Science Under Fire

Why Universities and Research Institutions Must Lobby for Democracy

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Abstract. Universities and research institutions play a central role in democratic societies, yet their political voice is often weak. While economic actors routinely engage in lobbying, political interest representation by scientific organizations remains under-theorized and normatively disputed, particularly in Germany. This study addresses this gap by reconceptualizing lobbying as a legitimate form of political communication for universities and research institutions.

Building on a multi-level perspective, the article defines lobbying as organized, interest-driven communication directed at political actors and embedded in reciprocal dynamics between society, organizations, and individuals. From this perspective, the articulation of organizational interests is not opposed to the common good but constitutes a mechanism through which organizations position themselves, justify their claims, and build legitimacy within democratic systems. Lobbying is understood as an integrated element of strategic communication, including public and non-public forms of political influence.

Empirically, the study employs a mixed-methods design. Eighteen qualitative expert interviews informed the development of a quantitative survey of 645 universities, research institutions, and scientific associations in Germany. In total, 120 fully completed questionnaires were included, corresponding to an overall response rate of 19%. The findings reveal fragmented structures, limited strategic coordination, and a strong concentration of lobbying activities at the level of institutional leadership, alongside weak scientific alliances.

The article introduces the Lobbying Cycle as an integrative framework. It argues that proactive and professional lobbying by universities and research institutions is essential not only for organizational interests, but also for safeguarding the role of science within democratic societies.

Keywords: lobbying, strategic communication, public affairs, universities, research institutions, democracy

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1 Introduction

The U.S. president is cutting research funding and prevents universities from enrolling international students [1]. In Germany, the far-right party AfD has called for the dismissal of professors and the restructuring of universities [2]. Science is under growing political pressure. At the same time, anti-scientific narratives portray science as a powerful lobby that dominates political decision-making by claiming absolute truth [3].

This perception is misleading. One reason is the lack of systematic research on how organizations communicate with political actors and what lobbying means in democratic societies [4]. Public debates on lobbying are largely shaped by politics, business, and professional lobbyists. Lobbying is described as both necessary and problematic: an essential form of interest representation, yet often associated with opaque backroom politics and financial power [5]. Its role as strategic communication and its relevance for non-economic and publicly funded organizations are rarely addressed. From a communication studies perspective, this constitutes a clear research gap [6].

Consequently, many non-profit organizations distance themselves from lobbying or explicitly reject it [7]. This applies in particular to universities and research institutions in Germany, where political interest representation is often seen as incompatible with academic norms, public funding, or institutional neutrality.

This article examines the lobbying activities of universities and research institutions in Germany. It develops an integrative theoretical framework for lobbying and analyzes political communication in the science system, considering its implications for science and society. The central research question is: To what extent do universities and research institutions engage in lobbying as a form of strategic communication?
The findings aim to stimulate debate in academia and the public sphere and to provide orientation for strengthening the political voice of science in democratic processes.

2 Literature review

Existing studies on lobbying are fragmented, conceptually inconsistent, and largely focused on economic actors [8]. The following review outlines these limitations by examining how lobbying is conceptualized in communication and public affairs research and how political communication is addressed in studies on science and university communication. This assessment provides the basis for the integrative conceptual approach developed in the subsequent section.

2.1 Organizational Communication and Lobbying

Lobbying is often reduced to personal relationships between individual actors, while its organizational dimensions receive less attention. Empirical studies mainly examine companies and business associations, particularly their influence in Brussels [9].

Conceptually, lobbying remains ambiguous. In German-speaking communication research, it is typically assigned to public affairs as a sub-area of public relations or organizational communication, both of which are understood as forms of strategic

communication aimed at managing organizational relationships with key stakeholders over time [6]. Many studies avoid the term lobbying and refer to political communication, public affairs, or political consulting, often using these concepts interchangeably. However, neither lobbying nor public affairs is defined consistently [10].

In English-speaking contexts, public affairs are often understood more broadly and sometimes equated with organizational communication as a whole [11]. Lobbying is generally treated as a legitimate organizational activity [12], although critical perspectives highlight potential risks for democratic processes [13, 14]. Despite these debates, empirical research remains limited and focuses on selected sectors or case studies, leaving broader communicative structures largely unexplored [15].

2.2 Science Communication and Political Target Groups

Research on science and university communication has expanded significantly over the past two decades [16]. Studies focus primarily on individual scientists, disciplines, or research topics, often in the context of public understanding of science [17].

