



The long shadow of lobbying: ideational power of lobbying as illustrated by welfare profits in Sweden

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Abstract

The weak correlation between lobbying and policy outcomes is puzzling. The main argument developed here is that the puzzle is partly caused by a lack of attention to the long-term effects of lobbying on the ideas espoused by policymakers. An analysis of ideational power goes beyond the usual empirical focus on the immediate effects of lobbying. Thus, it provides a more complete understanding of how lobbying pays off. To illustrate this, the paper analyzes the battle over profits in the Swedish welfare sector. Despite a strong public opinion in favor of a cap on profits, the industry got its way. To justify this, policymakers relied on the argument that a cap on profits would drive out private welfare providers and, thereby, undermine choice for service users. In other words, the idea that private entrepreneurship, choice, and individual liberty are inextricably linked is a key factor in explaining the outcome. This idea had taken root among policymakers in Sweden following a massive and costly lobbying campaign, organized by the business community, several decades earlier. The main takeaway is a focus on the here and now risks underestimating the efficacy of efforts to influence policy.

Keywords Lobbying · Consumers · Ideational power · Business power · Sweden

Introduction

The influence of lobbying on democratic politics is a central theme in the literature on interest groups. The common assumption has been that money buys influence. It is, therefore, surprising that the correlation between lobbying and policy outcomes is close to zero (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Related research demonstrates that corporate lobbying has a relatively weak impact on policy (Smith 2000; Dür 2008). At the same time, the political preferences of businesses seem to drive policy outputs much more than those of mass-based interest groups (Gilens and Page 2014). To explain

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this paradox, there is an increasing tendency to emphasize structural elements of business power and belittle active efforts to affect policy (Culpepper 2015; Rahman 2018; Braun 2020). In the words of Cornelia Woll (2019, p. 38), “we are overestimating the role of lobbying [...] lobbying is neither sufficient, nor even necessary, to explain the reach firms can hold over politics.”

How should scholars investigating lobbying respond to this? One option is to acknowledge the limits of lobbying (Lowery 2013). That is indeed a key avenue for research. Another option is to give serious thought to the concepts and measurements of lobbying influence. This article does that. Specifically, it homes in on the assumption that the two events (lobbying and influence) are contiguous. As a rule of thumb, that is a reasonable assumption. But it is hardly universal. The aim here is to show that lobbying can have a direct impact on policy that is far from immediate.

To understand why, the study draws on two largely disconnected strands of literature. One is the literature that conceptualizes lobbying as information sharing. According to this view, lobbyists wield power through the critical information they give to policymakers. The information can either be technical, political, or normative (Bouwen 2002; Mahoney 2008; Chalmers 2011). Regardless of which, the information is ultimately about the potential consequences of a policy proposal. Such casual claims are what scholars refer to as “ideas” (Béland and Cox 2011, pp. 3–4). What is important to recognize is that although ideas might serve short-term and policy-specific goals, ideas can shape how we think about political problems also in the future. Historical institutionalists argue that once ideas become institutionally embedded, policymaking becomes possible only in terms of these ideas (Hall 1986). These ideas are what Blyth (2001) calls cognitive locks. Ideational power is the second strand of literature that the article draws on. Ideational power is the capacity to influence normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideas. By analyzing interest groups’ supply of information as attempts to have a long-term effect on the ideas of policymakers, it becomes possible to uncover lobbying episodes whose direct influence on policy is not only, or even primarily, immediate.

The battle over profits in the Swedish welfare sector serves to illustrate the argument. In 2011, the media began to report on mismanagement in private welfare institutions and on the high profits earned by these companies. Welfare privatization became a hot-button issue, and a large majority were against profits made by schools and care providers (Nilsson 2017). Yet, no cap on profits, or any other significant measure, followed. An analysis shows that politicians and opinion makers, as the debate broke out, immediately made freedom of choice the centerpiece of their case against a cap. Limiting profits, they claimed, would deprive people of choice in the welfare marketplace by driving the private welfare providers out of business.

To explain this response from policymakers, it would be convenient to point to the vigorous lobbying effort mounted by the industry (for an overview of these lobbying activities, see Svallfors and Tyllström 2019). What such an explanation fails to see is that the industry was politically paralyzed at the beginning of the debate. It took months for it to organize. In the meantime, policymakers entered the scene. From the very beginning, their go-to argument was that freedom of choice is valuable and that it requires a market of private welfare providers. In short, their argument was about consumer choice. It attests to the fact that the relationship between



individual liberty, choice, and private welfare providers had become a cognitive lock (Blomqvist 2004; Meagher and Szebehely 2019). It was an idea that gained currency in the 1980s, as a result of a vast political campaign into which the business community invested enormous amounts of money. This exemplifies how lobbying generates ideational power and the long time lag this creates between lobbying and influence.

The study proceeds as follows. The next section starts by describing instrumental power and structural power. Ideational power is then introduced as another basis of power, which is largely absent in the literature on lobbying. The subsequent section presents the battle over profits as an illustrative case. It starts by identifying “consumer choice” as an important idea in modern market-based economies. It then goes on to provide a brief history of the privatization of the Swedish welfare system, where the right to choose between various providers is central. Through an analysis of the debate over profits that flared up in 2011, the article attributes the business-friendly outcome to this idea and the lobbying behind it. A final part concludes with the main findings, limitations, implications, and directions for future research.

