A Liberal Perspective: The Role of Interest Groups in US Foreign Policy Towards Iran

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Abstract: This research seeks to analyze the impact of interest groups in US foreign policy within US-Iranian relations and answer the question why some interest groups are more successful than others. This allows the investigation of policy decisions and US strategy in regard to Iran as a whole. Coming from the liberalist approach of Moravcsik and Risse this study focuses on domestic structures and internal groups as the origins of US foreign policy. It thereby contributes to recent studies analyzing lobbying success of interest groups.

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1. Introduction

This study explains the impact of domestic structures and coalition-building processes between political actors and interest groups on foreign policy and shows that these processes are highly influenced by interest groups. The question I want to answer is: Why is the amount of influence of some lobby groups higher than of others? With the answer I want to be able to analyze the conditions which enable interest group influence. Through this approach the sources of US containment strategy towards Iran will be clarified enabling a prediction of the future structure of US-Iranian relations. In spite of significant progress in the past decades, there exists no systematic research of interest group influence on US foreign policy. Some authors single out the influence of one interest group; however, there is no comparison of various groups from different branches like ethnic lobbies and industry lobbies. In addition, the current literature lacks an analysis of the mechanisms that are supposed to condition interest group influence in US foreign policy. This research fills the gap by a systematical examination of the decision-making process on the basis of
an actor-related approach. I analyze relevant policy decisions within Congress regarding Iran on the basis of potential influence indicators of interest groups. For an understanding of the existing or missing link between indicators of lobby influence and policy decisions it is important to have a broader knowledge of the domestic sources within US foreign policy.

Coming from the liberalist approach of Moravcsik and Risse this study focuses on the domestic structures and internal groups as the origins of US foreign policy. Analyzing the role of interest groups in US foreign policy-making with Iran reveals the background of the policy decisions made. To study which groups were successful and which not is an essential issue for political scientists (Christiansen et al. 2004; Dür & De Bièvre 2007; Jordan et al. 2004). The most important challenge is to define and measure interest group influence. This research contributes to recent studies (see Baumgartner et al. 2009; Dür & De Bièvre 2007; Mahoney 2009) with the aim to analyze influence. The focus lies in analyzing sample cases of US-Iranian relations and interviewing the actors involved about their objectives to show which factors have led to success, and which to failure. The research is case-specific and includes the interest groups which are most relevant for the political agenda regarding US-Iranian relations.

The research is case-specific and is based on an analysis of the activities of the interest groups most relevant for the political agenda regarding US-Iranian relations. I focus on the interaction of lobby groups with the House of Representatives as this institution is most vulnerable to interest group influence. The reasons for that lie in the short election and re-election cycle of the two-year term as well as the rising costs of election campaigns which make the delegates dependent on the support of interest groups. An investigation of lobbying success in this institution can explain under what conditions interest groups are most likely to exercise potential influence effectively.

2. Focus on US-Iranian Relations

Iran is a major regional player in the Middle East – a region with the highest energy reserves in the world, which is at the same time highly unstable through the turmoil of the Arab Spring, volatile countries like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the rise of the Islamic State. Beside US security interests in the region, Iran offers a high amount of oil and gas resources. Iran has the fourth largest oil and the second largest gas deposits in the world (U.S. Energy Information
Administration, March 28, 2013). To the discontent of the United States and other Western states the Iranian regime supports the radical groups Hamas and Hezbollah. These characteristics show the importance of this country and the Middle East as a whole. There are many interests Iran and the United States share like the desire to prevent a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, the opposition to al-Qaeda, and the exploitation of natural gas resources in Iran to undermine Russian hegemony.

Despite these common interests the two countries have no official diplomatic relations since the hostage crisis of 1979 during the uprising of the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the Iran-Iraqi War in the 1980s Iran's power weakened which lessened the concern of the United States of the first theocracy as the replacement of a former client state. As the war continued the United States supported a stalemate to prevent any of the countries of getting the upper hand the region. Only in the 1990s, with the growth of Iranian nuclear ambitions, the United States perceived Iran as a threat again. In 1993 Israeli leaders warned the United States for Iran's growing power and pushed for a containment of Iran (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007: 283). Clinton reacted in labeling Iran an “extremist” regime, issued sanctions as part of a containment policy designed by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy under Martin Indyk, former deputy research director of AIPAC (Labban 2008, 128).

