Empirical Approaches to the Study of Access*

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Abstract

While organized interests employ a broad range of activities in pursuit of their goals, practitioners and scholars alike deem access, or direct contacts with policymakers, as the "gold standard" of activities. However, this type of access is difficult for empirical researchers to study because scant records of direct contacts exist. In this essay, I discuss the role of access in studies of organized interests and policymaking and describe three common approaches to the empirical study of access: official records of access, when they exist; survey self-reports by organized interests and policymakers; and experiments. I identify the strengths and limitations of each approach and provide guidance and recommendations for empirical researchers using these approaches to study access.

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Organized interests engage in a wide range of activities to pursue their policy goals including making campaign contributions, testifying in legislative hearings, and mobilizing public support. Of these myriad activities, both practitioners and scholars identify direct contacts with elected and non-elected policymakers, or access, as one of the most common and consequential (e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2009; Levine 2009; Schlozman and Tierney 1986). While organized interests' influence over the policymaking process is difficult to detect (De Figueiredo and Richter 2014), access is posited as a key antecedent to influence (Wright 1996); through access, organized interests can most effectively convey information and expertise (Hansen 1991), mobilize policymakers to engage in activities amenable to their preferences (Hall and Deardorff 2006), and advance their preferred policy outcomes (Baumgartner et al. 2009).

Given its prominence as the "gold standard" of lobbying activities (Levine 2009, 7), access features in a variety of research questions in the study of organized interests and policymaking such as the strategies and tactics interests use to obtain access (Hojnacki and Kimball 1998), to which policymakers interests have access (Miller 2020), and whether access translates to influence (Baumgartner et al. 2009). While some of these studies draw on qualitative methods (e.g., Levine 2009; Nownes 2006) or formal theory (e.g., Austen-Smith 1995; Schnakenberg 2017), most utilize quantitative analyses of real-world or experimental measures of access. However, these quantitative studies must grapple with a unique challenge: access is rarely observed, and hence difficult to empirically examine. Because most direct contacts between organized interests and policymakers occur out of public view and records are seldom revealed, empirical researchers are often left to study access without direct measures of access itself.

In this essay, I provide an overview of how empirical researchers study organized interests' access to policymakers. While some studies conceptualize of access as interests' participation in policymaking venues, such as sitting on advisory committees or offering feedback in consultations or regulatory forums (e.g., Binderkrantz, Pedersen, and Beyers 2017; Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2020), my discussion focuses on access as direct contacts, or interpersonal interactions between policymakers and interests that typically unfold in private. As I describe in the next section, I focus on direct contacts not only because they are uniquely valued forms of access

by interests and policymakers alike, but also because the secrecy surrounding them poses unique challenges for empirical researchers.[1] In the remainder of the essay, I identify and describe three common approaches used to study organized interests' access to policymakers: official records, on the rare occasions they exist; survey self-reports; and experiments. While reviewing each approach, I discuss its strengths and limitations, and, in the concluding section, I provide recommendations and guidance for using these approaches. Through this essay, I hope to motivate researchers to think critically about the tradeoffs associated with these approaches and take steps to address shortcomings in their research designs. While data scarcity cannot forestall all research on substantively and normatively important phenomena, we must be cognizant of and strive to mitigate weaknesses in our studies as we work to accumulate knowledge.

Access as the "Gold Standard"

Despite its ubiquity in studies of organized interests and policymaking, "access" lacks a clear, universal definition; as Binderkrantz, Pedersen, and Beyers (2017, 308) note, "very few articles... offer an explicit definition of access," instead relying on "an intuitive understanding of access as some sort of (direct) contact" (see also Wright 1996). I do not here seek to arbitrate among different definitions of access (see Binderkrantz, Pedersen, and Beyers 2017), but instead focus on one particular form of access—direct contacts between organized interests and policymakers. I focus on direct contacts for three reasons. First, though scholars may seldom offer definitions of access, direct contacts are central to their "intuitive understanding" of access. Access implies the capacity to communicate or interact with someone or something (e.g., Hall and Wayman 1990, 800, 803; Langbein 1986, 1053; Wright 1989, 714), and direct contacts, whether in-person or remote (e.g., email, phone), are quintessential opportunities for communication and interaction.

