

LOBBYING REGULATIONS IN NEW BRUNSWICK: TOWARD A POLITICAL ECONOMIC ACCOUNT

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Introduction

New Brunswick's lobbying system can be generously described as a 'work in progress.' As the second last province to adopt a registry, New Brunswick's system is challenged by weak enforcement, few resources, and poor public access. These challenges undermine the *Lobbyists' Registration Act's* aims of openness and fair access. Why is New Brunswick a laggard in lobbying regulations?

The literature on lobbying regulations tends toward three causal explanations. Scandals, cross-jurisdictional learning, and rent-seeking (political manipulation to extract advantages with little regard for societal benefits) have all been advanced as key factors affecting the trajectory of Canadian lobbying systems. None of these factors, however, can explain why New Brunswick's system lags behind other provinces, namely Nova Scotia or Newfoundland and Labrador.

This Research Note posits a political economic explanation of lobbying regulatory development. Using New Brunswick as a theory-building case study, we argue that an uncompetitive lobbying environment undermines the *incentive* to develop and reform lobbying systems. Lobbyists may welcome regulations if there is a real threat of becoming an outsider. Between its homogenous industrial environment and its economically-concentrated business community, New Brunswick lacks sufficient lobbying competition to trigger this threat.

This argument is inspired by the insights of neopluralism. Responding to a 'pluralist' vision in which access to government is relatively open, 'neopluralist' works recognize how different factors, namely the markets (Lindblom), limit actors within policy processes. Political scientists often employ neopluralism to identify the "superior position" of business interests in shaping public policy (Smith 315). It is this neopluralist concern that partly motivates the push for a transparent lobbying system. While the political economic argument presented here is not neopluralist outright, neopluralism's emphasis on structural power is helpful in advancing it.

In this Research Note, I advance this argument in four parts. First, I provide an overview of New Brunswick's lobbying system. Second, I summarize and challenge three common causal explanations. Third, I articulate a political economic account of lobbying regulations in New Brunswick. Fourth, I discuss my findings and the value of this approach.

New Brunswick's Lobbying System: An Overview

New Brunswick adopted a lobbying registry in 2013, the second last province to do so. Originally as a campaign promise (PCNB), the David Alward Progressive Conservative government committed to introducing legislation shortly after the election in 2010. This commitment was stalled when an original version of the bill was allowed to die on the Order Paper in 2011 ("Journal of Debates (Hansard)," 2013). The *Lobbyists' Registration Act* was reintroduced in late 2013 with few changes ("Journal of Debates

(Hansard),” 2014). The Act received royal assent in 2014 before the provincial election. The registry under the Act became effective in 2017.

The Act’s purpose is to introduce transparency to lobbying in New Brunswick while recognizing that “free and open access to government is an important matter of public interest.” In pursuit of this goal, the Act establishes a registry for lobbyists and a registrar to monitor and publicize it (later the Office of the Integrity Commissioner (OIC)). The Office is also responsible for educating lobbyists, flagging non-compliance, and establishing regulations that help interpret the Act. Finally, the Act specifies penalties for non-compliance that are capped at \$25,000 for first offences and \$100,000 thereafter.

The requirements to register are set by *paid* lobbyist category. Under the Act, lobbyists are divided into three categories: consultant lobbyists, in-house (organization) lobbyists, and in-house (non-organization) lobbyists. Consultant lobbyists, who lobby on behalf of a client, must register in all circumstances. Both in-house lobbyist categories (organizational and non-organizational) are required to register providing their activity is a “significant part of their duties” (New Brunswick Regulation 2017-11 under the Lobbyists’ Registration Act (O.C. 2017-77, 2)). The Act’s regulations stipulate that 20% or more of a full-time position over three months constitutes a ‘significant part of duties.’ This is consistent with most systems in Canada, though it has been critiqued for its ambiguity (see Fry). The difference between organizational and non-organizational lobbyists is who registers: the responsibility for registration falls to the senior officer of an organization, but not necessarily for non-organizations. Figure 1 maps the registration requirements.