In the aftermath of September 11th and military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq security interests in the region grew, so the United States opened up the possibility of a dialogue and included Iran as an important regional power in the stabilization process of both countries. The relations have reached a deadlock as the United States’ answer to Iranian nuclear ambitions still maintains a policy of sanctions and the Iranian hardliners vote for confrontation on their side as well. The apparent tendency towards dialogue by the Obama administration does not disguise that economic sanctions have steadily increased since the Clinton administration and Bush administration, unilaterally, and multilaterally through the United Nations. The importance of the analysis of US-Iranian relations lies not only in current political developments but is also based on the demanded change in US policy from confrontation to diplomacy by many scholars (Cordesman 2008; Brzezinski et al. 2004; Goode 1997; Koschut 2011; Monshipouri and Keynoush 2008; Newkirk 2008; Slavin 2007; Perthes et al. 2008; Weiss 2009).
3. **Focus on Interest Groups**

Interest groups can be defined as associations of individuals who act to influence public policy autonomously from the government or political parties (Bloodgood 2010, 97; Hrebenar and Thomas 1992, 153; Grant 1979, 152). This study concentrates on interest groups rather than parties, the media or the public for the following reasons: In the United States parties have a rather weak role in the formation of foreign policy, the same applies for the media and the public due to the limitation of their direct impact on policy makers.

Political parties have never been very strong in the formation of foreign policy decisions in the United States, partly because of the fragmented political institutions and partly as consequence for the low degree of centralization, which made the political system open to pressures by interest groups (Risse-Kappen 1991, 484). In place of a strong party leadership partisan cleavages and ideological polarization lead to individualized power, which makes issue allegiances more important than partisan or institutional frameworks. The decentralized Congress offers an easy access point for interest groups and a promising perspective to exert pressure. In addition, interest groups offer organizational support and campaign funding as well as votes, which makes it often more promising for candidates to reach out to them than to their own party (Hersman 2000, 11; Skidmore 1993, 231; Wilson 1981, 3).

As most governments would not act against the will of the majority of the public, the public does have an important role. Depending on its support in favor or against a policy interest groups are more successful in regard to the issues that coincide with the preferences of the public. Interest groups also heighten their chances of success when they formulate their arguments within the framework of national traditions. Based on these they can safely rely on the support of the public as well as of policy makers (Trice 1981, 130-132). Even though political leaders will mostly act in accordance to opinion polls, the impact of public opinion is subtle as the information the public receives is channeled by the administration in order to convince and manipulate the public of its own stance on certain issues (Shapiro and Page 1994, 233). Opinion polls are at times a tool by policy makers used to undermine the influence of interest groups or other actors (Deese 1994, 270). The public itself is rather disinterested in regard to foreign policy matters as domestic and local issues are at the center of its focus (Toth 1997, 6). The limited access to foreign policy information and the complexity of the issues involved also lessen the concern of the
public in regard to foreign policy (Ambrosio 2002, 12). The public’s access to information concentrates on single political leaders, experts, or other key figures who take up issues in the mass media. The low interest in foreign policy can change rather sudden as a reaction to international events, particularly when there is a concern about the costs of American lives (Mueller 1999, 52-53; Shapiro and Page 1994, 226). The low interest of the public stands in stark contrast to the intense involvement of interest groups whose pressure is a key political motivator to officials to make concessions favoring the goals of the interest group involved. The interest group then returns the favor by giving its vote to the delegate (Ambrosio 2002, 12-15).

The media only plays an insignificant role in policy formulation. Journalists have to rely on official sources within the administration as provided by the president, top government officials, and key members of Congress or, to a limited amount, on big news networks with own foreign bureaus. Therefore, only few foreign policy issues are published and the topics that do come up derive from a selection of information made by others (Powlick and Katz 1998; Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hoge 1994, Sobel 2001; Bennet 1994, 178-179). In addition, the news covered depends on the interest of the public as the existence of media generally relies on an audience (Mueller 1999, 54-55). This makes the media and public opinion almost one: the media offers the information the public wants and the public receives only the information selected through and commented by the media. Political actors and interest groups use both, the public and the media, to strengthen their positions during the coalition-building process. Both, therefore, are part of the policy making process but only indirectly influence policy decisions through the previous manipulation of their opinion-forming (Risse-Kappen 1991, 510; Wittkopf 1994, 6).

4. **Theoretical Background**

The liberal approach builds the theoretical framework of this research as the analysis of domestic variables in foreign policy lead to a better understanding of the multiple ways a goal is reached and the dilemma of decision makers to weigh international costs or rewards against domestic costs or rewards.

The liberal approach recognizes the domestic impact on foreign policy making. With Robert Putnam's “two-level game” scholars of international
relations saw the interdependence of domestic and foreign policy. However, the main difficulty is to set the “focus on the interactions of national actors and not on the sources or consequences of interaction […]” (Rosenau 1971: 83). Within the broader liberal sphere the actor-related theory of Andrew Moravcsik argues that the individuals and groups within a state are the origin of foreign policy decisions (Moravcsik 1997). The domestic structure approach by Thomas Risse supports this theory as he also portrays the sources of US foreign policy in the domestic structures of the state and in the coalition-building processes (Risse-Kappen 1991).

