

# Democracy at Stake: Multipositional Actors and Politicization in the EU Civil Society Field\*

ALVARO OLEART<sup>1</sup> and LUIS BOUZA<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Université Libre de Bruxelles <sup>2</sup>Universidad Autónoma de Madrid / College of Europe

## Abstract

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) has the potential to significantly change the dynamics of interaction between EU institutions and civil society, which we conceive as a field. This article analyzes how the EU civil society field has been re-shaped by the ECI, the creation of networks and relationships between EU and national organizations and the effects of politicization. Using interview data and online documents from five ECI cases, we argue that an ECI can potentially transform the meta-field of civil society and democracy by altering what is at stake. We show that the five cases compete in a single field of civil society in the EU where incumbent organizations react to challenges. However, the field cannot be characterized in terms of a competition between insiders and outsiders. Rather, the ECI favours actors able to combine activism in different spheres – which we call multi-positional actors.

**Keywords:** civil society; European citizens' initiative; participatory democracy; politicization; European Union; lobbying

## Introduction: The ECI as a Tool for Contesting Positions in the Field of Participation and Democracy in the EU

The European Union (EU)'s interest representation system is characteristic of elite pluralism (Eising, 2007). Whereas the European Commission is open to many groups, in practice, the current policy-making process of the European Commission favours strongly institutionalized peak associations and umbrella groups that aggregate and represent diverse interests at EU level (Greenwood, 2011, pp. 1–4). These organizations are mainly Brussels-based federations interacting strongly with the institutions in a segmented policy-making space (Eriksen, 2007, pp. 33–34). As a consequence, these actors are likely to act within the institutional and referential framework provided by the polity, adopting registers of collective action akin to what their institutional counterparts expect. The 'field of Eurocracy' (Georgakakis and Rowell, 2013) is the highly bureaucratic political space where Brussels-based actors, including civil society actors, lobbies, trade unions and EU institutions, interact and bargain among them, and it is loosely connected to the general public.

The question of the role of the intermediate sphere of organizations and participatory mechanisms in connecting the public with the EU policy process inspires our understanding of civil society. We rely on Habermas' public discourse oriented definition where civil

\*Álvaro Oleart is grateful for the support of the ValeUR ARC project (<http://valeur.ulb.be>) at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), in particular to the team's promoters: Ramona Coman, François Foret and François Heinderyckx.

[Correction added on 28 December 2017, after first online publication: the acknowledgment has been updated in this version]

society is 'composed of those more or less spontaneous emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life sphere, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere' (Habermas, 1996, p. 367). It has been argued that the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) has the potential to modify the interaction between EU institutions and civil society (Bouza Garcia and Greenwood, 2014), because a successful ECI requires that promoters reach to at least 1 million supporters and probably co-operate with national Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to reach more people. Likewise, it might lead national CSOs to co-operate with other national and European organizations to try to 'upload' their own issues and create pan-European networks. This implies that the ECI may increase the competition among semi-institutionalized challenger organizations seeking more relevance in the EU policy-making process with CSOs using the ECI to potentially challenge incumbent groups and at the same time trying to establish their own positions and claims. Justin Greenwood has argued that 'the cleavage of access is not therefore between "privileged" business organizations which overpower the "small voices" of NGOs but between the institutionalized world of Brussels "insider" organizations and "outsider" organizations' (Greenwood, 2011, p. 234). The ECI implementation regulation was designed by the European Commission to favour non-institutionalized Brussels-based actors rather than Brussels-based interest groups. This is reflected by the fact that a committee formed by seven EU citizens from different Member States is required to be responsible for the ECI initiative, rather than an organization. All in all, the ECI is a change in the EU institutions repertoire from the institutionalization of groups towards more open notions of participation (Monaghan, 2012).

The insider / outsider category has often been used to describe interest groups in the EU (Dür and Mateo, 2016; Greenwood, 2011), in order to explain the advocacy strategic choices. A number of variables have been pointed out as relevant in understanding such choices. The political opportunity structures or venue-shopping institutional possibilities (Beyers, 2004; Eising, 2007; Klüver, 2013; Mahoney, 2004), the characteristics of the issue at stake (Beyers, 2008) and the type of group (Dür and Mateo, 2013) all condition actors' choices when deciding to use inside and or outside lobbying strategies (Kollman, 1998). Inside lobbying refers to advocacy strategies centred around directly influencing policy and decision-makers, whereas outside lobbying strategies refer to advocacy strategies focused on mobilizing citizens in order to encourage a favourable public opinion. It is generally expected that civil society groups (including both trade unions and NGOs) are more prone to take 'the streets' by using outside lobbying tactics, whereas business actors will generally use inside lobbying tactics (Maloney *et al.*, 1994). As an outside lobbying tool, the ECI is expected to be used mainly by those actors that do not have inside access to policy-makers – essentially national organizations or transnational networks – and that challenge the *status quo* of the EU Civil Society field, while the most established players in the EU policy-making process are less likely to use the ECI, given that they can push their agenda through inside channels. Furthermore, grassroots organizations have a competitive advantage in relation to EU umbrella organizations when using the ECI to influence EU politics as the ECI is a better fit for more confrontational and politicized tactics as opposed to the consensual, depoliticized and technical tactics used by incumbents within the EU Civil Society field. In fact, the ECI can encourage the formation of transnational advocacy networks (Keck and

Sikkink, 1998) that might bypass Brussels-based established players. In sum, the ECI transforms (mainly national) grassroots mobilization into a valuable resource whereas previously this was seldom used beyond farmers and trade unions (Balme and Chabanet, 2008, pp. 60–64).