By contrast, the communication of organizations – universities and research institutions – has received less attention. Existing studies show that organizational communication is highly heterogeneous and often concentrates on media relations, online communication, or marketing, without a comprehensive strategic framework [18].

Political actors are rarely considered a distinct target group. Based on the mediatization thesis, interactions between science and politics are often assumed to occur mainly through mass media [19]. Accordingly, research focuses on media coverage rather than on direct, organized communication between scientific institutions and political actors [20]. Studies on associations of universities and research institutions are entirely absent.

2.3 The Need for an Integrative, Multi-Level Perspective

Taken together, the literature shows that lobbying cannot be adequately analyzed at a single level. A focus on individual actors neglects organizational structures and societal contexts, while organizational perspectives alone overlook interpersonal interaction. Lobbying unfolds through the interaction of individual communication, organizational strategy, and broader societal and political conditions [21].

To address this complexity, a multi-level perspective is required. At the micro level, lobbying refers to interpersonal communication between individual actors and political decision-makers. The meso level captures lobbying as an organizational practice embedded in strategic communication. The macro level situates lobbying within societal, normative, and democratic contexts, including questions of legitimacy and transparency.

Multi-level approaches from public relations and organizational communication research provide useful reference points for this perspective [22-24]. However, such approaches have rarely been applied to lobbying. This gap motivates the integrative conceptual framework developed in the following chapter.

3 Conceptual Framework: A Multi-Level and Process-Oriented Model of Lobbying

Building on the need for a multi-level perspective, this chapter develops an integrative conceptual framework for analyzing lobbying, drawing on established models that conceptualize strategic communication as a cyclical process [25]. Rather than introducing a new definition, the framework synthesizes existing concepts to identify the core components of lobbying as an interactive and organizationally embedded form of political communication. Integrating the three analytical levels provides the basis for deriving guiding principles and for conceptualizing lobbying as a dynamic process, which is operationalized in the Lobbying Cycle developed in this study.

3.1 Lobbying at the Micro Level: Interpersonal Communication and Interests

At the micro level, lobbying takes place through interpersonal communication between individual actors. Despite the growing relevance of mass-mediated communication, personal and especially non-public face-to-face communication remains central to lobbying, particularly in political contexts such as hearings or committee meetings [26]. In such interactions, communicative effects are often less predictable and may produce unintended effects that must be considered in lobbying planning [27]. Non-verbal factors such as gestures, appearance, personal background, and the interaction setting can support or counteract intended messages [28].

Lobbying at the micro level frequently takes the form of policy advice [29]. In academic discourse, policy advice is positioned along a continuum between altruistic support by an ethically neutral scientific community and an access point for particularistic economic interests [30]. This study proceeds from the assumption that any form of communication, including policy advice, is inherently linked to interests.

3.2 Lobbying at the Meso Level: Organizations, Strategy, and Management

At the meso level, lobbying is understood as an organizational practice embedded in strategic communication. This perspective draws on Uwe Schimank's actor-structure model, which conceptualizes organizations as mediators between individual actors and society in a functionally differentiated and dynamic social environment [31, 32].

Organizations must continuously engage with stakeholders and their interests [33]. Communication plays a key role in this process [34]. The way an organization is perceived by its stakeholders, described as "relationship capital" [35], constitutes an important organizational resource. How organizations are perceived in their environment defines their legitimacy [36].

In this context, lobbying can be understood as a key mechanism through which organizations establish and maintain legitimacy in the political system [23]. Because legitimacy must be continuously established and maintained, lobbying requires strategic communication [37]. Strategy refers to the ongoing alignment of communication with stakeholder expectations and changing social conditions [38].

If lobbying is understood as strategic communication, this must be reflected in organizational structures [39]. As a management function, lobbying requires coordination between leadership, communication professionals, and organizational members. Clear mandates and recognized authority for communication professionals are essential.

3.3 Lobbying at the Macro Level: Society and Normative Frameworks

At the macro level, lobbying is embedded in societal, political, and normative contexts. In this setting, associations play a particular role, as they operate at the intersection of organizational structures and societal interests [40]. Their legitimacy is based on shared interests and membership, while communication with political actors constitutes an inherent function. Increasing individualization and differentiation make it more difficult to aggregate and articulate diverse interests [41]. To counteract these dynamics, close coordination between leadership, members, and communication professionals is required. Associational lobbying therefore depends on strategic communication [42].

