

A Price to Pay?

The Backsides of the Privileged Access to the Political System

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A Price to Pay?

The Backsides of the Privileged Access to the Political System

Classical corporatism has been supplemented in the Scandinavian countries by a pattern of privileged pluralism. Under these new conditions, some interest organizations are granted a privileged position in policymaking compared to less resourceful organizations. Based on the concepts of group genesis and dynamic coupling, I argue that historically embedded dynamic coupling can affect the autonomy of the interest organization, creating a difficult dilemma; that is, the difficulty of being an independent organization and at the same time having privileged access. To illustrate the dilemma, the case of one privileged organization, The Danish Consumer Council, is presented.

Keywords: privileged pluralism, group genesis, dynamic coupling, interest groups

Introduction

Some interest organizations attain a highly privileged position among decision-makers across government, parliament, public administration, and the media (Binderkrantz et al, 2015). Such privileged organizations become directly involved in policy processes via committee participation, by providing written information to legislative committees, and through direct meetings and exchanges of information with policymakers. Implicit in the literature is the claim that the institutional structure of privileged pluralism enables such privileged organizations to increase their influence on public policy. However, organized interests are not suppliers in a free market of policy ideas (Mahoney, 2004, p. 444). The literature often neglects the constraints and disadvantages of such institutional embeddedness. The purpose of this paper is to study these under-researched

aspects of privileged access. I will argue that a dynamic coupling with the state not only enables interest organizations but also constrains the ability of the organization to act free of politicization and state influence. Dynamic coupling is understood as a mutually beneficial relationship between state and interest organization (Fraussen, 2014), which can have a historical background stretching back to the genesis of the organization.

This study is a novel attempt to study the disadvantages of privileged access. Therefore, I have chosen to make an explorative, single-case study of one such privileged organization: the Danish Consumer Council. Consumer organizations vary greatly in size and permanence. Traditionally, however, most of them have had no formal role in or legal access to the policy process (Forbes, 1985; Goldstein, 1979). However, a study of interest organizations in Denmark (Binderkrantz & Christiansen, 2015) has found the Consumer Council to be among the ten organizations enjoying the best access to political decision-makers, including the public administration. My interest in the Council was especially evoked by its involvement in the Chemistry Watch App project and the public dispute surrounding it. This brings us to the research question: *How does privileged access to decision-makers both enable and constrain the ability of the Consumer Council to pursue consumer interests?*

The next section briefly clarifies the Danish context of lobbying and privileged pluralism. Then follows the theoretical framework, and I clarify my explorative case study approach in the methodology section. The conclusion discusses the implications of the analytical results for interest organizations that attempt to gain privileged access.

Lobbyism and Privileged Pluralism

Lobbyism can be defined as communicative action aimed at influencing political decision-makers (Davidson, 2017), and lobbyists tend to become an essential part of the political process. In a

classical pluralist system, policy emerges in a relation between a supply side (organized interests) and a demand side (political decision-makers), where the supply-side actors mobilize the will and concerns of citizens and focus the attention of decision-makers on specific problems and solutions (Mahoney, 2004). This is different in classic traditional corporatist systems, where the relations between lobbyists and decision-makers are assumed to be more formal and institutionalized than in classic pluralistic systems (Christiansen & Rommetvedt, 1999; Rommetvedt et al, 2012, p. 461). In the Scandinavian countries, the political system have been characterized by corporatism for many years, where organized interests are institutionally granted access to policymaking (Binderkrantz, Christiansen & Pedersen, 2015, p. 1023). The organization could also be directly funded by the government as a form of purposive or quasi-governmental organization (Forbes, 1985). Access to decisionmakers took place (and still does) through committees and councils throughout the political system. The corporatist system in the Scandinavian countries also affected the ability of the organization to act freely. Forbes (1985, p. 116) argues: “In return, the interest groups operate very much like an arm of government. At least, open criticism of the government is frequently lower and cooperation with government greater than in pluralistic systems where interest groups are treated at an arm’s length and have few if any statutory assists in generating resources to influence policy development.”

