

Interest groups in election campaigns

Omnipresent but poorly understood

by Guillaume Courty

Among the less visible actors in election campaigns, interest groups are the subject of numerous fantasies. Although they invest considerable resources, they in fact have little influence on the political agenda.

The 2022 French presidential election was no exception to the rule. The contest pitted candidates one against the other, each surrounded by a campaign team trying to capture votes through rallies and media exposure. Traditionally, candidates, parties, media and citizens are expected to participate in this process, but an equally important player is often overlooked: interest groups.

"Interest groups" refers to all non-political groups advocating with decision-makers. They range from NGOs to religious groups, companies, professional organisations and trade unions. All of them are regular actors in this democratic sequence, some permanently, others more sporadically.

This situation may seem surprising or shocking to many readers who would not expect to find them taking action at this particular moment in political life. The action of interest groups is indeed often considered a dent in the democratic edifice with its share of sometimes fantasised scenarios: from suitcases of cash to behind-the-scenes transactions and other arrangements between friends, an electoral campaign

that is open to interest groups reveals another facet of the political regime's corruption and the drift of a system towards its capture by economic circles (Cagé, 2018).

To counter these common clichés regarding the action of interest groups, a research project set out to collect data on these actors during the 2012 presidential election (Courty and Gervais, 2016). Between November 2011 and the first round of voting in April 2012, the result of the survey showed that 1178 organisations had made contact with at least one candidate in the contest¹. This amounts to more than 6,500 questions or requests made in more than 5,000 pages of documents received by the candidates' teams, and involves more than 200 campaign rituals (consultations, meetings, parties, etc.). Ultimately, this hidden side of elections shows one of the electoral activities of civil society that significantly helps to support the campaign for all these people, yet plays only a marginal role in determining the issues and, even less so, the axes of future government policy.

Elections: an important time for interest groups' activity

Through this initial collective research, we began to know a little more about the electoral history of advocacy groups, even if it is something of a blind spot in our political history.

The first thing we can be certain of is that electoral action by interest groups is as old as competitive elections themselves, even if there is a lack of data for the period 1848-1880, when only the creation of clubs and committees of corporations for electoral purposes was recorded. Thereafter, the data, although scattered, allow us to outline a steady series of electoral actions by interest groups.

In that set of actions, some are now outdated or difficult to mobilise. The most famous is the presentation of candidates. The rules of the political game have gradually established almost watertight boundaries between partisan, member-based and trade union organisations. This began with the gradual exclusion of organisations that did not fit into the right-left opposition, and ended with the constitutional

¹ This research system was based on search engines that brought up the requests, questions and proposals of advocacy groups, but above all on the archives of a campaign HQ with the spreadsheets used to process all the requests. When compared to the data kept by a different team and the interviews conducted with advisers of other candidates, these data can be considered sufficiently robust to serve as a basis for analysing the action of interest groups during campaigns.

recognition of the parties' monopoly on the presentation of candidates by the Fifth Republic. In the meantime, groups tried to compete with parties, the most famous being the employers' circles such as the *Parti commercial et industriel* in 1901 and the last known one, the *Redressement français*, which stopped presenting candidates directly from 1928. It was not until 1951 that such a practice was seen again, with the establishment of an "economic front", while in 1956 the most significant event occurred: 52 Poujadist candidates were elected on the lists of the *Union de défense des commerçants et artisans*, which defended artisans and small shopkeepers.

However, such action was not limited to the business community. The anti-alcohol leagues also presented their candidates in the 1902 legislative elections. Other candidates, considered to have little legitimacy, were scattered throughout the country and supported by interest groups, such as a representative of fairgrounds in 1899, and a list of carriers in 1956. The only candidacy that still fits in with this past practice in certain respects is that of Jean Saint-Josse for *Chasse, pêche nature et tradition* (a party defending the traditional values of rural France) in the 2002 presidential election.

The second action used in campaigns was a logical consequence of the abandonment of the first. In the absence of candidates, the groups submitted programmes to the party candidates and asked them to sign or, at least, to acknowledge them. This was the case with the agricultural union in 1889, and later with a great many interest groups who used this practice as a means of appeal by publishing their demands, claims or projects for the next term of office. Here too, this original method of producing extra-partisan programmes became a ritual for employers' organisations in the inter-war period. It enabled these groups to publish the list of supported candidates, often those who had agreed to sign the famous electoral commitments. In the most recent elections in France, the majority of groups abandoned the programme aspect in favour of appeals, demands, claims or proposals in the form of a summary document or booklet, often a "white paper", which may propose a new project for French society.