The article seeks to empirically address the question: *what impact has ECI had on the EU civil society field?* However, in order to respond to such a question, we first need to address two other questions: *who has used the ECI* and *how has it been used?* To answer these questions, we have analyzed five ECIs that include both ‘innovators’ and ‘realists’ (concepts explained later in the article), allowing us to compare the different usages given to the ECI by different actors. Our argument is that, as a field, incumbent organizations react to initiatives undertaken by non-established actors. We argue that forms of capital (such as grassroots mobilization) in the EU civil society field are directly related to what is at stake in the field (access to policy-makers): who has access to EU institutions and under what conditions.

Because of the competition among alternative forms of collective action at the EU level and among different views of the rationale for involvement in EU policy-making by civil society we conceive the interactions between EU institutions and civil society as a competitive field where actors are constantly competing ‘in a game in which they are playing to maintain or improve their position’ within the field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 28; see Johansson and Kalm, 2015 for a full discussion of the applicability of the field notion to EU–civil society relations). We therefore expect an opposition between those more likely to use and defend the validity of insider registers – such as dialogue with EU officials, amendment dialogue – and those claiming direct citizens’ support via signature collection and other forms of external lobbying as the clearest form of legitimacy.

The article argues that the insider / outsider category (Dür and Mateo, 2016; Greenwood, 2011) or a venue-shopping approach does not fully grasp what is going on in the field. Instead, we see a number of actors that are not simple insiders or outsiders, but multi-positional socially-skilled actors. Most ECIs can only be partially related to outsiders to the field of European civil society in that they are promoted by groups connected to European affairs either directly or via networks and can be characterized as multi-positional actors that often intend to address the national and European level at the same time, albeit with different strategies. In this sense these actors are multi-positional also in that they seem particularly able at venue shopping and adopting different strategies if required at national and EU level. This includes for some of them an ability to adapt the framing of demands and policy expressions according to the policy level (Woll and Jacquot, 2010) in the co-ordinative discourse and the political debate in the communicative discourse (for the types of discourse see section below). This implies that the new emerging actors may not seek to establish themselves as the new incumbents in the field after successfully challenging the established organizations, but rather that they increase the competitiveness of civil society involvement in EU affairs.

## **1. Politicization in the EU Civil Society Field: European Democracy at Stake**

Involvement of civil society in decision-making has been one of the cornerstones of the EU institutions legitimacy-seeking strategies since the late 1990s (Longo and Murray, 2015; Saurugger, 2010). EU civil society actors are expected to contribute to the input,

throughput and output legitimacy (Schmidt, 2013) to the EU despite potential contradictions between these orientations (Lindgren and Persson, 2011). On one hand, EU civil society is expected to bridge EU institutions with the general public (Smismans, 2003). And on the other hand, EU civil society is thought to give more output legitimacy, being the 'voice' of the public interest and making EU laws more responsive to it (Armstrong, 2002). These differentiated goals can be seen in the structure of Art. 11 TEU that enshrines the participatory mechanisms in the Treaty. Paragraphs 11.1–11.3 were introduced in the Treaty as a reflection of the privileged access of some civil society organizations to the institutions, whereas paragraph 11.4 on the ECI is the result of a differentiated lobbying on direct participation (Bouza Garcia, 2015; Monaghan, 2012). Originally this article was labelled as 'Participatory democracy' and was meant to complement the previous article on representation, reflecting much of the thought from the early 2000s on participatory solutions for the EU democratic deficit (Armstrong, 2002; Smismans, 2003).

The field of EU institutions–civil society interactions has emerged around the uncontested notion among its participants (Kohler-Koch, 2013; Saurugger, 2010) that the EU needs to improve its democratic legitimacy by engaging with civil society. However, because of the ambiguity and numerous alternatives about who belongs to civil society and how it can actually contribute to policy-making, the definition of the channels through which civil society has access to policy-makers is subject to constant attempts at re-signification. The definition of such channels can transform the political strategic choices made by civil society actors, which will certainly have policy implications (Bouza Garcia, 2015). These attempts are not only symbolic struggles, since what is at stake in the different formulations of the 'rules of the game' is who has access to EU institutions and under what conditions. The key actors of those struggles are members of the EU institutions, and interest groups and civil society organizations active at different governance levels and attempting to access the EU policy process. The structure of competition in the field also creates unequally distributed and valued types of capital that organizations need to possess to access the field – in this case funding, expertise, access to EU institutions or the support of national and/or grassroots organizations and members – and the selection of issues in the agenda and the frames of reference – in a nutshell accepted forms of doing things enacted by all organizations (Stone Sweet *et al.*, 2001).

Because of the abovementioned segmentation of EU policy processes from the public sphere (Eriksen, 2007), the frames that resonate within EU institutions will not necessarily resonate with the general European public, and vice versa. One of the innovations that the ECI brings to EU policy-making is that actors have to make political claims and frame them coherently to different audiences at the same time, both to the general European public (because they need 1 million signatures) and EU institutions (because they will process the particular policy demand). This is unprecedented because previous mechanisms for interaction with civil society were based on organizations' responses to Commission proposals, thus leaving the institutions to frame the issues, traditionally in a relatively technocratic and depoliticized fashion (Radaelli, 1999; Schmidt, 2006). But with the inclusion of the ECI in the Lisbon Treaty, actors are given the possibility of launching new issues – albeit within Treaty limits and the Commission self-imposed limits on what ECIs can be used for – thus providing incentives to use frames that resonate among the general European public.

