

A contribution to the conceptualization of political resources utilized in corporate political action

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- *This paper is an attempt at improving existing conceptualizations of corporate political resources. I contend that existing typologies are too vague, simplistic and incomplete on several points. This is why I firstly suggest a new typology and then offer some thoughts on the main characteristics of these resources. Lastly, I apply the idea of resource combination (or bundle) to political resources, showing that they can play three different roles in implementing two generic political strategies.*

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Introduction

A seminal paper by Birger Wernerfelt (1984) has paved the way for an influential stream of research into strategic management, now known as the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm. At first, the resource-based approach was very much focused on internal resources. However, in the 1990s, several authors started to broaden the range of resources considered by looking at external aspects such as corporate or brand reputation (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990), stakeholder trust (Barney and Hansen, 1994) or regulation. This last area is less widely accepted as a resource, but authors such as Maijoor and Van Witteloostuijn (1996), Boddewyn (2000) and, much more briefly, Kay (1993) or Bensédine and Demil (1996) suggest

that a given state of regulation can be regarded as a 'strategic asset'.

A few attempts have thus been made at applying the resource-based approach to public policy. Furthermore, such public policy research has used this framework, as far as competition in both the political and business arenas is concerned, which created some confusion in the use of the term 'political resource'. In this paper, I shall restrict the use of such a term to describing assets and skills utilized in the political arena, while the term 'regulatory advantage' can be used to refer to a favourable state of public policies for a given firm.

The former subject (the use of political resources in the political arena) has been more explored recently than the latter (the exploitation of a regulatory advantage in the good or service market). I wish here to contribute to a better understanding of political resources by proposing a more comprehensive list of potential political resources, highlighting their

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different functions, and by articulating these functions with corporate political strategies.

A tentative improvement of existing classifications of political resources

The idea of (and the need for) specific skills and resources used by the firm to manage its political environment is not recent. Indeed, Fainsod (1940) explained that an industry obtains a favourable regulation by its capacity to mobilize three kinds of resources: financial (political campaign financing), human (the use of lobbyists and lawyers), political (political coalition-building). He had already stressed the need to tie in the industry's political demands with broader societal goals in order to gain a wider support. Thus, even the concept of legitimizing the firm's political actions had already been suggested.

This idea of mobilizing specific resources and skills was also mentioned by Leone (1977) and Mahon and Murray (1981). Wilson (1980) also suggested that any resource can be converted into power usable in the political environment. Yoffie and Bergenstein (1985) spoke of the accumulation by the firm of a 'political capital'. Moreover, while Oberman (1993) favours the term 'institutional resources' to describe political resources, Boddewyn (2000) uses the term 'non-market resources' in a broader sense than Baron's (1995) 'non-market assets'.

The concept of political resources was introduced in France by Attarça (1999) and Jacomet (2000), who both use this term. They offer a classification of political resources, but their levels of analysis differ: while Attarça looks mostly at the individual level of the firm, Jacomet is mainly interested in the collective level of the trade associations.

Table 1 presents the different lists of political resources identified by the various authors. It should be noted, however, that the list of potential resources is infinite because it depends on the firm's political and competitive situations (see Boddewyn, 2000; Clegg, 1996). Never-

theless, we shall try to synthesize the most frequent generic categories in the literature.

Improvements in existing typologies can be proposed, as will now be discussed. First of all, very few classifications take into account the external dimension of resources: only those of Oberman (1993), Baron (1995) and Boddewyn (2000). It is true that some institutional factors mentioned by some authors cannot be owned directly by a firm. Nonetheless, certain external aspects can be controlled, maintained and channeled, if not owned, and thus are worth including. On the one hand, the creation and development of some resources may often come from other actors (who may share resources with the firm in the context of a coalition, for example). On the other hand, the creation and exploitation of a resource may be delegated outside of the firm (to a trade association, consultants, lobbyists or lawyers, etc., who will write reports and meet public decision makers on behalf of the company). Furthermore, existing typologies do not distinguish between image and reputation. Not only is there a difference in nature (image is a fugitive perception: it varies in the short run, depending on 'visible' actions undertaken by the firm, while political reputation is earned over time through a series of successes and/or failures), but also these two perceptions do not concern the same actors. Political reputation is built through repeated relations with professional non-market actors (especially public decision makers) who will eventually conclude that the firm is (or is not) politically credible, dangerous, legitimate, trustworthy, etc. This idea is very briefly mentioned by Jacomet (2000). By contrast, the political and social image of the firm (which often dresses as a 'corporate citizen', pretending to be 'socially responsible') is a perception by the general public. Its memory is much shorter and its opinion more shaped by the media than the perception of the interest group by professional non-market actors.

