provide important local knowledge on their foreign market environments, including the needs and tastes of local consumers and information about local competitors (eg, Lu and Beamish, 2006). In the spirit of this research, we suggest that, when evaluating their prospective partners, the lobbyists of non-EU firms will in particular consider their knowledge of EU policy making and political developments in Brussels.

Assuming that alliances provide firms with access to the knowledge of their partners, and assuming that non-European firms—owing to a liability of foreignness—may be unfamiliar with the workings of EU policy making, we finally proposed that:

***P5:** There is a positive relationship between being headquartered outside the EU and the importance attached by lobbyists to partners' political expertise.*

Methodology

We explored our propositions using data from an online survey of in-house lobbyists representing their firms' political interests in Brussels. We chose this method even though we knew that a survey may prevent respondents from reflecting at length about their evaluations of prospective lobbying partners. Also, respondents' answers to survey questions can reflect desired rather than actual behaviours. Furthermore, there is a risk that sensitive questions discourage respondents from answering openly. Despite these potential concerns, we nonetheless considered the survey method appropriate given the exploratory nature of our research.

We developed our survey in English and French, and sent it via personalised e-mails to a total of 353 potential respondents identified using the European Transparency Register and European Public Affairs Directory. We sent our first mailing in late May 2012, and a reminder two weeks later. We gave guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage respondents to complete the survey. Our response rate remained fairly even for both mailings: we received fifty-three full responses from the initial mailing and fifty eight from the second. In total, the survey rendered 111 eligible responses, representing a final response rate of 31.4% (111/353). This appears reasonable compared with other large-scale surveys of corporate lobbyists in Brussels (eg, Barron and Hulten, 2011).

To test nonresponse bias, we created one variable comprising all continuous survey variables, and another dividing respondents into two groups ('early responses' and 'late responses') depending on when they completed the survey. An independent sample *t*-test

used to explore potential differences between both response waves revealed no significant differences in the scores of early ($M = 3.59$, $n = 53$) and late ($M = 3.48$, $n = 58$; $t_{111} = 1.16$, $p = 0.25$, two-tailed) respondents. Armstrong and Overton (1977) suggest that this lack of difference is sufficient evidence that nonresponse bias is not a concern.

Development of measures and descriptive data: dependent variables

Inspired by Dahan (2005), we created six dependent variables to capture respondents' perceptions of potential partners' political resources. As shown in table 1, each variable is a scale comprising questions asking respondents to specify on a Likert scale (1 = not important, 5 = very important) the importance attached to potential partner's endowments in different political resources. All scales have acceptably high reliability (above 0.70), as examined by Cronbach's α .

Table 1. Importance attached to different political resources: complete sample.

How important are the following criteria when selecting coalition partners?	Mean	SD
<i>Informational resources, $\alpha = 0.733$</i>	3.82	0.82
knowledge of economic issues	4.28	0.93
knowledge of social issues	3.42	1.17
knowledge of environment issues	3.78	1.20
knowledge of technological issues	3.80	1.13
<i>Political expertise, $\alpha = 0.880$</i>	3.67	0.82
knowledge of EU policy making	4.01	0.98
knowledge of EU policy developments	4.06	0.98
experience of EU lobbying	4.05	0.93
<i>Relational resources, $\alpha = 0.792$</i>	3.27	0.81
personal connections with policy makers	3.90	1.05
memberships of policy-making bodies	3.51	1.16
contacts with journalists	2.70	1.04
contacts with other opinion formers	2.98	1.05
contacts with domestic policy makers	3.33	1.11
<i>Organisational resources, $\alpha = 0.864$</i>	2.86	1.07
ownership of EU representative office	3.02	1.30
ownership of government affairs unit	2.96	1.25
number of lobbying staff	2.59	1.16
<i>Reputational resource, $\alpha = 0.789$</i>	4.15	0.77
credibility with policy makers	4.34	0.88
trustworthiness in eyes of policy makers	4.39	0.82
public image of partner	3.72	1.04
<i>Financial resources, $\alpha = 0.827$</i>	2.31	0.91
lobbying budget	2.32	0.99
ability to finance social events	2.14	1.05
ability to finance fact-finding missions	2.47	1.11

Note: 1 = not at all important; 5 = very important. For the purposes of our statistical analyses reported below, we renamed these variables INDSPECINFORMATION, EUPOLEXPERTISE, RELATIONAL, ORGANISATION, REPUTATIONAL, and FINANCIAL.