We analyze the re-signification possibilities provided by the ECI using Vivien Schmidt's notions of co-ordinative and communicative discourse (Schmidt, 2008). The co-ordinative discourse is the policy sphere, where those actors at the centre of the policy-making process 'co-ordinate agreement among themselves on policy ideas' (Schmidt, 2008, p. 309). The democratic legitimacy implications of the co-ordinative sphere are related to the output of the laws passed. The co-ordinative discourse is the space where inside lobbying takes place. On the contrary, the communicative discourse refers to the political sphere, where a process of public deliberation takes place, linking the policy debate to the general public and therefore having more input legitimacy. The communicative discourse is the space where outside lobbying takes place, where actors use public opinion in their interest. The relationship between co-ordinative and communicative discourse in the EU is complex, given that it has a strong co-ordinative discourse (due to the diverse actors that participate in it: different EU institutions, interest groups, Member States...) that is combined with a very weak communicative discourse. This is due mainly to the national fragmentation of the public debate and the low visibility of European actors in mainstream media.

The particularity of the ECI is that it is an outside lobbying tool that is meant to connect the communicative and the co-ordinative discourse in the EU, linking the policy debate with the political debate. This close connection between the policy process and public debate is reflected in the way in which the mechanism is designed (Conrad *et al.*, 2016): before starting to collect signatures, organizers must register their initiative with the European Commission and pass a test that the subject matter and the proposals are within the European Commission's power to act in implementation of the EU treaties. Once the European Commission agrees to register the proposal, a period of 12 months is given to the initiators to collect 1 million signatures. The connection between both discourses can also be seen in the fact that signature collection is also strongly regulated with regards to data protection and to the identity of supporters. Finally, the initiative is also regulated as to the outcome: if it collects 1 million signatures in at least a third of the Member States the organizers are invited to a hearing with the European Parliament and the Commission must formally respond indicating whether it will attend the demands and how. Only an issue that is widely discussed in the European Public Sphere(s) can achieve 1 million signatures and, therefore, be on the policy agenda. By doing so, transnational grassroots mobilization has become an important type of capital within the field where civil society actors participate, and it is becoming increasingly important to frame issues coherently both in the policy and the political debate. The process by which the policy debate is linked to the political debate is the process of politicization (Hooghe and Marks, 2009), defined as a phenomenon that 'can be empirically observed in (a) the growing salience of European governance, involving (b) a polarization of opinion, and (c) an expansion of actors and audiences engaged in monitoring EU affairs' (De Wilde *et al.*, 2016, p. 2). The process of politicization of EU issues is important for the present article, because it has implications for the EU civil society field.

The core component of politicization is the expansion of the scope of political conflict. For an issue to become politicized, it is required to observe opposing positions, a certain public salience and an expansion of the actors involved. In terms of ideas, a political claim or frame can only be 'politicizing' (what we are defining as an 'innovator' framing) in relation to other ideas. Given the traditional consensus-oriented EU policy-making, the

politicization of EU issues can have field transforming effects, because it involves an expansion of the actors involved. As argued by Mehta (2011, p. 36), 'in any fight, there are many more that are unconcerned than there are mobilized on either side and that therefore it is to the advantage of the weaker side to find a way to frame the issue that will bring in more of the uninvolved bystanders on their side'. By bringing new actors to the political battle through the politicization of an EU issue, an ECI can change the meaning given to European democracy and, therefore, the stakes of the field. The ECI does not 'contest' democracy in Europe, but rather opens the possibility for actors to put forward competing meanings of democracy and to challenge the agenda of the Commission. By doing so, the ECI does not challenge democracy in the EU, but rather it contributes to making the field of civil society participation more competitive for organizations. If an EU issue becomes politicized and new actors enter the debate, it can change the dynamics of EU policy-making, that has traditionally granted access only to a few peak organizations. Politicization and the consequent mobilization of large numbers of people (for instance, through the collection of signatures or demonstrations) can then be considered a type of capital within the EU civil society field.

## 2. Data and Methodology

In order to test our argument, we have selected five ECI campaigns that are considered to challenge the sincerity of the commitment of EU institutions to the EU democratic values. Whereas to some extent this is inherent in the ECI – challengers often appeal to the democratic consciousness of the Commission to let the initiative make it to the EU legislative chambers instead of being stopped by 'unelected officials' – these initiatives do not, unlike other ECIs, challenge the democratic nature of the EU. They rather point out that the EU institutions – the Commission and / or the Council – are not living up to the democratic standards enshrined in the Treaty of Lisbon in relation to the respect of European values such as the rule of law in Member States (Wake Up Europe), media pluralism, democracy (STOP TTIP), human dignity for embryos (One of Us) and human rights (Right2Water).

The five campaigns attempt to re-signify elements of what democracy in the EU means or ought to be. This re-signification has different levels. The first common dimension is the notion of European values. In more or less explicit ways the five ECIs assume the existence of common values as more than a declaration or a basis for a common identity, and as a general guidance for legitimate action by the EU institutions, since they consider that these values must apply to all the members of the EU political community, including Member States in affairs of their sovereignty. The second common trait is that the initiatives seek to define pan-European standards on democracy rather than simply argue that the EU policy in a given field (say minorities, media and trade) suffers from democratic problems. Instead the initiatives share arguments stating that the lack of action in a given sense challenges the democratic standards of the EU. The third common standard is that, although they may differ in relation to their degree of support for further EU integration, they all attempt to make the EU institutions promote an agenda beyond or even against the will of Member States. To sum up, by re-signifying what democracy in the EU is or should be about, the promoters of these ECIs are not only challenging the incumbents

in the policy area, but are potentially transforming the meta-field of civil society and democracy by altering what is at stake in this field.