Second, while other lobbying activities, such as participating in committee hearings or holding

[1] I also limit my discussion to studies that utilize measures of direct contacts (or experimental analogues) as outcomes or explanatory variables. While many studies examine access through related phenomena such as campaign contributions (Bertrand, Bombardini, and Trebbi 2014; Fouirnaies 2018; Fouirnaies and Hall 2018; Powell and Grimmer 2016) and network connections (McCrain 2018; Vidal, Draca, and Fons-Rosen 2012), I exclude them from the essay because they do not grapple with the key predicament I identify—how to study access empirically when direct measures are seldom available.

seats on administrative boards (Binderkrantz, Pedersen, and Beyers 2017; Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2020), facilitate interaction, both organized interest representatives and policymakers report that direct contacts are among the most frequent and effective means of interaction. In their survey of American organized interests, Baumgartner et al. (2009) report that the most frequent tactic in which respondents indicated engaging was personal contact with rank-and-file members of Congress and their staffs (80.6%), and many respondents also reported making personal contact with majority and minority members of congressional committees (60.7% and 53.6%, respectively) and officials in federal agencies (41.9%) relevant to their policy goals (see also Drutman 2015; Schlozman and Tierney 1986). Further, when asked which lobbying activities they believed to be most effective, most organized interests participating in surveys conducted by Berry (1977) and Milbrath (1963) selected direct contacts with policymakers. While many governments outside of the United States provide more formal opportunities for organized interests to participate in the policymaking process (Binderkrantz, Pedersen, and Beyers 2017; Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2020), organized interests in those contexts also report frequent direct contacts with policymakers in the legislative and executive branches of government (Beyers 2004; Binderkrantz 2005).

Direct contacts are so valued by organized interest representatives and policymakers for at least four reasons. Through direct contacts, policymakers and organized interests receive each other's attention, which enables them to share information and expertise more efficiently than they can through other means (Levine 2009; Nownes 2006). In addition, direct contacts makes the preferences of policymakers and interests more salient, or mentally accessible, such that they are more likely to consider each other's preferences and in the future (Miler 2010; Wright 1990). Further, access enables policymakers and interests to build interpersonal relationships that promote cooperation and trust (Levine 2009; Schlozman and Tierney 1986). Finally, when communicating privately, interests and policymakers feel more comfortable engaging in candid discussions than they would in public view (Schlozman and Tierney 1986). Thus, direct contacts are not merely *a* form of access, but *the* form of access most valued by both parties.

Third, despite their importance in the study of organized interests and policymaking, direct

contacts pose unique challenges for empirical scholars because they are uniquely difficult to measure among the advocacy activities associated with access. While collecting and coding data on other forms of access, such as interests' participation on government committees and in administrative consultations (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2020), requires extensive researcher labor, deriving measures of access based on these activities is at least feasible because the requisite data is public. Differently, direct contacts typically occur out of public view and records of their occurrence are rarely disseminated.[2] For example, the United States Congress does not disclose direct contacts between its members and outside entities and exempts itself from the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) such that journalists, scholars, and concerned citizens cannot compel disclosure. Again, when Binderkrantz, Pedersen, and Beyers (2017) asked members of the Danish Parliament to share their personal calendars in order to observe with which organized interests they interacted, only 33 of the 179 MPs agreed to provide these records, forcing the authors to find an alternative measure of access. As a result, researchers who study organized interests and their interactions with policymakers must find ways to measure direct contacts they can rarely observe.

Extant Empirical Approaches to Access

Empirical scholars have responded to the difficulty inherent in studying an often unobservable phenomenon with three general approaches: leveraging rare opportunities where official records are made public; collecting survey self-reports of access from organized interests and/or policymakers; and conducting experiments. While each approach can help us learn about access, organized interests, and policymaking, each also carries with it unique strengths and limitations.