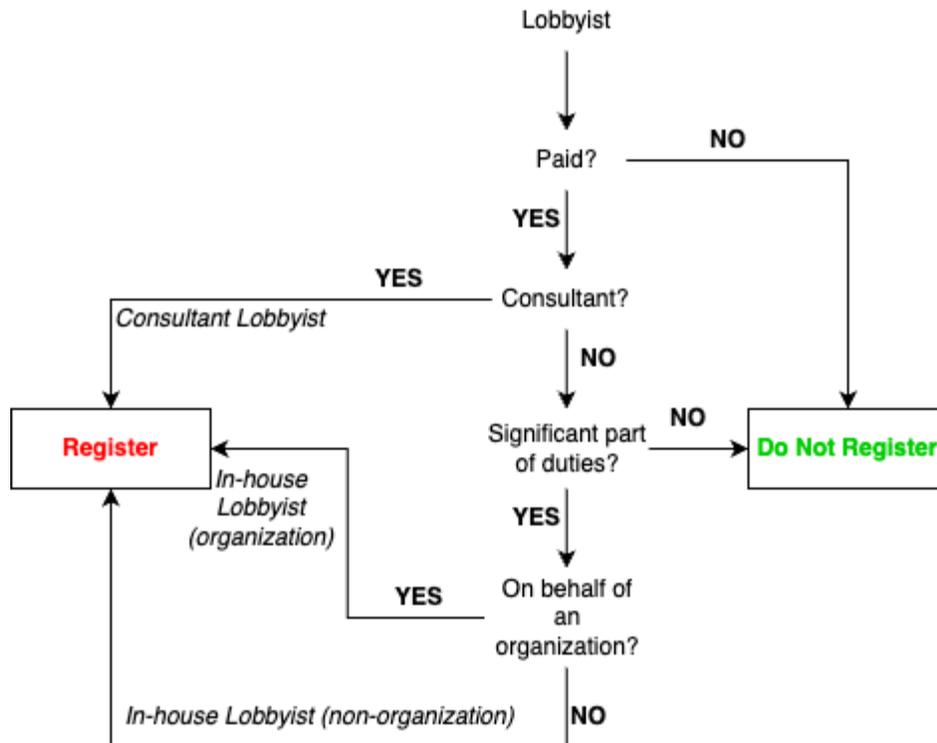


Figure 1. Registration Requirement Flow Chart

Lobbyists who register share basic information on their efforts and organization. New Brunswick requires lobbyists to provide their names, organizations, client's organization (if applicable), contact information, public officer targets (departments/agencies), communication methods, subject matter, and further details of their aims. This information is standard for a registry in Canada.

Most causal organizations and enterprises, however, do not need to register. The 20% floor likely exceeds the lobbying activity of smaller organizations. Ninety-six hours over three months is a lot of time dedicated to lobbying. It is also unclear what counts toward this floor. Does travel and prior research count, or only the time spent communicating with public officers? The regulations do not engage these questions, leaving ample room for selective interpretations.

The registry is inhibited by other factors. First, and perhaps most concerning, the Commissioner has no investigative or fining powers. Should a lobbyist not comply with the Act, the Commissioner has few options. By the Commissioner's account, this defect renders the registry "basically a self-reporting honour system" (Office of the Integrity Commissioner 11). Second, the OIC does not track frequency of communications, nor does it consider lobbying expenditures. The former makes it difficult to ascertain which specific public officers are being lobbied or if access to them is skewed. Third, as of the most recent annual report, the OIC employs seven people, only one of whom has a clear focus on lobbying (Office of the Integrity Commissioner). The others seem to be aligned with the other legislative acts under the OIC's purview. The OIC is responsible for managing conflicts of interests within the government, which is a significant undertaking.

