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Corporate Power in a Multistakeholder World: Venue Hopping and the Multilevel Politics of Ultra-Processed Food

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ABSTRACT

The regulation of business is increasingly characterized by "soft" governance regimes that blur the boundaries of public and private authority, as signaled by the rapid proliferation of multistakeholder initiatives in global governance. This article explores how the spread of multistakeholderism creates opportunities for new forms of strategic action, enabling actors to participate in multiple fora, successively or simultaneously in order to pursue a particular agenda. The article focuses on multistakeholder initiatives in UK food policy and corporate political strategy in the regulation of ultra-processed food. We adapt the concept of venue shopping, introducing the idea of venue *hopping*, which captures how actors advance agendas in multiple spaces and at multiple political levels. The analysis traces negotiations across two food policy partnerships, showing how industry actors operated in and between venues, playing one setting off against the other.

1 | Introduction

The regulation of business is increasingly characterized by "soft" modes of governance that blur the boundaries of public and private authority (Andonova and Carbonnier 2014; Black 2008; Djelic and Quack 2018). Reflecting the spread of managerialist ideas and practices (Whiteside 2020), soft governance is underpinned by a logic of accommodation between public and private sectors and corresponding alignment between economic and social objectives. This is evident in optimistic yet elusive discourses of "partnership," "collaboration," and "synergies" that promise to generate "win–win" policy outcomes (Banerjee 2014; Garsten and Jacobsson 2013; Uribe 2024).

These soft forms of governance position corporate actors as key "stakeholders" in the negotiation, structuring, and implementation of health and environmental policy regimes (Djelic and Quack 2018; Levy and Newell 2002; Taggart and Abraham 2023; Zehavi 2012). This has resulted in the dispersal of policy and regulatory responsibilities across multiple fora, leading to a proliferation of standards, codes, and agreements that rely on self-regulation and political engagement beyond the traditional architecture of the state (Bartley 2011, 2022; Cashore et al. 2021; Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson 2006; Eberlein et al. 2014; Levi-Faur 2005).

Multistakeholder initiatives have emerged as key mechanisms of soft governance (Andonova 2017; Brès et al. 2019; Schleifer 2019), offering an alternative to multilateralism in global governance (Scholte 2020) and a solution to complex policy problems across different levels and contexts (Abraham 2022). These initiatives are deeply rooted in a managerialist logic (Eagleton-Pierce 2020) that encourages collaborative decision making among equal stakeholders through participatory processes (Uribe 2024; van Schalkwyk et al. 2024). This managerialism has become intertwined

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with deliberative democratic ideals of consensus and collective decision making (Ansell and Gash 2008; Scherer and Palazzo 2011), which blur the lines between the state and the private sector (Börzel 2011; Swyngedouw 2005).

The spread of multistakeholderism has generated an extensive academic literature (Pouliot and Thérien 2023; Reinsberg and Westerwinter 2021), with empirical studies highlighting political conflict between the social and environmental objectives of regulatory initiatives and corporate interests (Fougère and Solitander 2020; Fransen and LeBaron 2019; Fuchs et al. 2011; Godziewski 2021; Moog et al. 2015; Schleifer 2016; Bloomfield and Manchanda 2024). What remains underexplored in this literature is an examination of the opportunities for multilevel corporate strategy created by the proliferation of multistakeholder initiatives in global governance. Although governance theory recognizes that the boundaries between state and non-state authority have become increasingly blurred and contested, producing regulatory regimes marked by fragmentation and interdependencies (Black 2008), these insights have yet to be applied systematically to multistakeholder initiatives.

This article represents a first step towards addressing this gap, exploring how the spread of multistakeholder initiatives can enable actors to move between them and play them off against one another. We trace how well-resourced corporate actors are able to operate in and between multistakeholder initiatives, drawing on perspectives from policy studies and political economy. We build upon Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) influential work on interest groups and agenda setting, adapting their concept of venue shopping to the emergence and spread of soft governance regimes. The notion of venue shopping captures how actors seek to relocate decision making processes to the institutional venue most receptive to their interests. Yet, as Helfer (2009) argues, the goal of shopping is usually a single favorable decision, rather than more iterative strategies. We propose the concept of venue *hopping* to provide a different perspective on strategic action between political levels and to capture the complex landscape of multistakeholder governance. Where Baumgartner and Jones find that actors shift issues to a particular institutional context, we argue that strategic action in contemporary governance can often resemble a game of hopscotch, in which actors participate in and move between multistakeholder initiatives (and other governance mechanisms) at different levels. Whereas shopping denotes instances where actors choose a single, preferable forum, venue hopping relates to actors participating in multiple fora successively or simultaneously in order to pursue a particular policy agenda. This creates opportunities for actors, particularly those with superior resources, to coordinate their activities across policy contexts and governance levels, using their engagement in one setting or initiative as a means of influencing decision making and policy implementation in another. This involves maintaining a presence in multiple spaces, where influence is exerted not through a (definitive) shift in venue, but rather through the ability to operate between them. As such, the concept of venue hopping captures the strategies that have emerged alongside the proliferation of soft governance instruments.