Development of measures and descriptive data: independent variables

We measured respondents' strategic political orientations using two scales based on questions, inspired by Oliver and Holzinger (2008), asking respondents to indicate on a Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = frequently) how frequently they engaged in political actions aimed at either monitoring (ie, bridging) or influencing (ie, buffering) policy developments. Scale items are reported in table 2.

Respondents' exposure to the institutional pressures characterising the setting for EU lobbying was measured by a question asking respondents to indicate how many years' lobbying experience they had accumulated in Brussels. In line with institutional writers (eg, Stein, 1997), we assumed that seasoned Brussels lobbyists, by virtue of their experience, would have a higher probability of greater exposure to institutional pressures and would

Table 2. Strategic political orientations of firms: complete sample.

How often do you engage in the following types of political actions?	Mean	SD
<i>Bridging strategies, $\alpha = 0.798$</i>		
monitoring policy developments	4.78	0.638
ensuring compliance with new regulations	3.91	1.283
aligning internal processes with policy changes	4.03	1.013
developing resources to improve compliance	3.37	1.159
actively predicting future policy developments	4.25	1.004
seeking first-mover advantage in implementation	3.37	1.152
investing in skills to improve predictive capacities	3.74	0.941
<i>Buffering strategies, $\alpha = 0.807$</i>		
influencing the EU institutional environment	4.27	0.090
blocking regulations that impact your business	3.48	0.120
diluting regulations that impact your business	3.66	0.114
protecting the institutional status quo	2.87	0.106
campaigning for new legislation	3.66	0.104
shaping how institutional norms are defined	3.69	0.105
promoting deregulation	2.50	0.117

Note: 1 = never; 5 = frequently.

Table 3. Summary of sample.

Group	N	%
<i>Firm size</i>		
>250 employees	25	22.5
<250 employees	86	77.5
total	111	100.0
<i>Nationality of firm</i>		
outside EU	30	27.0
within EU	81	73.0
total	111	100.0
<i>Experience</i>		
low experience	67	60.4
high experience	44	39.6
total	111	100.0

thus more likely lobby in conformity with established EU lobbying norms. Respondents had a mean lobbying experience of 9.4 years. We considered respondents with less than 9.4 years' experience to have comparatively low lobbying experience in Brussels; otherwise, we considered them to have comparatively high lobbying experience.

We coded firm size using a variable measuring whether firms had fewer than or more than 250 employees. This upper limit designation is supported by the OECD (2005) and the European Union. Firms' nationality was coded using a variable measuring whether firms' headquarters were located outside or inside the European Union. Table 3 summarises the sample of firms used as the basis for statistical analysis.

Results

We used a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to examine the proposed relationships between the independent and dependent variables. We chose this method to account for covariation among the dependent variables. The Box M test of homogeneity of the variances of the variables included in the model indicates that this assumption has not been violated ($p = 0.623$). Table 4 presents the multivariate test of significance (Wilk's λ) for the independent variables.

The relationships between the use of bridging strategies ($p = 0.00$) and buffering strategies ($p = 0.02$) are the most significant in the multivariate test. As shown in table 4, the frequent use of bridging and buffering strategies explain approximately 23% and 15%, respectively, of variation in the dependent variables (BRIDGING, $\eta^2 = 0.231$; BUFFERING, $\eta^2 = 0.149$). Table 4 also indicates a positive relationship (at the 0.10 level) between large experienced firms headquartered in the EU and the importance they attach to potential partners' political resources. We explored our individual propositions using ANCOVA to test the between-subject effects and coefficients for each of our six dependent variables. The results of these tests are reported in table 5.

Table 4. Multivariate analysis of covariance results: test of no overall effect.

