Exploring astroturf lobbying in the EU: The case of responsible energy citizen coalition

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Abstract
This paper explores the creation of an astroturf group, which is a fake grassroots movement, and looks at the strategies that were used to influence EU policies. The case under scrutiny is the Responsible Energy Citizen Coalition. This alleged citizen movement launched a campaign to influence two European Parliament reports regarding shale gas exploration in 2012. A quantitative text analysis offers insights regarding the astroturf group’s communication strategy in comparison to 39 other interest groups who published position papers on the issue. This study shows how the astroturf group’s communication is aligned with that of the organizations, which were behind its creation. Furthermore, the distinction between lobbying success and lobbying influence is discussed and a correspondence analysis shows how the astroturf group might have contributed to the success of the pro-shale coalition on the outcome of one of the two policy proposals.

KEYWORDS
astroturfing, fracking, grassroots, interest groups, lobbying
1 | INTRODUCTION

Astroturf lobbying consists of simulating a spontaneous mobilization from citizens on a political issue. It can range from purchasing followers on Twitter to remunerating citizens to demonstrate in the street. While the first examples of astroturf lobbying efforts can be traced to the United States, it appears that this strategy is increasingly used by interest groups to lobby the European institutions.

Presenting itself as a grassroots movement while in reality advocating for concealed interests is problematic in democratic societies. It is a moral failing to deceive, to lie, to distort reality. From a normative perspective, a policymaking process should rely on authentic communications, and, therefore, astroturfing represents a threat to the democratic process. Indeed, the purpose of genuine civil society organizations is to defend the interests of the citizens and to make their voice heard directly by the policymakers, or indirectly via the media. The roots of their legitimacy lie precisely in the fact that citizens devote time and energy to a greater cause. Thus, organizations or individuals simulating spontaneous citizen movements to disseminate their messages are problematic as this tactic challenges the voice of authentic grassroots movements in the public sphere.

This paper looks at the creation of an astroturf group set up to influence EU policies. The first section offers a definition of astroturf lobbying and presents the different forms it can take. The second section presents the results of a case study that focuses on the astroturf group Responsible Energy Citizen Coalition, which launched a campaign to influence two European Parliament (EP) reports on shale gas and hydraulic fracturing in 2012. The objective of this case study is to see whether the astroturf group's communication is aligned with the concealed interests that created it, or if it adapts its communication to the ones of other NGOs. The third and last section discusses the concepts of influence and lobbying success. A clear distinction between the two terms is made in order to assess whether astroturfing can be considered as a successful tactic in this case.

2 | DEFINING ASTROTURF LOBBYING

In 1986, Lloyd Bentsen, a U.S. Senator from Texas, coined the term astroturfing to describe a manufactured public relations campaign. His staff had received an unusually high number of letters from citizens who expressed their concerns about a new policy proposal aiming to regulate alcoholic beverages. It appeared that these public letters actually originated from the liquor industry itself. The Senator tried to reassure its constituency by saying he was able to “tell the difference between grass roots and AstroTurf” (Walker, 2014, p. 33). Bentsen thus cleverly qualified this fake grassroots movement as astroturfing in reference to the brand of synthetic grass AstroTurf. Originally, astroturfing thus refers to a communication campaign pretending to emanate spontaneously from concerned citizens while the identity of the real sponsor of the message is concealed.