Here, we focus on the ability of corporations to exploit opportunities created by soft governance regimes, where playing multistakeholder initiatives off against one another constitutes a "hedging" strategy against more stringent regulation (see Meckling 2015). The analysis below suggests that multistakeholderism enables venue hopping strategies by virtue of its informal and flexible aspects, characterized by low costs of separate entry and loose institutionalization. Our analysis highlights how the consensus-oriented logic of multistakeholderism was a crucial factor in shaping the ability of industry organizations to hop across governance levels and play one venue off against another. The concept of venue hopping is developed through the empirical case of multistakeholder partnerships in UK food policy, and separate, parallel initiatives by the UK and Scottish governments to develop and implement policies to address obesity and diet-related ill health.

The article is structured in four sections. The first section provides an overview of multilevel governance perspectives. It then elaborates on the concept of venue hopping, which provides the basis for understanding strategic action within soft governance regimes. The second section describes the methods employed in the empirical case studies. The third section examines the creation of multistakeholder initiatives and corporate political strategy in UK food policy. It focuses on the micro-politics of negotiations between industry organizations and the UK and Scottish governments. The analysis reconstructs negotiations in and between multistakeholder initiatives, tracing the contestation accompanying government proposals for industry self-regulation of ultra-processed foods. This analytical approach offers an account of the interplay of organizational and discursive dimensions of corporate political strategy and institutional contexts (Levy and Newell 2002). Our findings show that trade associations played a key organizational role, coordinating lobbying across levels of governance and leading discursive efforts to link multistakeholder initiatives. This strategy is conceptualized as a form of venue hopping. Food industry trade associations maintained a presence in both partnerships, strategically using this to "hop" across governance levels and play negotiations in one setting off against the other. The analysis also demonstrates how corporate political strategy was shaped by the institutional contexts of negotiations. The consensus-based logic of multistakeholder partnerships enabled industry associations to push for less stringent regulatory policies negotiated at one level to be transferred to another. We conclude with reflections on the multilevel dynamics of soft governance regimes and how norms of multistakeholderism may facilitate venue hopping as an important but overlooked form of corporate political strategy in fragmented systems of governance.

2 | Multilevel Governance and Venue(s) Hopping

The concept of multilevel governance captures the vertical and horizontal dynamics of political systems, marked by the diffusion of political authority from central governments to supranational and subnational levels, and between state and non-state actors (Börzel and Heard-Lauréote 2009; Marks and Hooghe 2004; Piattoni 2009; Tortola 2017). Central to this concept is the idea that political decision making has become increasingly decentered, shared across multiple levels of governance and institutional venues (Hooghe and Marks 2003; Woll and Jacquot 2010; Zürn 2020).

Although this literature emphasizes the polycentric nature of governance (Bache et al. 2015; Skelcher 2005), there is relatively limited research on the multilevel dynamics of soft governance. In a widely cited article, Hooghe and Marks (2003) set out two distinct types of multilevel governance: *Type I* governance refers to durable institutions that perform multiple policy functions, typically government departments. *Type II* governance describes more flexible, task-specific arrangements that can be understood in terms of networks, multistakeholder initiatives, and other forms of multi-actor collaboration. Despite the influence of this article over the field (Bache et al. 2015), Type II governance has largely been neglected in the governance literature (Bache et al. 2016). Although conceptual work on multilevel governance stresses the importance of non-state actors (Papadopoulos 2007; Stephenson 2013), empirical research in this field has concentrated on interactions between governmental institutions within multilevel systems (Piattoni 2010). As a consequence, the multilevel governance literature has tended to overlook the complex and fragmented regimes of soft governance that have emerged in recent years, including the ascendance of multistakeholderism in global public policy (Gleckman 2018; Sharma and Soederberg 2020; Taggart and Abraham 2023).

This article considers the dynamics between multistakeholder initiatives and explores how actors navigate multilevel systems of governance. As such, it provides a more nuanced understanding of how those involved in policymaking move across institutional venues and the linkages between them (Peters and Pierre 2004). To develop an understanding of the interplay between actors, interests, and institutions, we draw on the literature on venue shopping: An analytical framework for how actors operate strategically within multilevel political systems.

The concept of venue shopping (also referred to as forum shopping) describes how actors seek out institutional venues where they perceive their interests are most likely to be accommodated (Beyers and Kerremans 2012; Halpin and Fraussen 2017; Littoz-Monnet 2014; Pralle 2003). This term originates from Baumgartner and Jones' (1991, 1993) influential work on agenda setting, which argues that policy making is structured by different institutional venues that represent and reinforce different ways of framing a policy issue. For example, the framing of public health issues may vary depending on whether policy debates are conducted in a trade- or health-oriented decision making venue (Hawkins et al. 2019). As Baumgartner (2007) notes, the relative stability of issue definition and frames within particular institutional venues creates incentives for actors to push issues towards the venue considered to be the most receptive to their interests. Baumgartner and Jones conceptualize this political dynamic as venue shopping, in which actors attempt to influence which institutions are considered relevant and authoritative in decision making (see Boswell 2018). An important part of venue shopping is, therefore, issue definition, and corresponding attempts by actors to move decision making to an alternative institutional venue by shifting "the terms of the political debate" (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). The efforts of transnational tobacco companies to oppose the introduction of standardized tobacco packaging (Hatchard et al. 2016; Hawkins and Holden 2016) provide a relevant example of venue shopping strategies, in which tobacco corporations have attempted to obstruct the implementation of tobacco control policies through the use of litigation across multiple jurisdictions, including cases brought under the World Trade Organization (WTO) and bilateral investment treaties as a tactic to shift decision making to the most receptive policy setting (Hawkins and Holden 2016).