Moravcsik claims that the actors within a state form its behavior in international politics. From a positivistic understanding of knowledge he developed a liberal theory whose core shows the difference from realism to institutionalism: In his interest is not the partition of power between states or international institutions but the federal organized societies. „For liberals, the configuration of state preferences matters most in world politics – not, as realists argue, the configuration of capabilities and not, as institutionalists (…) maintain, the configuration of information and institutions” (Moravcsik 1997: 513). These preferences derive from inner processes of negotiations. The governments of the states try to act according to these domestic processes (Schieder 2006: 6). In international politics this signifies that actions schemes do not derive from the international division of power or institutions but from the social context. The connection between the building of preferences by the state and the behavior of international conflicts is what Moravcsik calls policy interdependence (Schieder 2006: 177-178). Moravcsik's theory bases on Putnam's argument about domestic groups pressuring the government to adopt policies in their interests (Putnam 1988: 434) as well as Czempiel's approach in which decisions depend on the condition and structures within a state under which they are made.

This study focuses on evaluating lobbying success in public policy as this comes closest to understanding why interest groups fail or succeed and under which circumstances (see Mahoney 2008). Being successful is understood as reaching a policy output which is closer to the interest group's goal than it would have been without any interest group engagement. “No interest group ever achieves all it wants, and so the difference between success and failure is achieving an acceptable compromise.“ (Berry 1989, 83). This approach has been implemented in the case studies and quantitative studies of political decision making by Klüver (2009), and Mahoney (2008).
5. Research Design

Lobbying success is qualitatively measured by change in policy outcome by comparing stated goals of selected interest groups to political outputs. The dependent variable is operationalized using the approach of preference attainment (Dür 2008, 570) by which the distance of the interest group’s ideal goal is measured in regard to the achieved goal and the status quo. Changes to the status quo as reached in the achieved goal are measured by policy decisions as of passed resolutions in the House of Representatives according to the Library of Congress’ legislative tracking system. The variance of the passed resolutions results from amendments added at different stages of the policy making process. These signify the success of one group or the failure of another, respectively. The ideal goal of an interest group is measured by positions of interest groups stated in congressional hearings, the media, publications on the interest groups’ websites, and data from interviews.

Two main independent variables explain policy change: the access to policy makers and the amount of coalition-building regarding common goals. These variables will be further explained in the following.

Access to policy makers: Access is very important to interest groups because this is the only means to directly state their opinions to individual official holders. Various political scientists have focused on access as a precondition for influence (see Bouwen 2002; Beyers 2002; Eising 2004). This research uses the variable access as a combination of three factors on different levels for an adequate analysis of the importance of this variable to lobbying success (see Michalowitz 2005). The three factors are: the engagement of office holders in organizations or institutions related to interest groups, invitations of interest group representatives to congressional hearings, and financial campaign contributions for candidates of the House of Representatives. Taken together these three factors show the degree to which a policy-makers fights for the interest group’s goals. Choosing the right ally is essential for policy-makers, inside “champions”, and interest groups, outside “advocates” who often cooperate to reach a common goal (DeGregorio 1997; Paul/Paul 2009: 212). Both profit from a coalition: Electoral candidates seek financial and organizational support whereas interest groups gain backing regarding preferred policies (Berry 1984: 46).

Operationalization: The degree of access is operationalized by the amount of congressional hearings an interest group is invited to, the engagement of office holders with interest groups as shown by on-going
or previous memberships or chairmanships in institutions, organizations, or companies, as well as the financial contributions by interest groups to members of the House of Representatives.

**Coalition-building:** The main question is how interactions between competing interest group coalitions and, thus, relational aspects rather than individual group characteristics shape outputs (Klüver 2009). Building on the concept of lobbying coalitions, defined as “a set of actors who share a policy goal” (Baumgartner et al. 2009, 6), coalitions are understood as different actors who aim at the same or a highly similar goal.

Operationalization: In regard to the degree of coalition-building the research relies on official statements of coalition partners or similar goals of interest groups regarding an issue as stated in congressional hearings, publications on the interest groups’ websites, and data from interviews.