In pluralistic democracies, political decision-making is based on the articulation and balancing of competing interests [43]. From this perspective, lobbying does not stand in opposition to the common good but represents a mechanism through which particular interests are made visible and negotiable within democratic processes [44].

Lobbying unfolds within normative frameworks shaped by democratic principles, legal regulations, and public expectations of legitimacy and transparency. In Germany, lobbying is associated with a negative public image [45]. Although constitutional norms, voluntary codes of conduct, and since 2022 a federal lobby register exist, a shared understanding of legitimate lobbying practice remains absent [46].

Debates surrounding the lobby register illustrate these tensions. Critics point to the lack of a legislative footprint, while parts of the scientific community resist the registration of scientific policy advice [47]. These controversies reflect an ongoing uncertainty about political interest representation and its legitimate forms.

3.4 From Principles to Process: An Integrative Concept of Lobbying

The preceding analysis leads to the following ten guiding principles of lobbying:

Lobbying

1. serves an essential societal function,
2. contributes to the pursuit of organizational interests,
3. forms part of organizational communication,
4. requires strategic design,
5. involves relevant internal and external stakeholders,
6. needs to be anchored in organizational management,
7. combines direct interaction with (mass) media-mediated communication,
8. often unfolds within alliances and networks,
9. operates within normative principles and ethical values,
10. follows a process-oriented, communicative cycle.

As a logical consequence of these guiding principles, the Lobbying Cycle is introduced (see Fig. 1). It consists of three phases: analytical assessment, strategic decision-making, and operational implementation.

The analytical phase examines the initial situation and identifies challenges. The strategic phase defines objectives, stakeholders, and messages and results in a lobbying strategy. The operational phase implements this strategy through appropriate measures and resources. Evaluation feeds back into the analytical phase and enables continuous development of lobbying activities.

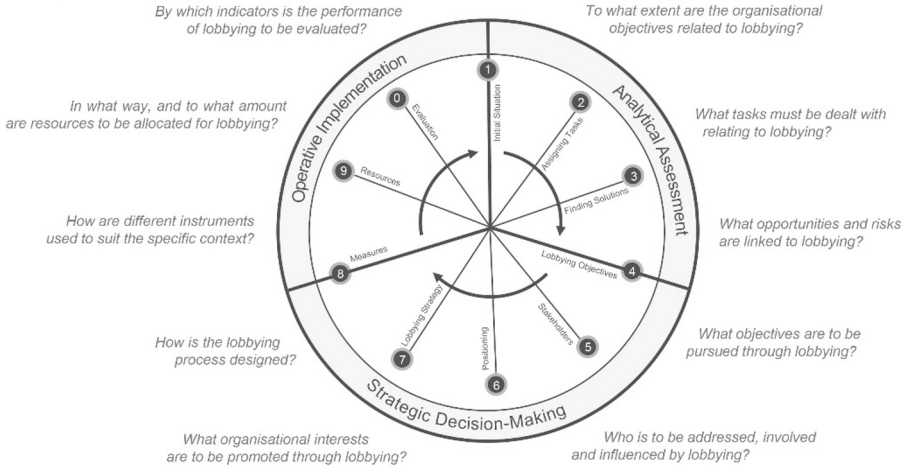

Fig. 1. The Lobbying Cycle with guiding questions for each phase; author's own creation, based on [48].

4 Method

The Lobbying Cycle served as the conceptual basis for the development of the interview guide and the survey questions in the empirical study, ensuring consistency between the theoretical framework and the empirical design. The key questions associated with each phase of the cycle (see Fig. 1) were translated into empirical indicators and survey items, allowing lobbying to be analyzed as a structured, process-oriented practice rather than as a set of isolated activities.

Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to leverage the respective strengths and compensate for the weaknesses of each method [49]. Qualitative methods enable an in-depth exploration of complex issues and can reveal previously unknown aspects. Quantitative methods allow for the testing of patterns and correlations within larger samples, leading to generalizable findings [50]. Methodological triangulation enhances both the validity and reliability of the results and deepens overall insights compared to single-method approaches [51].

4.1 Qualitative Preliminary Study

Since lobbying of science has not yet been systematically studied, a qualitative preliminary study appeared appropriate [52]. Given the complexity and heterogeneity of the field, an exploratory approach was necessary [50]. Semi-structured expert interviews were conducted to identify key thematic areas, terminology, and challenges that would inform the questionnaire development for the quantitative main study [49].