Our argument is that these initiatives have a potentially field-transforming effect if they succeed at politicizing the debate and amplifying the stakes of the discussion on civil society and democracy in the EU. Field transformation is a time when all the elements of the field, that is, the actors involved, appropriate forms of action and the frames of reference and understandings, are renegotiated (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 84) and 'the resources that help groups maintain their position are up for grabs, encouraging skilled social actors to engage once again in novel framing and innovative social action' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, p. 85). In line with our expectations about the ability of the ECI to politicize EU affairs in the sense of approaching co-ordinative and communicative discourses, our hypothesis is that the ECI challenges traditional insider/outsider dichotomies by enhancing the role of multi-positional actors in the field of EU civil society. We understand multi-positional actors in the context of field transformation as those able to use the ECI beyond the agenda-setting or protest functions to successfully advocate innovative demands.

As in any other policy field, the field of EU civil society is co-produced by the interaction between institutional representatives and the actors involved. Recent approaches to the interactions between institutions and civil society organizations argue that these have to be understood as relational forms of resource exchange (Johannson and Kalm, 2015; Klüver, 2013). These relationships have often been characterized as a trade-off between the information and legitimacy that organized civil society can provide in exchange for access and potential influence on the policy process (Greenwood, 2011). Although different actors have different types of starting capital – in this case funding, expertise, access to EU institutions or the support of national and/or grassroots organizations and members – the very exchanges among organizations and institutions contribute to determining the relative value of the capital of each of the actors (Woll and Jacquot, 2010). In analytical terms we regroup the different types of capital according to the informational resources and the forms of legitimacy which they claim to associate to their activities. We thus conceive the field as a two-dimensional space where contenders can be placed along two axes, each of them opposing alternative types of capital.

Because our hypothesis focuses both on the content of the demands and on the type of contact between the promoters of the ECI cases, we have designed a research strategy combining qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative approaches (network analysis using data collected through the websites and the interviews). In order to carry out this analysis we have conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with ECI promoters and organizations active in the EU civil society field (see online Appendix), and collected data from the websites of the different campaigns on the demands and the relationships between organizations promoting ECIs. We also attended an assembly of 'One of Us' to conduct participant observation.<sup>1</sup> We have combined the website and online data with interview data by coding the answers of interviewees to questions about their contacts with other organizations in the context of the campaigns in order to create a network contact matrix. Given that the degree of information cannot be measured using only the short

<sup>1</sup> We undertook participant observation rather than semi-structured interviews with members of the One of Us initiative due to asymmetrical openness and access in comparison to the other ECI initiatives.

statements provided by the ECI registrations or website, we use documents, interviews and participant observation to understand whether initiatives attempt to enter the policy cycle, which we define as realists, or rather challenge the Commission's agenda or introduce new controversial affairs, which we define as innovators. We attempt to verify this argument by qualitatively analyzing the framing of the demands, expecting realists' initiatives to emphasize the feasibility of their claims, the compatibility with past Commission agendas or current EU priorities and argue how the initiative is an opportunity for the Commission to show commitment. In contrast, we expect innovative demands and framings to emphasize that their initiatives are true to EU values that are under threat if no action is carried out and that they attempt to re-signify democracy at the EU level in terms of the EU institutions responsiveness to demands by the citizens via direct participation.

Changes in forms of legitimate involvement of civil society are precisely one of the stakes of the field: organizations in incumbent positions able to access institutions via insider registers will compete with those mobilizing citizens via signature collection campaigns. This form of capital will be measured with two types of quantitative indicator: absolute number of supporters in terms of number of signatures and number of organizations supporting a campaign at national level (here measured as degree). The second type of measure will consist of network centrality indicators: we expect to find a hierarchical relational space where some organizations accumulate particularly important types of relational capital. We thus expect organizations displaying strong betweenness centrality measurements to have a strong capital in terms of linking organizations that would otherwise be disconnected from the field. We thus expect this for organizations relying mainly on groups that are not strongly involved in the field, and thus claiming signature collection and direct mobilization as the most legitimate form of involvement. On the other hand, organizations showing higher indexes of closeness centrality are more likely to have on average a better general connection to the rest of the field, as they can access any single member more directly. We thus expect organizations established in Brussels and already having access to EU institutions and other actors of civil society to show this type of relational capital.

### 3. Realists' and Innovators' Demands

Although the five initiatives cover different policies (see table 1 below), they share a framing on the re-signification of EU values. They aim at introducing an issue on the Commission's agenda that was not there before (Right2Water, One of Us, Wake Up Europe and Media Pluralism) or are in direct opposition to the Commission's agenda (STOP TTIP).

While three initiatives (Right2Water, Wake Up Europe and Media Pluralism) have a 'realist' framing, One of Us and STOP TTIP have an 'innovative' framing. The five ECIs have been registered in different periods of time, have dealt with different policy areas, have been initiated by different actors, have different degrees of success, and have different levels of hostility towards the agenda of the European Commission.

A contentious framing (reference to EU values, questioning the overall direction of the European project) is shared by the five ECIs, although while three demands and framings are rather realist, One of Us and STOP TTIP's framing is innovative and directly addresses the European general public.