Today, scholars agree that classic corporatism has been supplemented by a pattern of pluralist policymaking (Blach-Ørsten et al, 2017; Öberg et al., 2011). This results in a mix of pluralism and corporatism, also referred to as “privileged pluralism” (Binderkrantz et al , 2015), where the continued institutional integration of some interest organizations grants them a privileged position in the policy process on behalf of other, less resourceful and less integrated organizations. In Denmark, these privileged organizations include the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions, the United Federation of Danish Workers, the Confederation of Danish Industry, and the Danish

Chamber of Commerce. The claim in the literature is that the institutional structure of privileged pluralism enables the privileged interest organizations. Often, however, the constraints and disadvantages of such institutional embeddedness are neglected. The question then becomes: What happens when the system transforms from classic corporatism to privileged pluralism? Are consumer organizations able to operate relatively more freely? Or is the status as a quasi-government organization maintained despite the shift from corporativism to privileged pluralism?

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of the theoretical framework is to describe the background of the Council's privileged access, including enabling and constraining factors in the dynamic coupling with the state. The study of privileged access often categorizes interest organizations into business organizations, trade unions, and public interest and identity groups (see, e.g., Binderkrantz et al, 2015). However, Baroni et al (2014) argue that the study of influence and representation should not be based on organization type alone; variations in contextual and background characteristics must also be considered.

Contextual factors, like control of resources, type of policy field, and the density of organizations in the policy field, have been studied previously. According to Robbins (2010), the policy context and resources shape the degree of information and access to decision-makers available to the organizations. The degree of information and access again influence the kinds of strategies the organization adopts in policy implementation processes (as in the Chemistry Watch project, see below). Robbins sees strategies of cooperation and conflict as a continuum (as opposed to a clear choice between two different strategies). Organizations with access and specialized or technical information will attempt to change or influence policy outcomes from the inside in collaboration with decision-makers on behalf of conflict. Organizations with less specialized or technical

information will tend to fight implementation from outside the political system. Hopkins, Klüver, and Pickup (2019) argue that different organization types also have different effects on decision-maker responsiveness. Cause groups have diffuse interests (e.g., climate or consumer policies), represent broad segments of society, and advocate for policies that are likely to diffuse benefits beyond the members of the organization (such as consumers in general). If a cause such as consumerism generates considerable voter concerns, decision-makers will likely become more responsive to the pressure of the cause group. Hanegraff, van der Ploeg, and Berkhout (2020) argue that the density of organizations in a policy field affects access to decision-makers. Given a high number of similar organizations in the same policy field, access will be more difficult for the individual organization.

All in all, there is reason to expect that a low density of interest groups in a policy field with considerable voter concerns will enable access and that considerable access will enable collaborative strategies.

Since so few organizations gain privileged access, however, the privileged position cannot be entirely understood by context or present choices of strategies and capabilities. In addition to the expectations stated above, I will therefore argue that a historically embedded dynamic coupling of the organization and the decision-makers will affect not only access and strategies, but also the tendency to make compromises; compromises that both enable and constrain the organization.

Organizations cannot gain considerable access in the short run (Fraussen & Halpin, 2018; Halpin & Fraussen, 2017), which renders it relevant to study how the genesis and history of the organization impact dynamic coupling, including factors such as the founding of the organization, its identity, and ideology (Halpin & Daugbjerg 2015). Halpin and Daugbjerg (2015) argue that the historical aspect is often undertheorized in the study of organization interests and lobbyism. They argue that

the first change event organizations typically experience is a change of mission. From here on, the founding identity (ideology, history, and mission) can both enable and constrain strategic action.

Scholars have previously studied group genesis, in the attempt to understand the existence of interest organizations. Forbes (1985) combine genesis with explanations of societal disturbance and entrepreneurial founders. Nownes and Neeley (1996a) argue that the creation of public interest organizations is linked to (aggressive) entrepreneurial activity, low costs, rapid societal change (e.g., wars or affluence), and the prevalence of patronage that secures financial backing or seed money. Such patronage often involves private enterprises or foundations, but the state can also play the role of the patron and provide seed money for specific organizations. In a study of German consumer policy, Schatz (1983) argues that the state cannot autonomously increase the capacity to concern itself with consumer problems. Instead, the consumer policy capacity is conditioned by stable, long-term interaction between private actors and government. Such long-term stability not only affects the rules of access for consumer organizations and their political capabilities, but also the probability that consumer issues and consensus among decision-makers will emerge. A growing, mutually beneficial state–interest organization coupling can therefore be essential for the ability of the latter to gain an increasingly more privileged position. Such dynamic coupling is often analyzed as the result of the strategic choices of both the privileged organization and the decision-makers. Over time, both organizations and decision-makers can customize their strategies to enhance coupling. Decision-makers can enhance such coupling by actively seeking support from visible and well-organized interest organizations. Decision-makers can increase the legitimacy of specific organizations by using them as a significant reference in policy issues. The state can also deliberately shape the development of civil society organizations by granting them access to stable funding (Fraussen, 2014), such as seed money or funding that serves a specific purpose for gaining access to specific arenas (e.g., the media or parliament) or funding that serves a general purpose