I also think that all previous authors have not been sufficiently precise about the areas of expertise required by corporate political activity. Even Attarça's (1999) distinction between

Table 1. Classifications of political resources in the literature

| Authors | Lists of resources used in the political environment | Comments |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Fainsod (1940) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Fainsod mentions 'resources', including the financial capacity to pay lobbyists and lawyers, to make campaign contributions and to use the media — In addition, the firm must exploit 'opportunities' such as creating coalitions or the possibility of legitimizing its demands by relating to the common good | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The distinction between resources and opportunities is close to Boddewyn's (2000) non-market internal versus external resources — Resources are considered from a purely financial point of view |
| Epstein (1969) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The creation and management of political alliances — Access to public decision makers and influencers — Dependency relationships of other actors towards the firm — The accumulation of political successes — The political status of the firm and its leaders | Some of the listed resources are uncommon in the literature: the accumulation of political successes (which can be explained by a learning process and leads to the building of a political reputation), the ties with dependent external actors (a pre-'resource-dependency' approach) |
| Leone (1977) | Leone stresses the fact that there are specific skills involved in the management of the political environment | A skill-based, rather than a resource-based, view |
| Boddewyn and Brewer (1994) | <p>Corporate political action requires</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — wealth — time — organizational skills — legitimacy — privileged information — access to other political actors, especially public decision makers | Is access to public decision makers really a means or rather an intermediary result of efficient political action? |
| Baron (1995) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Expertise and skills in the management of relationships with other political actors — Reputation as a responsible actor — Access to public decision makers | <p>Baron distinguishes non-market assets on the basis of several criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Assets which are hard versus easy to replicate — Assets shared with other actors versus assets owned by the firm — Assets which are built directly by the firm versus assets built and managed by an outside contractor |
| Oberman (1993) | <p>Three dimensions are crossed to classify resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Ownership: a political resource may be controlled by one firm or it may be collective (institutional resource) — Structure or content: this dimension differentiates the formal structure of an organization (an office, a trade association) and its output (a study, values) — Objectivity: a resource can be formal (e.g. the participation in a standard committee) or informal (e.g. reputation) | <p>This institutional approach is wider than the usual political resource approach: it includes companies but also public decision makers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The distinction between controlled versus collective resources is close to Boddewyn (2000)'s distinction between internal and external resources — These three dimensions are useful but in this wide institutional context, they make the classification rather complex |

Continued overleaf

Table 1. (Continued)

| Authors | Lists of resources used in the political environment | Comments |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Attarça (1999, 2000) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Technical-economic expertise — Organizational resources — Politicolegal expertise — Relational resources — Reputation (1999), economic and symbolic weights (2000) — Financial resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Resources are activated to become capabilities — External resources not directly controlled by the firm are not taken into account — The support of other political actors is not taken into account |
| Jacommet (2000) | Three types of resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The collective organization — The unity of interests among partners — Information and expertise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — This is a very collective approach of corporate political action — Information and expertise should be further detailed — The need for unity raises the issue of representativity (and thus of legitimacy) of the organization |
| Boddewyn (2000) | External non-market resources (power, wealth, mutual solidarity and respect between political actors) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Internal non-market resources (which seem to include the most common political resources mentioned by the other authors) | An interesting discussion of the internal resources (controlled by the firm) and the resources controlled by its allies (external resources), which are more likely to be shared than exchanged with such actors |

technical-economic and politicolegal expertise is simplistic. Indeed, there are other areas of expertise which a firm can exploit when dealing with public decision makers (such as the mastery of a technology, a social or environmental expertise). Moreover, his two categories regroup different kinds of expertise which do not necessarily go together: a company may possess high technical and technological skills without being an expert in the economy and management of its business and industry. Similarly, a firm may have a deep understanding of the legal constraints which it has to take into account, without a thorough knowledge of political and administrative system of public decision making.