Table 1: ECI Policy Demands and Framing to the General Public

<i>ECI</i>	<i>ECI policy demand – co-ordinative discourse</i>	<i>Framing of the ECI demand to the European general public – communicative discourse</i>
<b>Right2Water</b>	‘to propose legislation implementing the human right to water and sanitation as recognized by the United Nations’	‘Water is a public good, not a commodity’. (realist)
<b>One of Us</b>	‘The EU should establish a ban and end the financing of activities which presuppose the destruction of human embryos’.	‘To ensure consistency in areas of its competence where the life of the human embryo is at stake’. (innovator)
<b>Media Pluralism</b>	To protect media pluralism ‘through partial harmonization of national rules on media ownership and transparency, conflicts of interest with political office and independence of media supervisory bodies’.	‘Media freedom and pluralism are fundamental values enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. They are an essential pillar of democracy’. (realist)
<b>STOP TTIP</b>	‘To repeal the negotiating mandate for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and not to conclude the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)’.	‘We want to prevent TTIP and CETA because they include several critical issues such as investor-state dispute settlement and rules on regulatory co-operation that pose a threat to democracy and the rule of law’. (innovator)
<b>Wake Up Europe</b>	‘To refer the situation in Hungary to the Council, in accordance with Article 7 TEU’.	‘We want the EU to fully exercise its duty of upholding European founding principles and guaranteeing that all Member States respect the rule of law and protect human rights’. (realist)

#### 4. The ECIs and the Field of Civil Society in the EU: A Partial Challenge

The network and the structures provide a general representation of the five campaigns rather than a detailed analysis of the individual network of the five ECIs as we assume that all the campaigns are active in the same field despite addressing different issues. This allows us to compare the contacts among organizations active in different campaigns, considering the structural role of individual actors in the network and analyzing the general distribution of capital and information as explained above.

The possibility to analyze the five campaigns as one network is not only grounded on the theoretical consideration of a challenge to what is at stake in the field, but also on empirical reasons, as some organizations were involved in more than one ECI and several organizations were in touch with organizations involved in other ECIs even though they were not among the supporters. Because of this we have designed this network as a two-mode network where the ECI campaigns are not represented as actors but as nodes to which supporting organizations are affiliated. All other ties in the network represent actual contacts among organizations, reflecting the strategies of co-operation, competition as well as connection or disconnection between groups and areas of the network. The graph uses different colours to represent different types of ties among organizations: purple links relate organizations working together to organize a campaign or to promote it, and the green ties among

organizations and campaigns (red squares) involve support for the ECI or informal contact between actors. The few orange ties indicate that organizations reported competitive behaviour, challenging each other's views and actions. Finally, the area of the nodes represents their number of contacts, with wider nodes representing more contacts and vice-versa.

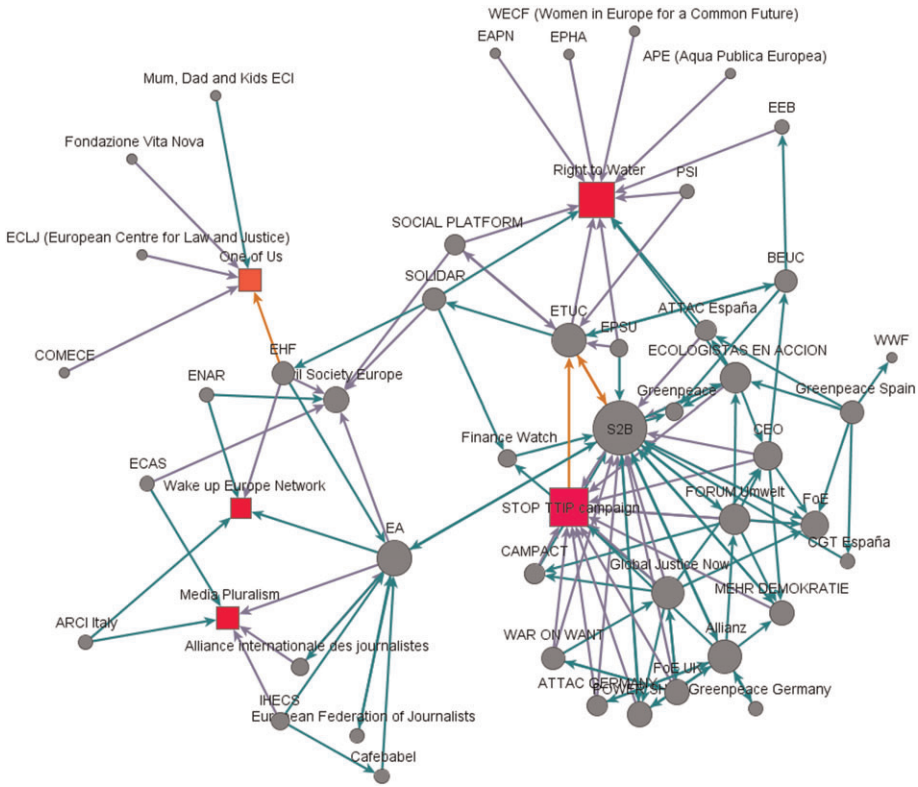
We will start by a general representation of the network structured around the five ECIs (represented as red squares). We then analyze the network using individual centrality measures and a structural core-periphery analysis. Finally, we combine these individual and structural measures with the analysis of the frames presented above into a two-dimensional graph representing the position of the organizations in the field along our typologies of realism / innovation and the types of mobilization.

This network presents a first significant finding: the entire network is connected, with an overall density of 0.25, that is one in 4 of all possible contacts which are established. This confirms that there is a social space beyond the five individual campaigns since relationships of co-operation and competition are established across and beyond the campaigns. The structure of the network is clearly differentiated in four parts and the network is structurally divided in terms of density with a medium to high number of ties around Right2Water and STOP TTIP campaigns, with the other three campaigns mobilizing a significantly smaller number of organizations. These campaigns show clearly differentiated profiles,<sup>2</sup> which is coherent with the assumptions about incumbents and challengers and with the idea that ECIs compete for access, attention, resources and legitimacy in a common field. Attention must be paid to the role of the organizations connecting the different campaigns – such as ETUC, Solidar, S2B, Civil Society Europe, Finance Watch or the European Humanist Federation (EHF) – since these organizations are the most likely actors in terms of co-operation and competition and play roles such as gatekeepers, brokers or bridges.