(e.g., subsidy for a large secretariat or staff). If the organization wants access to the public administration arena (councils and committees), this puts pressure on growing a political secretariat capable of producing policy documents and providing strategic advice during negotiations (Binderkrantz & Christiansen, 2014; Fisker, 2015).

Over time organizations can become so embedded in an institutionalized dynamic coupling with the state that the actors begin taking the institutional dynamic for granted. This may sound like a containment of the organizations, where the autonomy of an organization is compromised. One example could be how the growing dynamic coupling often increases the pressure for professionalization and bureaucratization; this may reduce the autonomy of the organization and the ability to be responsive to its members, and/or it might lead to inconsistency with the initial organizational mission (Fraussen, 2014). This somewhat resembles Forbes' (1985) argument, mentioned above, that some consumer organizations in corporativist systems become quasi-governmental. The point is that the organization might also have a price to pay as they gain access to decision-makers in a privileged pluralism system. The state-based patronage provides seed money and low start-up costs. Such funding can increase the chance of dynamic coupling and consequently affect an interest organization's autonomy.

It is important to emphasize how the dynamic coupling can also clearly enable the organization and their strategic endeavors toward privileged access. Furthermore, the organization can still make strategic choices that enforce or gradually change the institutional path. Likewise, the exploitation of focusing events depends on an organization's strategic capabilities (Daugbjerg & Halpin, 2015).

Methodological Framework: Case Study Approach

According to Binderkrantz and Krøyer (2012), there are two traditional approaches to investigating interest organization activities: Survey mapping of interest group strategies to look for systematic

variations and case studies examining specific circumstances. Quantitative studies often lack attention to context (Binderkrantz & Krøyer, 2012), and since the purpose of the paper is not to make general claims regarding the constraints on all privileged access organizations, this study applies the latter approach. The explorative case study prioritizes the context or mapping of the circumstances for the lobby work conducted by organized interests, since the interests organizations' strategies "depend greatly on the specific circumstances in which organizations find themselves" (Lowery & Brasher 2004, p. 23).

According to Flyvbjerg (2006), the single case study is a practical method that grants access to deeper layers of dynamics and mechanisms. Case studies have often been criticized for their low generalization potential, but that does not mean that you cannot study informative single cases, even if they deviate from the rest of the population (Ebbinghaus, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2003). Thus, a single in-depth case study of the Council offers unique opportunity to research how and with what consequences the Council has gained privileged access. Binderkrantz, Christiansen and Pedersen (2015) classify the Council as the only public interest organization among the ten most privileged organizations in Denmark. Public interest organization is defined as a group where members have no selective interest in group goals; instead, public interest organizations are seeking collective goods (Berry, 1977; Nownes & Neeley, 1996b; Shaiko, 1999). However, the Council is not a "black swan" in the population of public interest organizations. The Danish Society for Nature Conservation has also gained access to the public administration arena. Still, I will argue that the study of the Council's constraints encompasses analytical insights that are relevant to the study of other organizations, especially public interest organizations. This is debated at the end of the paper. To understand how historically embedded dynamic coupling creates privileged access, I adopt a two-step approach. Firstly, I study the Council's origins and its past to explore the emerging privileged access resulting from early state funding. Secondly, to understand how the past path

dependently shapes contemporary behavior, I study the present, where the Council has obtained a privileged status. The present section focuses on the Chemistry Watch dispute surrounding an app produced and distributed by the Consumer Council and funded under the auspices of the Finance Act. The focus on the app project was chosen in the light of expectations of high information levels (Flyvbjerg 2006) in the wake of the public dispute surrounding the app.