The notion of venue hopping is similarly focused on agency within multilevel systems, but extends it to the dynamics of soft governance. We build on the work of Helfer (2009) on international politics, who highlights how "regime shifting" creates linkages and relationships among treaties, international organizations, and multilateral institutions, and thus the potential for simultaneous and sequential negotiations in multiple venues. Where regime shifting describes the relocation of decision making to alternative venues, we develop the notion of venue hopping to describe strategies employed by commercial actors in governance regimes characterized by multiple venues dealing concurrently with the same policy issue. The complexity of international governance has been likened to "chessboard politics" (Alter and Meunier 2009). Here, we view the dynamics of soft governance as a game of hopscotch in which participants shift their weight from one foot to another, moving between different sections of the grid. In this context, the strategy used by actors to influence policy is not that of shifting decision making, fully and decisively, from one forum to another (preferred) one, but of participating in multiple fora successively or simultaneously in order to pursue a particular agenda across settings. If venue shopping is characterized by a degree of "passive monitoring" whereby actors "hibernate" and spring into action when there is a threat on the horizon (Gray and Lowery 1996), venue hopping points to a more active approach to political strategy and issue management, in which the flexibility and low entry costs of multistakeholder initiatives allow participation in multiple settings and political levels.

The reason why the notion of venue hopping might better explain the dynamics of soft governance regimes is that actors may be less concerned about shifting the terms of political debate—as in the case of venue shopping—and instead focus on engaging in and moving between institutional venues that have issue linkages and are likely to share the same logic of governance. In setting out why venue shopping might represent a useful strategy, Baumgartner and Jones observe that, in any given policy space, there exist competing interpretations of problems and solutions that shape how an issue is understood and what institutions are viewed as authoritative. Where particular norms, frames, and ideas become taken-for-granted, they constitute what the authors term a "policy image" which stabilizes how an issue is perceived and which institutions have the authority to make decisions about an issue. Baumgartner and Jones refer to the passage of the Environmental Protection Act in the United States as a quintessential example of venue shopping, where environmental groups that were continually on the losing side of regulatory decisions with the executive branch of the federal government shifted their attention to groups in Congress. In targeting the legislature at the federal level, environmental groups were able to bring in institutions and groups that were previously uninvolved, reframe the issue, and, in the process, begin to change the policy image (Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Indeed, there are multiple examples of venue shopping as a corporate political strategy, notably attempts by tobacco, alcohol, and fossil fuel

industries to obstruct the implementation of health and climate policies through litigation across multiple legislative venues.

Although we are likely to observe venue shopping in soft governance regimes (Pralle 2003), this concept may be less useful in examining agency and strategy where institutions have an equivalent logic (or policy image). In situations where fora share the same governing logic, as in multistakeholder initiatives, actors may develop strategies that are less about shifting between venues than identifying points of leverage between them. There are various reasons why we might expect this form of strategy in soft governance regimes. First, the spread of multistakeholderism across many fields of public policy (Scholte 2020) has resulted in complex and fragmented environments where there are typically multiple initiatives that operate in the same policy area.

Global health governance is one field where multistakeholder initiatives have rapidly expanded, with a first wave of partnerships in the 1990s and early 2000s focused on vaccine access (Buse and Harmer 2004; Kapilashrami and McPake 2013; Storeng et al. 2021), spreading to issues such as malnutrition, food security, and development (Clapp and Fuchs 2009; Lie 2019; McKeon 2017; Erdem Türkelli 2022). Uribe (2024) notes how multistakeholderism has gained traction as an alternative to multilateralism, examining the United Nations Food Systems Summit as an influential mechanism of collaboration between public and private sector actors. A similar pattern is evident in global climate governance, with the formal recognition of non-state actors within the Paris Agreement of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) leading to the creation of multistakeholder platforms linked to the treaty (Bäckstrand et al. 2021).

This trend towards multistakeholderism as a solution to biodiversity and environmental challenges is particularly noticeable in global plastics governance in which the issue of plastic pollution has become an important target of corporate social responsibility activities (Mah 2021). Although far from exhaustive, these examples illustrate the extent to which public policy is made within many governance arrangements operating across different levels. As such, actors may participate in several multistakeholder initiatives at any given moment in time. This seems to be particularly the case for transnational corporations that possess the material resources and organizational capacity not only to engage in initiatives at local, national, and global levels, but also to develop and operationalize new governance initiatives. If we take the example of the Coca-Cola Company's engagement with the issue of plastic pollution, there is a clear strategy of creating or joining multistakeholder initiatives, such as the Global Plastics Action Partnership coordinated by the World Economic Forum and its national and global-level collaborations with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and WWF on a circular economy for plastics. The example of Coca-Cola points to the wider dynamics of soft governance regimes in which a key consideration for actors becomes how to leverage, influence, and manage the various forms of interaction between institutions operating across multiple levels of governance. Second, the informal and flexible structure of multistakeholder initiatives can generate opportunities for actors to move between them (Skelcher 2005). Whereas research on venue shopping tends to focus on formal institutions—notably legislative and executive venues—that are governed by codified rules and procedures, the more informal aspects of soft governance create fluid and evolving boundaries that actors can move across. This is particularly relevant for multistakeholder initiatives which are structured around norms of deliberation and inclusiveness, as our empirical case study highlights.