The structure of the network provides examples of two different types of campaign: the star-shaped campaign of One of Us, Wake Up Europe and Media Pluralism (around European Alternatives), and the thicker networks of the STOP TTIP and Right2Water campaigns. We could call the first type a centralized ECI, a campaign clearly structured around a proposal co-ordinated by a few European-level organizations but with little or no contact among the supporters or involvement of those organizations in other campaigns or contact with other groups. On the other hand, the connected campaigns do not tend to have the ECI as a central node in the network, given that the actors active in the ECIs are strongly connected among them. For instance, the TTIP campaign appears as relatively marginal within the network (see Figure 2), since it is essentially the reunion of two networks with strong internal connection: the first one led by Seattle to Brussels (S2B) and the German Alliance against TTIP. Interestingly, however, the main characteristic of the Stop TTIP campaign is that it is not a double star (a reunion of two different networks) but instead there are strong connections among organizations connected to each of the promoters. A similar phenomenon is observable in the Right2Water ECI, where a core group of organizations is joined by an important number of supporters, while at the same time we find strong connections among the organizers and supporters of the ECI.

<sup>2</sup> The Right2Water ECI was promoted by ETUC, EEB and the Social Platform whereas the STOP TTIP campaign is put forward by the national chapters of ATTAC or Greenpeace and transnational networks like Seattle to Brussels, or Mehr Demokratie

Figure 1: Descriptive Representation of the Network of EU and National Organizations. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



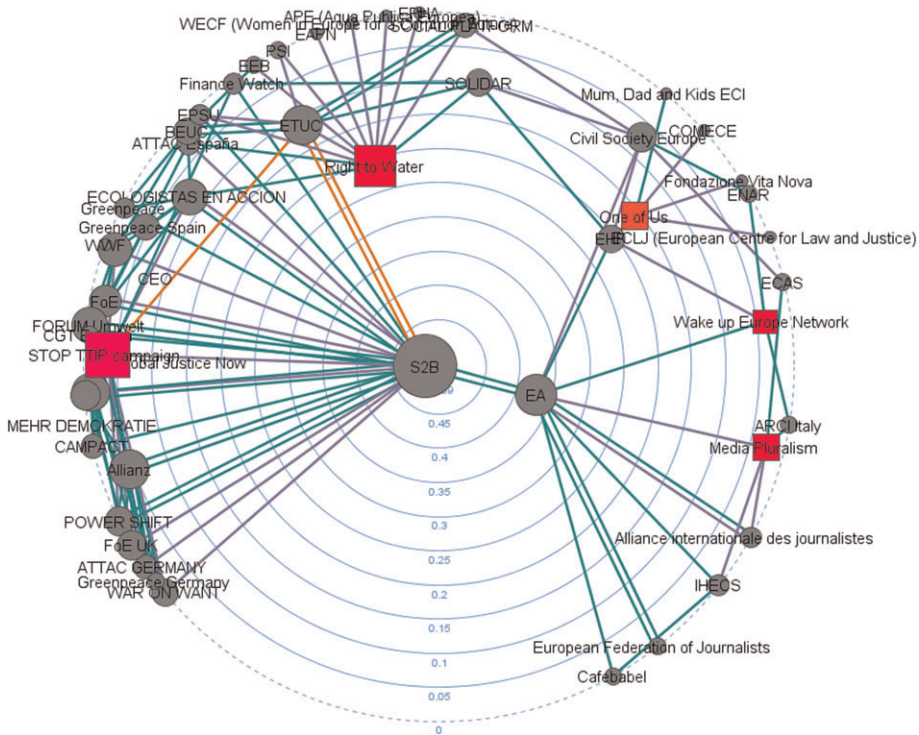
These arguments are now tested via organization centrality measures (Figure 2) and a structural core periphery analyses. Figure 2 distributes the positions of organizations according to their betweenness centrality<sup>3</sup> and degree<sup>4</sup> (visualized according to the node size). The figure shows that the number of contacts does not imply a greater centrality as some of the more central organizations have medium to low scores in centrality. Interestingly, the more central organization is Seattle to Brussels (S2B), a non-Brussels based umbrella organization, and not one of the five signature collection campaigns. Even though the next more central organizations – European Alternatives (EA), Right to Water, EHF and One of Us – have weaker betweenness indexes (see online Appendix 2), it is significant that each of them represents a different campaign. This means that the networking required to bring together a signature collection campaign contributes to raising the profile of organizations able to broker networks, in particular by bringing into the field organizations that would otherwise be absent (as implied in the definition of betweenness given in footnote 3).

<sup>3</sup> Which measures organizations’ distance to the other nodes of the graph in terms of how many of the shorter paths among nodes pass through a certain node.  
<sup>4</sup> Number of contacts.

The graph shows that both challenging organizations (such as S2B) and more realist organizations such as EA use signature collection campaigns with success. These results are interesting at the individual organization level too. Whereas S2B has been described by all interviewees as an active European network since 2000, other actors such as ‘One of Us’ or European Alternatives have emerged around a single cause. If we consider other measures, such as degree and closeness centrality (see table in online Appendix 2), these campaigns are contributing to the salience of national organizations such as those in the Stop TTIP (Friends of the Earth and War on Want UK, Ecologistas en Acción and Greenpeace Spain, or Forum Umwelt from Germany).