The data material consists of documents and a small sample of interviews. Access was granted to documents by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, including email correspondence between the Council and the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. The analysis also draws on articles retrieved from the Infomedia news database together with documents from the Folketing (the Danish Parliament) database. Seven interviews were conducted with key actors, who were chosen for two reasons: the centrality of their role in the privileged access of the Council (e.g., representatives from the Council (Jørgensen)) and gatekeepers from each of the three arenas of privileged access: the media, the parliament, and the public administration. The public administration respondents include Vinten and Lunde Larsen (former minister), both from the Ministry of Environment and Food. From the Folketing, the respondents are Wermelin, Adelsteen, and Christensen, who were spokespersons from the three main political parties. The respondent from the media is Kragesteen (editor at Altinget.dk, a mainstream media website). Secondly, respondents were chosen due to their insights into and different positions in the Chemistry Watch dispute.

The interviews were transcribed before the analysis, and the documents and interviews have both been coded according to an abductive process, whereby theory was applied to describe and understand how the Council gains access in each of the three arenas and with what consequences. This process rendered the constraining aspect of the Council's dynamic coupling with the state more evident.

Analysis of Case Study

The Consumer Council can be categorized as a public interest organization. It profiles itself as the consumer watchdog, a party-neutral and independent umbrella organization that engages in active consumer advocacy (Forbrugerrådet Tænk, 2018b). Their mission is to ensure that consumers can make qualified choices and that their voices can be heard in the political process (Forbrugerrådet Tænk, 2016a). The Council represents some 75,000 individual members, one local consumer group, and 29 national member organizations, with even more individual members (Forbrugerrådet Tænk, 2017a; 2018b).

The Past: Genesis of the Council

Already in the 1930s, the Danish state established a state-based Household Council to secure the consumers' voice in the public debate. But the state council had difficulties claiming independence in the eyes of consumers (Ronit 2003, p. 61). This became evident in 1946. Households suffered from the aftereffects of the war, and an exceptionally cold winter damaged the Danish potato harvest. The range of consumer products was limited, quality was low, and prices high. A demonstration of housewives was arranged to get the politicians' attention (Philip, 2017). The events demonstrated the need for a relevant public interest organization to balance commercial interests; neither the state-based Household Council nor the more local household associations could assume this role with sufficient legitimacy in the eyes of consumers. In 1947, this led to the merger of a range of household associations (Forbrugerrådet, 1987, p. 2; Handelsministeriet [Ministry of Trade], 1976, p. 21.1), called the Danish Housewives' Consumer Council. The Council was equipped with a mission to qualify consumer choices and to give consumers a political voice. It presented its founding identity as independent, party-political neutral, and with a broad representation of interests. The official state recognition of the new independent Consumer Council

came shortly after it was established. This prompt recognition is also indicative of the parliamentary access enjoyed by the Council from the outset. Nevertheless, the Council was a small organization. In 1951, it was only able to pay a part-time office clerk to do secretarial work (Nøhr Andersen, 2017).

One of the significant founding figures was Lis Groes (1910–1974). She had a master's degree in economics, was a life-long Social Democrat. She had a high profile in Danish civil society. She also became chairman of The Danish Women's Society (1958–1964) after having served as the chairman of the Danish Housewives' Consumer Council (1949–1953). In 1953, she was surprisingly appointed the Minister of Trade in a Social Democratic government. She served as minister until 1957, and was elected to the Folketing from 1960 until 1971 (Dybdahl, 2011). The foundation of the Council, the prompt political recognition it enjoyed, and Lis Groes' career in the 1950s reflect the close, dynamic relationship between the Council and the state from the very beginning.

In summary, and in accordance with Nownes and Neeley (1996a), the creation of the Council is rooted in the significant entrepreneurial activity of Lis Groes, low costs due to the voluntary work carried out by housewives, and the rapid societal disturbance and change resulting from WWII and the affluence of the post-war period. Furthermore, the foundation for dynamic coupling with the state was laid out from the birth of the Council.

State Funding and Emerging Privileged Access

Post-war society was marked by economic growth until the 1970s, creating an increase in consumer needs and demands that also protected consumers from the more negative effects of industrialized production (Koopman, 1986). Consequently, the post-war world also shaped voter concerns with consumer issues and interests in new consumer policies.