Even though such strategies are reminiscent of propaganda techniques and appeared long before the ’80s, it is worth noting that the existing literature on the subject is still at an early stage and is very scattered. Most research on the subject has been conducted in North America, the cradle of astroturfing, but is now emerging in Europe as well. The first scholarly work about the astroturf phenomenon started to emerge in the ’90s under the impetus of Stauber and Rampton (1995). They defined astroturfing as “a grassroots program that involves the instant manufacturing of public support for a point of view in which either uninformed activists are recruited or means of deception are used to recruit them” (p. 23). This definition has been used by many researchers working on the phenomenon. For Klotz (2007), “the term astroturf is used to denote grassroots support that is artificial because it is manufactured and does not arise spontaneously” (p. 5). Depending on the field of research or the
geographical and political context, different meanings of astroturfing coexist. It is in that context that Boulay (2012) suggested a comprehensive definition in order to clarify and ease further research on the matter. She sees two conditions that must be fulfilled to characterize a communication process as astroturfing. Indeed, she defines it as “a communication strategy whose true source is hidden, and that pretends to emanate from a citizens’ initiative” (p. 61). In recent years, more specific definitions are emerging emphasizing the objective of the strategy (i.e., political or commercial) and/or the tools that are used (i.e., online or offline). For example, Keller, Schoch, Stier, and Yang (2019) define political astroturfing as “a centrally coordinated disinformation campaign in which participants pretend to be ordinary citizens acting independently” (p.1) and Kovic, Rauchfleisch, Sele, and Caspar (2018) suggest a generalized definition of digital astroturfing in politics: “Digital astroturfing is a form of manufactured, deceptive and strategic top-down activity on the Internet initiated by political actors that mimics bottom-up activity by autonomous individuals” (p. 71). In this paper, astroturfing is studied more specifically when it is used to influence public policies. Building on the previous uses of the term, the definition suggested in this paper for astroturf lobbying is a deceptive communication strategy initiated by a political actor and manufacturing public support to influence public policies.

Astroturfing lobbying can take different forms, such as writing and sending false public letters to policymakers, forging signatures on a petition, hiring actors to participate in demonstrations, or setting up front groups and bogus NGOs. The rationale behind astroturf lobbying is for individuals or organizations to find an alternate way to convey their messages with more credibility. The goal is to manufacture the voice of civil society in political debates. In this regard, creating a front group, for instance, opens “avenues for businesses to influence policymakers and for wealthy donors to sway political campaigns and to leave few fingerprints” (Drinkard, 1997, p. 10). Because this strategy is based on deceiving policymakers and citizens, it raises concerns about the democratic aspect of the public policy process (Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006). These concerns are all the more pressing that astroturf lobbying has developed as a distinct industry that sociologist Walker (2014) coined grassroots for hire to depict how easy it has become for public affairs consultants to manufacture public participation.

3 | AN ASTROTURF GROUP IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT?

3.1 | Background

In 2011, the EP decided to launch an own-initiative procedure to request the European Commission to put forward a legislative procedure on the regulation of shale gas in the EU. The first one was under the impetus of the committee on Industry, Research, and Energy (ITRE) and was entitled “Industrial, energy and other aspects of shale gas and oil” (2011/2309(INI)). The second report was directed by the Committee on Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety (ENVI) and was entitled “Environmental impacts of shale gas and shale oil extraction activities” (2011/2308(INI)). The procedure was eventually completed with the two reports being adopted on first reading on the November 21, 2012. An important decision in the final document was that the proposal to impose a moratorium on the exploration of shale gas in Europe was dismissed. Consequently, the European Commission published a Recommendation in 2014 to complement the existing legislation at EU level. However, recommendations are non-legal binding acts and therefore have no legal force.

The two reports launched by the EP were the targets of many interest groups, with Corine Lepage, who was a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) during the process, claiming she had never seen such intense lobbying as on these reports. Among the interest groups who communicated on
the topic, the Responsible Energy Citizen Coalition (RECC) was very vocal and notably organized an event inside the Parliament the day before the vote called *How Shale Gas Will Transform Europe*.

### 3.2 Responsible energy citizen coalition: an astroturf group with access to the parliament?

The first question that is raised in this paper is to assess whether or not RECC is an astroturf group. Based on the definitions of astroturfing, an astroturf group could be defined here as *an organization pretending to represent the voice of citizens, but which is actually created and financed to a certain extent by a sponsor that remains concealed*. This definition takes into consideration that astroturfing should not be approached with a Manichean view. Rather, astroturfing should be envisioned as part of a continuum ranging from pure grassroots to total astroturf, with many groups finding themselves in between. There are indeed different levels of astroturfing, from an NGO buying some followers on Twitter to appear larger than they are to a group being entirely set up by concealed interests without any involvement from dedicated citizens. Indeed, the reality behind astroturf groups is often complex and evolves over time: some groups might start as a genuine citizen movement and use astroturfing to boost their membership and, conversely, a front group can be created by a company and be joined by real citizens who share their values. That is to say that the label *astroturf group* must be understood as a group presenting at least certain astroturf features, such as the ones suggested by Boulay (2012).