In execution, there are other barriers. The registry itself is not user-friendly. Information on each registration is tucked away in their registration profiles. A given registration's description of lobbying activities is often written in one language, usually English. Search criteria do not allow for filtering by lobbying categories (eg. consultants), and initial search results do not indicate these categories. The website has several misdirects. At the time of writing, the "General Information" and "The Act and Registration" links under the Lobbyist Registry drop-down menu go to the *Conflict of Interest Act*. Finally, the Office has not presented an annual report since 2018.

Many of these issues are not unique to New Brunswick. Provincial registries share many of these larger concerns over investigations, compliance, and inflated mandates. Some, like Newfoundland and Labrador, arguably have worse online access. Still, New Brunswick's system stands out for how late it was introduced and its unique combination of issues. Why did New Brunswick take so long to adopt a lobbying registration system? Why does this system remain underdeveloped and poorly resourced?

Three Causal Explanations

The lobbying regulations literature is dominated by three causal explanations. Scholars inside and outside Canada have pointed to scandals, cross-jurisdictional learning, and rent-seeking to explain the trajectory of lobbying regulations in a given jurisdiction. Though each approach can matter to regulatory development, I argue that none of them can sufficiently explain New Brunswick's specific trajectory.

Scandals

The presence (or absence) of lobbying scandals within a jurisdiction can explain shifts in lobbying regulatory systems. This is the common account within the lobbying system literature broadly (see

Bolleyer; Holman and Luneburg) and in Canada (see Shepherd). In theory, scandals incentivize political actors to publicly demonstrate that the lobbying system is fair, transparent, and accountable. Lobbying scandals are particularly effective in mobilizing reform under media scrutiny (Newmark and Vaughan).

We can align scandals to system developments in Quebec (Yates and Beauchamp), the City of Toronto (Bellamy), and the federal government (Shepherd). The Sponsorship scandal of 2004 is perhaps the best example of scandal-incited reform. As reinforced by the Gomery Commission, the Sponsorship scandal revealed that the Liberal Party of Canada directed public money to friendly ad firms in Quebec. In the wake of this scandal, both the Liberal Party and later their Conservative successors introduced accountability reforms, including to the lobbying system. Though, as Fry argues, these regulatory reforms were mediated by electoral opportunism and remain deficient in several ways.

Applied to New Brunswick, the scandal explanation falls short. Though there have been several scandals in New Brunswick (see for instance Bissett), the salience of these scandals is limited. Due in part to a small and monopolized media environment, lobbying does not feature heavily in the news. Moreover, scandals cannot readily explain differences in how robust lobbying systems are. For instance, why does Quebec require lobbyists' compensation to be reported, but not New Brunswick?

Diffusion and Learning

Lobbying regulations can be attributed to lesson-drawing from similar jurisdictions. Lesson-drawing, a type of policy diffusion, is typified by garnering insights from other jurisdictions in developing public policy. Pross and Shepherd advance this diffusion approach to explain regulatory developments across Canadian provinces. Appreciating the role of incremental change, Pross and Shepherd track how regulatory innovations develop throughout Canada in stages. While the federal government is the innovator, other provinces, like Ontario and Quebec, are 'early adopters'. Others follow as 'majority adopters'. Finally, there are some provinces that are laggards. Regulatory ideas spread from one jurisdiction to another, mediated by social and cultural differences. This tracks with a broader literature on international lobbying norms (see Crepez) and incremental reform (see Pross).

In scanning lobbying legislation across Canada, there are clear similarities. Some jurisdictions explicitly copy the legislation of others. For example, as Pross and Shepherd note, Nova Scotia draws its preamble and provisions from the federal government and Ontario respectively. Most Canadian jurisdictions use the same 'consultant-'in-house' lobbyist' division and use a 'significant part of duties' threshold. In New Brunswick's case, the Commissioner acknowledged that the Office "benefited from considerable input from the Office of the Registrar of Lobbyists for Saskatchewan" (Office of the Integrity Commissioner 11). In drafting the legislation, Minister Paul Robichaud noted that the Act was partly based upon Nova Scotia's model ("Journal of Debates (Hansard)," 2014). Moreover, there is an advantage to commensurate lobbying systems. Industry and civil society does not stop at provincial borders and many organizations may hold offices across jurisdictions. The more similar the systems, the easier it will be for these organizations to navigate them.