Before turning to the analysis of multistakeholder governance in UK food policy, we outline an analytical framework that understands venue hopping as a form of corporate political strategy, drawing on approaches that distinguish between organizational, discursive, and institutional dimensions of power (Ford and Newell 2021; Levy and Newell 2002). Although focused on corporate power, this framework draws on key dimensions of forum shopping and could be adapted to examine other actors engaged in venue hopping (see Table 1).

The political strategies of corporate actors are shaped by their material power, which enables them to "develop regulatory and technological strategies to protect their existing markets and invest resources in (...) preferable processes and products" (Levy and Egan 2003). Large corporations can use their market position, provision of products and services, and contributions to economic growth to influence policy agendas (Falkner 2008). This material power gives corporate actors access to policy and governance contexts (Ford and Newell 2021; Fuchs 2007), including multistakeholder initiatives and (inter)governmental organizations, as well as

TABLE 1 | A framework to understand venue hopping.

Dimension	Features	Examples
Organizational	The organizational capacity and resources to coordinate across multiple actors and intervene in governance structures and policy making	– Business coalitions – Peak trade associations – Advocacy networks
Discursive	The use of ideas, framing and narratives to shape interpretations of problems, solutions, and governing configurations	– Shaping "evidence-based" policy options – Allocating responsibility/accountability for socio-economic issues – Promoting specific models of governance
Institutional	Power exercised in and through institutions, via decision making processes, participatory mechanisms, and the creation of initiatives	– Multistakeholderism – Hybrid governance models – Voluntary standards

the material resources to create and promote new governance initiatives. Organizational dimensions of political strategy relate to the coordination of activities via varied forms of association and coalition. This includes industry associations that represent different sectors, often referred to as peak trade associations (Brulle and Downie 2022; Fuchs 2007), as well as more informal or ad hoc advocacy coalitions and networks (Downie 2018). Second, discursive forms of power relate to the construction of political realities through ideas, frames, and narratives (Hajer and Laws 2006). The discourses employed by actors involved in soft governance regimes may aim not only to shape interpretations of policy problems but also direct efforts to frame governance itself. By framing the norms and procedures of governance arrangements, actors can shape decision making environments and render some options more possible than others. The discursive dimension of venue hopping may involve efforts to link institutional venues through appeals to shared governing logics and/or decision making processes. Third, institutional contexts shape (and are shaped by) agency (Bell 2012). As sets of formal and informal norms, rules, and procedures (Blanco et al. 2021; March and Olsen 2006), institutions affect the degree of power that actors have over decision making (Culpepper 2011; Hacker and Pierson 2002; Hall 1986). In terms of soft governance regimes, it is often the case that industry actors occupy a privileged position as stakeholders that *ought* to be involved (and accommodated) in the policymaking process (Ralston et al. 2023; Taggart and Abraham 2023). This institutional power may be leveraged through corporate political strategies to reinforce, reinterpret, and translate norms or procedures that align with their interests.

3 | Methods

3.1 | Empirical Setting

The article draws on the case of multistakeholder governance in UK food policy, exploring the politics of two separate partnerships created by the UK and Scottish governments to improve the nutritional quality of ultra-processed foods through voluntary regulation. Devolution of several policy areas, including health (Cairney 2011), creates the potential for policy divergence, as evidenced by the introduction of smoke-free places (Cairney 2009) and a minimum unit price for alcohol (Hawkins and McCambridge 2020). These policies have led to forum shopping strategies by both the alcohol and tobacco industries to obstruct their implementation, which we anticipated might also materialize in the area of food policy. It serves as a key illustrative case to explore corporate political strategy in multilevel and multistakeholder governance, and to demonstrate the analytical value of venue hopping. The intention is not to develop a generalizable theory, but rather to provide a "thick" description so that others who seek to transfer the concept to other empirical cases can assess its appropriateness and applicability (Taggart and Haug 2024).

3.2 | Research Design

We employ social process tracing to explore the microlevel politics of multistakeholder partnerships. This methodological approach emphasizes how decision making is "embedded in rules, roles, and institutions in a particular social setting" and the constitutive role of ideas and discourse in shaping such settings (Kaas et al. 2024). This could be thought of as an interpretivist approach to process tracing that attempts to understand how actions are embedded in specific institutional contexts (Pouliot 2014).

We collected and analyzed a large set of administrative and policy documents, using archived government websites to access strategies, proposals, technical reports, and evaluations, in addition to meeting agendas and minutes linked to multistakeholder partnerships. These public documents were supplemented by a series of requests made under freedom of information law for memos, proposals, and correspondence relating to negotiations, with a particular focus on food industry actors. These requests generated 400 pages of internal memos and correspondence between policy makers and industry actors, which included negotiations over the drafting of self-regulatory agreements. We employed an interpretive approach (Bacchi 2000; Yanow 2007), focusing on the ideas and discourses shaping contestation and accommodation over voluntary agreements. This approach reconstructed decision making processes at the microlevel, using this rich empirical data to assess how corporate actors participated in multistakeholder partnerships.