RECC presents itself as an association of “*natural persons, representatives of self-governments and local authorities as well as social organisations.*”\(^1\) The name of the organization itself clearly leads to thinking that it is a spontaneous citizen movement. However, the organization is not registered in the European Transparency Register. Regarding their funding, the information was scarce on their website and it is only in the fine print at the end of a webpage that the source of funding was revealed. The group was financed by PGNiG (Poland), KGHM (Poland), and LOTOS (Lithuania), three companies with a significant interest in the commercial development of shale gas. Presenting itself as a citizen coalition while being financed by the industry therefore tends to demonstrate that RECC shows astroturf features.

Almost immediately after being created in 2012, RECC organized an event the day before the vote on the two reports launched by the EP called *How Shale Gas Will Transform Europe*. The event took place in the premises of the Parliament. According to the rules of the institution, such exhibitions can only be held inside the Parliament building with the approval of some MEPs. That was the case since the event was co-sponsored by three conservative MEPs who gave the authorization to hold the event in the hallway in front of the plenary room. Other speakers at the event also included the representative of RECC: Henryk Doering, mayor of Krokowa, a Polish municipality of 3,550 inhabitants. After searching Henryk Doering’s previous activities, it appeared that RECC’s representative had close ties with PGNiG and had worked with that company in the past.\(^2\)

The objective of RECC’s conference was to convene different speakers in order to inform MEPs about the implications of shale gas exploration in Europe. The event was organized with professional public relations tools such as flat screens, posters, interactive games, and was followed by a cocktail reception. However, nowhere in their communication material did they mention who was funding the organization and the event. This raised concerns from different MEPs, who felt that RECC was not like any other citizen movement. Carl Schlyter, on behalf of the Greens, explained:

> I would firstly like to remind people about Ms Harms’s request for the Conference of Presidents to quickly reach a decision on the exhibition outside. Our rules for lobbyists
state that it must be clearly stated who the sender is. If a lobbyist claims to represent the citizen yet is in reality a company, then this is not in line with our guidelines. I hope you are able to reach a decision quickly.³

Even though some MEPs discovered before the vote that RECC had close ties with the industry, the astroturf group still had the opportunity to disseminate their message inside the institution the day before the vote and also sent a letter addressed to all MEPs with their position while still concealing the real sponsor of the message. Finally, it is worth noting that RECC erased its website a few days after the vote in plenary.

4 ❧ A COMMUNICATION SIMILAR TO THE SHALE GAS INDUSTRY

4.1 ❧ Research design

One of the objectives of this paper is to analyze the communication campaign of RECC and to compare it with other interest groups who communicated on the issue of shale gas and hydraulic fracturing in the EU. The method selected for that purpose is a correspondence analysis of 40 position papers, which were found on the websites of 40 different interest groups. This number of interest groups is in line with the ones from similar studies (Klüver & Mahoney, 2015). Among the 40 interest groups, 12 are listed as NGOs in the Transparency Register and the 28 others are representing business interests. Interestingly, one position paper is the product of an ad-hoc coalition made up of 4 NGOs operating at EU level and officially supported by 28 national NGOs and is listed as “NGOCoalition” in the figures. The software package used to perform the correspondence analysis is KH Coder. It is a quantitative text analysis software, which processes data using R. The corpus has been cleaned following the KH Coder manual and all the texts were lemmatized and stemmed. Also, a list of stop words provided by the software has been configured in order to remove common words from the analysis. The correspondence analysis allows mapping all the interest groups depending on the words they use. The objective is to see whether RECC used words similar to the interests they truly represent or if they communicated in a way closer to legitimate NGOs.

4.2 ❧ Birds of a feather flock together

The results of the correspondence analysis are displayed in Figure 1. In this analysis, the interest groups are positioned depending on the words they are using. Words close to the origin are not significant and are used by a majority of interest groups whereas words further away from the origin are significant and were used almost exclusively by the interest groups located near them. Interest groups being close to each other mean they have used similar words in their position papers.