Already present during the campaigns, interest groups have invented more discreet ways of taking action that have resulted in a lack of awareness of the work they carry out. Mobilising their members to support candidates is part of this line of action. Turning support into votes requires just one simple step, with precise voting instructions concerning the candidates for the cause or issue of interest, or others specifying the candidates who should not be voted for. This practice, while not the most widespread, is by far one of the most commented upon, particularly following

the positions adopted in 2012 by Act Up against Nicolas Sarkozy, and by Civitas against François Hollande.

A fourth type of electoral action involves enlisting candidates so that they commit themselves to making the organisation's voice heard after the election has been won. Candidates complete questionnaires asking them about their options on a particular issue, and thereby commit to defending a specific group. Their promise may be publicised in the sector concerned, or the elected representatives thus enlisted may create a 'study group' within a parliamentary assembly. The practice most in line with this longstanding tradition is the signing of pacts, of which the 2007 environmental pact attracted the most attention.

In fifth place comes the most important action in some political systems, with the most famous example being the American system: the financing of parties or candidates. Prohibited in France since the 1988-1995 laws on the financing of politics, these practices fuelled a number of controversies before the ban, the most famous of which concerned an office of the CNPF employers' union (later MEDEF) in 1955, whose purpose was to finance candidates favourable to employers. Since the 1990s, there has been a lack of clarity over exchanges that take the form of unbilled services — in some cases buses or even barges transporting activists, all under the radar of the supervisory authorities. In the current context, money still plays a part in elections but in ways that are still difficult to quantify in accounting terms (Phélippeau, 2018).

Memories of a campaign

In detailing his daily routine during the 1974 presidential campaign, François Mitterrand wrote this paragraph on page 134 of his book "The Wheat and the Chaff" published in French in 1975, and in English in 1982. The italics are ours.

"Over the past forty days I have written, dictated, corrected hundreds of articles and interviews; received countless journalists; been subjected to photographers' flashbulbs from morning till evening; given seven press conferences; appeared on twelve television programmes and as many radio broadcast; debated both my opponents, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Jacques Chaban-Delmas; taken part in nine other debates on regional radio and television stations; been the subject of six films, including two full-length documentaries. Since the French National Television only shoots in its studios in Paris, I limited my public appearances to thirty-two. Almost every night I appeared before huge crowds—50,000 in Toulouse; 25,000 in Nice,

Grenoble, and Nantes; 15,000 to 20,000 in most other places—and afterward returned home. *I spent the rest of my time listening to delegations from organizations and associations of every kind, sent to me, their briefcases and pockets brimming with petitions, resolutions, protests, motions.* In between I did my best to maintain my work sessions with my staff, personally checking the posters, pamphlets and books that we prepared for the election, and kept regular contact with my departmental leaders, the leaders of my party and the political and trade union organisations working at my side".

The sixth item in this set of actions brings us back to the contemporary period, with a practice that is certainly ancient but which is only known in its recent forms: the consultation of candidates by interest groups in private (in the organisation's premises) or in public (for example in theatres). In 1981, the candidates were invited to a meeting on women's rights, which the future president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, chose not to honour with his presence. Since then, these exchanges have been organised either in restricted committees, such as the meetings between first-round candidates and the French Construction Federation in 2017 and 2021, or in public, such as the LGBT movement during a joint meeting in 2012.

This practice has its symmetry: getting invited as a way of meeting the candidates. The heads of the main NGOs and employers' organisations are often keen to point out to their members that they have been received by all the candidates in the first round, the only source of uncertainty being their position with regard to the far-right *Rassemblement national* party, which is not systematically called upon.

Campaigning groups' action: professionals vs. contract workers and amateurs

With such a high volume of activity, the question arises of why interest groups take action. What are they trying to achieve? This first question is immediately followed by another: what effect do they have on the election, the candidates and the future elected representatives?

Before addressing the possible answers to these questions, one must be ruled out straight away: their contribution in votes. Even if numerous electoral commentaries highlight the contemporary importance of certain community votes —

hunters, Pieds-Noirs, etc. — few researchers have ventured into this field by proving a link between the mobilisation of advocacy groups and the results of particular candidates.