But why are some provinces laggards, namely New Brunswick, while others are early adopters? Is it legislative capacity or cultural differences? Pross and Shepherd are uncertain. Addressing Nova Scotia's minimalist approach to lobbying regulations, Pross and Shepherd surmise that perhaps "the province's New England roots" may be to blame (169). This is not particularly convincing. Pross and Shepherd entertain "institutional and cultural forces" as variables but do not engage political economic factors.

Rent-Seeking

Lobbying regulations can be shaped by the rent-seeking behaviour of the regulators and regulated. As one subset of rent-seeking, regulatory capture “asserts that agencies, while nominally working in the public interest, are habitually captives of the regulated” (Moran 189). That is, agencies are considered ‘captured’ when they are working to advance the interests of regulated actors. Regulatory capture is particularly effective at explaining regulatory stasis (Bunea). Other rent-seeking models, like regulatory opportunism, identify both the regulators and the regulated as equally calculated in shaping legislation and agencies. For instance, Fry argues that the federal lobbying system’s development is partly defined by “partisan power plays” seeking electoral benefits (90).

These causal explanations exceed scandal-based approaches by identifying the actors preventing or facilitating regulatory change in between moments of media or public scrutiny. In that regard, rent-seeking approaches offer more detail to sub-national jurisdictions with less public scrutiny, like New Brunswick. These theories also acknowledge the relationship between the size of regulated industries and system outcomes. Capture theories argue that the more competition within a regulated industry, the harder the capture (Stigler). This is a crucial insight into New Brunswick’s smaller lobbying community. There is little doubt that political opportunism shaped New Brunswick’s lobbying system. The Alward government conveniently introduced a registry near an election and stalled its operation for another three years.

Yet, there are anomalies to New Brunswick’s lobbying system that rent-seeking models cannot readily explain. First, why is New Brunswick different from, for example, Newfoundland and Labrador whose registry received legislative approval ten years earlier? Perhaps New Brunswick has a smaller lobbying community, but not meaningfully so. Newfoundland and Labrador is the second smallest province by population and has a history of sectoral dominance (Douglas and O’Keeffe). Second, the value of a weakened lobbying system is minimal to lobbyists. At worst, a lobbyist registry is a minor inconvenience to interest groups. To that end, committee evidence reveals that there is little political tension over the registry.

Toward a Political Economic Account

New Brunswick’s lobbying system can be explained by its unique political economy. Specifically, it is the interaction of a homogenous industrial environment and an economically concentrated business community that is responsible. Unlike any other province, New Brunswick’s economy is dominated by a small group of private businesses, producing an uncompetitive lobbying environment. This dominance undermines the *incentive* for a fair, balanced, and transparent lobbying system among advocates.

New Brunswick’s business community is not as diverse in industry and ownership as other provinces. Sometimes described as “underdeveloped” (Burrill), New Brunswick is highly reliant on resource development. The forestry and oil refining industries are critical to the New Brunswick economy. This is matched with high economic dependency. New Brunswick has some of the highest unemployment rates and lowest median incomes in Canada (Government of New Brunswick; Statistics Canada, “The Daily — Canadian Income Survey, 2020”). In 2019, New Brunswick surpassed Prince Edward Island as Canada’s ‘poorest province,’ receiving the most equalization support per capita (Jones). New Brunswick also has one of the lowest labour productivity rates (Statistics Canada, *Hours Worked and Labour*

Productivity in the Provinces and Territories (Preliminary), 2021) and business R&D spending (The Conference Board of Canada).