Official Records

In a few contexts, researchers have identified cases where official records of access are available. Some of these records are released to the public in compliance with statutes such as the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) (Ban and You 2019) and Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA)

[2]Policymakers are likely reticent to release records of direct contacts not only because transparency might hinder the advantages afforded by direct contacts, but also because providing evidence of their relationships with organized interests could cause ire among a public skeptical of so-called "special interests" (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

(Hirsch et al. n.d.; You n.d.). Others have been released as part of transparency initiatives implemented voluntarily by policymakers, such as Barack Obama's disclosure of the White House visitor logs (Brown and Huang 2020; Miller 2020) or the European Commission's disclosure of its meetings with lobbyists (Albareda 2020; Alves 2020; Egerod, van der Ploeg, and Rasmussen n.d.; see also Dommett, Hindmoor, and Wood 2017). Still others have been made public through open records requests and lawsuits, such as the White House visitor logs from the Bill Clinton and Donald Trump administrations, respectively (Miller 2020). Finally, researchers have acquired official records through personal requests to organized interests and policymakers (Rothenberg 1992; Smith 2015) and by scouring archives (Heberlig 2005). Scholars have used official records of direct contacts to explore research questions including which organized interests enjoy access to which policymakers (e.g., Alves 2020; Miller 2020), how revolving door lobbyists facilitate access for their clients (e.g., Hirsch et al. n.d.; Egerod, van der Ploeg, and Rasmussen n.d.), and how access helps organized interests and policymakers achieve their respective goals (e.g., Ban and You 2019; Miller 2020).

The primary strength of using official records to study access is that they directly capture the phenomenon of interest. Rather than relying on survey respondents to provide accurate recollections of their direct contacts or on experiments to recreate the dynamics of access in realistic ways, official records provide researchers with objective transcripts of which organized interests experienced access to which policymakers. An additional strength of official records is that they often offer coverage for long periods of time; therefore, unlike surveys and experiments, which can only measure access for the time period they are administered, official records enable researchers to explore how the dynamics of access vary with changes in the political environment (Egerod, van der Ploeg, and Rasmussen n.d.; You n.d.). A final strength of official records is that they sometimes provide information about the substance of the contacts, such as the policies interests and policymakers discussed (e.g., Ban and You 2019; Egerod, van der Ploeg, and Rasmussen n.d.). These details allow researchers to examine not only which interests have direct contacts with which policymakers, but also the substantive implications of those contacts.

The key limitation of official records is that they are seldom available for contexts of interest to

researchers. However, even when researchers obtain much-coveted official records of direct contacts, they must grapple with additional limitations. For instance, official records may provide information for only a subset of direct contacts in a given context, thus spurring generalizability concerns. Though many lobbying firms who represent foreign entities also lobby for domestic clients (You 2020), findings from studies drawing on direct contacts reported through FARA (Hirsch et al. n.d.; You n.d.) may not apply to congressional lobbying more broadly because they focus on foreign clients lobbying predominantly on foreign policy issues. Another limitation of official records is that they constitute observational data and cannot facilitate causal claims without a convincing identification strategy. A final limitation of this approach is that while official records identify which organized interests interacted with which policymakers, they rarely provide insight on the data-generating process by which the strategic behavior of organized interests and policymakers led to access. In other words, if researchers seek to understand how the access-seeking and access-granting behavior of interests and policymakers, respectively, produce direct contacts, official records can seldom provide answers without additional data collection and analysis (see Miller 2020).

Survey Self-Reports

When official records of access are not publicly available, the organized interest representatives and policymakers who are parties to direct contacts can divulge their occurrence. Thus, one popular approach to empirically studying access is to try to reconstruct official records by soliciting survey self-reports of access from those participants. While these surveys differ in many ways, their common characteristic is that they ask organized interests and policymakers to indicate the degree to which they had direct contacts with their counterparts. This approach has been used to measure access in myriad institutional contexts including Congress (Austen-Smith and Wright 1994; Hall and Miler 2008; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998, 1999, 2001; Langbein 1986, 1993; Langbein and Lotwis 1990; Wright 1989, 1990), the presidency (Brown 2014; Peterson 1992), and the federal executive branch (Reenock and Gerber 2008; Yackee 2012) in the United States (see also Baumgartner et al. 2009) and the parliaments and bureaucracies of several European countries and the European Union (Beyers 2004; Beyers and Braun 2014; Chalmers 2013; Crepaz, Hanegraaff, and Salgado 2021; Eising

2007*a*,*b*; Hanegraaff, van der Ploeg, and Berkhout 2020). Among the research questions scholars have probed with survey self-reports are which members of Congress lobbyists target (Austen-Smith and Wright 1994; Hojnacki and Kimball 1998), what tactics interests use to seek access across venues (Beyers 2004; Chalmers 2013), and how direct contacts influence regulatory language (Yackee 2012).