The analysis is also informed by qualitative interviews with key policy officials that provided an understanding of how those involved interpreted processes and practices across the two partnerships. The article draws on 38 interviews with civil servants in the UK and Scottish governments, policy officials from civil society organizations, academics, and public affairs and policy leads within industry trade associations. Several interviewees were involved in both partnerships, which helped to investigate linkages and overlaps between them. Interviews were structured around a thematic set of questions that explored substantive and procedural dimensions of policy processes. Interviews lasted roughly an hour and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded. The concept of venue hopping was developed through an abductive approach that involved an iterative and reflexive process of descriptive and analytical coding.

These sources of data allowed us to develop what Boswell (2018, 22) describes as plausible narratives about the processes we are seeking to understand. The set of documents gathered through archives and information requests enabled us to reconstruct the micro-processes of negotiations, piecing together the informal bargaining between government and industry in the "backstage" and formal deliberations in the "frontstage" of meetings (Ayres 2017). Interviews provided a sense of how these negotiations played out in practice, adding insights into the politics of collaboration and corporate political strategies.

3.3 | The Logic of Multistakeholder Governance: Partnerships in UK Food Policy

The Public Health Responsibility Deal partnership was a central feature of the UK government's public health strategy between 2010 and 2015. Introduced by the Conservative-Liberal coalition government as part of a wider deregulatory

agenda (Crouch 2011), the Responsibility Deal was legitimized by the UK government as a means for food companies to demonstrate their collective commitment to improving public health (Hawkins and McCambridge 2019; Knai et al. 2018; Ralston 2021). This notion of corporate social responsibility was signaled in the branding of the partnership and reinforced in public statements made by the minister for health, who underlined that public health policy "would be built on social responsibility, not state regulation." Reflecting these discourses of corporate social responsibility, the stated expectation was that the partnership would be able to "secure more progress, more quickly, and with less cost than legislation" due to a willingness of involved actors to negotiate voluntary regulatory standards (Department of Health 2011c).

While significant emphasis was placed on corporate engagement, the Responsibility Deal was intended to operate as a multistakeholder mechanism, structured by managerialist ideas of participation, collaboration, and inclusivity. Reflecting this logic, procedures for guiding decision making referred to norms of collaboration and the importance of achieving consensus among civil society and the private sector. This multistakeholder vision was outlined in a strategy paper that reiterated "collaboration and collective action" (Conservative Party 2008) in developing policies on issues such as product reformulation, nutrition labeling, and marketing practices. These standards were to be negotiated through regular meetings coordinated by the Department of Health, which provided a secretariat and meeting space for the partnership. The "Food Network" of the Responsibility Deal included civil society organizations, several transnational food companies—such as Mars, Unilever, and PepsiCo—in addition to trade associations representing manufacturing and retail sectors: the British Retail Consortium (BRC) and Food and Drink Federation (FDF).

The multistakeholder partnership created by the Scottish government shared this governing logic, if not narratives of deregulation and rolling back of government (Foster et al. 2014). Labeled the Food Implementation Group, this partnership followed the same governing logic as the Responsibility Deal, with the partnership framed as a "blank canvas" for voluntary standards that would be developed "hand-in-hand with the food industry" (Scottish Government 2010). This was reinforced at the first meeting of the group with a memo circulated to industry actors—including the trade associations—that stressed the government's "collaborative approach" to negotiations (Scottish Government 2010).

3.4 | Venue Hopping and the Interplay Between Multistakeholder Initiatives

3.4.1 | Corporate Influence in Negotiating a Voluntary Standard on Ultra-Processed Foods

Negotiating a voluntary standard on the reformulation of ultra-processed foods was a key priority for the UK government, which promoted self-regulation as a way to demonstrate the "industry contribution to improving public health" (Department of Health 2011b). This proposed standard was named the Calorie Reduction Pledge and centered around the public health objective of a daily reduction of 5 billion calories in population-level intake. To achieve this, a voluntary standard on product composition and marketing was suggested by policymakers within the Department of Health, which would commit food companies to the reformulation of ultra-processed and packaged foods, reductions in product size, and responsible marketing practices to reduce the overconsumption of calories and components such as salt, saturated fat, and sugar (Clapp and Scrinis 2017).

Although the partnership was intended as a collaborative decision making mechanism, civil society organizations became increasingly peripheral, with deliberations narrowing to exchanges between food companies and policy makers. Despite apparent optimism within government that industry would embrace the opportunity to engage in a dialogue, proposals for voluntary agreements were opposed. This opposition played out in the "frontstage" of partnership meetings, but more significantly, through informal "backstage" channels of emails, phone calls and bilateral meetings between industry organizations and policy makers. The trade association for the food manufacturing sector—the FDF—led negotiations with the Department of Health. This built on groundwork, including a parliamentary reception hosted by FDF and promotional materials sent to policy officials that underlined the economic contribution of the sector. As one FDF email to the DEPARTMENT stated, food "represents the largest manufacturing sector in the country—accounting for 15% of the UK's total manufacturing sector by value." These communications, and the strategic exercise of material power they represented, formed the backdrop to informal discussions between the FDF and policy makers. In emails to policy makers, the FDF relayed that its member companies - among them, including several large transnational food and beverage firms—not support the proposed voluntary standard. Table 2 provides excerpts of email correspondence (obtained from freedom of information requests) between the Federation and Department of Health that illustrate the extent to which regulatory actions to improve the nutritional quality of ultra-processed foods were regarded as incompatible with profit margins and growth. As one email from the Federation underlined, its members had "fundamental difficulty with any proposition that appears to require businesses to inhibit their commercial strategies for growth." Other correspondence reiterated that addressing overconsumption of calories was "not something industry can deliver." This basic tension between industry self-regulation and profit motives was summarized by one NGO official involved in the Responsibility Deal, who described how "the industry go on about how it is technically difficult. I think a lot of these things are not that difficult if you are prepared to take a lower profit on them, which, of course, is absolutely not what companies are incentivized to do."