Effect	Wilk's λ	F	Numerator df	Denominator df	Significance	Partial η^2
Intercept	0.788	4.299	6.00	96.00	0.001	0.212
BRIDGING	0.769	4.801	6.00	96.00	0.000	0.231
BUFFERING	0.851	2.806	6.00	96.00	0.015	0.149
EUMEMBERSHIP (EU)	0.924	1.310	6.00	96.00	0.260	0.076
Size (S)	0.930	1.213	6.00	96.00	0.306	0.070
Experience (Ex)	0.956	0.730	6.00	96.00	0.627	0.044
EU $\times$ S	0.888	2.016	6.00	96.00	0.071	0.112
EU $\times$ Ex	0.907	1.640	6.00	96.00	0.144	0.093
S $\times$ Ex	0.927	1.265	6.00	96.00	0.281	0.073
EU $\times$ S $\times$ Ex	0.887	2.038	6.00	96.00	0.068	0.113

Institutional pressures

P1 is not supported: there is no significant relationship between lobbyists' exposure to EU institutional pressures (as measured by their experience of EU lobbying) and the importance they attach to potential partners' informational and relational resources. In fact, table 5 reveals no significant relationships between exposure to institutional pressures and any of the dependent variables. However, there is a significant positive relationship between a combination of experience, firm size and nationality, and the importance attached to lobbying partners' organisational resources. In essence, respondents familiar with the institutional

Table 5 (continued).

Source	Type-III SS	df	<i>F</i>	Significance	<i>B</i>	SE	Partial η^2
Corrected model:							
FINANCIAL	17.962	9	2.788	0.006			0.199
intercept	0.934	1	1.305	0.256	0.957	0.558	0.013
BRIDGING	3.368	1	4.706	0.032	0.266	0.123	0.045
BUFFERING	1.680	1	2.348	0.129	0.167	0.109	0.023
EUMEMBERSHIP (EU)	1.695	1	2.368	0.127	-0.466	0.299	0.023
size (S)	0.060	1	0.084	0.773	-0.072	0.370	0.001
experience (Ex)	0.312	1	0.435	0.511	-0.574	0.229	0.004
EU × S	1.871	1	2.613	0.109			0.025
EU × Ex	0.853	1	1.192	0.277			0.012
S × Ex	0.674	1	0.941	0.334			0.009
EU × S × Ex	0.279	1	0.389	0.534			0.004
$R^2 = 0.199$ (adjusted $R^2 = 0.128$)							
Corrected model:							
RELATIONAL	18.588	9	3.850	0.000			0.255
intercept	3.053	1	5.691	0.019	1.234	0.483	0.053
BRIDGING	3.898	1	7.267	0.008	0.287	0.106	0.067
BUFFERING	5.169	1	9.635	0.002	0.293	0.094	0.087
EUMEMBERSHIP (EU)	0.738	1	1.375	0.244	-0.131	0.259	0.013
size (S)	0.097	1	0.181	0.672	0.079	0.320	0.002
experience (Ex)	0.054	1	0.100	0.752	-0.318	0.198	0.001
EU × S	1.057	1	1.971	0.163			0.019
EU × Ex	0.005	1	0.009	0.924			0.000
S × Ex	0.393	1	0.733	0.394			0.007
EU × S × Ex	0.237	1	0.442	0.508			0.004
$R^2 = 0.255$ (adjusted $R^2 = 0.189$)							
Corrected model:							
ORGANISATIONAL	29.130	9	3.167	0.002			0.220
intercept	1.206	1	1.180	0.280	1.028	0.667	0.012
BRIDGING	2.113	1	2.068	0.154	0.211	0.147	0.020
BUFFERING	8.235	1	8.057	0.005	0.369	0.130	0.074
EUMEMBERSHIP (EU)	3.163	1	3.095	0.082	-0.610	0.357	0.030
size (S)	0.064	1	0.063	0.802	0.351	0.442	0.001
experience (Ex)	2.670	1	2.613	0.109	-0.376	0.274	0.025
EU × S	0.735	1	0.719	0.398			0.007
EU × Ex	7.176	1	7.021	0.009			0.065
S × Ex	3.491	1	3.415	0.068			0.033
EU × S × Ex	3.214	1	3.145	0.079			0.030
$R^2 = 0.220$ (adjusted $R^2 = 0.151$)							

Note: reference = non-EU membership, smaller firms, and shorter experience. See note in table 1 for explanation of some of these variables.

Strategic political orientation

P2 is partially upheld: there is a significant relationship between respondents' use of bridging strategies and the importance they attach to potential partners' political expertise, but there is no such relationship between respondents' use of bridging strategies and the importance

they attach to potential partners' organisational resources. Interestingly, table 5 also reports a significant relationship between political bridging and the importance they attach to prospective partners' reputational resources: respondents who frequently monitor political developments in Brussels make favourable assessments about potential lobbying partners they consider as being credible and trustworthy in the eyes of policy makers.