Sources of business power

Instrumental power comprises various means by which organizations actively try to influence politics. The instruments at their disposal include campaign contributions, lobbying, and the revolving door (Hacker and Pierson 2002, p. 280). There are various ways to model the use of these instruments. One is to model lobbying as an exchange, typically an exchange of campaign contributions for votes (Austen-Smith 1996). This perspective has dominated the empirical research on lobbying (Lowery 2007, pp. 32–33). Another class of models instead conceptualizes lobbying as persuasion. Here, interest groups and lobbyists persuade policymakers to adopt certain policy positions (Hansen 1991). A third, more recent, view is that of lobbying as a legislative subsidy (Hall and Deardorff 2006). It argues that lobbying is not a strategy for changing legislators’ preferences but to assist legislative allies to achieve their own, coincident objectives.

In the latter two models, there is a focus on lobbyists as purveyors of information (Hansen 1991; Hall and Deardorff 2006, p. 74). The information they transmit typically falls into two categories. One is expertise and technical know-how (Bouwen 2002). The other one is intelligence on constituents’ policy interests and opinions (Hansen 1991). Regardless of category, the information that interest groups and lobbyists provide is ultimately about the consequences—practical or political—of policy proposals (Aplin and Hegarty 1980; Chalmers 2011, p. 46; Bernhagen 2013).

The nature of these instruments aside, there is weak empirical support for the instrumental power thesis. First of all, lobbying does not seem to make a big difference. As Baumgartner and Leech (1998, p. 134) write “the unavoidable conclusion is that PACs and direct lobbying sometimes strongly influence Congressional voting, sometimes have marginal influence and sometimes fail to exert influence.” Furthermore, empirical investigations have challenged the assumption that corporations wield more instrumental power thanks to their deep pockets (Smith 2000; Dür 2008). What is even more puzzling is that despite these



findings, politics appears to cater to the needs and wishes of business. An analysis of thousands of policy changes in the USA reveals that the preferences of business groups are much more likely to come to fruition than those of mass-based interest groups or average citizens (Gilens and Page 2014).

To make sense of these paradoxical conclusions, scholars have increasingly turned to structural sources of power. What characterizes this class of models is the contention that business enjoys a structurally privileged position in capitalist societies. According to the most established formulation of structural power, the state of the economy is largely determined by the investment decisions of private firms. This prompts governments to automatically adopt business-friendly policies to spur investments (Lindblom 1977; Przeworski and Wallerstein 1988). In brief, the power of business does not derive from lobbying and advocacy but from its ability to withhold investments if displeased with the government.

In recent years, there has been a second wave of research on structural power. In most cases, the endeavors build on the notion that structural power flows from investment decisions (Culpepper and Reinke 2014; Culpepper 2015). But scholars have also pointed to other structural elements of business power. For instance, financial giants and Internet service providers exercise control over crucial economic and societal services. Rahman (2018) proposes that this “infrastructural power” gives these firms another structural basis of power. Braun (2020) also talks about infrastructural power but refers to the dependence of the state on the financial system for the execution of market-based economic governance. Another related concept is that of platform power (Culpepper and Thelen 2020). Firms with platform power benefit from the enormous popularity of their products. Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Netflix enjoy platform power by dint of the perceived electoral backlash that policymakers would face if they tried to impose regulations that would affect these firms negatively. Even if this is not structural power per se, it exposes another mechanism of business power that does not hinge on lobbying efforts.

Where does all this leave the scholarship on lobbying? As Lowery (2013) urges the readers of this journal, a part of the response should be to think harder about the various reasons for why lobbying and influence might not move in tandem. On top of that, Woll (2019) argues that structural power offers a better model of corporate political influence than instrumental power. While not negating any of these views, it also critical to uncover blind spots in how the relationship between lobbying and influence is perceived and measured. Significant progress has been made in this area in the last few years (Yackee and Yackee 2006; Klüver 2013; Dür et al. 2015). Despite these efforts, a common thread that runs through the empirical literature is the assumption that lobbying and influence are contiguous events. A departure from this assumption would presumably enhance our ability to discover instances of lobbying success. To offer a theoretical justification for such a departure, the present article presents ideational power as a “slow-moving” mechanism through which lobbying impacts policy.



Ideational power

To understand ideational power, one must start with the basic concept of an “idea.” Essentially, ideas are causal beliefs (Béland 2010; Béland and Cox 2011). As such, they provide interpretative frameworks through which we formulate goals and strategies, define political problems, and come to regard some facts as more relevant than others. Consequently, ideas are the cause of actions (Béland and Cox 2011, pp. 3–4). Conceptualized this way, it does not take much to see why political power and ideas are bound up with one another.

Carstensen and Schmidt (2016, p. 329) define ideational power as “the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence actors” normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements. They go on to identify three forms of ideational power: power through ideas, power over ideas, and power in ideas. Power through ideas is the capacity of actors to persuade others to accept and adopt their views through the use of ideational elements. Power over ideas is the capacity to control the meaning of ideas. Power in ideas, finally, is the capacity to make sure that some ideas enjoy authority at the expense of other ideas.

