

Is Lobbying Permissible in Academia?

On the Legitimacy of Political Advocacy by Universities and Research Organizations. *By Antje Eichler*

Science is expected to provide the basis for political decision-making while simultaneously refraining from engaging in politics. This expectation—prominently articulated by right-wing actors and increasingly echoed in broader public discourse—contributes to a growing reluctance among scientific organizations in Germany to articulate and represent their own interests.

At the same time, lobbying is widely accepted for other societal actors, particularly corporations and economic organizations. This asymmetry raises fundamental questions about the role of science in democratic processes.

The article therefore asks:

- ▶ 1) To what extent may science engage in lobbying?
- ▶ 2) How can lobbying by scientific organisations be justified in terms of functional, formal, and normative legitimacy?
- ▶ 3) How is lobbying currently practiced within universities and research organisations?

The article conceptualizes lobbying as part of strategic organizational communication within public affairs (Röttger et al. 2021). It is understood as a structured communicative process through which organizations analyze political environments, develop strategic positions, and seek to influence decision-making processes.

Building on Sandhu (2012), public relations is closely linked to the communicative construction of legitimacy in society. Organizations are embedded in a network of stakeholders and must continuously align their communication with societal expectations and the common good. As lobbying constitutes a specific form of organizational communication directed at political actors, it can be understood as a mechanism through which organizations negotiate and secure their legitimacy.

A particular focus is placed on science advice as a central

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interface between science and politics (Fährnich 2021). Rather than representing purely neutral knowledge transfer, science advice is embedded in communicative contexts in which interests are inevitably articulated.

The article builds on the first comprehensive empirical study of lobbying by scientific organizations in Germany (Eichler 2024), using a mixed-methods design:

- ▶ 17 qualitative interviews with senior representatives of scientific organisations
- ▶ a quantitative survey of communication professionals (n = 120)

The study analyses strategic anchoring, organisational roles, instruments, and self-perceptions of lobbying activities.

The findings reveal a pronounced reluctance towards lobbying within the scientific sector:

- ▶ Only 44% of respondents consider lobbying part of their role
- ▶ Formal strategies exist in only 8% of universities and 15% of research institutes
- ▶ Activities are predominantly reactive and fragmented, focusing on:
 - ▶ providing expertise in administrative contexts
 - ▶ participating in representative meetings

Scientific organisations represent only around 2% of registered lobbying actors in Germany. Three organisational types can be identified:

- ▶ active lobbyists (≈10%)
- ▶ unsystematic actors (≈30%)
- ▶ organisations that explicitly reject lobbying (≈60%)

Although many organizations maintain close contact with political actors, they frequently avoid describing these activities as lobbying, reflecting persistent conceptual and normative reservations.

The article argues that lobbying by scientific organizations is not only legitimate but necessary.

Functionally, science and politics are structurally inter-

dependent. Scientific organizations depend on political frameworks for funding and regulation, while political actors rely on scientific expertise. Lobbying is therefore part of how science secures its capacity to operate.

Formally, lobbying is grounded in democratic rights such as freedom of expression and participation. Transparency instruments such as lobbying registers contribute to its institutional legitimacy, even if they remain incomplete.

Normatively, skepticism towards lobbying in science is based on a misleading opposition between neutral knowledge and interest-driven communication. However, as Thummes (2021) argues, lobbying should be understood as a legitimate component of democratic negotiation processes, provided that actors share a common understanding of its role and rules. Democratic legitimacy does not require the absence of interests, but their transparent articulation and contestation.

The reluctance of scientific organizations to engage in lobbying contributes to a structural imbalance in political decision-making. While other actors articulate their interests strategically, science often remains cautious, reactive, or silent. In a context of increasing political pressure and growing skepticism towards scientific knowledge, this restraint has significant consequences. If scientific institutions do not actively represent their interests, they risk losing influence over the conditions under which they operate.

Lobbying should therefore be:

- ▶ strategically institutionalized within scientific organizations
- ▶ embedded in communication structures at the leadership level
- ▶ and guided by ethical principles such as transparency, responsibility, and orientation towards the common good

The article concludes that lobbying is not external to science, but integral to its role in democratic societies. Its legitimacy depends not on whether it occurs, but on how it is practised—and its absence may be more problematic than its presence.

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