The key strength of survey self-reports is that they help researchers recover the unobserved records of direct contacts between organized interests and policymakers. In an ideal world with full compliance from all organized interests or policymakers in the researcher's sampling frame, this approach would provide the same information conveyed by the official records policymakers are reticent to disclose. Another strength of survey self-reports is that researchers can use the broader survey to collect other hard-to-measure quantities of interest. For example, Hojnacki and Kimball (1998) aim to explore whether organized interest characteristics, such as the number of employees who work on lobbying and the strength of an interest's base of support within each member of Congress' district, inform interests' targeting strategies. While information on these characteristics is not required by federal lobbying disclosure reports and not publicized by interests themselves, the authors were able to use their survey to collect information on both interests' direct contacts and several organizational characteristics.

Like official records, survey self-reports are observational data, subjecting them to the same inferential limitations like endogeneity. However, the central unique weakness associated with self-reports of access is that they are vulnerable to non-response and response bias. First, non-response bias describes how respondents' decision to not complete researchers' surveys can yield a sample of respondents whose characteristics and behavior are systematically different than those of non-respondents. For instance, if a researcher investigating interests' targeting of members of Congress for direct contacts receives more responses from high-resource interests than from low-resource interests, and if resources condition targeting strategies, then the researchers' empirical analyses could produce erroneous conclusions.[3]

Second, response bias describes the bias introduced when respondents' answers deviate from the

[3]Problems arising from survey non-response can be mitigated through sampling procedures or survey weights that yield random or representative samples (e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2009; Miller 2021).

truth. Researchers using survey self-reports depend on respondents offering accurate recollections of their direct contacts; when their accounts diverge from their realized direct contacts, they introduce measurement error.[4] If these divergences arise from respondents' mistaken recollections, then this error will be random, yielding unbiased but inefficient inferences. However, social desirability concerns may lead respondents to systematically misreport direct contacts. For instance, organized interests might exaggerate their clout by overstating direct contacts with legislative leaders. Unlike mistaken recollections, inaccurate reports motivated by social desirability introduce non-random error that biases researchers' analyses. Because researchers can rarely verify self-reports of access, the extent to which response bias affects self-reports is unknown.

A final feature of survey self-reports represents both a strength and a weakness: researchers' choices in question wording dictate the measures of access recovered. In the former case, researchers can use their discretion over the survey instrument to hone in on important dimensions of access, such as the degree to which access arises from access-seeking or access-granting behavior by interests or policymakers, respectively. For instance, by asking interests how often they experienced access at their initiative or that of a policymaker, Crepaz, Hanegraaff, and Salgado (2021) can discern that interests receiving public subsidies are more likely to receive access at the initiative of policymakers. However, in the later case, imprecision in researchers' question wordings can induce measurement error. For instance, Hojnacki and Kimball (1998) ask respondents to indicate whether the level of effort they exerted on getting direct contacts with specific legislators was "strong, medium, weak, or none at all" (see also Austen-Smith and Wright 1994). If respondents interpreted the scale points differently, then some of the variation in self-reported access would be attributable to respondent subjectivity rather than real differences in access experienced.

Experiments

As an experimental revolution has worked its way into the study of political institutions in recent decades (Grose 2014), a small but growing set of experimental studies focusing on organized interests' access to policymakers has emerged. In contrast to official records and survey self-reports,

[4]This concern also applies to self-reports of other quantities of interest that researchers collect in surveys.

experiments do not draw on information about previous instances of access, but instead glean inferences through exercises that either simulate access-seeking or access-granting behavior or through randomized interventions that influence real-world requests for or provisions of access. Lab and survey experiments recruit organized interest representatives or policymakers to participate in a simulated task or respond to a series of questions that the respondents are aware are part of an academic study (Chin 2005; Chin, Bond, and Geva 2000; Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger, and Stokes 2019; Miller 2021). Differently, field experiments introduce and examine the effects of randomized interventions on the behavior of organized interests and policymakers who are unaware of their participation in the experiments (Brodbeck, Harrigan, and Smith 2013; Grose et al. Forthcoming; Kalla and Broockman 2016; Wiener 2020). Extant studies use experimental approaches to investigate research questions such as which members of Congress organized interests target for direct contacts (Miller 2021), what organized interest characteristics and tactics inform policymakers' provision of access (e.g., Kalla and Broockman 2016; Wiener 2020), and how direct contacts influence policymakers' preferences and activities (Grose et al. Forthcoming).

