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Editorial: The global impact of lobbies and think tanks on democracy and policy

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Editorial on the Research Topic

The global impact of lobbies and think tanks on democracy and policy

Today, interest representation is heavily shaped by how digitalization has transformed communication, the increasing demand from citizens for greater transparency, and the pressure institutions face to respond to global challenges. These factors have made the role of lobbies and think tanks in democratic governance and policymaking more complex than ever before (Ihlen et al., 2020; Gorostiza-Cervino et al., 2023; Serna-Ortega et al., 2025). The Research Topic presented in this editorial aims to deepen the scientific literature in this area. It brings together 12 studies that examine how lobbies and think tanks operate, communicate, and exert influence across multiple geographical settings.

Digitalization is a core theme running through many of the contributions. Six studies can be broadly framed within this theme, as they explore—albeit with varying levels of specificity and scope—how lobbying groups and think tanks use social media and digital platforms. On these platforms, organizations can develop dialogic communication strategies with interested audiences and enhance citizen activism (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2023).

Two of these six studies focus on international scenarios. On the one hand, Smolak-Lozano examines the digital lobbying strategies within the European Union, offering a methodological framework to monitor online advocacy actions. This article is particularly relevant given the institutional complexity of the European Union. On the other hand, Castellero-Ostio et al. delve into the digital interactivity of think tanks in the United States. Their study assesses the degree of engagement and participatory communication adopted, and is part of a broader body of research. The authors have replicated their methodology across different continents (Castillero-Ostio et al., 2024, 2025), making it possible to carry out comparisons on how think tanks around the world are adapting to the demands and opportunities of digital communication.

The remaining four studies within the digitalization theme are centered in the Spanish context. Among these contributions is the one by Pineda et al., who analyze how Andalusian interest groups interact with citizens through X (Twitter), revealing a predominantly unidirectional use of the platform—characterized by limited interactivity and a tendency toward self-promotion rather than dialogue. Something similar can be seen in the work of Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas and Gil-Ramírez, who analyze the presence of Spanish think tanks on YouTube. Their findings reveal an imbalance between visibility and engagement: while organizations maintain an active presence on the platform, there is still room for improvement in audience interaction and content adaptation.

Distinct from these institutional or organizational approaches, [Godoy-Martín](#) investigates grassroots activism. His study describes how citizen pressure groups in Spain mobilize against touristification through social media. Unlike the more controlled and often unidirectional communication strategies of formal organizations, these grassroots strategies demonstrate a spontaneous and dynamic use of digital platforms—highlighting a different form of digital lobbying, which, while less structured, can exert indirect influence on public debate and policy.

Besides that, in a divergent yet complementary direction, [Nicolás Ojeda et al.](#) study the social communication strategies of major Spanish banking brands and their alignment with the narratives produced by sector-specific think tanks. Using a phase-based framework in their analysis, the authors trace the evolution of the corporate discourse of financial institutions since the 2007 crisis, incorporating interesting elements of social legitimacy and digital dialogue.

Transparency constitutes another crucial theme addressed in several contributions. In that line, the study by [Ridao Martín and Galcerà](#) is particularly relevant, offering a legal and jurisprudential review of the European Union's Transparency Register. Their article analyses the functioning and challenges of the system following its consolidation as a mandatory mechanism in 2021, and reflects the institutional implications of a model that seeks to balance participation, integrity, and traceability in lobbying activities.

Alongside this contextualizing study on transparency, three other contributions approach the theme from more specific angles. The first, by [Fernández-Torres and Chamizo-Sánchez](#), takes the Qatargate scandal as a case study to reveal the weaknesses in the European Union's lobbying regulations. The findings emphasize the need for stronger oversight mechanisms. The second, by [Roger-Monzó and Castelló-Sirvent](#), explores how environmental policy think tanks influence academic research, raising questions about how to balance making knowledge, pushing for policies, and staying truly independent. The third contribution, by [Guerra-Heredia et al.](#), focuses on the profiles of lobbyists—a relevant issue in the debate on transparency. Through a comparative analysis of Spain and France, the authors define who the lobbyists are.

Finally, two theoretical contributions are also included, introducing disruptive ideas into the field of study. The work by [Castillo-Esparcia et al.](#) proposes a renewed paradigm of convergence in lobby-state interactions. [Chatzistavrou](#), for her part, offers a reinterpretation of the concept of political capitalism within the context of the digital economy.

Together, the contributions included in the Research Topic provide a broad, interdisciplinary look at the changes reshaping the world of political advocacy and influence. The insights they offer can inform academic debates, inspire reflection, and help advance discussions on how democratic systems can make the most of the positive roles that lobbies and think tanks play—while also managing the risks they pose. Furthermore, the findings can be useful for guiding reforms that aim to create more transparent, inclusive, and accountable ways of representing interests.

Before closing this editorial, it is necessary to acknowledge the thematic limitations of the Research Topic. Notably absent

are contributions that explore the role of fossil fuel lobbies and the powerful influence they continue to exert over climate and public policy. For decades, these actors have helped shape political agendas, stalled regulation, and hindered democratic responses to the climate crisis worldwide ([Brulle et al., 2024](#); [Ekberg et al., 2022](#)). Their omission here—especially the think tanks and transnational networks that sustain them—is a significant gap. To address this omission and complement the findings presented, readers are encouraged to consult the extensive body of scholarly literature that deals with these issues (see e.g., [Almiron et al., 2020, 2023](#); [Busch and Judick, 2021](#); [Graham, 2024](#); [Moreno-Cabanillas et al., 2024](#); [Plehwe, 2022](#)).

Another thematic limitation relates to the mechanisms of access that lobbies and think tanks use to reach authorities. Although transparency is addressed in various contributions, none of the articles focus on how such access is operationalized in practice. The ways in which organizations leverage formal and informal channels to build relationships with decision-makers, gain privileged information, or influence institutional agendas remain underexplored. This is also a crucial omission, as access is not merely a procedural issue but a key factor shaping lobbying effectiveness and the equity of interest representation ([Bouwen, 2002, 2004](#); [Serna-Ortega et al., 2024](#)).

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