Between autumn 2017 and spring 2020, 18 expert interviews were conducted with communication professionals from universities and research organizations, as well as with members of university leadership, including a university president and senior staff responsible for political communication in research organizations. The sample was selected based on institutional characteristics such as university type, size, and regional distribution, while also considering the principle of theoretical saturation [50].

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis with MAXQDA. A deductive–inductive coding framework was developed, grounded in the categories derived from the lobbying cycle [53]. More than 3,200 coded segments were identified, from which subcategories such as objectives, stakeholders, and instruments were generated. These findings directly informed the design of the main study.

4.2 Quantitative Survey

The standardized questionnaire predominantly consisted of closed-ended questions, ensuring comparability and enabling statistical analysis [53]. To account for differences between universities and research institutions, the content was adapted accordingly, while the structure remained consistent across all versions to maintain comparability.

Between September 2019 and October 2020, a total of N = 645 organizations were contacted, including 343 universities, 264 research institutions, and 38 scientific associations. The questionnaire was addressed to communication departments, who were asked either to complete the survey themselves or to forward it to the person responsible for political communication. The sampling frame was based on the membership lists of the German Rectors' Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz, HRK), the Association of Private Universities, and the four major non-university research organizations in Germany (Fraunhofer, Helmholtz, Leibniz, and Max Planck).

In total, n = 120 fully completed questionnaires were included in the final analysis. Response rates varied by organizational type, ranging from 15% among universities to 45% among scientific associations, which is consistent with expectations based on previous studies [54].

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS. Validity and reliability were ensured through pre-tests and plausibility checks prior to analysis. The participating organizations are largely representative of the population in terms of institution size, regional distribution, and university type. Small private universities and institutions located in Eastern Germany are, however, underrepresented.

5 Findings

The findings reveal a heterogeneous pattern of lobbying practices among universities and research institutions. Three central results can be identified:

1. Political communication with policymakers is rarely embedded in explicit strategic frameworks.
2. Responsibility for lobbying activities is concentrated at institutional leadership level, while communication departments are mainly assigned supporting roles.
3. Collective lobbying through alliances and associations plays a limited role and is characterized by varying degrees of coordination.

Drawing on survey data and qualitative interviews, three types of institutions can be distinguished with regard to their lobbying practices:

1. Lobbying-Active Institutions: engage in lobbying as a deliberate element of strategic communication.
2. Lobbying-Passive Institutions: maintain political contacts and expresses openness toward lobbying but engages only sporadically and without systematic coordination.
3. Lobbying-Refusing Institutions: reject lobbying as an appropriate activity for science, while nevertheless reporting regular political communication.

5.1 Strategic Orientation of Lobbying Activities

The data show that political communication with policymakers is widespread among universities and research organizations but rarely embedded in formalized or strategically coordinated structures. Three aspects characterize the strategic orientation of lobbying activities: the frequency of political contacts, the existence of formal strategies, and institutionalization through dedicated structures or formal registration.

Frequency of Political Contacts

Among universities (n = 50), 54% report weekly and 38% monthly contact with political actors, whereas research organizations (n = 50) report weekly contact less frequently (42%) and monthly contact in 26% of cases. This difference can largely be explained by institutional structures and funding arrangements: Universities are primarily financed and supervised by the federal states and therefore maintain frequent administrative contact with ministries, as one survey respondent noted: “As the ministry is the supervisory authority, there are phases with very frequent contacts, especially concerning budget and target agreements.” Qualitative interviews further illustrate that political contacts at universities are often triggered by detailed administrative requests rather than strategic exchange: “There are regular small inquiries concerning universities. “These requests occur at various levels of detail and require rapid responses; sometimes they are time-consuming, but this is part of everyday interaction with politics.”

Formalization of Lobbying Strategies

Formal lobbying strategies remain rare, particularly among universities. Only 8% of universities (n = 4) report having a formally agreed lobbying strategy coordinated within the organization. Among research organizations, this share is slightly higher at 15% (n = 8). Instead, political communication is often described as implicit or ad hoc: "It's a bit of experiential knowledge; it's not written down. If I ever have a successor, I'll have to pass it on orally." While universities and research organizations without a coordinated strategy are less satisfied with lobbying outcomes, all respondents from universities with a written strategy indicate being (rather) satisfied (see Fig. 2).