Finally Figure 3 presents the two-dimensional analysis of frames and relational capital described above. The horizontal axis distributes actors according to the innovative (left-hand side of the graph) and realist framings (right-hand-side). The further organizations are from the centre of the x-axis, the higher their relational capital in terms of closeness centrality. The vertical axis opposes organizations according to a centre periphery model that identifies ‘a set of actors who have high density of ties among themselves (the core) by sharing many events in common, and another set of actors who have very low density of ties among themselves (the periphery)’ (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005, section 17), with core organizations in the upper part of the graph and peripheral ones in the lower area. This does not imply that organizations in the periphery are less important or have weaker resources, but rather that

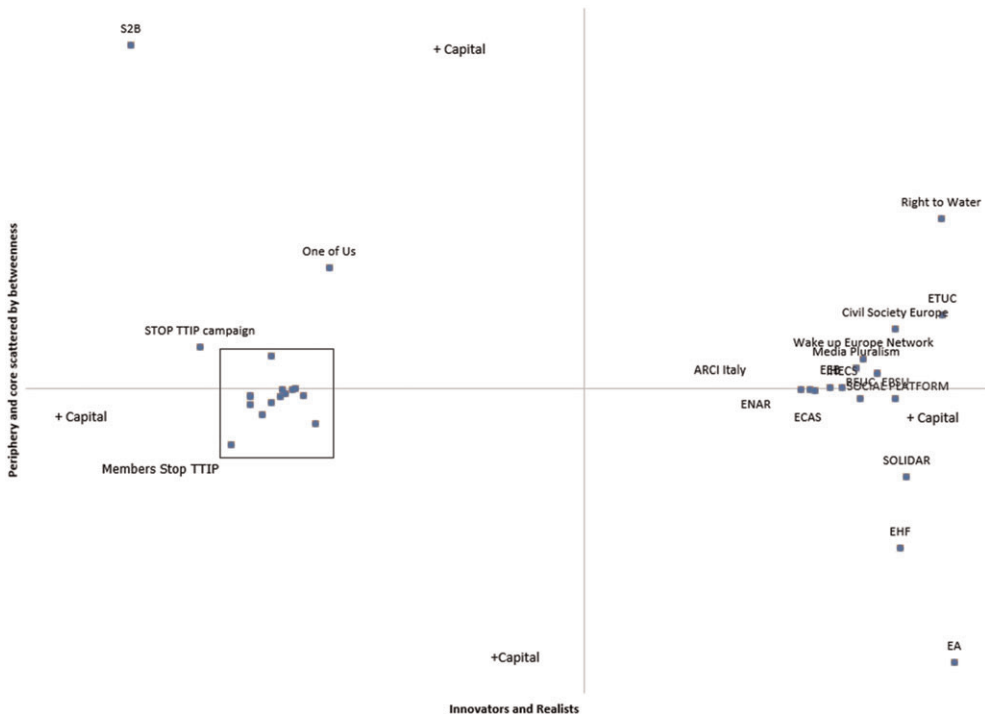
Figure 2: Organization Centrality Layout. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



they have structurally different contacts compared to those in the centre. The positions on the y-axis are scattered according to individual betweenness centrality.

The figure provides a different reading from the previous ones. Whereas Figures 1 and 2 seemed to emphasize the centrality of outsiders and national organizations, Figure 3 shows that overall the Brussels-based groups tend to be at the core of the network and have stronger relational capital (closeness centrality). This is explained through the embedded position of the incumbents: they may have fewer contacts with other groups, but they have stronger and better contacts among them (strong transitivity), appearing as a strongly coherent sub-group. It also shows that campaigns like Stop TTIP, Media Pluralism and One of Us manage to be at the core of the network without necessarily making all their supporters more central. These findings imply that whereas some campaigns may have strong support from numerous organizations acting together (typically Stop TTIP and to a more modest extent One of Us), this does not provide organizations with very salient roles unless they are in the leading positions or directly engage with groups outside their campaign. Finally, S2B, the EHF and EA appear as individual organizations with strong capital leading the challenging core and the realist periphery, respectively. It is interesting that One of Us did not have contact with other Brussels-based organizations related to religion, such as Caritas, SOLIDAR or Eurodiaconia. This confirms the potential of the ECI for challenging incumbents' positions in the field, as it challenges the social-oriented agenda of the above-

Figure 3: Spatial Distribution by Capital and Framing. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



mentioned Church-related actors by introducing a controversial matter that they have not been able or interested in debating in EU fora.

The core of the actors involved in the STOP TTIP campaign (fundamentally gathered around the S2B network) were involved in the derailment of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) (Dür and Mateo, 2014), where a combination of inside and outside lobbying was already present (Crespy and Parks, 2017; Parks, 2015). Similarly, the ECI 'Stop Glyphosate', approved by the European Commission in January 2017, which as of June 2017 had already gathered over 1 million signatures, has also mobilized similar frames of reference in comparison to the STOP TTIP campaign, while having the support of some of the same actors (such as Campact, Greenpeace, CEO or Ecologistas en Acción). This strongly indicates the continuity between campaigns and the learning process of social skills that multi-positional actors have undertaken in order to attract a wider range of actors, including some incumbents.

## 5. Conclusion: Hierarchy, Multi-Positionality and Social Skill

The analyzed campaigns have contributed to bringing EU skilled actors – able to raise attention of an issue and to Europeanize a network of organizations – into salient positions in the EU civil society field. These campaigns confer actors who invest their resources in skilled pan-European grassroots campaigns the ability to rapidly transfer issues traditionally seen as national (such as abortion and media ownership) to the EU level. Thus, they may possibly change stakes in policy areas such as the digital agenda or bio-medical research. These organizations are not only able to lead a pan-European campaign in several public spheres, but they are also able to successfully engage with the incumbents in the field.