A first observation indicates a polarization between a group of organizations closely positioned on the right-hand side and using words such as economic, import, energy, price, market, and production. On the left-hand side, groups are more scattered and are using words such as fracking, water, risk, assessment, and health. To see the topics of the environment and the economy emerge is not surprising, for two different reasons. The first reason is that the results from this analysis echo with recent articles looking at the frames used on the shale gas issue. Few researchers have focused on the framing of shale gas as a European issue (Bomberg, 2017; Lits, 2019a; Metze & Dodge, 2016). More attention has been devoted to studying the issue of shale gas exploration in specific Member States such as the Netherlands.
(Metze, 2014), Poland (Lis & Stankiewicz, 2016), Spain (Alvarez, Herranz de la Casa, & Mercado Saez, 2014), and the UK (Bomberg, 2015; Hilson, 2015). Nonetheless, the results from these studies all point in the same direction when it comes to framing. The proponents of hydraulic fracturing use a dominant frame, which is economic growth. Energy security and reassurance regarding the technology are also predominant in the pro-fracking network. On the other side, the dominant frame invoked by the opponents to hydraulic fracturing is the risks. Risks to human health, to the climate, to the environment, and to water are found systemically in all the studies aforementioned. The second reason arises from the issue selection itself. The focus has been set on the adoption of two reports of the EP. One of this report was conducted by the ITRE committee while the other by the ENVI committee. The topics of the two reports were distinct. One was looking at the industrial aspects of shale gas on the one hand, and the second was devoted to the environmental impact of unconventional gas including hydraulic fracturing on the other hand. From that perspective, it is not surprising to see the two topics arise in the position papers. The institutional demand configured the interest supply in terms of framing.

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**FIGURE 1** Position of 40 interest groups on the shale gas issue
The positioning of interest groups tends to show a pattern: NGOs are mostly situated on the left-hand side of the graph and use words that are related to the risks of hydraulic fracturing. Business and trade associations are on the right-hand side of the graph and use terms related to the production of natural gas and the economic consequences it can have. There are, however, a few notable exceptions. Eureau and the European Federation of Bottled Water (EFBW) are trade associations sharing similar words with NGOs, which is explained by their core business that is water. One of the controversies surrounding hydraulic fracturing is indeed that the process could pollute water. Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) shows a singular use of words as they communicate about the issue of over-representativity of corporate actors in expert groups of the European Commission. WWF has a position that is interesting as it is positioned close to business associations. The reason is that their position paper addresses the economic issue of shale gas in the EU and aims to undermine the arguments brought forward by the industry.

Regarding the position of RECC, different hypotheses could have been advanced to predict its position. Indeed, astroturf groups can decide to design their communication messages based on a logic of membership or a logic of influence (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999). Either the astroturf group can frame the issue according to the members it represents, in this case the shale gas industry, or they can adapt its rhetoric to the targets of the campaign they want to influence. This highlights the paradox that astroturf groups have to face in the sense that they pretend to be and act as grassroots movements, but in reality, advocate for concealed interests (Lits, 2019b). Consequently, it could be argued that RECC would use a wording similar to NGOs because the purpose of an astroturf group is precisely to look like a citizen movement. The astroturf movement would thus be used to counter the arguments of the genuine grassroots movements. On the other hand, as RECC was created to promote the interests of the shale gas industry, it could be argued that the astroturf group was used as a mouthpiece for the industry. In this case, the position of RECC is clearly defined: among other business associations that are pro-shale with a focus on the economic benefits of hydraulic fracturing.

5 | HOW TO MEASURE LOBBYING SUCCESS?

5.1 | Literature Review

The question of building a method to assess lobbying influence on public policy has challenged researchers for a long time. One of the main difficulties revolves around isolating the real influence of an interest group from other contextual determinants that could lead to shifts throughout the making of a policy (i.e., political scandals or natural catastrophes). The first attempts were based on interviewing lobbyists or policymakers, but this approach had significant biases in the results (Heinz, Laumann, Nelson, & Salisbury, 1993). Indeed, lobbyists seem to consistently overestimate their influence, as if to prove their worth to their clients, while politicians overlook a possible influence from a third party, implying their work is irrefutable. To overcome these biases, new methods have been tested by scholars, which notably include quantitative methods looking at a larger number of policy proposals and interest groups.

