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EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT INTERGROUPS AND INTEREST REPRESENTATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE BIODIVERSITY, COUNTRYSIDE, HUNTING AND RECREATIONAL FISHERIES INTERGROUP AND ITS STAKEHOLDER NETWORK

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Abstract

This thesis examines the hitherto under-researched topic of European Parliament intergroups and their relationship with outside interests. As the European Parliament has risen in prominence in recent years, it has become an ever-more attractive target for interest representation by civil society and interest groups. Intergroups, which are informal MEP groups that gather to discuss various topics, have been identified as an important platform for MEPs and civil society to interact. However, they have also been criticised as channels for lobbying because of the phenomenon of “external secretariats”, by which stakeholders provide financial and administrative assistance to maintain intergroups. This thesis examines such intergroup-stakeholder relationships through a case study of the Biodiversity, Countryside, Hunting and Recreational Fisheries Intergroup, an old and active intergroup known for its close interaction with stakeholders. It investigates why stakeholders engage with this intergroup, either by providing its secretariat or attending its events, even though it has no formal power. What motivates them and what added value does it entail for them? Via semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, MEPs, and Commission officials, it is found that a key motivation for stakeholders is that the Intergroup is an efficient channel for contact with friendly MEPs, which helps stakeholders in their interest representation towards the European Parliament. This was expected from the extant academic literature. However, the thesis also takes the novel approach of applying policy network theory to reconceptualise the intergroup-stakeholder relationship as more than just a one-directional lobbying relationship. It is argued that the Intergroup should be considered a policy network, composed of a policy community of leading MEPs and stakeholders at the core, and a looser policy network of less active MEPs, stakeholders, and European Commission representatives in the periphery. By appreciating the Intergroup’s networked quality, which previous literature has ignored, it is shown that access to the European Parliament is not the only motivation for stakeholders; they also see an added value in engaging with the Intergroup to exchange resources with other actors in its network, especially the Commission. Some exploratory interviews with stakeholders from other intergroups confirm that these findings are not unique to the Hunting Intergroup. The hope is that this thesis will inspire future research to use policy network theory to reinvigorate the analysis of intergroups and interest representation.