The key advantage of experiments is that they can identify causal relationships. By randomizing treatment assignment to organized interests and/or policymakers, all confounders are balanced across groups such that differences in outcomes are attributable to the researchers' treatments. For instance, because interests' campaign contributions are endogenous to other considerations related to access, such as the alignment of interests' and policymakers' preferences (Bonica 2013), it is difficult to identify the effect of contributions on direct contacts or subsequent behavior in observational studies (Wright 1990). However, with experiments, Kalla and Broockman (2016) isolate the relationship between contributions and access, and Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger, and Stokes (2019) demonstrate that contributions influence policymakers' preferences. Another advantage of experiments is that they allow researchers to study typically unobservable behaviors such as the dynamics of lobbyists' targeting choices (Miller 2021) and how policymakers' responses to requests for access are informed by the tactics interests use in making requests (e.g., Kalla and Broockman 2016; Wiener 2020). A final advantage of experiments is that they are less susceptible to social desirability bias than survey self-reports. Because subjects in field experiments are unaware

of the experimental interventions, their responses are unlikely to deviate from their day-to-day actions. Additionally, some survey experimental tools, such as conjoint (Miller 2021) and list experiments (Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger, and Stokes 2019), minimize social desirability bias because respondents can rationalize socially undesirable choices with other components of the experiment.

The central limitation of experiments is that, because researchers' interventions are not naturally occurring, they generate concerns about external validity (Grose 2014).[5] An experiment's external validity hinges on whether it elicits the same responses that subjects would provide in their day-to-day activities; as an experiment deviates from a realistic scenario, its external validity suffers because its conclusions are less likely to generalize to the real-world phenomena of interest. For example, if organized interests always disclose whether they employ registered lobbyists or that members make campaign contributions, then experiments which find that the disclosure of this information leads to more or better access may be of lesser substantive value (Brodbeck, Harrigan, and Smith 2013; Kalla and Broockman 2016).

External validity concerns pose challenges for experimental design. For lab and survey experiments, because respondents know the exercises are hypothetical, they may offer responses that differ from the decisions they make in their day-to-day work. To mitigate this challenge, researchers must craft survey experiments that resemble reality as closely as possible through exercises which mimic real-world tasks (Chin 2005; Miller 2021). Though field experiments avoid this challenge by implementing interventions in the course of real-world activities, they are more difficult to execute because they typically require the cooperation of confederate organized interests who allow researchers to manipulate their behaviors toward policymakers (e.g., Grose et al. Forthcoming; Kalla and Broockman 2016). Because interests may be unwilling to facilitate experiments, researchers sometimes must employ deception, which prompts further ethical concerns (Wiener 2020). Additionally, the range of behaviors which researchers can plausibly manipulate with their partners' consent limits the scope of their projects. For instance, while Kalla and Broockman (2016) ran-

[5]Lab and survey experiments also face the same survey non-response challenge as do survey self-reports. However, experiments' internal validity ensures that the treatment effects are unbiased for the sample of respondents, and researchers can use survey weights to assess the degree to which those effects generalize to the population (see Footnote 3).

domize the content of access requests sent from the liberal interest with which they partnered to Democratic members of Congress, they could not randomize the interest's ideology or the members' partisanship. Thus, while their findings indicate that a liberal interest receives better access to Democratic congresspersons when it discloses that its members make campaign donations, they are unable to consider whether the same dynamics hold for conservative interests' access to Republican members of Congress or interests whose ideology diverges from the members of Congress from whom they request access.

Guidance and Recommendations for Researchers

No approach to studying access is perfect; while each of the three approaches discussed here have unique merits, each also has distinct drawbacks. However, scholars cannot allow these drawbacks to preclude research on access because this work not only contributes knowledge about organized interests and the policymaker process, but also provides insights about important normative issues such as representation and political equality (e.g., Gilens and Page 2014; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). Thus, the goal for researchers is to use the approaches at hand in ways that emphasize their strengths while addressing and remaining cognizant of their weaknesses. I conclude with a series of recommendations that researchers studying access with empirical methods should consider in conducting their work. While some recommendations apply to only one of the approaches discussed, others speak to the study of access more broadly. I summarize my discussions of each of these approaches and the applicable guidance and recommendations in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Characteristics of Empirical Approaches to the Study of Access