This industrial homogeneity is observable in New Brunswick's active firms and GDP. Table 1 presents New Brunswick's top ten industries and their number of employers, large employers and GDP percent. Three findings stand out. First, after "Health care and social assistance," there is a sharp decline in GDP contribution. Second, while the number of employers varies considerably, all industries are typified by few major employers. Major employers are more likely to lobby and compete over public policy. Third, New Brunswick's manufacturing industry, which includes petroleum refining, only has three major employers. This is the second lowest in the country.

Table 1. Top New Brunswick Industries by Employers

<i>NAICS Category</i>	<i># of Employers</i>	<i># of Large Employers</i>	<i>GDP % of all Industries</i>
Real estate and rental and leasing	929	0	13.3%
Public administration	292	6	11.3%
Manufacturing	881	3	9.8%
Health care and social assistance	3000	11	9.6%
Retail trade	3018	0	6.7%
Construction	2829	1	6.6%
Educational Services	212	5	6.0%
Finance and Insurance	716	5	5.9%
Transportation and warehousing	1302	3	4.6%
Utilities	39	1	3.9%

Details: Industry categories are established by the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS). Larger Employers are defined as employers with over 500 employees. Sources: (Statistics Canada, "Canadian Industry Statistics"; Statistics Canada, "Table: 36-10-0402-02 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at Basic Prices, by Industry, Provinces and Territories, Growth Rates").

More crucially, these industries are not competitive with each other. Specifically, the Irving Group's ownership of a swath of New Brunswick businesses reduces competition. It is estimated that the Irving Group includes 300 companies, though this is difficult to track given limited transparency (Bacon). It is important to note that the Irving Group remains a privately- and family-owned company.

The Irving Group's standing in New Brunswick is unmatched in Canada. As the Bacon report on Canadian News Media argues, the Irvings' provincial influence is "unique in developed countries" (59). The report attributes the Irvings' "dominance" to its industrial and media base (p. 12). Until recently, the Irving Group owned nearly all of New Brunswick's major newspapers (Ibrahim). Scholars have observed that the Irving Group advances its own agenda and orchestrates the defeat of unfriendly coalitions through its media empire (Couture; Steuter; Glynn and Rao; Lord).

On the industrial side, the majority of New Brunswick's exports are in energy and natural resources (New Brunswick), and the Irving Group makes the bulk of these exports. In fact, at times, Irving Oil has independently been responsible for the majority of New Brunswick's exports (Parkinson; Poitras).

Between its companies, some have estimated that the Irvings employ either one in twelve (Ratchford, Anderson, and Yusufali) or one in eight of all New Brunswick workers (Moser). This industrial influence is even greater when controlling for public employment, which represents nearly 30% of workers in the province (Statistics Canada, “Employment by Class of Worker, Monthly, Seasonally Adjusted (Table: 14-10-0288-02)”).

In brief, New Brunswick’s political economy is characterized by a lack of competition. New Brunswick’s economic portfolio is homogenous in industrial composition. There are fewer major industries and those industries tend toward similarly sized firms. This is not itself the issue, nor is it unique to New Brunswick. The challenge is that this homogenous business environment is also economically concentrated. Firms in New Brunswick are not equal, and the Irving Group leads the way. It is this homogeneity-concentration interaction that produces an uncompetitive lobbying environment.

As presented in Table 2, we can see the signs of an uncompetitive lobbying environment within the registry itself. New Brunswick has the second fewest registrations of any province, only slightly exceeding Prince Edward Island. Likewise, New Brunswick has the least consultant lobbyists of any province. This may indicate a dearth in demand for lobbying expertise. While provincial registries are not identical, this likely downplays New Brunswick’s smaller lobbying environment. Unlike provinces like Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick does not categorize lobbyists under one organizational entry.