Important research was conducted by Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Leech, and Kimball (2009). The authors were among the first to address the issue of measuring the lobbying success of interest groups on a large number of issues. Their research design includes interviews with more than 300 lobbyists and government officials on a variety of about 100 issues faced by the Federal Government of the United States. The findings from this study depict a clear picture of lobbying activities in Washington. The authors notably found that 60% of lobbying campaigns failed to induce policy
change. Even though the authors focused on U.S. lobbying, the method developed in their research inspired scholars to conduct similar studies in the EU.

In Europe, recent advances have been made with the INTEREURO project. Researchers involved in this European project refined different methods which all offer specific advantages. One of them is to look at the preference attainment of coalitions of interest groups (Bernhagen, Dür, & Marshall, 2014; Dür, Bernhagen, & Marshall, 2015; Klüver & Mahoney, 2015). Concretely, it involves a quantitative analysis of the position of interest groups and their desired outcomes regarding a policy proposal, and to separate them on a one-dimension scale between the ones advocating for new or more stringent regulations and the ones who are advocating for the status quo. The evolution of the position from the institutions, from the legislative proposal to the final piece of legislation, is then looked at to evaluate which coalition has managed to steer the debate in their direction and attained their objectives.

Looking at coalitions rather than interest groups taken individually is relevant for several reasons. First of all, it allows overcoming the bias of attributing a major shift in policymaking to only one organization, as it could have been the case by solely interviewing lobbyists on a qualitative level. Second, studying interest groups as coalitions gives a more representative picture of how lobbying is conducted. Building coalitions is indeed a necessity in creating advocacy strategies because it brings together groups sharing the same objectives and thus speaking with a louder voice in the political arena, as their legitimacy increases with the broader constituency they represent. As Mahoney (2007) explains, “the coalition can signal to policymakers that a policy position has the support of a large and varied group of interests and that the coalition can provide a framework for more efficient use of resources” (p. 6).

This method suggested notably by Bernhagen et al. (2014) is limited in the sense that it reduces the debate to a single dimension, often a binary struggle between business and civil society organizations. However, as Thomson (2011) has demonstrated in his comprehensive book on EU policy debates, most legislative debates are inherently multidimensional, with coalitions wanting to steer the debate in more than one or two ways. To overcome this hurdle, Klüver and Mahoney (2015) have designed a method that allows mapping interest groups and institutions on a multidimensional scale, based on the clusters of words that they are using. The underlying assumption is that if the wording of a report has evolved and moved closer to certain interest groups, that means that they have been successful in steering the debates on the aspects of the issue that were most important to them. This assumption can be illustrated by the addendum of amendments pushed by a coalition that would appear in the final text.

5.2 Assessing RECC lobbying success

The objective of this section is to assess if RECC was successful regarding their policy objectives. First and foremost, it is necessary to distinguish lobbying success from influence. Success is here understood as the extent to which policy goals of an interest group are attained. Therefore, as De Bruycker and Beyers (2019) explained:

Success does not necessarily require the use of political resources, coordinated action, or advocacy. That is, success can also be the result of exogenous factors or even lucky coincidence (e.g., support from policymakers, economic changes, technological advancements). For example, some groups might see their goals attained through no action of their own, while others may be unsuccessful because their lobbying coincided with an exogenous event that affected outcomes in an unfavorable way (or vice versa) (p. 2).
The method to measure the lobbying success in this case follows the steps of Klüver and Mahoney (2015) described previously with factorial correspondence analysis. For that purpose, four documents have been added to the 40 position papers displayed in Figure 1. These four documents are the initial ITRE committee draft report published on March 30, 2012, the initial ENVI committee draft report published on April 11, 2012, and the two final reports adopted by the EP on first reading on November 21, 2012.