This form of ideational power shares similarities with other approaches to ideas in power relations, for example, Lukes (1974), Gramsci (1971), and Foucault (2020). In contrast to these, ideational power, as understood here, takes a more agency-oriented approach (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016, p. 320). Thus, policy elites are able to deploy ideas strategically and think critically about the ideas they hold (Carstensen 2011, p. 148). It does not mean that ideational power is rational, in the sense that those armed with the “best” arguments win (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016, p. 323). Nonetheless, it is different from false consciousness and ideological hegemony, where manipulation becomes the main vehicle of ideational power and where actors struggle to imagine things differently. By adopting an agency-oriented approach, ideational power becomes more observable and subject to analysis.

In the last couple of decades, especially in the fields of comparative political economy and institutionalism, scholars have been able to demonstrate the importance of ideas in policymaking. According to Blyth (2001), ideas can serve three functions. First, as institutional blueprints during periods of uncertainty, ideas reduce uncertainty and give definition to interests. Second, as political weapons, ideas identify the cause of a problem and a solution to it. Third, as cognitive locks, ideas become institutionally embedded. This is an insight borrowed from historical institutionalists (Hall 1986). What it suggests is that ideas can reproduce policies and existing institutions over time.

At this point, recall that both “lobbying as persuasion” and “lobbying as a legislative subsidy” regard lobbying as the transmission of information on the consequences—practical or political—of policy proposals. Put differently, lobbying is about advancing causal beliefs or ideas. By connecting the two strands of literature, lobbying can be conceptualized as the activity in which organized interests try to persuade policymakers to accept and adopt their views through the use of



ideas. In other words, it is an attempt to exercise what Carstensen and Schmidt (2016) refer to as “power through ideas.” This conceptualization is compatible with the expectation that lobbying and influence are contiguous events. That said, once cognitive locks are brought into the picture, it also becomes possible to see how lobbying can create long-term ideational shifts that affect policymaking well beyond the immediate.

It should be noted that this is different from the status quo bias in policymaking. One of the more robust findings in research on interest groups is that it is easier to lobby in favor of the status quo than in opposition to it (Baumgartner et al. 2009). If an interest group manages to change policy, it can benefit from the status quo bias at a later stage. This is another example of the long-term effects of lobbying on policymaking. However, status quo bias and cognitive locks differ in several respects. First, status quo bias is about the uncertainty concerning the distribution of gains and losses from a reform (Fernandez and Rodrik 1991). Cognitive locks are about the ideational institutionalization of certainty. Second, and more importantly, lobbying may produce a new status quo, but it is not directly responsible for the psychological bias that inheres in it. True, defenders of the status quo can feed the bias by pointing to potential risks. But this lobbying effort would be separate from the one that shifted the status quo in the first place, with an effect on a policy decision that is immediate (Baumgartner et al. 2009, p. 141). Conversely, a cognitive lock can exist independently of the agents who developed and promoted an idea, but not independently of the idea itself (Blyth 2001, p. 4). This means that a successful attempt to impose a cognitive lock will reproduce that initial influence time and again. The effect of lobbying on policy is, in this regard, direct but either prolonged or delayed. To illustrate this, the next section turns to the case of profits in the Swedish welfare sector.

Case and method

The limitations of case study research are acknowledged by students of interest groups, not least when it comes to the limited generalizability (Beyers et al. 2008, 2014). However, the purpose of the paper is not to arrive at general conclusions but to formulate the main outlines of an argument and to provide an illustration thereof. An illustrative case study is meant to introduce the reader to a theoretical argument by “providing a concrete example of its application, or to demonstrate the empirical relevance of a theoretical proposition by identifying at least one relevant case” (Levy 2008, p. 7). Establishing causality is not the priority here. Consequently, alternative explanations recede into the background. Such a partial effort at assessing a theory, which Eckstein (1975) calls a plausibility probe, is an important step to further theoretical development (George 1979, p. 52).

The case of the Swedish for-profit welfare sector was mainly selected for reasons of convenience. Welfare privatization is a contentious issue in Swedish politics with clearly exposed ideational dimensions. It is also a well-documented chapter in modern Swedish political history, which enables the tracking of key actors and their arguments and actions. In what follows next, the paper presents a condensed history



of the privatization of Swedish welfare. As will be apparent, freedom of choice was a political objective that moved the process forward. This part of the story is well established by previous studies. The more original empirical contribution is with regard to the events that unfolded in 2011 when policymakers resisted a cap on profits by arguing that a cap would undermine consumer choice and, by extension, the right of people to choose freely what services they preferred. This article presents an analysis of the debate and the actions taken by the welfare lobby and leading policymakers around that time.

The bulk of this analysis is based on opinion polls, op-eds, and editorials published in the four largest newspapers between 2010 and 2013. The stance of each opinion piece on welfare privatization was coded as either negative or positive.¹ If positive, the main argument in favor of private welfare was identified.² If there was more than one argument, and no one was given priority, a ratio—one divided by the number of arguments in the text—was assigned to each argument. The rationale for limiting the analysis to op-eds and editorials is threefold. First, it is easier to identify the general tone of an opinion piece than that of a news report. Second, they reflect the author's own opinions and thereby give a better insight into what he or she thinks is the best argument(s). Third, the four largest newspapers tend to publish only those opinion pieces that are authored by leading policymakers. The method is, therefore, appropriate for an agency-oriented approach to ideational power where policy elites are the main actors (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016, p. 320). The four-year period, 2010–2013, coincides with the period immediately before, during, and after the most intense media coverage of the issue. Before delving into this analysis, or the story of the Swedish welfare privatization, it is necessary to provide a broad description of the idea that occupies a central position in all of this.