Table 2. Registrations by Province

<i>Province</i>	<i>Active Registrations</i>	<i>Consultant (as %)</i>
New Brunswick	180	60 (33.3%)
Alberta	901	557 (61.8%)
British Columbia	973	370 (38.0%)
Manitoba	391	95 (24.3%)
Newfoundland and Labrador	298	154 (51.7%)
Nova Scotia	413	88 (21.3%)
Ontario	2997	2435 (81.2%)
Prince Edward Island	165	82 (49.7%)
Saskatchewan	236	124 (52.5%)
Quebec	1977	487 (24.6%)

The concentration of lobbyists in New Brunswick is even more striking. The Irving Group (and Irving Oil) has twenty-three active registrations, representing 13% of all active lobbyists. The next closest is Merek Canada (a pharmaceutical group) and the Canadian Medical Association at nine each. There is no good comparator to the Irving Group in another provincial registry. The Canadian Medical Association has twenty-four registrations in Manitoba and thirty-one registrations in Nova Scotia. But these total registrations represent proportionately less than overall registrations in their provincial systems and are not industry groups.¹

To be clear, I am not suggesting that New Brunswick’s lopsided business community is actively preventing regulatory reform. Such an argument is more consistent with regulatory capture. Instead, we are arguing that a competitive environment raises the value of a more robust lobbying system for lobbyists. As some have noted, a transparent, balanced, and fair lobbying system can benefit lobbyists (Năstase and Muurmans). Lobbyists with competition want to know that they are all playing by the same rules. Likewise, there is evidence that lobbyists may welcome modest reform, as they could benefit the most from a fair system. Therefore, an uncompetitive environment *reduces* this incentive, making reform less likely. The regulated (lobbyists) are not conspiring against a robust lobbying system, but they are not clamouring for it either. This causal argument is presented in Figure 2.

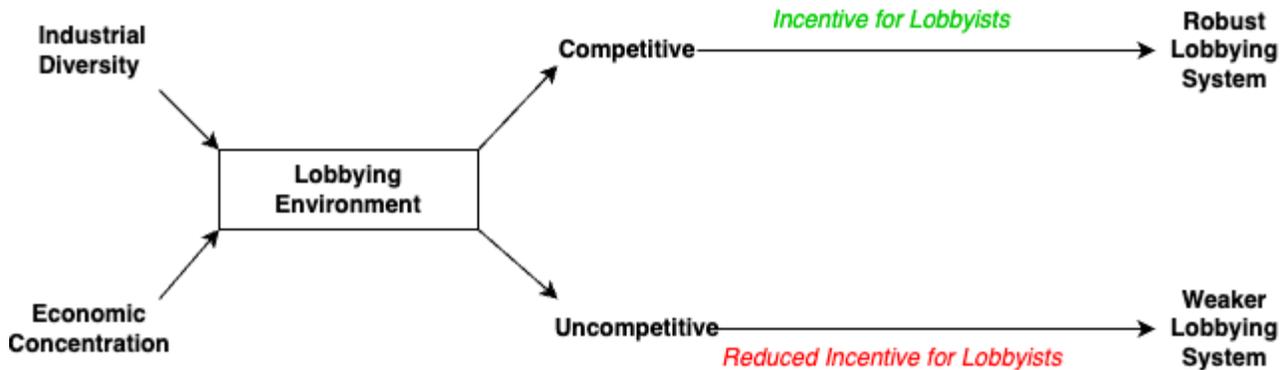


Figure 2. A Political Economic Causal Approach to Lobbying Regulations

Briefly, this political economic account draws from neopluralism’s focus on structural power. Neopluralist scholars, like pluralists, emphasize the role of interest groups in public policy (McFarland; Smith). Unlike pluralist thinkers, neopluralists find business influence often exceeds the check of countervailing interests. As Lindbloom argues, business is advantaged explicitly and implicitly by their market influence. Governments are more likely to give business actors priority because they influence economic conditions. Beyond that, the actions taken by businesses, which affect people’s livelihoods, are not democratically controlled. This structural power can undermine the openness of public policy.