The combination of these variables together with additional control factors will make it possible to draw a broad picture of lobbying success. The control factors (see Figure 1.) are important additional conditions, which support the analysis of lobbying success. They are grouped in factors on the interest group level, the issue level, the institutional level (see Mahoney 2008), and the international level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Operationalization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional level</td>
<td>- Political constellation in the Congress/committee</td>
<td>- Party majorities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Presidential activity</td>
<td>- Executive order, statements in State of the Union speechs</td>
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<td>Interest group level</td>
<td>- Degree of electoral implications</td>
<td>- Financial contributions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Positional resources</td>
<td>- Membership in boards and committees</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Organizational structure</td>
<td>- Type of organization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Type of contact</td>
<td>- Appointing opponent/friends or undecided office holders</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Organizational strength</td>
<td>- Degree of professional lobbying machinery and sufficient financial assets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issue level</td>
<td>- Balance</td>
<td>- Press releases by interest groups</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Media attention</td>
<td>- Amount of print news articles</td>
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<td>- Public opinion</td>
<td>- Public opinion polls</td>
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<td>- Scope of the issue</td>
<td>- Amount of branches involved</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Degree of opposition</td>
<td>- Lobby groups competing for access to decision-makers</td>
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<tr>
<td>International level</td>
<td>- Military conflicts</td>
<td>- Degree of involvement</td>
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<td>- Focusing conflict with worldwide impact</td>
<td>- Consequential changes of policy</td>
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Source: Own figure. Indicators partly self-developed and based on Ambrosio-2002, 18-13; Mahoney 2008, 55-56.
6. Selected Interest Groups

This research focuses on the lobbying success of interest groups in regard to policy decisions concerning US-Iranian relations. The selected interest groups in this project had to fulfill the conditions of having a political voice that matters meaning that these groups interact with policy makers on relevant issues and that they are able to set the political agenda. The interest groups were selected on the basis of their relevance in regard to US sanction policy towards Iran and of the completeness of necessary data in order to be able to compare the explanatory variables between all selected groups under the same conditions. In addition, the interest groups’ lobby expenditures had to exceed $20,000 in at least two out of four of the chosen Congress periods between the 110th to the 113th Congress, i.e., the years 2007-2014, and the number of the interest groups’s lobby reports had to be equal to four or exceed four at least twice during this timeframe.

The selected interest groups are: ACT! for America, American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), American Jewish Committee, Anti-Defamation League, J Street, Jewish Federations of North America, Republican Jewish Coalition, and Friends Committee on National Legislation deriving from the ethnic sector; National Foreign Trade Council Inc. representing the economic sector, and Bipartisan Policy Center Advocacy Network, Council for a livable World together with Center for Arms Control & Non-Proliferation as representatives of general advocacy groups. These interest groups can be divided into two clusters, as they are either opting for the status quo, e.g. confrontational strategy, or policy change, e.g. a diplomatic solution.

For each interest group cluster two cases are analyzed to investigate the interest group’s lobbying success and two cases for its failure. To eradicate randomness the case studies include all explanatory variables for each selected interest group and a common denominator of control factors for which data exists in regard to all interest groups. In case of lacking data for the explanatory variables interest groups might be removed. The research is only scientifically adequate if the selected interest groups are compared with the same indicators.
7. Methodology

The research is based upon process tracing via an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources as published by interest groups, the media, and the government (US Library of Congress (THOMAS): congressional hearing transcripts, text of amendments, relevant sections of bills, testimony in hearings, speeches on the floor of the House). The research also relies on “the valuable flexibility of open-ended questioning” (Berry 2002, 679) and the “detail, depth, and an insider’s perspective (Leech 2002, 665; also see Weiss 1994, 3) which elite interviews offer. Interviews are conducted with congressional staffers involved in the policy making process of relevant Iran resolutions to “learn about settings that would otherwise be closed to us” (Weiss 1994, 1), and with as many interest groups representatives available for an interview to make sure that important points missed by document analyses can be remedied “by interviewing the people who were there (...)” (Weiss 1994, 1).

The case studies are made up from passed resolutions regarding Iran sanction policy introduced in the 110th till the 113th Congress. Resolutions that died are left out of the analysis, as there are too many unknown factors that could have caused the resolutions to be not voted upon. There are no resolutions voted upon which failed, so the variance within the passed resolutions lies in the amendments added to them in different stages of the policy making process.

8. Conclusion

US foreign policy regarding Iran is a history of non-consistent strategic decisions: containment, economic sanctions, and cooperation, which is paving the way to the nuclear deal voted upon by Congress on September 17 2015. These characteristics describe the difficult relationship between the “Great Satan” and the “Rough State”. In order to explain the background of this relationship including the recent shift in US foreign policy in favor of a nuclear deal this research focuses on the power of the domestic. Policy change is particularly important as this shows the degree of lobbying success in a climate in favor for a confrontational course towards Iran. Even an apparent small success like a trade loophole or preventing a clause enabling military intervention demonstrates under what conditions interest groups reach their goals and why they are more successful than others.
Literature

Mirjam Koch


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