Despite efforts by policymakers to persuade industry actors to engage with the government's proposals, the Federation informally communicated to the secretariat that its members, which included Coca-Cola, Nestlé, and Mondelēz, would "not be offering drafting suggestions" on the Calorie Reduction Pledge. This opposition resulted in a deadlock that was only resolved when policymakers accommodated a collective preference for voluntary actions that did not threaten profit margins or growth in sales of ultra-processed and packaged foods. The discursive

strategy of industry actors was one of blame shifting, with the overconsumption of calories framed as an issue of personal over corporate responsibility. These frames replaced an initial focus on corporate responsibility for product reformulation to reduce high levels of saturated fat, salt, and sugar, with a much stronger emphasis on personal responsibility for lifestyle choice and dietary behaviors. Although language around product reformulation and marketing was not dropped entirely from the standard, the causes and solutions to diet-related ill health were reframed to promote individualized approaches that reasserted "downstream" interventions such as education and information. This influence over negotiations is highlighted in Table 3, which tracks the various drafts of the Calorie Reduction Pledge. Crucially, *all* the revisions made to the standard minimized corporate responsibility for public health regulation, and aligned with the stated preference of industry actors for a policy that would "enable consumers to manage their own calorie intake." As one official involved in negotiations reflected, there was "lots and lots of debate (but) what you got was quite watered down."

Beyond these corporate political strategies, it is important to note the institutional features that formed the backdrop to this exercise of power. Although the informality of these negotiations led to a divergence from the participatory ideals of multistakeholderism, norms of consensus meant that industry actors could push for their interests to be accommodated (Scholte 2020). This dynamic was commented on by several interviewees, with one policy maker describing how the department's approach to negotiations was to accommodate industry because of the nonbinding nature of the standard. These norms of consensus were also embedded in the formal rules of the partnership, which outlined that participants should "consider and agree compromise approaches" (Department of Health 2011a). This institutional context, therefore, shaped how industry organizations exercised power, in which the governing logic of multistakeholder governance could be leveraged to reinterpret regulatory policies that threatened profitability. This drift towards a lowest common denominator solution was thus consistent with the norms of the partnership, if not its public health objectives.

3.4.2 | Playing One Setting Off Against Another

Although the partnership created by the Scottish government had many similarities with the approach taken by the UK government, specific proposals made within the Food Implementation Group were perceived by industry actors as an unwelcome divergence from regulatory standards already negotiated. This opposition focused on a set of benchmarks for reformulation of ultra-processed foods, with quantitative targets for the reduction of saturated fat and sugar content. This included a 4% reduction in the sugar content of sugar-sweetened beverages (soft drinks) and a 10% reduction of saturated fat in chocolate confectionery products. Interviews with policy makers involved in the development and communication of this proposal indicated a desire to extend beyond the voluntary standard negotiated by the UK government. As one interviewee reflected, benchmarking was a result of "looking for gaps" in policy discussions in the

TABLE 2 | Informal interactions between the Food and Drink Federation and UK Department of Health on a voluntary standard on ultra-processed foods.

Thank you for the useful meeting we had with you, (redacted) and (redacted) to discuss the draft (...) that said, some fundamental issues do remain for our members (...). While we are supportive of a calorie reduction pledge, we would have fundamental difficulty with any proposition that appears to require businesses to inhibit their commercial strategies for growth. When we met, you said that this was not the Department's intention and that you would produce wording that made this clear
Our understanding is that the aim of the pledge is to provide a framework for contributions from the food industry as part of the responses to a broad-based calorie challenge. The ultimate aim, of course, of the calorie reduction challenge is a net reduction in the number of calories consumed by individuals and this is not something industry can deliver (...)
In general, members were uncomfortable with the use of the word "encourage," which appeared to suggest that companies would be expected to tell consumers to eat less of their products.

TABLE 3 | Revisions to the calorie reduction pledge.

1st draft Aug 2011	We recognize the need to reduce the population's calorie intake by 5 billion calories (kcal) per day. We will encourage and enable our people to eat and drink fewer calories through actions such as product reformulation, portion control, and responsible promotions. We will monitor and report on our progress on an annual basis
2nd draft Nov 2011	**We recognize the need to assist the population to reduce its energy intake** by 5 billion calories (kcal) per day. We will support and enable our customers to eat and drink fewer calories through actions such as product/menu reformulation, portion control, and actions to shift the marketing mix towards lower calorie options. We will monitor and report on our progress on an annual basis
6th draft Final text Feb 2012	Recognizing that the Call to Action on Obesity in England set out the importance of action on obesity, and issued a challenge to the population to reduce its total calorie consumption by 5 billion calories (kcal) a day. We will support and enable our customers to eat and drink fewer calories through actions such as product/menu reformulation, reviewing portion sizes, education and information, and actions to shift the marketing mix towards lower calorie options. We will monitor and report on our actions on an annual basis.

Note: Underline indicates where the text has been revised. Bold underline indicates where text has been revised and subsequently deleted.