Another weakness of previous classifications lies in the collective nature of some political resources: Oberman (1993), Baron (1995) and Boddewyn (2000) mention the fact that some resources can be shared with outsiders. However, Jacomet (2000) goes one step further when he suggests, briefly, that the unity of interests of the trade association members should be included as a political resource in itself. According to this author, this unity reinforces collective action. This idea can be

extended to a wider variety of actors. Indeed, the support of any stakeholder is a political resource. Obviously, the firm does not 'own' such a resource but it can use this support. The political weight of the supporting stakeholders will depend on their number (number of employees, company members, activist group members of the coalition), on the unity of their interests (speaking with a single voice makes for a more effective message) and on the diversity of actors (the more a firm is able to rally companies from various industries, diverse social groups, etc., the less it can be accused of being self-interested). This creates a new category of political resources which are purely collective by nature, as opposed to individual resources which become collective because they are simply shared.

Our last suggestion for improvements would be to include the activity of organizing various events to cement relations with non-market actors. The literature has not explicitly acknowledged this practice while being extremely common, as evidenced by the study of empirical cases. Indeed, in the context of rather co-operative governmental and media relations, many companies and trade associations

organize study trips, seminars, company or factory visits, debates, cocktails, breakfast meetings, dinner parties, etc. Such events provide unique opportunities to get the undivided (and more open-minded) attention of public decision makers and journalists. This practice is so widespread that it could be said that organizations compete in terms of originality and quality to provide such services, with very significant budgets in order to attract key actors. Sometimes on the edge of legality, journalists, civil servants and politicians are invited to the best restaurants and hotels, and are offered free trips. This is very common in most European countries and at European Community level, while the behaviour of lobbyists is more strictly regulated in the USA. This leads to the idea of a 'recreational skill' provided by the firm, and valued by both public decision makers and journalists, which will

often be part of a wider public relations campaign. This resource is a useful way to get a privileged access to a non-market actor.

Taking into account all of these remarks, I offer our own typology of political resources in **Table 2**.

The characteristics of political resources

These various political resources may differ in several characteristics, as mentioned above.

Internal versus external resources

Indeed, some resources can be internally created and owned by the firm (expertise, financial resources, organizational resources, recreational skill), but these very same resources can be externalized to partners (a hired lobbyist, lawyer or an association which

Table 2. A new typology of political resources

| Political resources | Comments |
|---|---|
| Expertise | Expertise can be gained in several separate areas: technical/technological, economic/managerial, social, environmental, legal, political/administrative |
| Financial resource | It can be both a direct political resource (through campaign contributions) and an indirect resource (through the financing of other political resources) |
| Relational resource | Including formal relations (e.g. the membership of a standard committee) and informal relations (interpersonal contacts with non-market actors) |
| Organizational resource | Either an internal resource (permanent office of representation, inhouse office of public affairs or regulatory monitoring, etc.) or an external resource (consultant under contract, offices of a trade association, etc.) |
| Reputation with other non-market actors | — This concept is close to Yoffie and Bergenstein's (1985) 'political capital', which stresses the idea of accumulation over time — A useful distinction could be made between the individual reputation of the firm's leaders or advocates (e.g. chief executive officer, prominent lawyer, etc.) and the institutional reputation of the firm itself |
| Public image | This public image may be a moderating factor in the public decision makers' reactions to the firm's attempt at political influencing |
| Support of stakeholders | — The weight of this support is a positive function of the stakeholders' number, unity of interest and diversity of origins — This support may be more or less formally organized (from a simple petition or demonstration to the creation of an association), and more or less durable (<i>ad hoc</i> versus permanent coalition) |
| Recreational skill | I include all kinds of recreational services supplied to public decision makers and journalists in order to gain the opportunity for a more informal, personal and perhaps favourable contact. These services are diverse: restaurants, hotels, 'study' visits, trips by planes, helicopters, etc. (usually all free of charge) |

will develop such resources on behalf of the company), while others are external in nature: the firm may manipulate and channel them but it will never own them (relational resources, reputation, public image, stakeholder support).

Firm-level versus collective resources

All listed resources may be created and exploited either at firm level (through inhouse offices and employees or hired consultants) or at collective level (through a formal association or an informal cooperative agreement, leading to the pooling of existing firm-level resources, and the creation of purely collective resources, such as stakeholder supports).

***Ad hoc* versus semi-permanent resources**

In business competition, some exploited resources will be product specific and will last only as long as the product's life cycle, while other resources are transferable to different activities and products — especially 'core competencies', as discussed by Hamel and Prahalad (1990).

The same can be said of 'political competition': some political resources will be issue specific and will last only as long as the life cycle of the issue (for example, stakeholder support or public image), whereas other political resources will be transferable to different issues (e.g. the firm's political reputation, which is accumulated over time through successes and failures, financial resources, political-administrative expertise). The issue-specific political resources are thus adhoc in nature, while multiple-issue political resources can be nurtured and exploited over a longer time frame, hence the term 'semi-permanent'.