Consumer choice as a political idea

As Amartya Sen (1993, p. 519) points out, the ability to increase material welfare is the main perceived benefit of the market economy. But, he continues, what is “perhaps less obvious—but obvious enough—[...] is the claim that the market makes people ‘free to choose’” (Sen 1985, p. 3). Although freedom of choice means different things to different people at various points in time, this is an era where it is

¹ The four newspapers are Aftonbladet, Expressen, Dagens Nyheter, and Svenska Dagbladet. By accessing the online database Mediearkivet and searching for the combination of the terms private (which returns both “private” and “privatization”) and välfärd (welfare), op-eds and editorials referring to private welfare were downloaded. If the main subject of the text was not private welfare, it was subsequently dropped. Even if privatization of welfare services encompasses a wide range of activities and aspects, op-eds and editorials tend to focus on just one of them. The classification of an opinion piece as negative or positive is done in relation to the expressed sentiments about that specific aspect. It was very rare that the author of a text expressed a mix of negative and positive tones. In the few cases that came up, the stance was based on the sentiments expressed in the lead and closing paragraphs. Not in one single case did the author express a mix of sentiments in the lead and closing arguments.

² If the lead and closing paragraphs refer to one and the same argument(s), it is considered the main argument(s). The only exception to this rule is when an additional argument is used in more than one paragraph. However, this never occurred.



frequently cast as a feature of market liberalism (Fotaki 2011). The free market is associated with various freedoms, including the freedom to produce, the freedom to trade, and—most importantly—consumer choice. Consumer choice is the ability of consumers to choose from a range of competing products and services (Fotaki 2011). On this, Friedrich Hayek (1944, p. 96) writes that “[o]ur freedom of choice in a competitive society rests on the fact that, if one person refuses to satisfy our wishes we can turn to another.” What one should bear in mind is that not only libertarians subscribe to Hayek’s view. Sure enough, many markets are oligopolies or even monopolies. Besides, the choice could be between products and services that differ marginally. Nonetheless, it is generally accepted that consumer choice can only exist insofar there is a market economy (Peter 2004).

Whereas few would question that consumer choice is one of the defining features of market-oriented economies, the idea that it is something desirable seems less obvious. First, consumers often do not behave rationally. They are very much influenced by brand loyalty and habits (De Mooij 2010). Second, it is contested whether choice does raise human welfare or not (Schwartz 2004). Despite the validity of these arguments, what matters here is not what is objectively true. Again, ideational power does require having the “the best” arguments. What matters is the cognitive and normative persuasiveness of an idea. Not even those who contest the merits of choice deny that there is a prevalent sense that consumer choice maximizes individual liberty (Markus and Schwartz 2010, p. 344). Some scholars talk about an unchallenged “imperative of consumer choice” that has washed across the globe (Mick et al. 2004).

If consumer choice is a powerful idea, which interest groups does it benefit? Since consumer choice is perceived to be an outcome of private and free entrepreneurship, it supports free trade and open markets. These are two integral components of the overall economic liberal agenda of the business community (Vogel 1989; Fones-Wolf 1994; Fairbrother 2007; Waterhouse 2013). As for non-business interests, some consumer advocacy groups champion consumer choice. That said, most consumer organizations primarily seek to protect people from corporate abuses (Vogel 1990). In contrast, freedom of consumer choice is one of the main political slogans of the business community (Crouch 2014, p. 115).

Just because the idea of consumer choice advances and protects the overall business agenda does not imply that it benefits all firms equally. First, it may create winners and losers within an industry. For instance, consumer choice is often invoked against trade barriers, a policy domain that tends to pit firms against each other (Rogowski 1987). Other examples include mergers, acquisitions, and breakups of monopolies. Second, the political relevance of consumer choice is not distributed evenly across all industries. The concept of differentiation applies here. Kotler et al. (1999, p. 365) define differentiation as “the act of designing a set of meaningful differences to distinguish the company’s offer from competitors’ offers.” Such meaningful differences are more noticeable in some goods than in others. This variation in the breadth and depth of differentiation should be positively correlated with the importance attributed to consumer choice. It is safe to assume that the number of TV stations and beer brands matters more to people than the number of soap bars and wiper fluids.



What are then the areas of policymaking that could conceivably be shaped by the belief in the causal relationship between the free market, choice, and liberty? One pertains to policies affecting the costs of products and services. If the costs associated with a policy are passed onto consumers, a product or a service could become unaffordable and no longer a viable alternative for many people. Still, material welfare is more likely to dominate a discussion on price hikes. Conceptually speaking, it is also easier to maintain that higher prices modify the quantity that is consumed, not the range of alternatives that are available to consumers. A more unambiguous scenario is the actual diminution of the range of competing products and services. It might occur when a government policy tilts the balance between revenue and costs so that a business activity is no longer profitable. This can happen, for example, when a government introduces tariffs, higher corporate taxes, or stricter regulations. If profits are low, the slightest perturbation may cause a firm or a group of firms to exit from a market or withdraw products or services. Irrespective of how such an exit affects prices, it would unequivocally harm consumer choice. In an even more extreme case, a diminution would happen when a government decides to nationalize a sector. To illustrate ideational power based on consumer choice, the next section turns to an example of a political threat facing an industry whose purpose is very much that of offering citizens choice.