In general, many policies were directly developed in the corporativist structure in the 1950s and 1960s, and the Folketing was more or less reduced to a rubber stamp for these policies (Binderkrantz, 2005, p. 80). The Consumer Council had limited general resources to participate. A focusing event occurred in 1955, however, when the Council, after several attempts, was able to obtain public funding from the Ministry of Trade for the first time, while the former chairman Lis Groes was Minister of Trade. That same year, the Council obtained larger office facilities in the same building housing the state's Household Council. Both the state funding and co-housing reflect the dynamic state–Council coupling from early on.

The Council maintained the path to obtain increased state funding and developed a stronger relationship with the state. Later, in 1963–64, the Council received its first funding via the Finance Act. Since that time, the Council has received funding from the Finance Act every year (Ronit, 2003, p. 62; Forbrugerrådet, 1987, p. 5), increasing its resources and building a stronger secretariat and more professionalized voice for consumer issues.

But state funding alone was not enough to counterbalance commercial interests; there was also a need for the Council to obtain resources from other sources. In 1964, the council was rechristened the Consumer Council and reorganized by mobilizing unions as members (to gain funding and increase legitimacy in the public eye). New, local consumer groups were started, officially aiming to decouple consumer policy from the state. But the main strategic goal was still to obtain general resources from the state and to maintain the status as permanent representative in the corporative structure. The inside work thus continued to develop the state–Council coupling. In 1968, Lis Groes secured the Council a direct voice in the Folketing by once again becoming Council chairperson while still an MP.

The continued coupling dynamic paid off in another focusing event. As a result of the Consumer Commission in 1969, the Consumer Council gained numerous seats. where business interests otherwise would be represented', was recognized as a permanent representative in the consumer policy field (Ronit, 2003, p. 71; Handelsministeriet, 1976, p. 21.1), and it enjoyed broad support in the Folketing (Ronit, 2003, p. 77).

The public funding continued in the following years. In 1977, the Finance Act funding was DKK 3.5 million (roughly corresponding to \$2.5 million today), an estimated 87.5% of the Council's total budget. The secretariat grew as new tasks also increased, such as rights to be consulted and seats in committees. With more general resources, the secretariat could match more public policy fields and even cover a broader field of policies than The Danish Competition and Consumer Authority (Konkurrence- og Forbrugerstyrelsen) (Ronit, 2003, p. 109).

In summary, the Consumer Council's financial backing was secured by extensive state support. The state required a strong, legitimate voice on consumer issues due to increasing voter concern with them. Due to this political support, the Council has been financed by governments since the 1950s to represent Danish consumer interests. As the only national consumers organization, the Council has maintained a representational monopoly on consumer interests. In other words, the consumer policy field has been marked by a very low degree of group density, which increases the probability for access to decision-makers and the deployment of collaborative strategies.

The Present: The Era of Privileged Access

The Council continues to depend on public funding to secure its continued existence. In addition to the Finance Act funding, it receives state funding for specific projects. All in all, public financing represented 37% of the total revenue in 2017 (Forbrugerrådet Tænk 2018a). Similar public interest organizations receive much less: the Danish Society for Nature Conservation (0.2%) and Animal

Protection Denmark (5%) (The Danish Society for Nature Conservation 2017; Animal Protection Denmark 2018).

From 1996 to 2018, the Council received a summed total of DKK 346.2 million as part of its primary funding from the Finance Act. This annual funding maintains the institutionalized dynamic coupling. Today, the Council enjoys broad access to the public administration arena, with representation in 116 public committees in 10 ministries and 17 public agencies. The Council secretariat has a seat in 94 of these, Council members in 18, and personal appointees in 32 (Forbrugerrådet Tænk 2016b). Similar public interest organizations, such as the Danish Society for Nature Conservation, are only represented in 62 public committees (The Danish Society for Nature Conservation, 2017).

Today, the corporatist structure has been supplemented by a new system of privileged pluralism, where privileged access depends not only on access to parliament, government, and public administration, but also to the agenda-setting media. Despite this transformation of the system, the existence of a coupling dynamic is maintained: The Council continues to depend on the state to finance its core activities, mainly to maintain its success as a stable partner in the corporatist system. In turn, the Danish state depends on the Council to secure public legitimacy in a range of policy fields (Ronit, 2003, p. 65–68). Since it was established, the organization has also maintained a monopoly on its role as consumer voice in the public. “[The Consumer Council] speaks with a certain weight [...] they speak on behalf of everybody” (Kragesteen interview 2018).