P3 is fully supported: there are significant relationships between using buffering strategies and the importance lobbyists attach to partners' relational and reputational resources. The β coefficients suggest that respondents claiming to engage in buffering strategies most frequently were the ones with the most favourable perceptions of lobbying partners possessing such resources. Table 5 also reveals significant relationships between the frequent pursuit of buffering strategies and the importance attached to prospective partners' organisational and information resources and their political expertise.

Firm size

P4 is rejected: table 5 reveals no significant relationships between the size of respondents' firms and the importance they attach to prospective partners' financial and organisational resources. However, there is a significant relationship (at the 0.10 level) between firm size and the importance attached to potential partners' reputational resources: respondents representing large firms judge it important to work with lobbying partners endowed with such resources. There is also a significant relationship (at the 0.10 level) between a combination of size and a firm's nationality and the importance attached by respondents to potential partners' political expertise: lobbyists of large firms headquartered in the EU consider it more important than other respondents in our sample to enter alliances with partners possessing knowledge of EU policy-making processes and developments.

Nationality: being headquartered in the EU

Support for P5 is less clear. Table 5 reports a significant relationship between EU membership and the importance attached by respondents' to potential partners' political expertise. The β coefficient demonstrates that respondents representing firms outside the EU were the ones most likely to favour partners possessing such expertise. However, as noted above, lobbyists of large firms headquartered in the EU consider it more important than other respondents in the sample to enter alliances with partners possessing political expertise. There is also a significant relationship between a combination of EU membership and experience and the importance attached by respondents' to potential partners' organisational resources. Essentially, experienced respondents representing firms headquartered in the EU consider it more important than respondents from firms based in non-EU states to join forces with organisations endowed with such resources.

Findings and discussion

Our findings add to studies into ad hoc coalitions of interest in the EU by addressing how firms—having taken the decision to form or join an interest coalition—actively go about evaluating potential coalition partners. Prior research (eg, Beyers and Braun, forthcoming) claims that decisions to lobby through informal interest coalitions are motivated by a search for resources. Our research builds on this by suggesting that the search for resources can also guide how lobbyists assess potential coalition partners.

Previous research suggests that lobbyists' selections of coalition partners in the EU are influenced by past experience and political expedience (eg, Cram, 1998), pragmatic searches for advantage (eg, Pijnenburg, 1998), and complementary objectives (eg, Warleigh, 2000). Our multivariate test specifically suggests that firms' strategic political orientations—bridging and buffering—have the greatest impact on how EU-based corporatist lobbyists evaluate potential coalition partners. Importantly, the frequent use of bridging strategies

accounts for more variation than the frequent use of buffering strategies in the importance attached by respondents to political resources when evaluating potential political allies. This makes sense since, while most firms might seek to monitor political developments, they will not all seek to influence those developments (eg, Meznar and Nigh, 1995; Oliver and Holzinger, 2008).

This finding is consistent with strategic behaviour perspectives of partner selection in the strategic management literature (eg, Glaister and Buckley, 1996), suggesting that firms' strategies are a major driver behind their selection of alliance partners. It also implies that firms' nonmarket strategies—not just their market strategies—can influence how managers evaluate potential partners. Whilst prior research exposes the search for scale economies, the sharing of R&D costs, and international expansion as key strategic motives driving firms' selection of alliance partners, our research highlights how the pursuit of strategies to influence and in particular monitor political developments can influence managers' assessments of alliance partners.

Our multivariate test also reveals that lobbyists' assessments of potential partners were least affected by their exposure to EU institutions, as measured by their lobbying experience. Whilst institutional arrangements can strongly influence criteria used by managers to evaluate potential alliance partners in their market environments (eg, Hitt et al, 2004), this does not appear to be the case in the nonmarket environment of the EU. Even if elite pluralism pressurises lobbyists in Brussels to adopt particular interest representation behaviours (eg, Coen, 1997), our research suggests that these pressures have little or no influence over their perceptions of potential partners.

This finding is corroborated by the results of our ANCOVA tests. Prior research claims that access to technical information and network relationships is an important institutionally grounded precondition for successful EU lobbying (eg, Beyers and Braun, forthcoming; Coen, 1997; Klüver, 2012). However, we found when exploring P1 no significant relationship between lobbyists' exposure to EU institutional pressures and the importance attached to prospective partners' endowments with these resource types.