The functions of political resources

Individual resources or resource bundles?

The mainstream resource-based literature explains superior economic performance by

the existence of a competitive advantage that is sustained through the use of a *bundle* of resources, skills or assets (there is no unified vocabulary on this topic). However, when authors move on to identify the resources which actually make a competitive difference, they offer evaluation techniques (such as Barney's Value, Rareness, Inimitability, Organization framework, 1997) used on individual resources. This is a common view in the founding works of Dierickx and Cool (1989), Barney (1991, 1997), Amit and Schoemaker (1993) and Collis and Montgomery (1995). Only Black and Boal (1994) stress the fact that a firm's competitive advantage is drawn from superior configuration of multiple assets, rather than just mobilizing one or a few unique individual resources. This idea has led to a sub-stream within the resource perspective initiated by the famous work of Teece, Pisano and Shuen (1997), centred on the concept of 'dynamic capabilities'. I tend to agree with this notion, considering the linkage from individual resources to competitive advantage to be unjustly overlooked. The crucial step of combining a set of complementary assets (which may lead to synergies) is missing.

I wish to apply here this idea to *political* resources, moving away from the usual simplistic unit of analysis (the individual resource) to the more realistic and aggregated unit of analysis represented by the resource combination (or bundle). This will enable this paper to show that the different political resources which have been identified here do not fulfil the same purpose: they actually complement each other.

Modes of political relationship and the use of political resources

As Andrews (1971) stressed in the general case of corporate strategy, and as Mahon (1989) applied to corporate political strategy, strategy is about mobilizing resources in order to achieve set goals: '... corporate political strategies employ an organization's resources to

integrate objectives and to undertake coherent actions directed toward the political, social, and legal environment in order to secure either permanent or temporary advantage and influence over other actors in the process' (Mahon, 1989). This is why I would like to link more explicitly than has previously been done the mobilization of certain political resources in the context of a given corporate political strategy. As will be shown, a political resource will be used in a different way, depending on the kind of political strategy that a firm wishes to implement.

There is no unified view in the literature on corporate political strategy classification. As noted by Oberman (1993), some authors have used the term 'political strategy' to describe very operational and isolated actions undertaken by firms. I tend to agree, and view the dominant typologies of corporate political strategies offered by authors such as Keim (1981); Keim, Zeithaml and Baysinger (1984); Keim and Zeithaml (1986); Zeithaml, Keim and Baysinger (1988); and Hillman, Zardkoohi and Bierman (1999) (who all agree to call political action committees [PACs], grassroots campaigns, PR and media campaigns, lobbying, etc. 'strategies') as accurate lists of corporate political *tactics*, which are employed within a coherent political strategy.

To sum up very briefly the main political strategy typologies suggested by other authors, three dimensions are used to classify the possible strategic options: the motivations of the firm (Yoffie and Bergenstein, 1985; Yoffie, 1987), the degree of involvement of the firm collectively (Jennings and Shipper, 1981; Lenway and Rehbein, 1991; Schuler, 1996; Demil, 1998) or individually (Weidenbaum, 1980; Mitnick, 1981; Oliver, 1991) and, lastly, the mode of relationship with public decision makers. As this third dimension seems to me to be the most important one, I shall relate the choice of a political relationship mode to resource utilization. Most authors who have chosen to describe corporate political strategy along this line have opposed two generic modes: cooperative versus adversarial relationships. In the cooperative mode, the firm

chooses to create a climate of trust, mutual esteem and interaction through the exchange of information and the search of a fair and reasonable compromise. As far as the adversarial mode is concerned, the firm tries to put pressure on the public decision makers through threats. Various terms are used to label these relationships: Birnbaum (1985) distinguishes between what he calls 'direct influence strategy' (described as information strategy) and 'indirect influence strategy' (described as pressure strategy), while Bourgeois and Nizet (1995) refer to 'legitimization strategy' and 'pressure strategy'. Considering the term 'legitimization' to be too restrictive in describing cooperative political activity, I support Jacomet's (2000) broader term of 'interaction strategy', which stresses the idea of a mutually beneficial exchange of resources.