According to a leading civil servant, public administrators also continue to recognize the Council’s expertise (Vinten interview 2018), and one left-wing politician comments on how the Council is “a very trustworthy source of information” (Wermelin interview 2018). Politicians are especially attracted to the Council’s broad public-interest mission and their monopoly on the consumer voice. Perhaps due to the coupling dynamic, left-wing parties have tended to promote the Council’s

participation relatively more than have right-wing parties, which have tended to promote commercial interests more (Ronit, 2003, p. 61).

However, the dynamic coupling has had consequences, not only for the Council's privileged access but also its public image as being more or less quasi-governmental. A survey carried out by the Council in 2013 found that seven out of ten Danes did not know what the Consumer Council actually did, and more than half of the respondents thought it was a public organization. Only 31% knew it was a public interest organization. Twenty-five percent of all members paid their membership fee thinking that the Council was a public organization (Thiemann, 2013). This indicates how the dynamic coupling has affected the public image. The question then becomes whether the dynamic coupling has also constrained the internal political behaviors within the Council itself.

The Chemistry Watch-App Dispute

After years of preparation, the Council initiated the Consumer Chemistry project in 2014. The idea was to qualify the communication with consumers and make it easier for politicians to regulate the chemicals in consumer products (Jørgensen interview 2018). An important part of the communication with consumers was Chemistry Watch (*Kemiluppen*), an app that enables consumers to scan products (cosmetics and personal hygiene) and actively opt out of products with unwanted chemicals. Originally, the app used a traffic-light code (red–yellow–green) to classify products. Red meant that the product, despite its legality, contained disputed or potentially dangerous chemicals. This classification was based on a risk assessment in which tests have found a real risk for human use of the products. The app has become well-known among consumers, and three million scans were carried out in 2016 (Forbrugerrådet Tænk, 2016c).

The Council tried to persuade the Danish Environmental Protection Agency to support the project (Jørgensen interview 2018). In 2014, the left-wing government and the parliamentary majority

agreed to fund Consumer Chemistry, thereby creating a unit of information that was independent of commercial interests (Folketinget, 2014, p. 1; Jørgensen interview 2018). The right-wing opposition and commercial interests clearly opposed this decision (Vinten interview 2018; Kragesteen interview 2018), but without luck.

The agreement with the state established an advisory group for the project, which includes members from national agencies and commercial interests (Forbrugerrådet Tænk, 2017b). The group has no formal power. However, “[...] if they don’t feel that we listen to them, they can complain to the politicians” (Jørgensen interview 2018).

This happened in 2015, when a new right-wing government took power. A politician from a right-wing party in government criticized the traffic-light categorization of products in the Chemistry Watch App (Ministry of Environment & Food, 2015). Within the advisory group, the commercial interests argued for a longer time limit for businesses to respond to the Consumer Chemistry Division testing (Zeuthen, 2014). This criticism resulted in a meeting between the Danish EPA and the Council, where the latter accepted the longer response period. Publicly, however, the business world continued to criticize the traffic-light categorization (Ministry of Environment & Food, 2016b). Emphasizing the fragility of the coupling dynamic, the former right-of-center Minister states that there is a “balance an organization such as the Consumer Council continuously must respect. It is the caretaker of consumer interests, but it also has to do so objectively when government funds are involved” (Lunde Larsen interview 2018).

In the annual negotiations for the Finance Act bill in 2016 the funding disappeared (Ministry of Environment & Food, 2016a). The lack of political will to continue public funding triggered a lengthy period of disagreement in the Folketing and the media. The Council launched a public campaign, “Save the Chemistry Watch,” to appeal to consumers in general (Jørgensen interview

2018). A center-left- speaker confirms that the speakers received many messages from citizens concerning the disappearance of the Chemistry Watch App: “it was something you noticed, and it’s also a way of showing that its survival is justified” (Wermelin interview 2018). Besides the campaign, the Council Chemistry division continued to publish test results and maintained its media activity.