The emergence of the Swedish for-profit welfare sector

During the twentieth century, the Social Democratic vision of welfare became a reality in Sweden. A system almost exclusively publicly funded and run by the state emerged. In the 1970s, the tide started to turn. What caused this to happen was a combination of various factors. First, the welfare system had expanded greatly during the postwar era. Second, due to stagflation and oil crises, there was an economic downturn. Third, labor unions had strengthened their position and started to challenge businesses' rights of ownership. Faced with dwindling profits, a growing state that recorded larger and larger budget deficits, and a powerful labor movement, the Swedish business community launched a counteroffensive against the Social Democratic political project.

The counteroffensive consisted of two strategies. One was to withdraw from corporatist arrangements (Rothstein and Bergström 1999). The other one was to marshal liberal ideas to contest existing institutions (Blyth 2001; Svallfors and Tyllström 2019). In the pursuit of the latter, the main business organization almost quadrupled its spending on lobbying and advocacy (Pestoff 1991). A substantial amount of that money was put into outside lobbying (Kollman 1998) and advocacy organizations (Allern and Pollack 2020). The goal of these efforts was to achieve an ideation shift in economic policy and welfare. As Blyth (2001) shows, the campaign orchestrated by the business community successfully did so. The Social Democrats adopted and implemented many of the ideas, not to mention the conservative and liberal parties. With time, these ideas became woven into the fabric of Swedish policymaking (Blyth 2001, pp. 22–23). In other words, there was a cognitive locking.



Consumer choice is a case in point. During the 1980s, the criticism from the business community against the welfare sector spread across the political landscape. By the mid-1980s, all the liberal and conservative parties had adopted the view that the public welfare service sector was “wasteful, overly bureaucratic, and, above all, depriv[ed] the Swedish people of their right to choose freely what services they preferred” (Blomqvist 2004, p. 144). The proposed solution to the lack of choice was privatization.

Paula Blomqvist (2004) has identified three stages in the privatization that followed. Paradoxically, a Social Democratic government introduced the first reforms. The party had been out of government between 1976 and 1982 and was under pressure to deliver fresh messages to voters. Although reluctant to implement liberal market reforms, the Social Democrats bought into the same narrative about the lack of choice. At the core of the new Social Democratic vision of welfare, the goal was to expand the range of options available to citizens (Meagher and Szebehely 2019, pp. 460–461). To accomplish this, a great decentralization of welfare provision was initiated.

To go so far as to open the door to private providers did not form part of the reform agenda. That changed when the liberals and conservatives came to power in 1991. One year earlier, a government investigation had released its final report. The report, which received much attention, described the welfare system as unable to provide choice and meet the increasingly differentiated expectations of citizens (SOU 1990:44 1990). The parties on the right maintained that the only solution was privatization and the introduction of consumer choice. In his first speech before Parliament, the newly elected prime minister declared that there would be a “choice revolution in the welfare system.” (Bildt 1991). Under his stewardship, private providers got access to the public purse. This marked the beginning of the second phase.

In 1994, the Social Democrats came back to power and remained there until 2006. During these 12 years—the third phase—the choice revolution became the new normal. In short, the choice revolution became a cognitive lock. Instead of dismantling the policies of the previous government, the Social Democrats sought to consolidate and improve on them. This was consistent with the ideational shift that had taken place within the party leadership. The whole meaning of egalitarianism had been redefined, from equality of outcomes guaranteed by the state to equality of opportunity guaranteed by the market and consumer empowerment (Andersson 2009). The cornerstone of the new Social Democratic vision of welfare was choice (Meagher and Szebehely 2019, p. 468).

Then, in 2011, the privatization of Swedish welfare services went from being an issue of low salience to being at the center of the political discourse. A string of revelations caused this. It started with a series of articles on the high profits earned by private welfare companies. The high profits came to be framed as theft of taxpayers’ money. A few months later, a report concluded that privatization had *not* increased efficiency (Hartman 2011). Adding insult to injury, a think tank with close ties to business had prepared the report. The business community reacted with anger to the report, which prompted the resignations of the lead author and some of the most renowned academics affiliated with the think tank. Later that October, the largest newspaper and the Swedish national public TV broadcaster ran stories about



mismanagement at an elderly care center in Stockholm, owned by a private company. If abstract concepts such as profits and efficiency did not galvanize the masses, reports about mistreatment of old people did. Quickly, the conflict expanded and came to be about private providers in general, regardless if they operated in health care, education, or elderly care. The issue of private welfare provision was suddenly propelled to the forefront of political debate.

Since the beginning of the choice revolution, a majority had wanted less, not more, privatization. However, due to the negative publicity, the public support for privatization plummeted and reached a new low. The main topic of the debate over privatization came to be about profits. Polls revealed that people were united in their hostility to profits made in the welfare sector. In 2012, 62% were in favor of a ban on profits, while 16 percent were against it. The opposition to profits was strong in every socio-economic segment of the population (Nilsson 2017). Despite the high salience and widespread hostility to profits, no cap on profits was implemented.