It is this paper's view that the type of relationship chosen by the firm has a fundamental bearing on the kind of resources which are going to be mobilized and how this will be implemented. Indeed, in both relationship modes, political resources play a key role, although this role differs. In an interaction strategy, firms and public officials exchange political resources sought out by others: a firm offers financial support (through PACs in the USA, for example) or provides useful technical information to public decision makers who value such resources, in exchange for a favourable regulation or any kind of public decision (subsidy, tax exemption, etc.) valued by the firm. By contrast, in a pressure strategy, the firm threatens officials of negative consequences in the case of an unfavourable decision. These threats are all related to a risk of political resource loss for the public decision makers: loss of support from public opinion or local voters, withdrawal of financial support, etc.

Depending on the relationship mode, the various political resources identified earlier will play differing roles within a coherent combination (or bundle). We distinguish three roles played by political resources:

- *Primary resources* represent the resources having the most impact on public decision

makers. In the case of an interaction strategy, most often the resources valued by officials and supplied by the firm will be expertise (in different possible areas, this is especially valued by civil servants) and financial resources (campaign financing, directed at, and valued only by, elected politicians). Whereas in the case of an adversarial strategy, the firm will rely mainly on indirect pressure exerted by other stakeholders on the public decision makers. The firm will rely mainly on political resources, such as the support of stakeholders threatening to sanction public decision makers (demonstrations, petitions, detrimental media coverage, etc., ultimately leading to negative votes in subsequent elections), its public image and political reputation.

- *Supporting resources* (including relational and organizational resources, political-administrative expertise, recreational skills) are the vectors of the main resources. Qualified human resources are required to know how to create, mobilize and direct the main political resources to the key decision makers. Relational and recreational skills will enable the firm to gain access to officials and journalists and deliver its message (of cooperation or threats). With the exception of recreational skills (only used within a cooperative context), supporting resources do not vary with the relationship mode adopted. They are not valued by public decision makers in themselves but they are the necessary vehicles for offering other resources.
- *Complementary resources* are secondary resources which reinforce the impact of the primary resources. They are much less valued than the main resources. In the case of a cooperative relationship, these complementary resources will include: public image, political reputation and stakeholder support. Indeed, a firm's representative will be more likely to gain access to officials in order to hand in an expert report along with a position paper (primary resource) if its firm enjoys a positive public image and political

reputation, or the support of a stakeholder coalition (complementary resources). Whereas, when a firm chose a pressure strategy, complementary resources will be: financial resources (used to finance the mobilization of stakeholders through public relations and media campaigns, grassroots campaigns, etc.) and expertise in various areas (used to convince stakeholders to support the firm).

The most usual political resource combinations are represented in **Figure 1**, which demonstrates the main variations between the two relationship modes.

It should be noted that there clearly are other possible resource combinations, as this is highly contingent to the firm's internal and external situations. Furthermore, as already mentioned in this discussion, politicians and civil servants will value less highly the different political resources offered by the firm. This factor does not appear in our figures but should be kept in mind.

Illustrations of the use of political resources

Due to the space constraints of this paper, it is impossible to offer indepth empirical validations of this conceptual contribution, but a few illustrations of lobbying organizations can be briefly provided.

On the one hand, Greenpeace's opposition to the end of the moratorium on genetically modified organisms in Europe is a good example of a pressure strategy. The aim is to exert a threat of electoral retaliation on politicians. Thus, the main political resources mobilized include stakeholder support (by organizing petitions, demonstrations, sending letters to elected politicians and mobilizing the media), political reputation (Greenpeace is known to be a serious and stubborn contender) and public image. These political resources are far more important in a pressure strategy than resources such as expertise or financial support. Greenpeace