Despite the media strategy, it was the status as a privileged organization that became most important in the Council efforts to save the project. The Council’s close relationship with the civil servants in the ministry in question during the dispute paid off. According to the civil servants, the Council lived up to the administrative standards and criteria for success established at the beginning of the Council Chemistry project (Forbrugerrådet Tænk, 2016c; MOF, 2016). The Council also drew on its strong relations to the Folketing. The Council directly contacted the speakers in question from the political parties, and it was also able to meet, both formally and informally, with the Environment and Food Committee. The Council provided evaluations and status reports to especially pro-Council politicians about the project, which the speakers used in the debate with the right-of-center minister (Jørgensen interview 2018; Adelsteen interview 2018).

In November 2016, a compromise was reached that saved the Finance Act funding. The Council was able to meet the assessment criteria for chemistry products (Forbrugerrådet Tænk, 2016c; MOF, 2016), and the Council agreed to adopt a fair hearing principle in their product testing (Forbrugerrådet Tænk Kemi, 2016) (Vinten interview 2018). Furthermore, as part of the settlement, the Consumer Council agreed to replace the traffic-light categorization with an ABC categorization. Representatives view this as an unusual step by the politicians. Politicians are not normally involved in “detail-regulation of the project [...] We carefully considered whether this was too much political interference in our work” (Jørgensen interview 2018).

The incident with the Council's Consumer Chemistry project illustrates how privileged access can also have disadvantages. The embeddedness in year-long dynamic coupling and the risk of losing the advantages of this dynamic coupling made the Council subject to compromise. The actual loss created by a shift in categorization typology — from traffic code to ABC code — can obviously be debated, but the point is that the arm's length principle between the organization and government was violated, and the Council had to lean toward the wishes of government and business interests instead of speaking with the clear voice of consumers.

Conclusion

This paper represents a novel attempt at providing new insight into the research investigating the constraints on interest organizations with access to decision-makers. The corporatist system in Scandinavian countries had a constraining effect on the ability of consumer organizations to be openly critical of consumer policies, violating the arm's length principle between interest organizations and the state. The question then becomes: What happens when the system transforms from classic corporatism to privileged pluralism? Are consumer organizations able to operate relatively more freely? Or is the status as quasi-government organization maintained despite the change from corporatism to privileged pluralism? In the introduction I asked: How does privileged access to decision-makers both enable and constrain the ability of the Council to pursue consumer interests?

The case story reveals how the Council's privileged status is a result of a series of focusing events contributing to a growing dynamic coupling with the state. Already during the genesis of the Council, there is a close relationship to the Social Democrat elite in the post-WWII world. Simultaneously, the concern for consumer issues grew among voters, creating a clear interest for decision-makers to engage in a dynamic coupling with the Council. Again, when the Council gained

public funding in 1955 and a spot on the Commission in 1969, the events resulted in continued processes of dynamic coupling, bringing the Council into a closer and mutually beneficial relationship with the state.

The generalizability of the results of the case study is limited due to the qualitative data material and explorative and grounded nature of the research. Furthermore, the Consumer Council's strategies can hardly be pursued by other public interest organizations. As the case study shows, the Council's privileged access has resulted from lengthy political efforts stretching back to its very beginnings. The Council enjoyed optimal conditions to grow into privileged access from the start, including favorable public sentiment and low group density in the consumer policy field.

However, the Council is not the only public interest organization with access to the parliament and public administration, and other organizations can learn from its strategic actions if they strive for privileged access to the political system. Here, the case study shows how privileged access can be akin to a double-edged sword for public interest organizations. The Chemistry Watch App case casts light on the Council's dilemma in balancing their role as independent organization with the historical role as a privileged partner for the state. By adapting to the wishes of the Minister, the Council risks compromising its autonomy. This is a difficult dilemma for public interest organizations: Can you be an independent organization and at the same time an institutionalized partner with privileged access to the political system? This is not only a dilemma for the Council, but also for politicians and consumers who want an independent voice on consumer policy issues: Can you have both in a system of privileged pluralism? Does access compromise independence? The dispute illustrates the delicate nature of the conduct of privileged public interest organizations when working to maintain their position. For some, the price of privileged access may be too high. For others, like the Consumer Council, the ability to influence a range of policies seems to make political interference a price worth paying.

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