Analyzing the outcome

To fend off the threat of a cap on profits, the welfare industry waged a vigorous lobbying campaign (Svallfors and Tyllström 2019). Outwardly, that could explain the political victory of the private welfare providers. If true, that means that there was a short time lag between cause (lobbying) and effect (influence). This paper contends that there was not. This contention is underpinned by two observations. First, political leaders exhibited great consistency in their views on private welfare throughout the whole period. Second, the welfare sector was inert and disoriented when the crisis broke out; it took some time for it to devise and implement a lobbying strategy. The year 2011 provides a good point of departure for these two observations. It does so for two reasons. First, in the wake of the extensive media coverage and its impact on public opinion, there was a window of opportunity for politicians to adjust their positions. Second, the lobbying strategies that have been credited with saving the sector were the ones devised after 2011 (Suhonen 2014; Wingborg 2016).

Regarding the first observation, there are eight political parties in the Swedish Parliament. The four liberal Conservative parties and the Left Party are most invested in the issue of privatization. The Left Party has always been vehemently opposed to for-profits. In 2011, it immediately seized the opportunity to capitalize on the public outcry and the issue became the centerpiece of its election campaign of 2014. The parties on the right did not either deviate from their previous positions. An analysis of op-eds written by representatives of the liberal Conservative parties shows this. Apart from an opinion piece by a liberal politician in a small municipality, all fourteen op-eds between 2011 and 2013 were supportive of the private welfare sector. The willingness of the liberal Conservative government to defend the private welfare providers was never in question. When reports on mismanagement and mistreatment started to dominate the news, the government called a press conference, where reporters were told that private welfare as such was not a problem (Sveriges Radio 2011b). A month later, the Conservative Prime Minister was



interviewed on national radio. He refused to criticize the for-profit sector and their profits (Sveriges Radio 2011a).

If the Conservative parties and the Left Party behaved as expected, the passivity of the Social Democratic Party is more puzzling. Even if the party has, as described earlier, played an active role in the privatization of welfare, it is also the historical vanguard of public services. That said, the Social Democratic Party is a tale of two parties. Whereas many activists and backbenchers are opposed to welfare privatization, the party leadership has, in many ways, embraced it. The tug-of-war has been going on for decades, but, in the end, the party leadership has always been able to prevent a non-profit resolution from being introduced in the party manifesto. Consequently, the official position of the Social Democrats on private welfare has remained essentially unchanged since the 1980s. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise when the new party leader, who was appointed shortly after the issue had exploded, declared that it was neither desirable nor practically feasible to prohibit profits (SVT 2012).

Of course, the observed rigidity of policy positions does not necessarily imply that the lobbying efforts by the welfare industry exerted no effect. They might have prevented leading politicians from moving toward anti-privatization positions. However, such a proposition does not agree with the timeline of actions and events. Before 2012, as described by the head lobbyist of the trade association of private care providers (Tenelius 2016a), the public affairs activities had aimed at local politicians. Rarely did they meet with MPs or ministers. The main reason was that the representatives of the sector simply did not see any threat on the horizon. They were so accustomed to the low public support for private welfare services that they did not even regard it as a problem.

Several pieces of evidence substantiate this account of a lack of urgency and strategy. First, the welfare industry had been relatively absent at the Almedalen Week—the most important political forum in Swedish politics—before 2012.³ Second, it was only well into the crisis that the private welfare providers recruited their most prominent lobbyists.⁴ At the time when things went south in 2011, the whole industry became paralyzed and it took many months before it managed to develop a new political strategy. As the head lobbyist recounts, instead of fighting back, the industry was internally divided on how to respond and put time and effort into conducting an internal audit to determine the accuracy of the news reports (Tenelius 2016b). By the time the industry had developed a political strategy, the largest trade union confederation (Landsorganisationen, LO) had passed a resolution calling on the government to prohibit profits. Other trade unions, such as the Swedish Municipal Workers' Union, passed similar resolutions. Consequently, the rigidity of policy position, exhibited during the period when the debate reached fever pitch, seemingly

³ Of the six largest welfare providers (Praktikertjänst, Ambea/Carema, Attendo, Acamedia, Capio, Aleris), three of them attended the Almedalen Week in 2011. In 2012, only one did not. In previous years, their attendance was even lower.

⁴ For example, the Social Democratic senior advisor and chief of staff, Stefan Stern, was recruited by Magnora in February 2012.



cannot be explained by concurrent lobbying efforts by the industry or the lack of counter-lobbying.

Yet, one party did change course, namely the far-right Sweden Democrats. Their leader had been, on numerous occasions, critical of profits. Not so much anymore in 2014. This is cited as the clearest example of the power wielded by lobbyists (Wingborg 2016, pp. 43–49; Nilsson 2017, p. 490). The key piece of evidence is a series of secret meetings between representatives of the private welfare sector and the upper echelons of the Sweden Democrats in the aftermath of the election of 2014. It was after these meetings that a shift toward a profit-friendly outlook was detected. In reality, the shift had started earlier and it was part of a broader rightward turn in economic policy to make the Sweden Democrats more attractive as a coalition partner for the conservative parties (Wingborg 2016, pp. 55–58). When the Association of Private Care Providers surveyed the parties before the election of 2014, the Sweden Democrats expressed the same views on private welfare as the liberal Conservative parties (Vårdföretagarna 2014, pp. 54–61). Hence, Sweden Democrats had changed its policy position before the meetings between the party leadership and representatives of the private welfare sector took place.