TABLE 4 | Industry feedback to policy makers on benchmarks.

You must understand that brands will not jeopardize their quality to achieve these goals as they would simply lose business as consumers switch to "full fat" versions from competitors
You cannot seriously expect food manufacturers and retailers to ignore consumer demand for HFSS (high in fat, sugar, and salt) products—they have a duty to shareholders to run a business and make a profit
(...) you seem to asking turkeys to vote for Xmas—why would (companies) voluntarily reduce their revenue—getting real works both ways!

Responsibility Deal. In contrast with more interpretive commitments negotiated with the UK government, these benchmarks would commit companies to meeting quantitative targets linked to the nutritional value of their products. Given that ultra-processed foods are typically highly profitable (Moodie et al. 2013; Wood, Williams, et al. 2021), and that altering the nutritional composition of these products would affect their manufacture and marketing, these targets represented a problem for food companies that derive significant sales revenue and profits from ultra-processed food (Wood, McCoy, et al. 2021).

The strength of industry opposition to these benchmarks became evident at an early stage of negotiations, with a stakeholder meeting between the Scottish government, trade associations, and companies (including Mars, PepsiCo, and McDonald's) characterized by industry pushback against the idea of benchmarks. This is highlighted in Table 4, which reproduces industry feedback to policymakers. This feedback was provided anonymously, enabling industry representatives to offer a candid account of the tensions between public health policy and their business models. As one industry submission argued, "You cannot seriously expect food manufacturers to ignore consumer demand for (high in fat, sugar, and salt products)—they have a duty to shareholders (...)."

Policy makers continued to engage and deliberate with industry actors in the hope of negotiating a consensus position on benchmarking. However, these attempts were met with organizational and discursive corporate strategies that sought to leverage institutional power within the Responsibility Deal as a means of influencing decision making in the Food Implementation Group. As in the case of negotiations with the UK government, the organizational strategy was one of delegating responsibility to the manufacturing sector trade association. This meant that the FDF led negotiations across governance levels, maintaining a presence in both institutional settings. This enabled the trade association to have a foot in both venues, allowing it to bridge governance levels.

The discursive strategy of industry actors centered on the interrelationship between multistakeholder initiatives, with the FDF invoking its active engagement across different levels of governance to construct linkages between the Responsibility Deal and the Food Implementation Group. This strategy emphasized the temporal and spatial interconnectedness of multistakeholder governance (see Levy et al. 2016) in which the latter was represented as dependent on the former. By discursively constructing this relationship between institutional venues, industry actors were then able to play one setting off against the other by presenting the Responsibility Deal as the primary venue in which authoritative decisions were made. This narrative allowed industry actors to argue that the interdependence of interactions between governance levels would restrict the scope for policy divergence. For example, the following excerpts of industry feedback illustrate how benchmarking was seen as incompatible with standards negotiated with the UK government:

> The format of feedback presumes that acceptance of the process is a given. Many companies are obviously engaged in activities via the RD. (Responsibility Deal)

> Can't reformulate only for Scotland targets—needs to be joined up across UK.

> Where is the proof industry want targets? This was not consulted on and has not been the case in England? Can SG (Scottish government) elaborate on this before stating it as fact.

As part of this approach, the FDF used Food Implementation Group meetings to stress temporal interdependencies, claiming that negotiations with the Scottish government should not impact standards already negotiated or any future negotiations within the Responsibility Deal:

> Industry had concerns about the idea of targets being set in Scotland which did not apply to England, especially when the Responsibility Deal was understood to be looking at saturated fat in 2012 at the earliest with an anticipated flexible approach.

This coordinated strategy of linking institutional venues was ultimately used to lobby for alignment with much weaker regulatory standards being negotiated with the UK government. As trade association officials relayed to policy makers:

> There was a keen sense from industry members that the draft articles were pushing too hard and were out of step with the Responsibility Deal timings and approach. FIG (Food Implementation Group) industry members reiterated that they wished to see a 'menu of options' approach—rather than one that was targets-driven—giving companies the space to develop reformulation approaches.

Many of the interviews with policy makers involved in negotiations reinforced a sense that industry actors sought to bridge

across partnerships as a means of influencing negotiations over benchmarking. As one interviewee recounted, meetings with industry actors were characterized by opposition to reformulation benchmarks on the basis that they were "already doing most of this under the Responsibility Deal."

Ultimately, proposed benchmarks to improve the nutritional value of ultra-processed foods were quietly dropped from the government's obesity strategy, despite earlier statements about the significant public health contribution this regulatory approach could make (Scottish Government 2013). Although a request to the Scottish government for information about this decision was denied on the grounds that policymakers must be able to "communicate or meet, often in confidence, with external stakeholders (...)," the interview data support the interpretation that corporate political strategies of venue hopping influenced this decision. As one policymaker noted, the revisions made to the strategy were "not due to the evidence base," but on the extent to which the government could secure industry support.

At this point, it is useful to bring in the institutional dimensions of multistakeholder governance and how norms and procedures of consensus shaped the ability of industry actors to identify points of leverage that could be used to oppose public health policy. Although policymakers may not have anticipated that industry actors would exploit soft modes of governance through venue-hopping strategies, the collaborative approach taken by the Scottish government meant that they could legitimately argue that their interests should be accommodated. Indeed, the governing logic of partnership was directly referred to by the FDF in an interaction with policymakers, where it is implied that this type of accommodation was consistent with its deliberative ideals:

> (...) we welcome the collaborative and voluntary approach which is being undertaken (and) the recognition in discussions with officials that monitoring, especially of detailed targets, can be burdensome for companies. If an element of reporting is required, we would request that as far as possible the Scottish government works with the Responsibility Deal secretariat to align monitoring requirements (...) linking to the approach taken under the Responsibility Deal.