Figure 2 shows the correspondence analysis of the 40 position papers with the draft and final reports of the ITRE committee. In order to better visualize the position of the interest groups, words have been hidden on the graph, but follows the same trend as in Figure 1. The position of the draft report is on the right-hand side of the graph, which indicates that the cluster of words used in the report revolved around economic terms and is thus close to the position of business associations such as AmCham EU and BusinessEurope.

Interestingly, the final report has moved even further on the right-hand side and closer to groups like Eurogas, Shale Gas Europe, and RECC. Again, it does not necessarily mean that these groups had a direct influence on the wording of the report, let alone that this shift was induced solely by the position papers of these interest groups, as position papers are only one of the lobbying tactics deployed to
influence the reports. But it means that the wording of the report has evolved and show more similarities with the policy aspects that these interest groups emphasized in their position papers.

The results of the correspondence analysis for the ENVI report are showed in Figure 3. The inclusion of the two reports has resulted in a symmetry with respect to the x-axis. The business groups are still on the right-hand side and the NGOs on the left, but groups who were at the bottom of the graph moved to the top and vice versa. Looking at the evolution of the report, the direction that the report takes moves toward the three interest groups that have made water a priority. As the final text adopted by the EP moved significantly in that direction, it would mean that the words such as *water* and *protection* have become more preponderant in the document. In that regard, the three interest groups who have voiced their concerns about water (Eureau, EFBW and Water UK) seem to have been heard by the ENVI committee, much more so than the other coalitions.

These results were followed by an in-depth analysis of the EP reports in order to substantiate the observations from the correspondence analysis. The initial ITRE draft report counted 33 items. Each item presents a clear and single aspect of unconventional gas. The final text has been amended and counted 48 items. Fifteen items have thus been added by the MEPs and other items were substantially reduced to a more compact form.

![Figure 3](image-url)  
**Figure 3** Evolution of the ENVI committee report on shale gas
modified. A move toward the aspects emphasized by business associations is noticeable. For instance, the final text shows the addition of items that embody clear concerns from the industry such as the issue of competitiveness, which was absent in the initial draft:

[The European Parliament] …

5. Notes that gas prices in the US are still falling, which poses additional competitiveness challenges for the EU.

6. Notes that, as the gas market becomes ever more global and interconnected, the development of shale gas will increase global gas-to-gas competition and will therefore continue to have a major effect on prices; points out that shale gas will help to strengthen the position of customers vis-à-vis gas suppliers and should therefore lead to lower prices.4

Even more changes were made on the ENVI report. The initial report counted 23 items. The final report, on the other hand, counted 68 items, almost three times as many. The emphasis on the water issue is indeed perceivable in the amended texts with addenda such as:

[The European Parliament…]

20. Stresses the need for scientific studies regarding the long-term impact on human health of fracking-related air pollution and water contamination;

29. Recognises the relatively high-water volumes involved in hydraulic fracturing given that water is a particularly sensitive resource in the EU; highlights the need for advance water provision plans based on local hydrology with consideration for local water resources, the needs of other local water users and capacities for wastewater treatment

32. Calls on the industry, in transparent collaboration with national regulatory bodies, environmental groups and communities, to take the measures needed to prevent the status of relevant bodies of groundwater from deteriorating, and thereby maintain good groundwater status as defined in the Water Framework Directive and the Groundwater Directive.5

The changes made to the final reports confirm the observations from the correspondence analyses. From that point of view, the coalition of organizations who communicated about the water issue can be deemed successful regarding the ENVI report and the coalition of business associations, including the oil and gas industry, can be deemed successful regarding the ITRE report. The correspondence analyses permit to better conceive how RECC might have contributed to the success of that coalition. By pretending that it represented the voice of concerned citizens, the astroturf group gave more weight to the coalition and gave it more credibility.