Groups, their voices and candidates' strategies

Filmed by Raymond Depardon (*1974 une partie de campagne*, 2002), at the request of candidate Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the latter organised a discussion to prepare the strategy for the period between voting rounds, in an office of the Ministry of Finance in the Louvre, with the members of his campaign team for the 1974 presidential election. This is the explanation he gave on camera, during the meeting, for his strategy for the last three days of the campaign:

"I think, as well you know, that for the last two or three days, my whole trick has been not to lose votes. So that's why I haven't written to the nice turtle doves and the rest of them, because I was thinking 'I'll lose some hunters,' right?"

We shall begin with the logic behind their mobilisation during the campaign. There are two opposing analytical frameworks. On the one hand, some authors stress that these organisations only act in order to influence. On the other hand, another area of theory insists on the fact that these interventions respond more to internal issues such as the mobilisation of members, their participation in the shared reflection on the state of the defended cause or the legitimisation of the group's leaders who thus show how much they are devoted to others. In order to settle this debate, it is important to be aware of the population of the interest groups in question. Indeed, an election is a specific context involving organisations that are not very active in traditional politics. Since the entry into force of the Sapin II law — which organises the registration of interest representatives on Agora, a website open to the general public — we are starting to learn more about the groups that are active during the five-year presidential term. Compared to those identified during the presidential campaigns, two sides of French society are emerging.

The first side emerges from the action taken by groups during the parliamentary session, where people who have interacted at least ten times with a decision-maker must register. These figures clearly reveal the over-representation of economic interests in the French political system (79.3% of actors, even lawyers and consultants, advocate for causes on the fringes) and the extremely marginal share

occupied by associations (10%) and employee unions (0.2%)². This makes the French political system even more focused on economic issues than the European institutions (less than 60% of the groups present) and certainly shows the withdrawal of associations from the parliamentary and governmental decision-making arenas.

The second face, which takes shape during presidential campaigns, is diametrically opposed in that it opens up one of the few windows for social actors (66.8% of mobilised actors) to try to interact with the candidates.

Table 1: Comparison between the groups in action during the 2012 election and those registered during the 2017-2022 session

	Groups during the 2012 election N=1158	Grouping of economic and social interests	Groups during the parliamentary session N=2058	Grouping of economic and social interests
Companies	1.9%	24.4%	29.1%	79.3%
Professional organisations	22%		44.3%	
Chambers of commerce	0.1%		5%	
Law firms	0%		0.9%	
Consultancy firms	0.4%		7.7%	
Public bodies	1.7%		1.8%	
Research organisation	2.6%		0.7%	
Associations	52.7%	66.8%	10%	10.2%
Trade unions	14.1%		0.2%	
Others (religious groups, associations of elected representatives)	4.5%		0.1%	

Clarification: The HATVP's data have been recoded to avoid the numerous errors of assessment produced by its services, which all too often stop short at the outward appearance of interest groups, their legal status or their title, and not at their real activity (this is particularly the case with the confusion between associations and professional

² It should not be concluded that trade unions are excluded from the political game because they are not obliged to register as soon as they act within the framework of labour law legislation. They are one of three groups left out of this legislation, along with religious groups and associations of elected representatives and communities.

organisations, employee unions and professional unions). These figures were established in May 2020 with 2058 interest groups comprising 6479 collaborators.

This duality was confirmed by a questionnaire survey carried out in 2012 where only 44.2% of the lobbying professionals questioned acknowledged having set up a specific mechanism for the elections (n=183); the others had continued to work normally while the political system was on stand-by. In addition to the opposition between economic interests and societal causes, these two sides give an insight into what separates the *insiders* of interest representation, whose action is constant whatever the circumstances, and the *outsiders* who improvise an influential action when the context seems favourable. The difference between these two worlds of interest representation lies in their practices and in the effects they produce or seek. It also lies in the curious sequencing of political life, where the economy ultimately prevails over social considerations.

De Gaulle, the 1962 referendum and the condemnation of the collusion between the interest group agenda and the media agenda

The last period covered by De Gaulle's memoirs ("l'Effort. 1962...", published in English as "Endeavour", 1971) does not deliver anything on the first presidential elections of 1965 but contains interesting insights into the activity of interest groups during the 1962 referendum campaign, which specifically concerned the planned presidential election³.