Figures 2 and 3 can be read together as a strong confirmation of the hierarchical and competitive nature of the network, also beyond these initiatives, of the EU civil society field in general (Johansson and Kalm, 2015). Figure 2 shows that organizations like Ecologistas en Acción are multi-positional actors for whom the ECI appears as a useful tool to the EU and the national level. Social skill in this multi-positional game is shown in two types of ability. Firstly, in the capacity to frame an issue in a way that can include national organizations which have different priorities. Secondly, promoters show an ability to create contacts among salient members of the network, such as Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO), or Greenpeace. However, Figure 3 shows that even campaigns promoted by successful multi-positional actors do not turn all the supporters of the initiative into new incumbents in the field, as the core organizations successfully interact to keep the more central positions via their strong relational capital. Some of the most influential civil society organizations in Brussels such as ETUC, the Social Platform and Solidar launched the Right2Water ECI to demonstrate engagement with the new tool and reported pressure from members to at least engage with the STOP TTIP campaign – German and Spanish trade unions being strongly opposed to TTIP.

These results do not support the idea that all five ECIs challenge the field of EU-civil society relations in the EU. Also, they do not necessarily support that all campaigns mobilizing national organizations are more challenging to the dominant incumbent actors of the field. The Media Pluralism campaign suggests that an organization can successfully mobilize their

members in order to establish a favourable framework at EU level – media ownership is an EU issue because of its link to democracy – without necessarily increasing the salience or the degree of contestation of the demand. Instead, our results show that the opposition between innovators and realists applies also to the challenging organizations, whose frames of reference and strategies differed strongly. While the STOP TTIP did challenge the position of incumbents on TTIP (in particular that of ETUC) and One of Us challenged the Brussels consensus on abortion not being an institutional policy topic (therefore challenging actors such as the European Women’s Lobby, but also Church-related organizations), the other three initiatives were meant to set the institutional agenda, thus not challenging what is at stake but rather using the democracy argument to achieve an incremental change. However, the overall results confirm the hypothesis that ECIs have effects on the field of civil society, in that movements in one area – such as media ownership – seems to provoke the reaction of existing organizations asking them to take a position even if it seems distant from their main concerns. This confirms that the usages of the ECI go beyond what can be described in terms of an opposition between insiders and outsiders. It rather appears that the ECI has value for both organizations seeking to challenge the rules of the game of access to the institutions and for those aspiring to a role as incumbents thanks to the ability to promote new issues and bridge the involvement of national organizations.

Our research also points towards a growing importance of the communicative discourse in EU policy-making and its potential to change the ‘rules of the game’ of the EU civil society field. Until recently, grassroots mobilization was not considered an important type of capital by civil society actors, who tended to focus on the co-ordinative discourse among Brussels-based actors, generally bureaucratic, technical and depoliticized. Expertise on issues and the capacity to adapt the demands to the EU institutions’ ideological framework were more important types of capital to EU civil society actors than large-scale grassroots mobilization. However, the STOP TTIP campaign shows that the EU civil society field can be shaped if actors manage to politicize their campaign and mobilize people at the national level in different Member States, while also being active at the European level in Brussels (what we refer as multi-positional actors). Essentially, the traditional incumbent actors of the field lost their dominant position to the advantage of other actors, such as S2B. This is not to say that politicization of EU issues by civil society actors will necessarily change the relationships of power within the field, and that grassroots organizations will replace the incumbents in the field. Rather, what our research indicates is that grassroots mobilization (such as our ECI cases) can become an important capital in the field. All in all, it confirms our idea of multi-positional actors using different channels and tactics to influence EU policies. It also shows that not only challenging organizations have used the ECI, but also incumbent actors have made use of it to win leverage within the EU civil society field.

#### *List of interviews and participant observation*

Representative of War on Want, London

Representative of Global Justice Now, London

Representative of Friends of the Earth UK, London

Representative of BEUC, Brussels

Representative of ENAR, Brussels

Representative of ECAS, Brussels

Representative of EHF, Brussels  
 Representative of Civil Society Europe, Brussels  
 Representative of EA (2), Brussels  
 Representative of Alliance internationale des journalistes, Brussels  
 Representative of IHECS, Brussels  
 Representative of Finance Watch (2), Brussels  
 Representative of SOLIDAR, Brussels  
 Representative of ETUC, Brussels  
 Representative of EPSU, Brussels  
 Representative of Forum Umwelt, Berlin  
 Representative of Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO), Brussels  
 Representative of S2B, Brussels  
 Representative of Campaña no al TTIP, Madrid  
 Representative of Ecologistas en Acción (2), Madrid and Barcelona  
 Representative of UGT, Madrid  
 Representative of CCOO, Madrid  
 Representative of ATTAC España, Madrid  
 Representative of CGT España, Madrid  
 Representative of Greenpeace (2), Madrid  
 Participant observation in the 2016 One of Us General Assembly

*Correspondence:*

Luis Bouza  
 Dpto Ciencia Política y RRII Facultad de  
 Derecho - Universidad Autónoma de  
 Madrid Campus de Cantoblanco, 28049,  
 Madrid  
 email: luis.bouza@coleurope.eu

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### Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found online in the supporting information tab for this article.

**Appendix S1:** Closeness centrality graph layout

**Appendix S2:** Individual measures of centrality ordered by higher measurements of betweenness