If not instrumental power, does structural power appear to be a more plausible explanation? The answer seems to be no. The for-profit welfare sector is financed by the public purse. If the owners of these firms would exit and invest their money elsewhere, because of a cap on profits, these jobs would not disappear. They would be transferred to regional and local governments, from where they came originally. Therefore, structural power of investments and economic growth is not a very helpful analytical tool. The same goes for infrastructural power and platform power. Neither do the private welfare providers exercise control over crucial economic and societal services, nor are their services significantly more appreciated than those provided publicly (Burström 2015). Hence, to understand why there was no cap on profits, one must search elsewhere.

Whereas worries about investments and economic growth did not protect the industry, freedom of choice did. Throughout the debate over private welfare, choice was at the forefront. The analysis of arguments, used in opinion pieces that defended the private welfare sector, demonstrates this. In total, six arguments were identified: private welfare service providers (1) enable freedom of choice, (2) improve gender inequality since many of the companies are run by women, (3) do not report very high profits, (4) simply act in accordance with market principles, (5) offer citizens better and more efficient services, (6) employ thousands and serve hundreds of thousands of users, all of whom would face uncertainty if stricter regulations and a profit cap were to see the day.

As displayed in Fig. 1, freedom to choose was by far the most common argument. Figure 2 is a time series bar chart, where all other arguments are aggregated. Between the third quarter of 2011 and the third quarter of 2012, the freedom to



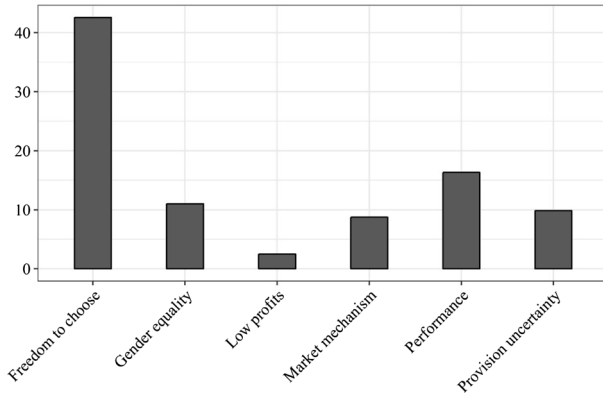


Fig. 1 Frequency of main arguments in newspaper op-eds and editorials that support private welfare providers

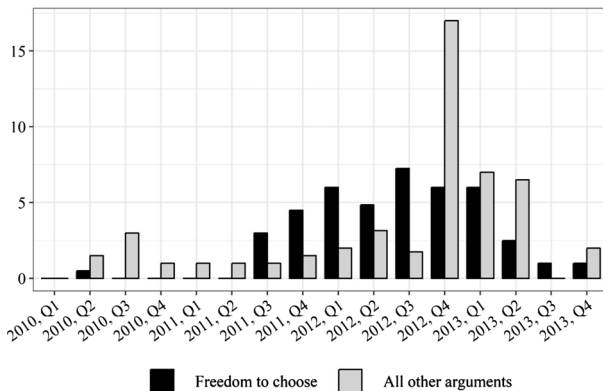


Fig. 2 Frequency of main arguments in newspaper op-eds and editorials that support private welfare providers 2010–2013

choose was the main argument in almost 75% of all opinion pieces. Although the repertoire broadened over time, freedom to choose was the most common argument during each period between the third quarter of 2011 and the last quarter of 2013. As for the welfare lobby, it was only in 2012 that freedom of choice was emphasized in its communication in response to the proposed cap on profits.⁵

⁵ All the press releases published by the Association of Private Care Providers between the third quarter of 2010 (one year before the debate broke out) and the first quarter of 2014 were analyzed. On average, 7.9 press releases were published every month. No press release between the third quarter of 2010 and the fourth quarter of 2011 highlighted freedom of choice.



Freedom of choice was also the dominant theme in the op-eds written by politicians. In more than 75% of positive opinion pieces authored by a Member of Parliament or a minister ($N=13$), the freedom to choose was one of the main arguments. In almost 70 percent, it was the sole main argument. The corresponding figure for op-eds written by a member of a party leadership—a minister or a shadow minister—was 100% ($N=6$). Evidently, politicians tried to shift attention away from profits to freedom of choice, and they tried to do so from day one.

Not surprisingly, the liberal and conservative parties invoked freedom of choice most passionately. As for the Social Democrats, its leading figures trod more carefully not to upset the party activists. Even so, also they emphasized freedom of choice when trying to justify their opposition to a cap on profits. In interviews, the newly appointed party leader tried to keep critics of private welfare at bay by framing the issue in terms of freedom of choice (Wrede 2012). In 2014, during the election campaign, two leading figures in the party bluntly declared that “the freedom to choose is very valuable and it is here to stay” (Damberg and Hallengren 2014).