"This joint offensive of all the parties was emulated by a number of professional organisations which, though strictly speaking they had no business to involve themselves in political discussions, rushed to take part in that one". There followed a series of open calls to vote "No" by the CGT, FO région parisienne, CFTC, Ligue de l'enseignement, Syndicat national de l'enseignement technique, Syndicat national de l'enseignement secondaire, Union française universitaire, FNSEA, Association d'exploitations agricoles MODEF. Noting that these opinions were published or supported by "almost all the Parisian and provincial newspapers", the President of the Republic acknowledged that "[i]n the long run I had become impervious to this attitude on the part of the press".

³ Toutes les citations qui suivent sont tirées de la traduction des mémoires : [Endeavour disponible en ligne](#) et sur Google Books (des fragments).

Once the emotions and resentfulness of the referendum campaign had passed, De Gaulle painted a picture of French society confronted with the "ruthless laws of the capitalist system". On the one hand, he claimed that government economic policies had ensured the "material progress of the French people", while on the other hand "the trade unions, because they took no part in the studies and debates from which decisions stemmed — the chief among them, moreover, being closely associated with systematic opposition of the Communist Party — devoted themselves exclusively to pay claims".

This sequencing opens up the controversial theory of the capture of modern States by the business community⁴. Another, less radical, formulation is possible: the omnipotence of economic interests is not so much due to the means they deploy — their economic capital compensating for their weak social capital — as to the blank cheque they have at their disposal as a result of the expectations of the political-administrative elites⁵.

These two campaigning worlds are opposed in the intensity and number of lobbying actions taken. On the one hand, some associations send or publish memos without ever contacting a member of the campaign HQ or worrying about what happens to them. The result is that only 1.4% of the organisations that sent a document published a comparison of the responses they received to their letters. On the other hand, some teams break down their requests into several different media (email, PDF, websites, press releases, etc.), send them to the candidates' specialist advisers, follow up by phone to find out how the response is progressing, and then ask the candidate, or call on him/her in the media, to come and present his/her responses and meet the members of the organisation. To summarise these differences between professionals and temporary interest groups, only 7.7% of groups met the candidates in the second round, and 89.7% did not receive any response to their request.

4 NGOs make their own contribution to the debate, arguing that capitalist interests are prioritised in the political system on account of the economic means at their disposal.

5 We have already stressed that this blank cheque also results from the homology of positions between political elites and interest representation professionals (Courty, 2018; Courty and Gervais, 2016).

The marginal effect on the political agenda

The lobbying actions of these groups reveal another, final facet of organised civil society: the hierarchy of issues it defends. The French presidential campaign is indeed known for having a civic agenda highlighted by the polls — it presents the hierarchy of expectations of the citizens polled — and a political media agenda that comprises the main issues on which the candidates make their proposals and around which the debates are partly organised — this agenda is based on the themes addressed by the press and developed by the candidates.

All these lobby groups suggest opening up a third agenda made up of the demands of interest groups, which North American researchers call the lobbying agenda. The result of the 2012 survey is highly significant: this third agenda corresponds very partially to that of citizens because of the importance given to economic issues⁶. However, it is almost completely out of step with the agenda of the media and the candidates⁷: the issues of most concern to the candidates did not match those supported by these civil society organisations. An observation that has been broadly made elsewhere also applies here: the field of power is not very sensitive to the issues raised by interest groups, and some of them are not even heard.

Table 2: Issues raised by interest groups during the 2012 elections

Issues	Percentage	Issues	Percentage
Economic issues	15.5%	Family Assistance and international issues	3.4%
Health	9.7%	Justice	3.2%
Rights and minorities	9.6%	Environment	3.1%
Education	9.2%		3.0%

⁶ For the record, 78% of respondents highlighted an economic issue, with unemployment accounting for 47.8%. This is well below the 15.5% of economic issues and the 2.3% of labour issues raised by the interest groups. On these data, see Sauger Nicolas, Raillard Sarah-Louise, "Économie et vote en 2012. Une élection présidentielle de crise?", *Revue française de science politique*, 2013/6, vol.63, pp. 1031-1049.

⁷ For the record, the media agenda focused on two issues that were absent from the demands of the interest groups: insecurity, revived by the Toulouse and Montauban terrorist shootings from March onwards, and the economic situation following the bailing-out of the Greek economy. On this point, see Grossman Emiliano, Jaber Asmaa, "Le rôle des médias dans la campagne présidentielle de 2012" in Gerstlé Jacques, Magni-Berton Raul, (ed.), *2012 : La campagne présidentielle*, Paris, Éditions L'Harmattan, 2014, pp.53-72.