Instead, we found when investigating P2 and P3 that the importance attached to partners' informational resources was significantly related to the political strategies pursued. As expected, we found that lobbyists frequently engaged in buffering value partners' informational resources. Surprisingly, we found that respondents who pursued bridging strategies the most frequently also appeared to attach the greatest importance to partners' informational resources, and not—as predicted—to their political expertise. This particular finding suggests that respondents take a broad view of monitoring in Brussels. Monitoring seemingly covers not only political intelligence gathering but also the acquisition of broader market intelligence. This finding is consistent with the extensive literature which—stemming from Aguilar (1967)—focuses on how firms scan their general business environments to identify political, economic, social, and technological threats and opportunities.

As predicted, we also found relational resources to be important to firms pursuing buffering strategies. This resonates with previous research (eg, Inkpen and Tsang, 2005) suggesting that relationship building with policy makers helps lobbyists to build the trust needed to influence policy. Contrary to our predictions, we also found that firms pursuing bridging strategies attach importance to partners' political connections. This nonetheless makes sense insofar as such connections can be an important source of political intelligence for monitoring EU policy developments (eg, Geiger, 2007). Combined, these findings corroborate prior research suggesting that coalition membership provides exclusive access to network relationships (eg, Beyers and Braun, forthcoming).

Although our exploration of P1 reveals that lobbyists' assessments of potential partners were least affected by their exposure to EU institutions, we are reluctant to discount fully the effects of institutional pressures on lobbyists' perceptions of lobbying partners. Personal connections with EU policy makers may be a more important partner evaluation criterion than our research suggests. That they do not figure more prominently in our research may possibly be explained by reporting bias. In disclosing that they valued partners with political connections, respondents may indirectly have admitted to not possessing such relationships themselves, thus portraying their efforts to influence EU policy in a negative light. Respondents may have underplayed the importance they attach to political connections to avoid associations with the notions of sleaze that are commonly attached to personal connections in political advocacy.

Moreover, we found when exploring P1 that institutional forces can impact upon lobbyists' assessments of potential allies in conjunction with other variables, rather than alone. Crucially, we found that a combination of lobbying experience (and thus exposure to institutional pressures) and being headquartered in the EU was positively related to respondents' perceptions of a potential partner endowed with organisational resources.

This somewhat unexpected finding merits further investigation. Here, we simply speculate that it could be explained by the timing of our research. We conducted our survey when recessionary stresses resulting from the global financial crisis and euro crisis were putting pressure on the lobbying budgets of European firms (eg, Barron and Hulten, 2011). Against this background, European firms might have been reviewing the scale of their EU lobbying operations, and experienced lobbyists in particular may have been seeking to pool their organisational resources with partners to maintain their historically high levels of presence and visibility in Brussels.

Although prior research emphasises the importance of information and network relationships in EU lobbying (eg, Beyers and Braun, 2014), our findings also expose instances when Brussels lobbyists attach importance to other resources when judging potential alliance partners. For example, we found when exploring P2 and P3 that respondents who are engaged in bridging or buffering also value partners possessing positive reputations with policy makers. That firms frequently using buffering strategies consider reputation as an important assessment criterion was expected, and makes sense since the pursuit of such strategies is facilitated by the deployment of social legitimacy (eg, Aldrich and Foil, 1994; Oliver, 1991; Oliver and Holzinger, 2008; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). That firms frequently pursuing bridging strategies value partners' reputations was unexpected. One speculative explanation may be that firms engaged in political monitoring in Brussels consider it important to work with partners with credible and trustworthy reputations in the eyes of policy makers in the hope that such partners are better able to glean insider information on political developments from policy makers.

We found when exploring P4 that respondents representing large firms were likely to consider it more important than smaller firms to work with partners endowed with such resources. This unexpected finding challenges our original prediction, based on transaction-cost-based accounts of alliance partner selection, that smaller firms would favour alliance partners endowed with financial and organisational resources. It could be tentatively explained against the backdrop of the Transparency Initiative: since 2005, the Commission has been seeking to tighten rules governing interactions between EU policy makers and lobbyists. In this context of increased lobbying scrutiny, large firms might wish to give the impression that they are discerning in their choice of lobbying partners and prefer working with only those perceived to be politically credible and trustworthy.