The importance Social Democratic leaders ascribed to freedom of choice resonates strongly with the party manifesto. On the one hand, the party manifesto acknowledges that competition between welfare providers might harm equality. On the other hand, it highlights the importance of freedom of choice and a plurality of providers:

We Social Democrats want to develop the public sector so that it responds to classic demands for justice and equal access and new demands for influence and freedom of choice. People are different, with different needs and conditions. They must have the opportunity to choose between different educational styles, different types of care, and different care opportunities. Therefore, it is an important task for the public sector to develop different alternatives (Socialdemokraterna 2013, p. 36).

There is little doubt that freedom of choice is appreciated by citizens. Opinion polls show that 75% of voters believed that freedom of choice was important. This is the majority opinion across all regions and socioeconomic segments (Nilsson 2017, p. 497), even if only a minority exercise choice (Brennan et al. 2012; SKL 2016). However, these results are open to interpretation. The ability to choose between different schools, clinics, and care homes does not require the presence of private providers (Blomqvist 2004, p. 141). Furthermore, the public support in Sweden for freedom of choice evidently does not translate into support for profit-based enterprises in the welfare sector (Nilsson 2015). Despite this, policymakers have consistently equated the two—a reflection of the belief in the causal relationship between the free market, choice, and liberty.



Conclusion

Empirical research has unveiled a weak correlation between lobbying and policy outcomes. To address this puzzle, the aim here was to show that these are not necessarily contiguous events. To do so, the main objective was to connect the literature on lobbying with the one on ideational power. By seeing lobbyists as purveyors of information, lobbying can be conceptualized as the activity in which organized interests try to persuade policymakers to accept and adopt their views through the use of ideas. If one accepts that a possible ramification of systematic, persistent lobbying efforts is an ideational shift in how policymakers approach a problem, the direct influence of lobbying on policy decisions can be prolonged or even delayed. However, in their assessment of whether lobbying pays off or not, most empirical studies overlook that possibility.

To illustrate the argument, the Swedish private welfare lobby was chosen as a case. What set the privatization in motion was a massive and costly lobbying campaign organized by the business community during the 1980s. Central to this campaign was the message that the system offered very little choice for service users. The campaign triggered an ideational shift whereby policymakers made freedom of choice a top political priority. With time, freedom of choice became equated with consumer choice, which refers to a situation where private actors can compete for service users. The idea of consumer choice ushered in a period of privatization and formed the basis of future policymaking (Blomqvist 2004).

Seemingly, it was the ideational power based on consumer choice that protected the private welfare industry when the debate about profits broke out. In 2011, the industry plunged into a crisis and calls for limiting profits grew louder. While the private welfare industry was suffering from political inertia, politicians of all stripes swiftly came to its rescue. They asserted that a profit cap would strip the welfare system of private actors and, in turn, curtail the freedom of citizens to choose freely between providers. Thus, the outcome can be attributed to the earlier lobbying efforts that had persuaded policymakers to accept and adopt the idea that freedom of choice is paramount and that is it inextricably linked to consumer choice. This sequence of events highlights the usefulness of looking well into the rearview window to fully grasp the relationship between lobbying and influence.

What are, then, the implications of all of this on scholarship? Measuring influence is one of the greatest challenges of research on lobbying (Dür and De Bièvre 2007). Alas, an analysis of how lobbying has a long-term impact on the causal beliefs held by policymakers makes the challenge even greater. Still, ideational power is a less thorny subject matter than false consciousness or the third face of power. The analysis of ideational power takes an agency-oriented approach (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016, p. 320) and explores the deliberate use of facts and arguments (Culpeper 2008). In other words, ideas are observable. By analyzing the power of ideas, researchers may observe channels of influence that would otherwise be overlooked.

This is not to say that one should jettison the assumption that lobbying and influence are mostly contiguous. The paper merely suggests that ideational power opens new empirical paths forward to understand the relationship between lobbying and



influence. It is a relationship in which the time lag between cause and effect is not necessarily short. Consequently, ideational power offers an instrumental explanation as to why there is a weak correlation between lobbying and immediate policy outcomes, on the one hand, and a strong correlation between corporate political preferences and policy outcomes, on the other hand. How well it fares against more structural explanations is, however, an open question.

It is a question that also hangs over consumer choice. Since consumer choice presupposes a free market, the assumption made in this article is that consumer choice ultimately acts as a bulwark against policies that are thought to impede private entrepreneurship. However, its emphasis on competition has not prevented antitrust enforcement from reaching its lowest levels since the 1970s (Shubber 2018). Perhaps ideational power based on consumer choice pales in comparison with structural sources of business power, such as the protection of national champions against international competition. Still, consumer choice theory, at least historically, best explains the body of decisional antitrust case law (Lande 2001). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that the freedom to choose argument tends to trump all other political arguments in the long run, as it appeals to basic human notions regarding equality (Strimling et al. 2019). Given how frequently the freedom of choice and consumer choice arguments features in political debates, scholars should pay closer attention to how this idea empowers business and how business, through their political activities, persuades policymakers to accept and adopt the view that consumer choice is imperative. Needless to say, much more theoretical and empirical work is required to integrate the literature on ideational power in general—and the idea of consumer choice in particular—with that on lobbying.

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Compliance with ethical standards

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