6 | DISCUSSION

This paper consists of three major parts. First, astroturf lobbying is defined. After explaining the origin of the term and the different uses in research nowadays, astroturf lobbying has been defined as a deceptive communication strategy initiated by a political actor and manufacturing public support to influence public
policies. Second, closer attention has been paid to the modus operandi of a group presenting astroturf features who launched a lobbying campaign to influence two reports voted by the EP on shale gas exploitation in the EU. Interestingly, it appeared that the astroturf group RECC has been created specifically before the vote and decided to cover its tracks by erasing their website a few days after the vote. The results of the analysis of their position paper show that its purpose was to convey the messages and the frames of the industry. Astroturf lobbying was therefore used here as *corporate ventriloquism* (Bsumek, Schneider, Schwarze, & Peeples, 2014). Third, by complementing the corpus with the draft and final versions of the two reports of the EP, this paper shows how different coalitions of interest groups have attained their policy objectives. A coalition of business association, including the gas industry and RECC, can be considered as successful when looking at the evolution of the ITRE report, even though its initial position was already industry friendly. As for the ENVI report, it is a coalition of industry associations and NGOs focussing on water issues that seems to have mostly attained their policy preferences. Again, it is not to say that the lobbying campaigns of these groups had a direct influence on the final reports, but rather that the final reports voted by the EP are more in line with the topics they campaigned about.

The results of this research are relevant for several reasons. First, this study illustrates one of the reasons why concealed interests would rely on astroturfing, and that is to broaden their coalition. Recent literature on interest representation demonstrates that a key aspect of lobbying success is building a large coalition. Studies show that the larger a coalition is, the more likely it is to attain policy goals (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019; Klüver, 2011). Also, a coalition bringing together different interest group types are more likely to have their voice heard by the institutions. It means that interest groups should not only cooperate with similar organizations but also should be part of broader coalitions mixing business interests and civil society movements for instance. However, creating such a transversal coalition can be arduous as business and NGOs are not often on the same wavelength. It is in that sense that private interests might see the appeal of manufacturing their own grassroots support. By so doing, they present a front that supposedly takes into account private and public interests, with the advantage of controlling the communications from their astroturf group.

Second, the reliance on astroturfing can also be explained with the concept of *venue shopping*. This concept postulates that interest groups are concentrating their lobbying efforts on the venue where they consider they can exert the most influence. Along those lines, an interest group might develop a strategy to try to enact change in the policymaking process and make another institution responsible for the policy in question (Pralle, 2003). Research has shown that depending on group type, access is more easily granted to certain venues. In the EU, it appeared that the Commission is more likely to listen to business groups, and the EP to NGOs and civil society organizations (Bernhagen et al., 2014; Beyers, 2004; Bouwen, 2004). Given the fact that the EP is not the ideal venue for businesses to spread their messages, creating an astroturf group can be seen as a strategical choice by private interests. In order to compete with the voice from genuine grassroots movements, an astroturf group would appear as legitimate and appeal to MEPs who were on the fence regarding shale gas and hydraulic fracturing. The case study shows that astroturfing can be used strategically depending on the target of a lobbying campaign. Whereas it might prove difficult for oil and gas companies to have the permission to organize an event inside the EP, RECC was successful in gaining access to the institution to organize an exhibition the day before the vote.

In conclusion, this paper offers insights regarding the use of an astroturf movement for lobbying purposes. In this case, a front group with a misleading name was created briefly before a vote in the EP. The objective of this group was to promote the position of the shale gas industry and claiming it represented the voice of concerned citizens. The impact of RECC is hard to assess but they managed to gain access to the EP to organize an event and spread their messages without having to disclose their ties to the industry. The objective of the shale gas industry was attained as no moratorium was introduced regarding shale gas exploration and no new binding EU legislation followed.
By simulating the voice of citizens, astroturfing poses a real threat to EU democracy. As this case study shows, oil and gas companies managed to bypass the rules on exhibitions inside the premises of the EP, which illustrates how the rules on lobbying transparency in the EU are not stringent enough. It is thus necessary to conduct further research on astroturf lobbying in order to understand how astroturf movements are created, how they operate, and how they communicate. These avenues of research might help in finding ways to detect astroturf groups online and offline as early as possible.

DISCLOSURE
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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ENDNOTES
1 The text was retrieved on 25 September 2018 from the website of the organisation http://re-cc.eu/about/. However, since the website had been closed in 2013, the website http://archive.org/ was used to extract the data.

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