The undoubted success of corporate political strategies across these institutional venues should thus be understood as the result of a complex interplay between actors, interests and institutions.

4 | Discussion and Conclusion

The emergence and spread of multistakeholderism has created opportunities for new forms of strategic action. In this article, we examine how corporations operate in and between multistakeholder initiatives, using their participation in multiple fora to influence public policy. We introduce the concept of venue hopping to capture how actors navigate adjacent and frequently overlapping institutional venues within soft governance regimes. We build on Baumgartner and Jones' influential work on agenda setting in multilevel policy systems, adapting their concept of venue shopping to capture the formation of actor strategies in increasingly complex governance contexts. In contrast to the analytic focus of venue shopping on actor strategies to shift decision making to a preferable forum, venue hopping denotes actors participating in multiple fora successively or simultaneously in order to pursue a particular agenda. This concept is developed through a case study of UK food policy that explores its organizational, discursive, and institutional dimensions.

The findings highlight corporate strategies to leverage the flexible design of both partnerships, exploiting their collaborative logic to play one setting off against the other. This was achieved via a two-step process. First, through lobbying efforts to weaken self-regulation at one level of governance. Second, by constructing linkages across governance levels that presented the institutional venue most aligned with industry interests as the primary (and thus most authoritative) locus of policy making. On the organizational level, industry actors (including large transnational corporations) delegated responsibility for negotiations to their trade association. This allowed the food industry to speak with a collective voice and maintain a continued presence across both partnerships. On the discursive level, industry organizations deployed various frames to influence negotiations. Within the Responsibility Deal at the UK level, a proposed standard to improve the nutritional value of ultra-processed foods was reframed in a way that shifted responsibility from corporate to personal responsibility for lifestyle choices.

Having reinterpreted this policy to align with their interests, industry attention turned to the Food Implementation Group in Scotland, with the discursive strategy shifting the substance of policy to procedural issues and the relationship between institutional venues. In this case, the organizational presence of a trade association across governance levels formed the basis for frames that sought to leverage their power within one partnership and use it to play one setting off against the other. This strategy used industry engagement in both partnerships to discursively construct linkages between them, emphasizing their spatial and temporal interconnectedness. This, in turn, created an opportunity to play one setting off against the other. This analysis demonstrates how corporate political strategies relied on trade associations having a foot in both venues, in which their influence flowed from an organizational and discursive ability to exploit overlaps and linkages between different levels of policy making.

It is important to highlight the interplay between the agency of corporate actors in exploiting points of leverage and the extent to which this was shaped by institutional factors. Although the material power of the food industry is important to understanding their privileged access and ability to influence agenda setting, the success of venue hopping strategies is also explained by the modalities of multistakeholder governance. The norms and practices of multistakeholderism enabled corporate actors to lobby for their preferences to be accommodated, even if this threatened to undermine the policy objectives of these initiatives. This highlights that venue hopping strategies are not purely agential but are mediated by institutional contexts that may constrain or facilitate strategic action across governance levels (see Woll 2016).

In terms of theoretical development, we set out a new perspective on structure and agency in soft governance regimes. The concept of venue hopping can help us to understand how actors navigate polycentric contexts, where relatively loose and inclusive forms of governance (Torfing and Sørensen 2014) create opportunities for actors to operate in and between initiatives. The fluid and fragmented nature of contemporary governance resembles a game of hopscotch in which actors plant a foot in one venue, while placing the other elsewhere. Whereas venue shopping evokes an image of an actor weighing up alternatives, the hopscotch metaphor captures the ability of actors to participate within and across multiple fora. In this case, we find that industry actors used their participation at different political levels to play one partnership off against the other, leveraging the norms and decision making procedures of these governance forms through discursive and organizational strategies. This represents simply one expression of venue hopping, and we would expect forms, strategies, and arenas to vary by policy or governance issue. This might involve attempts to expand industry-led multistakeholder initiatives as a means to hedge against stricter regulation in climate and environmental policy (Ralston and Taggart 2025), or linking multistakeholder initiatives to multilateral institutions (Scholte 2020). This strategy may play out across multiple (*vertical* hopping) or at the same level (*horizontal* hopping), or in combination.

As other studies of business power have argued (Meckling 2011; Newell 2008), the high level of resources at the disposal of multinational corporations is likely to enable coordination of political strategies across multiple governance levels simultaneously. This highlights the risk that the spread of multistakeholder governance will privilege corporate over public interests, owing to their ability to participate in multiple fora successively or simultaneously. This does not mean that alternative forms of venue hopping are not possible. For example, civil society organizations moving between different levels of governance may be able to ratchet up ambition or hold corporations to account, particularly in areas where there exist diverging strategies and positions within industry sectors. As in other arenas of regulatory politics, corporate interests become more likely to lose political battles when issues achieve high salience (Culpepper 2011). In developing the concept of venue hopping, we offer a new analytical framework to understand how power is exercised in an increasingly complex and fragmented world of multistakeholder governance.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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