Institutionalization: Dedicated Positions and Lobby Register

In line with the limited strategic orientation, only 6% of universities (n = 3) report having a specific position responsible for political interest representation, compared with around one quarter of research organizations (n = 14). In most cases, lobbying tasks are handled informally or directly by institutional leadership.

Registration in lobby registers – which can be considered an indicator of more strategically organized lobbying – is likewise uncommon. Only between 4% and 8% of institutions report being registered at the federal, state, or EU level, while around one third state that they do not know whether their institution is registered. At the time of the survey, no public universities were listed in German federal or state lobby registers, although some registrations existed at the EU level.

Qualitative interviews suggest that this limited institutionalization is often associated with a principled distancing from lobbying: "We don't engage in lobbying. Instead, in accordance with our statutes, we advise policymakers and society based on our research findings." This pattern is also reflected in the survey data: only 18% of universities (n = 9) and 13% of research institutions (n = 7) describe their political communication activities as lobbying. Institutions that self-identify as lobbyists or have dedicated positions more frequently report the existence of formal strategies and assess their political communication more positively, including higher satisfaction and perceived responsiveness of political actors (see Fig. 2).

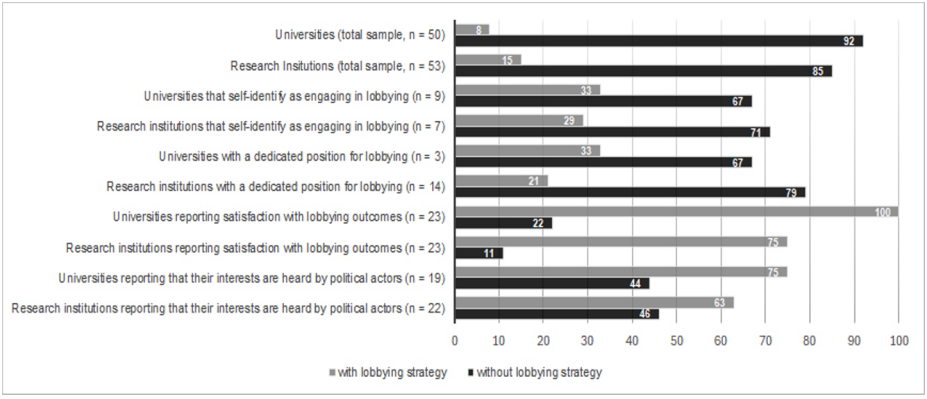

Fig. 2. Lobbying strategy and perceived effectiveness (percentages).

5.2 Organizational Responsibility and Role Distribution

This section examines how responsibility for political interest representation is distributed, focusing on leadership responsibility, internal information flows, and the involvement of communication departments in strategic planning.

Assignment of Responsibility
Among universities, only 44% of communication professionals (n = 22) state that political interest representation is considered part of their own role, typically in a supporting capacity. At the same time, most respondents report that key political contacts and decisions are handled by the leadership. This leadership-centered allocation is also reflected in the qualitative interviews: "The communication department does not engage in politics at all. All conversations are conducted exclusively by our president."

Information Flows within Organizations
Limited information flows accompany this concentration of responsibility: Only 60% of respondents at universities (n = 30) and 34% at research organizations (n = 18) report being informed by leadership about lobbying activities, despite much higher expressed demand (84% and 70%, respectively). Where dedicated positions for political interest representation exist, reported levels of information are higher (66% at universities; 53% at research organizations), but gaps between desired and actual information remain. The relevance of internal coordination is emphasized in the qualitative data: "We cannot convey anything to politics that we do not know ourselves."

Involvement in Strategic Planning
A similar pattern emerges at the strategic level: Only about one quarter of communication departments report being involved in lobbying planning. Where dedicated positions exist, involvement is roughly twice as high (see Fig. 3). Institutions that involve communication departments more frequently report that their interests are heard by political actors (see Fig. 3). Qualitative interviews indicate that such involvement often depends on leadership practices: "The rector talks to the minister, and that's what counts as political communication."