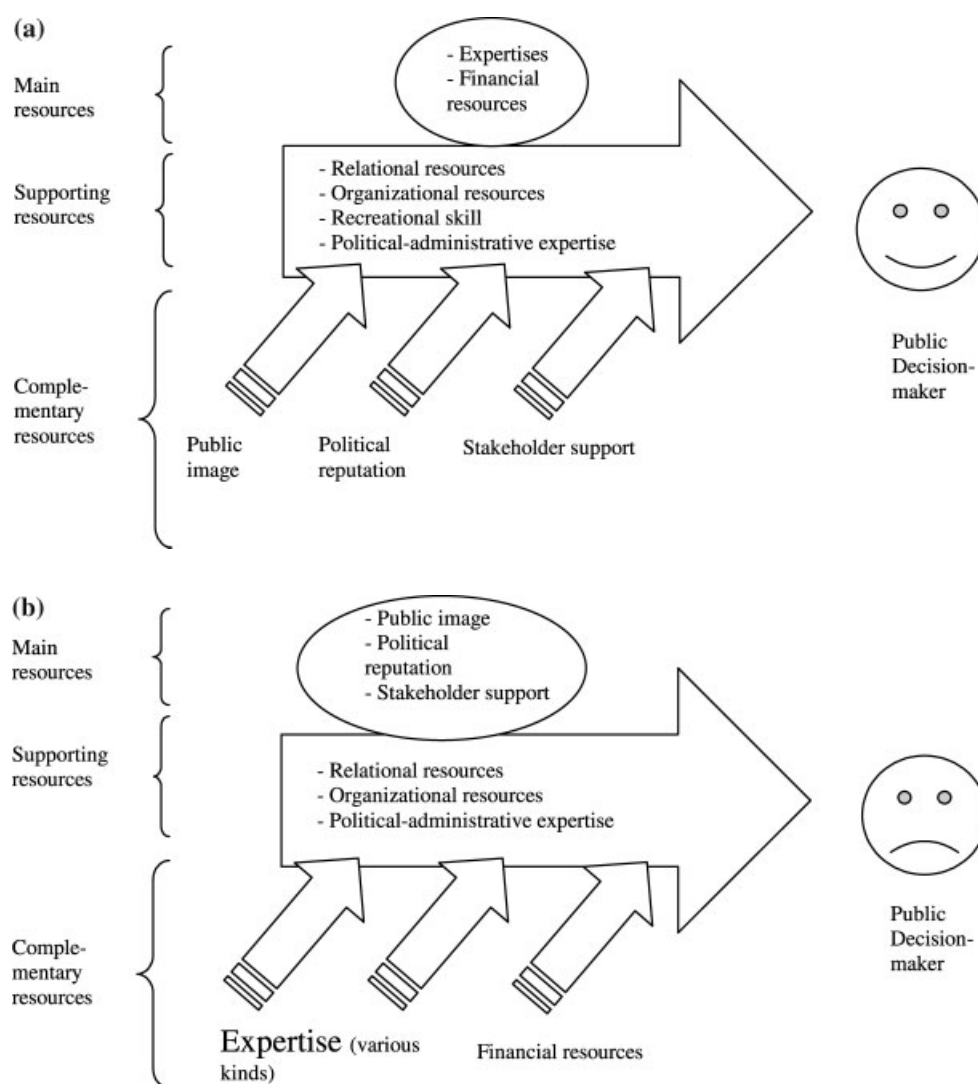


Figure 1. Most frequent combinations of corporate political resources used for (a) an interaction strategy and (b) a pressure strategy.

neither finance electoral campaigns nor possess the necessary human resources to supply public decision makers with substantive counter-scientific reports. The latter resource can be used sometimes by the non-governmental organization, but only as a complement to the main resources already mentioned. On the other hand, the recent adoption of the revised European directive on cosmetics regarding animal testing (directive 2003/15/EC) was an example of an interaction political strategy undertaken by the

cosmetics industry. It was able to provide expert information and recommendations, showing that alternative methods of testing were not yet sufficient to ban animal testing. It also developed the idea that an immediate ban would put the European industry at a competitive disadvantage compared with its Japanese and American counterparts. Resources such as stakeholder support (trade unions concerned about job losses, public research institutions, consumers, etc.) or public image were secondary in the

campaign. They were rarely used, and only as a complement to the main resources — technical and economic expertise. By cooperating with the European Commission officials and Europe's Industry ministers, cosmetics firms were able to maintain a long-lasting debate, ensuring that a final decision would last for several years, and that when it happened, a transition period of six years would be provided.

These two examples illustrate how political resources can be combined in order to implement the two types of political strategies.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to improve existing conceptualizations of corporate political resources. It has contended that typologies have been too vague, simplistic and incomplete on several points. This is why I first suggested a new typology and then offered some comments on the main characteristics of these resources (internal versus external, firm-level versus collective-level, *ad hoc* versus semi-permanent). Finally, we have applied the idea of resource combination (or bundle) to political resources, showing that they can play three different roles. This last development was also an opportunity to link more closely the existing literature on political resource (stemming mostly from resource-based works) with the body of research on corporate political strategy (drawing heavily on resource-dependency theory as far as Bourgeois and Nizet's (1995) influential classification is concerned). I would thus support the idea that these two research streams have much to offer each other.

An avenue for further research would be to validate this conceptualization empirically, either through indepth case studies or large-scale surveys.

Biographical note

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