Empirical Approach	Basis of Access Measure	Recent Examples	Strengths	Limitations	Guidance & Recommendations
Official Records	Retrospective reports of direct contacts, often from government files	Albareda (2020); Alves (2020); Egerod, van der Ploeg, and Rasmussen (n.d.); Miller (2020); You (n.d.)	•Direct measure of concept of interest •Offer coverage for long periods of time •May provide information on substance of direct contacts	Often unavailable •May not generalize to substantive contexts of interest •Difficult to make causal claims •Rarely provide insight on access-seeking and access-granting dynamics	•Draw on other methods and data sources to contextualize observed access •Be creative in looking for untapped official records
Survey Self-Reports	Policymaker/organized interest recollections of past direct contacts	Crepaz, Hanegraaff, and Salgado (2021); Hanegraaff, van der Ploeg, and Berkhout (2020)	•Can recreate unobservable records of direct contacts •Can design questions to capture access-seeking and access-granting dynamics •Can gather information on other hard-to-measure concepts in the same survey	•Vulnerable to nonresponse and response bias •Difficult to make causal claims •Question wording may induce measurement error	•Probe potential bias •Ensure question wording targets concepts of interest •Consult practitioners and other data sources to inform question wording
Experiments	Responses to simulated tasks or real-world interventions	Grose et al. (Forthcoming); Hertel-Fernandez, Mildenberger, and Stokes (2019); Miller (2021); Wiener (2020)	•Can identify causal relationships •Can provide leverage on specific components of access-seeking and access-granting dynamics •Minimal susceptibility to social desirability bias	•Results may have reduced external validity •Difficult to find confederates willing to facilitate experiments •May require deception •May not be able to manipulate access dynamics of interest	•Craft simulated exercises and interventions that mirror real-world behavior •Consult practitioners and other data sources to inform experimental design

Draw on Other Data and Methods to Inform Empirical Research

The secrecy surrounding organized interests' access to policymakers not only limits our ability to observe access, but also obscures the antecedents and consequences of access that are of interest in empirical studies. For instance, the process by which access occurs is often a "black box"; while researchers know that access stems from a confluence of interests' access-seeking behavior and policymakers' access-granting behavior, empirical data often sheds little light on the dynamics through which access manifests. Even official records of access seldom provide information about the substantive policies addressed (but see Ban and You 2019; Egerod, van der Ploeg, and Rasmussen n.d.), such that it can be difficult to discern the policy consequences we should expect from access. Thus, empirical researchers are often unable to determine how well their research designs map onto the real-world processes leading to and flowing from access.

When empirical researchers confront these limits, other types of data and methods can help them augment their studies. For instance, though the theoretical linkages between access and other quantities of interest are sometimes unclear, formal theory can help researchers elucidate expectations and guide empirical tests. As an example, while the relationship between network connections and access is opaque, Hirsch et al. (n.d.) pair expectations from a formal model of revolving door lobbyists' ability to provide clients access to their connected policymakers with an empirical analysis of lobbyists' direct contacts disclosed in their FARA reports (see also Austen-Smith and Wright 1994). Additionally, a resurgence in formal models of lobbying in recent years provides empirical researchers with ample predictions to test with real-world data (e.g., Awad 2020;

Dellis n.d.; Ellis and Groll 2020; Schnakenberg 2017).

Alternatively, researchers can draw on existing or original interviews and surveys to improve their contextual understanding of access and related phenomena. Scholars looking for insights on access from organized interest representatives and policymakers can benefit from recent qualitative studies that synthesize the authors' interviews as well as ample direct quotes (e.g., Nownes 2006; Levine 2009). For those looking for more detailed primary source materials, Leech (2014) provides the full transcripts of interviews with 15 lobbyists discussing topics such as lobbying tactics and targeting strategies. Finally, Miller (2020) demonstrates how original surveys and interviews can provide theoretical leverage for empirical research—specifically, the author illustrates how organized interests' access to the White House is driven by the preferences of presidents rather than of organized interests. Insights from organized interest representatives and policymakers can be particularly useful for survey self-reports to help researchers design questions that precisely measure their phenomena of interest and for experiments to augment their external validity. For instance, experimentalists might consult with practitioners to craft stimuli and treatment allocation mechanisms that mirror the real-world analogues they look to replicate.