Neopluralism identifies the advantage of industry in policy outcomes, which aligns with our theory. The case of New Brunswick is further exacerbated by limited industrial competition. The structural power of a few elite industry actors, namely the Irvings, has diminished the incentive for a robust lobbying system. However, this Research Note differs from neopluralism in two ways. First, I argue that competition among business actors can incentivize more robust lobbying systems. That is, countervailing power matters to system outcomes. Second, I am not implying that any actors are opposed to a stronger lobbying system. The lack of an incentive is different from hostility. For example, there appears to be no evidence to suggest that the Irving Group opposes lobbying system reform.

Discussion and Conclusion

The trajectory of lobbying systems can be influenced by many factors. Scandals, learning, and rent-seeking all shape lobbying regulations. These causal factors are insufficient in explaining New Brunswick’s lobbying system. New Brunswick is a late adopter to lobbying legislation with a relatively weak registry and Office. Why does New Brunswick differ from other jurisdictions like Nova Scotia? A

lack of competition among paid lobbyists is at fault. Due to high economic concentration and low industrial diversity, there is little incentive among lobbyists to advance the system.

Often, we assume lobbyists are antagonistic to regulations and work against their success. This political economic approach partly flips this logic on its head. Interest groups are not inherently opposed to lobbying systems. To the contrary, interest groups may welcome new regulations under competitive circumstances. Systems and notional transparency afford lobbyists more credibility with the public. Similarly, regulatory systems reduce the chance of closed access. When lobbyists can see themselves as potential outsiders, the transparency and accountability of a system becomes more attractive.

As we have discussed, New Brunswick is not competitive like other provinces. The New Brunswick business community is dominated by a small group of actors. The Irving family is the most evident example of this dominance. The Irving Group's political and economic influence in New Brunswick is unrivaled. While there is no evidence to indicate that the Irving family is conspiring against the lobbying system, their structural power undermines its development.

One may surmise that a lobbying system is not merely the function of industry and business. This is true to an extent. Still, many non-profits and other non-industry groups do not meet the thresholds used by lobbying legislation. In some jurisdictions, non-profits have explicit exemptions. Moreover, civil society is not generally typified by intense competition as we may expect with profit-oriented industry groups. And one would be remiss if we did not acknowledge where the anxiety over lobbying is really directed. The 'nefarious lobbyist' trope tends to elicit an image of industrial influence, less so in the case of non-profits.

Looking ahead, there is more opportunity for political economic accounts of lobbying regulations. This Research Note makes the case for highlighting industrial depth and economic concentration. Crucially, lobbyists cannot be assumed to be opposed to regulations. Regulatory studies more broadly should pay close attention to the incentive structures of the regulated under competitive circumstances.

One factor not considered here is legislative capacity. Smaller provinces have limited resources and must prioritize legislation and agencies accordingly. This is probably part of the reason why PEI was the last province to adopt a registry. New Brunswick's inadequate electronic access is also a function of this capacity. Relatedly, New Brunswick seems to find itself a laggard in several policy areas and very rarely an innovator. But this should not be taken too far. Both Newfoundland and Labrador and Nova Scotia established registries far earlier than New Brunswick while sharing limited legislative capacity and innovation. Moreover, New Brunswick's record as a policy laggard in other areas does not independently explain why its lobbying system also lags behind other jurisdictions.

Future works should consider how both competitive and capacity deficiencies can be overcome. In drafting its legislation, New Brunswick briefly considered a joint registry among the Maritime provinces. This would simultaneously address concerns over limited competition while making better use of finite resources. A joint lobbying registration system would also simplify the process for lobbyists in multiple jurisdictions. This would not be the first instance where the Maritimes have combined resources into one agency (e.g., the Maritime Provincial Higher Education Commission). It remains a mystery why this idea did not come to fruition.

To comment on this research note, please write to editorjnbs@stu.ca. Si vous souhaitez réagir à cette note de recherche, veuillez soit nous écrire à editorjnbs@stu.ca.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the feedback on earlier drafts from Stephen McBride, the anonymous reviewer, and the Editor. This Research Note draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Endnote

¹ Perhaps a closer comparison to the Irving Group would be Nova Scotia's Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers.

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