Communication, culture, sports	6.1%	Energy	2.3%
Functioning of the state	6.1%	Labour, employment, immigration	2.3%
Transport	5.3%	Defence	2.2%
Agriculture	4.9%	Social protection	2.1%
Urban development and housing	4.4%	ICT	1.9%
Social policies	4.0%	Church and religion	1.5%
Total	100.00%		

Source: The data collected during the 2012 survey was coded for issues in the 5000 pages of documents using the project agenda nomenclature.

Two further examples demonstrate the fact that this agenda does not converge with the other two. The position occupied by immigration (1.2% of the Labour, Employment, Immigration category) shows very clearly that the issue of most concern to actors in the field of power is overlooked by interest groups. Health (9.7%, i.e. the second most important issue) moves into first position if we add to it questions of social policy, social protection and the functioning of this State sector. Thus graded, the issue of health is the first on interest groups' list in 2012. It is also the second most unanswered issue after economic matters, just ahead of minority rights issues. One conclusion is that the three key themes of the interest groups' campaign are neither the candidates' themes nor the issues they actually want to talk about.

The result is a picture that is hardly compatible with the most frequently held fantasies about the influence of interest groups. In fact, as is the case in ordinary political life, the influence of a group on a candidate is extremely marginal and shows a quasi-monopoly of professionals working for central economic interests or for major societal causes. In concrete terms, the actors who manage to obtain a response or to meet and interact with the candidates or their teams represent less than 7% of the groups mobilised. Unsurprisingly, they are permanent members of the political system, regularly consulted and systematically present⁸. They are also staffed with those individuals most likely to capture the attention of political professionals: former political staff are over-represented, along with former communication professionals.

⁸ This list of some sixty French organisations includes, for example, *40 million d'automobilistes*, *Association des paralysés de France*, *Fédération française du bâtiment*, *Anticor*, *Comité anticorrida*, *Union nationale des associations familiales*, etc.

Unsurprisingly, those who get 100% of the responses and attention are groups of local elected officials (including the association of French mayors). But do they have the capacity to win systematically? Here again, the answer is contrary to the power they are given, since all these groups, the dominant ones as well as those on the fringes, only obtain a sort of follow-up right authorising them to contact the government team again to discuss the policy to be put in place. A second response also undermines the power they are deemed to hold⁹ : their contribution to the composition of candidates' programmes is so marginal as to be almost non-existent; once again, with the exception of the permanent members of the system who are more successful in having a demand taken into account that the previous five-year term had not managed to address: in short, another concrete expression of the right to follow up.

The 2022 presidential election, like the previous ones, saw an outpouring of energy and resources — in 2012, the highest budgets were 500,000 euros — by organisations that believed they had an opportunity to capture the candidates' attention, and sometimes the public's. While we should not deny their ability to raise awareness and mobilise their members and their environment around the causes and interests they defend, we must nevertheless take some of the magic out of the electoral ritual by pointing out that it very rarely allows demands to be converted into electoral programmes, or category proposals into bills. During the election, and the five-year term that now follows, the survey carried out confirms the theory on other political systems developed by other political scientists: interest groups advocate on the margins of political goods — the writing of certain technical characteristics of standards — and rarely impose an issue on the governmental agenda. This theory no doubt disappoints those who consider that interest groups are primarily responsible for the drift of the political system. Nevertheless, it is intended to help to return political elites to their rightful place in this debate and not to consider them *a priori* as the weak link.

Further reading

- Julia Cagé, *The Price of Democracy*, Paris, Fayard, 2018.

⁹ On the theory of the marginal influence of interest groups in contemporary political systems, see in particular Frank R. Baumgartner, Jeffrey M. Berry, Marie Hojnacki, David C. Kimball and Beth L. Leech, *Lobbying and Policy Change*. Berry, Marie Hojnacki, David C. Kimball and Beth L. Leech, *Lobbying and Policy Change. Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

- Guillaume Courty, *Lobbying in France. Invention and normalisation of a political practice*, Brussels, Peter Lang, 2018.
- Guillaume Courty, Julie Gervais (eds.), *Le lobbying électoral, Groupes en campagne (2012)*, Lille, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2016, Preface by Daniel Gaxie.
- Éric Phélippeau, *L'argent de la politique*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2018.

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