Ensure Question Wording Maps onto Intended Measures

All survey responses are susceptible to question wording effects, or the phenomenon that respondents' answers are influenced by the construction of questions themselves (Zaller 1992, 33-34). In the case of survey self-reports of access, how researchers pose their questions about direct contacts can influence the substantive interpretation and precision of the resulting measure. Consequently, researchers should take care to design their survey instruments such that they correspond to their theoretical concepts of interest and that respondents interpret their questions as intended and provide answers consistent with researchers' aims. As mentioned earlier, when asked by Hojnacki and Kimball (1998) if their efforts to get access to specific members of Congress was "strong, medium, weak, or none at all" (see also Austen-Smith and Wright 1994), interest representatives likely interpreted the answer choices differently such that respondents exerting the same effort to obtain access provided disparate answers, thus increasing the noisiness of their measure. Differently,

Crepaz, Hanegraaff, and Salgado (2021) ask interest representatives to provide a more objective indicator of access—the frequency with which they experienced access in the previous year—that likely produced a more precise measure. Additionally, by asking separately about access initiated by the interests themselves or by policymakers, Crepaz, Hanegraaff, and Salgado (2021) could craft distinct measures of access that mapped onto their access-seeking and access-granting hypotheses. Researchers should take advantage of the freedom afforded by customizing survey questions to ensure that respondents understand what information researchers seek and that their answers coincide with the researchers' intended measures.

Probe Bias in Survey Self-Reports

The extent of bias in survey self-reports of direct contacts is unknown; because the motivation for using this approach is to collect otherwise missing data, the accuracy of the self-reports cannot be assessed with another data source. One approach researchers can take to assess concerns about bias is to survey multiple policymakers and interests about the same direct contacts and assess the consistency of their answers. For example, if multiple persons privy to the same instances of access provide similar self-reports, researchers can be more confident in their measures (see Beyers 2004). Differently, if researchers have strong beliefs about the directionality of the bias in self-reports, they can conduct sensitivity analyses to assess the robustness of their results across varying magnitudes of bias (Gallop and Weschle 2019). For instance, as discussed above, social desirability bias might induce organized interest representatives to exaggerate their clout by overstating their direct contacts with legislative leaders. Through sensitivity analyses, researchers who suspect this bias contaminates their data could re-estimate their results with simulated data to determine how large the upward bias concerning direct contacts with legislative leaders needs to be in order to alter their substantive conclusions.

Be Creative in the Search for Official Records

While official records of access are rare, the eclectic places where researchers have found them suggests that other official records lie in wait for scholars to find. Many of the official records of

access examined in extant studies were released in accordance with statues or at policymakers' initiative, but others were discovered through formal requests or stumbled upon in archives. For instance, the White House visitor logs from the Clinton and Trump presidencies were only released after FOIA requests and lawsuits, respectively (Miller 2020). Additionally, the records of direct contacts between the AFL-CIO and members of Congress from which Heberlig (2005) draws were found in the organization's archives. Further, as digitization of archival and contemporary data accelerates, it may become easier for researchers to obtain and process records of direct contacts. Researchers with the perseverance to file information requests or dig through archival material might be rewarded for their determination with novel data.

Use Approaches Complementarily

While no approach to studying access is perfect, researchers can combine approaches in the same studies to address the weaknesses of each approach. The most natural way to complementarily pair approaches is to match observational data drawn from official records or survey self-reports with experiments. With observational data, researchers could demonstrate empirical relationships using naturally-occurring data to provide a basis to generalize similar patterns found in an accompanying experiment. Conversely, the experimental element of the study could causally identify the relationships established in the observational analysis or probe the mechanisms believed to underlie those relationships. Experiments can also help address response bias in survey self-reports by providing an additional venue to test researchers' expectations where social desirability is less likely. Further, researchers interested in the access-seeking or access-granting dynamics underlying the direct contacts in their observational data could utilize experiments to scrutinize how those behaviors affect access. Finally, in cases where the observational data comes from a contextually narrow set of official records where generalizability is in question, researchers could incorporate experiments evaluating the same theories with a more broadly drawn sample of respondents to assess the findings' applicability in other contexts. By drawing on the strengths of multiple approaches, researchers can produce more robust insights on organized interests' access to policymakers and its consequences.

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