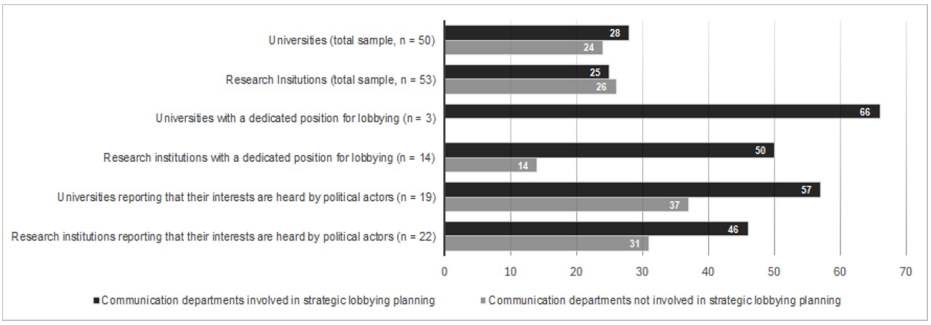

Fig. 3. Involvement of communication departments and perceived effectiveness of lobbying. Percentages below 100% indicate missing responses or neutral ("partly/partly") answers.

5.3 Alliances and Collective Lobbying Practices

Although universities and research institutions rarely employ systematic evaluation tools to assess their lobbying activities, they nevertheless identify collaboration within alliances and associations as a relevant factor for political interest representation. However, only 30% of universities (n = 15) and 27% of research institutions (n = 14) consider their most important association to be an effective lobbying actor.

Given the small number of associations that completed the survey (n = 17), the findings are reported descriptively. Only about one third of the associations regard their membership fees as a worthwhile investment. Resource limitations appear to play a role: Around half of the state-level rectors' conferences maintain an office in the respective state capital, while one third report having no dedicated lobbying budget.

Only three alliances report having a formalized lobbying strategy. All of them indicate that communication professionals are involved in lobbying planning, internal responsibilities are clearly defined, and lobbying outcomes are assessed positively, including perceived responsiveness by political actors. Alliances without a lobbying strategy report substantially lower levels across these indicators.

Due to the small case number, these findings must be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, the data suggest that the limited effectiveness of alliances is associated with a lack of strategic coordination. Instead, agenda-setting is often driven by the leadership of individual member institutions. This pattern is also reflected in the survey data: almost 60% of respondents within alliances state that the success of collective lobbying primarily depends on alliance leadership. One interviewee illustrated this dynamic as follows: "The rectors thought, 'Great, I know the minister; she's always friendly when we have a beer in the evening.' Everyone assumed they had made their case. And then they ended up with a really tough higher education law."

5.4 Types of Institutions and Lobbying Practices

Based on survey data and qualitative interviews, three types of institutions can be distinguished with regard to their understanding and practice of lobbying. The typology draws on self-assessments, organizational arrangements, reported activities, and the degree of strategic coordination.

Lobbying-Active Institutions (≈ 10%)
16% of respondents describe their political activities as lobbying. Taking additional indicators into account – such as formal responsibilities, strategic coordination, and systematic use of lobbying instruments – the data suggest that approximately 10% of institutions can be classified as lobbying-active. These institutions typically assign clear responsibility for political communication, sometimes through dedicated positions. They articulate lobbying objectives and report using established instruments such as policy monitoring, political analysis, and informal exchange with political actors. Interview data indicate that lobbying is embedded in broader strategic communication processes. Resource availability varies and does not appear to be the decisive factor; organizational clarity is more characteristic.

Lobbying-Passive Institutions (≈ 30%)
Around 20% of respondents report not engaging in lobbying but express openness toward political interest representation. Based on survey and interview data, about 30% of institutions can be classified as lobbying-passive but open. In this group, engagement is sporadic and weakly coordinated. Lobbying activities, where they occur, are handled by institutional leadership and are not embedded in strategic communication structures. Communication departments play a marginal role. Institutions often avoid the term lobbying due to its negative connotations, even when engaging in political communication.

Lobbying-Refusing Institutions (≈ 60%)
More than half of the respondents report that their institutions do not engage in lobbying. Combining this self-assessment with indicators such as the absence of strategic coordination and the explicit rejection of lobbying as a legitimate activity for science, around 60% of institutions can be classified as lobbying-refusing. These institutions frame their political role primarily as providing policy advice in the service of society. Interest-driven communication on behalf of the organization is viewed as incompatible with academic norms. At the same time, many maintain regular political contacts and engage in activities that qualify as political interest representation according to the indicators used in this study, without labeling them as lobbying.

