

Panel 4: Interest Groups and the Policy Process: Revisiting Research on State-Society Relations in Multi-layered Political Systems

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Background

The contemporary political-institutional context is characterized by the blurring and transformation of traditional boundaries (Bartolini 2005). Political responsibilities are increasingly fragmented, shared or divided among different political levels (transnational, EU, national and regional). National political authorities have to cope with a hollowing out of their competencies, and with various organized interests bypassing them. Recent years have also witnessed the decline of political parties as the aggregators of societal interests (Mair 2005). In response, there have been calls for the greater involvement of a diverse range of groups in contemporary democratic systems. The EU Commission's White Paper on Governance and the post-Lisbon settlement, for example, are focused on reducing the EU's democratic deficit by bringing citizens in via a wide variety of civil society organizations and fora. However, our theoretical understanding and empirical knowledge of the role that interest organizations play in domestic, international and European multilevel systems remains limited.

Current limited intellectual understandings of interest groups politics are the result of two parallel trends in the literature. First, we face a diverse collection of theoretical perspectives on interest group behaviour that fail to communicate effectively (see Beyers et al. 2008; Eising 2008). Analytic-descriptive approaches that focus on interest group institutionalization and patterns of state-society relations provide us with useful generic typologies, such as the corporatism-pluralism continuum, but these typologies are less useful for developing testable hypotheses on interest group behaviour in multi-level governance systems (Falkner 1998). Other explanatory approaches, such as the exchange (Bouwen 2002), framing (Baumgartner and Mahoney 2008), and venue shopping and agenda-setting perspectives (Princen 2009) have provided testable hypotheses on interest group behaviour, but the interconnections between these approaches have not been systematically investigated.

Second, until recently research on interest group behaviour was mainly based on qualitative case study designs. While these studies have generated valuable insights in specific sectors (e.g. Pedler 2002; van Schendelen 1993), they rely heavily on non-comparable research designs in terms of sampling, measurement, and data analysis. This makes it difficult to combine their insights into a comprehensive understanding of group behaviour in the policy process. More recently, research has developed a more quantitative and explanatory approach, focussing more extensively on a wider range of theoretical issues (Crombez 2002; Eising and Kohler-Koch 2005; Wessels 2004) and using quantitative research designs that facilitate steps toward comparable research strategies needed for the advancement of knowledge (Bernhagen and Mitchell 2009; Beyers 2004; Bouwen 2002; Broscheid and Coen 2007; Mahoney 2008). Although these studies test general propositions about interest group behaviour, they are often based on idiosyncratic research designs that make direct comparison and wider inference difficult.

The political reality of fragmented compound polities, the related democratic deficit and limited knowledge accumulation on interest group behaviour mean that a comprehensive analysis of interest group politics would be intellectually timely. This panel aims to build upon existing work by bringing together papers which connects different aspects of interest group behaviour, are based on systematic projects of data-collections and aim to test. Generally, we expect papers which enable us to reconnect the study of interest group politics in Europe to the broader scholarship on comparative and multi-level governance and to rescue interest group studies from its 'Cinderella status' compared to political party scholarship (Beyers et al., 2008).

Interest groups are not a small piece of the policymaking puzzle; they are part and parcel to politics. Few policies are made in modern democratic systems without the input of organized interests, and yet interest group scholarship does not reflect that. And international or supranational venues such as the EU, the UN or the WTO are increasingly targeted by a large variety of interest groups. The objective of our panel is to gather a set of scholars working on interest group politics and focusing on how these societal interests interact with policymakers of various kinds (parties, bureaucrats, regulatory agencies, ministers) and at different levels of government (EU, international, national, subnational).

Link with the NIG major research themes

The study of interest groups can be situated within three major NIG-areas, namely 'citizens and governance' and 'the future of the nation state'. More in particular our panel concerns how organizational formats of interest group politics cause a bias within the overall system of political representation. There is also a clear link with the 'future of the nation state' as the multi-layered nature of contemporary government may considerably affect patterns of

interest group representation.

Type of papers we hoped to attract

We were primarily interested in papers which attempted to build a more comprehensive theoretical and empirical understanding of the role interest groups play in the European Union or its member-states. More in particular, we were very interested in papers which:

- rely on systematic methods of data-collection (elite surveying, document analysis, registration data) and attempt to test hypotheses by using advanced research methodologies (social network analysis, QCA, multivariate analyses);
- attempt to link the different aspects interest group politics (organizational maintenance and development, strategies, framing, influence) in the policy process in an integrated theoretical framework;
- relate the study of interest groups to other areas of political science such as regulatory governance, party politics, citizens representation and participatory governance, non-state actors in international politics, judicial politics, bureaucratic politics or political communication.

Notes

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