We found when exploring P5 that gaining access to political expertise is, as expected, a more important partner evaluation criterion for lobbyists representing non-EU rather than EU firms. This finding chimes with organisational learning research suggesting that managers can select alliance partners based on their assessments of their partners' knowledge (eg, Nielsen, 2005). It makes sense inasmuch as that such lobbyists, if non-EU nationals themselves, may be less familiar than their EU counterparts with EU policy making due to their liability of foreignness (eg, McGuire et al, 2012).

However, the significance of this finding should not be overstated. After all, when exploring P4, we also found against expectations that lobbyists of large firms headquartered in the EU consider it more important than other respondents in our sample to enter alliances with partners possessing political expertise. This finding clearly requires further investigation. Here, we simply speculate that, at the time of our survey, the Commission was particularly active in formulating responses to the euro crisis. Consequently, we suggest that large European firms with operations across the continent might have had a particular interest in using alliances as a means of acquiring knowledge about political developments at the EU level.

Concluding remarks

There is a notable absence of research addressing how lobbyists—having chosen to sidestep formal interest groups and business associations in favour of more informal interest coalitions—select their coalition partners. We responded to this concern by investigating the importance attached by Brussels-based corporatist lobbyists to their prospective partners' political resources, including informational, reputational, financial, relational, and organisational resources and political expertise. Inspired by strategic management research on how managers select alliance partners, we developed a research framework for exploring whether the importance attached by lobbyists to potential partners' endowments with each of these resource types are influenced by their firms' exposure to institutional pressures exerted by the EU, strategic political orientations, size, and nationality. Propositions derived from the framework were investigated using original data collected from a survey of Brussels-based corporate lobbyists.

Findings suggest that, in the EU context, lobbyists' evaluations of partners are most strongly influenced by their firms' strategic political orientation. We found strong relationships between the frequent pursuit of bridging strategies and the importance attached to all political resource types, except organisational resources. We also found strong relationships between the frequent pursuit of buffering strategies and the importance attached to all political resource types, except financial resources. The overriding strength of these relationships notwithstanding, we also exposed instances when lobbyists' evaluations of potential partners are influenced by size and nationality of their firms. Crucially, lobbyists representing large firms were likely to consider it more important than their smaller counterparts to work with partners endowed with reputational resources, and lobbyists representing non-EU firms were likely to consider it more important than their EU counterparts to work with partners endowed with political expertise.

Our results also revealed some unexpected yet interesting findings. For example, although institutional pressures do not appear to impact upon lobbyists' assessments of potential allies alone, they can do so in combination with other factors, notably the nationality of the lobbyists' firm. In addition, lobbyists frequently pursuing bridging strategies use reputations as an assessment criterion when evaluating potential partners. Moreover, lobbyists representing the interests of both non-EU firms and large EU-based firms appear—in our view, contradictorily—to attach importance to political expertise as a criterion for evaluating potential partners. These surprising findings clearly merit further investigation.

Future research should also address the limitations of our work. Our research is based on an online survey, which focused exclusively on the EU policy-making context and which may not have allowed respondents to reflect in depth on the processes through which they choose their lobbying partners. The data we collected are potentially perceptual, and may not capture lobbyists' actual selection of political partners. As the overall sample size remains relatively small, care should also be taken in not generalising our results to all corporate lobbyists in Brussels, or to lobbyists in other jurisdictions.

Future research could also consider additional contextual factors that might influence the importance attached by lobbyists to different political resources when evaluating political partners. Drawing on Schmidt (1999) and Eising (2003), subsequent studies could investigate the effects of EU lobbyists' domestic institutional conditions—and in particular the influence of corporatist, pluralist, and statist state–society relations—on their assessment of prospective partners. Future research could also apply the scales used by Bernhagen and Mitchell (2009) to explore whether their firms' exposure to regulatory intrusion impacts upon lobbyists' perceptions of appropriate partners.

In summary, the research findings reported here should be considered as intermediate hypotheses ripe for further exploration through more detailed empirical work. Despite its limitations, we hope that our research can open up new avenues for future research and encourage scholars to engage more actively with the criteria that guide firms' choice of partners and strategies to deal with challenges and opportunities in their nonmarket environments.

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