LOBBYING

A question of citizenship

How do corporations balance lobbying with social responsibility?

IN LIGHT OF THE ECONOMIC crises and corporate scandals of recent years, the ways in which corporations take part in politics have become a major concern for societies across the globe. In the UK this concern is reflected in heated debates about the pending lobbying bill, revisions to the rules on corporate reporting and wider public controversies about tax avoidance.

Despite the growing interest in the political behaviour of corporations, the public knows relatively little about the strategic and social considerations that underpin corporate political behaviour: What kinds of corporations get involved in politics? When do they seek to talk to national politicians and to European legislators? And how do corporations reconcile openly political activities such as lobbying with expectations of corporate social responsibility (CSR)?

These questions are investigated in a new research project led by Professor Patrick Bernhagen (University of Aberdeen) and Dr Kelly Kollman (University of Glasgow) with the support of Dr Alvise Favotto and Dr Natalia Patsikura. The project tracks the political behaviour of 2,000 large corporations across different activities (lobbying, campaign contributions and CSR) and venues (national, European Union and United Nations). This information can shed light on corporations' political strategies as well as on how coherent these strategies actually are.

For example, analysing the data will show if a corporation simultaneously commits to reducing its carbon emissions while lobbying governments or international organisations to prevent more stringent regulation of such emissions. In this way the project can identify to what extent CSR commitments are effective, rather than ceremonial in nature or even part of a corporate lobbying strategy to avoid future regulation.

LOBBING & SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The project's preliminary findings suggest first that corporations that engage in lobbying or political campaigning are also more likely to become active in social responsibility initiatives - a pattern that is observed at national, European and global levels. While corporate social responsibility may be beneficial for society, this implies that public officials may want to be wary of corporations engaging socially with the aim of enhancing their legitimacy in the political realm.

Second, even though large corporations respond to evolving global standards of corporate conduct, there are considerable national differences in how corporations define and seek to implement their environmental and social responsibilities. This suggests that it is possible to engage corporations in a discussion about their responsibilities to society, but that global CSR initiatives may need to be tailored to different political settings to a greater extent than they presently are. www.pbernhagen.de/research-projects

Corporations that lobby are more likely to be active in social responsibility initiatives