6 Concluding Discussion

6.1 Discussion

Reconceptualizing Lobbying in the Science System
This study sets out to reconceptualize lobbying as strategic communication and to empirically explore how universities and research institutions engage in political interest representation. The findings reveal a heterogeneous but structured pattern, marked by three central results: limited strategic orientation, leadership-centered responsibility, and weak collective lobbying through alliances. Most importantly, the study identifies a widespread rejection of lobbying as a self-description that does not correspond to actual communication practices.

Policy Advice versus (Allegedly Illegitimate) Lobbying
A key contribution of this study lies in challenging the prevailing distinction between legitimate policy advice and the allegedly illegitimate practice of lobbying, a distinction widely held in academic institutions but not supported by empirical evidence. The empirical findings demonstrate that universities and research institutions, including those that explicitly reject lobbying, regularly communicate with political actors, articulate organizational interests, and seek influence on political decision-making. The distinction therefore does not reflect empirical reality but serves as a normative boundary that obscures rather than clarifies political communication by science. In this sense, the data support the proposition that there is no meaningful non-interest-based communication with politics.

The Paradox of Lobbying Refusal
The widespread refusal to label such activities as lobbying has practical and normative consequences. By rejecting the term, institutions relinquish conceptual clarity, organizational responsibility, and strategic coordination. At the same time, this avoidance does not prevent political influence but shifts it into informal, personalized, and less transparent forms of communication. This creates a paradox: while lobbying is normatively rejected, it is simultaneously practiced without strategic reflection or institutional safeguards.

Legitimacy, Representation, and the Risk of External Substitution
The findings further indicate that rejecting lobbying does not protect scientific legitimacy. On the contrary, abstention from explicit political interest representation risks leaving the articulation of scientific interests to external actors, including self-appointed experts, privately funded research voices, or politically motivated intermediaries. In this context, the refusal to engage openly in lobbying may undermine the ability of scientific institutions to legitimize their role in relation to the political system and to defend their organizational and epistemic interests.

Leadership-Centered Lobbying and Organizational Integration
The study also highlights the role of internal structures. Leadership-dominated lobbying, combined with limited involvement of communication professionals, correlates with weak strategic planning and inconsistent political communication. Where communication departments are informed and involved, institutions report higher satisfaction and perceived political responsiveness. This underscores that lobbying, if understood as strategic communication, cannot be reduced to ad hoc leadership interaction but requires organizational integration.

The Limits of Collective Voice in Alliances
Finally, the findings on alliances reveal that collective lobbying does not fail due to lack of relevance but due to insufficient strategic coordination. Alliances that operate without clear responsibilities, professional communication structures, or shared strategies are perceived as ineffective by their members, reinforcing individualized and fragmented political engagement.

6.2 Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the quantitative sample is relatively small, particularly for specific subgroups. Reliable conclusions cannot be drawn for private universities, as only three participated in the survey, nor for comparisons between small and large institutions. Similarly, findings regarding alliances are based on a limited number of cases and should therefore be interpreted cautiously.

Second, the study relies primarily on self-reported data. A self-selection bias is likely, as institutions more open to political communication and lobbying may have been more willing to participate. It is therefore plausible that, relative to the overall

target sample, the share of lobbying-active institutions is overestimated, while lobbying-passive and lobbying-refusing institutions are underrepresented.

Third, the study cannot directly observe informal or non-public lobbying practices. Although qualitative interviews help contextualize survey data, access to backstage political communication remains structurally limited. Future research should combine surveys with document analyses, process tracing, or comparative policy studies to better capture informal influence.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design allows for robust pattern recognition and theoretical advancement. The study does not claim generalizability in a statistical sense but offers analytically transferable insights into organizational lobbying by science.

6.3 Conclusion

This article argues that lobbying by universities and research institutions is neither an anomaly nor a threat to democratic processes but a constitutive element of political communication in knowledge-based societies. The empirical findings show that avoiding the term lobbying does not prevent political influence but weakens transparency, strategy, and legitimacy.

The proposed Lobbying Cycle offers an integrative framework that connects analysis, strategy, and implementation and is applicable across organizational contexts. By embedding lobbying within strategic communication, institutions can move beyond personalized, informal practices toward accountable and professionally coordinated interest representation.

Ultimately, safeguarding the role of science in democratic societies requires not less, but more reflective, transparent, and strategically organized political communication. Recognizing lobbying as a legitimate responsibility of universities and research institutions is essential for democracy.

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