Cooperative politics as an indirect pathway to the question of interest group influence

Maximilian Schiffers

Abstract: Interest group research is still considered to be a niche field. New approaches advanced our understanding of numerous factors of interest group influence. But it remains somewhat unclear, how these general factors translate into tangible influence. In dealing with this issue, forms of cooperative politics between government actors and interest groups allow for new insights. They appear to serve as focal point at which formal and informal interactions are pooled. These forms are used e.g. for the German “Energiewende”, the transition from nuclear and conventional energy to renewables.

This paper develops a comparative approach to identify behavioral patterns within the context of ‘government - interest group’ cooperation. It follows the logic of congruence analysis, using argument- and interest-based theoretical frameworks to interpret energy policy coordination in German states. These patterns are expected to improve our understanding of political context as a condition for interest group influence on government action.

Paper outline
1. Introduction: the problem of interest group influence and the relevance of political context
2. An indirect pathway: interest group influence as policy coordination
3. Constructing the pathway: congruence analysis with interest- and argument-based frameworks
4. Research design and casing: coordinating German states’ energy policy with cooperative politics
5. Concluding remarks

Maximilian Schiffers, M.A.
NRW School of Governance • Universität Duisburg-Essen | email: maximilian.schiffers@uni-due.de
Cooperative politics as an indirect pathway to the question of interest group influence

1. Introduction: the problem of interest group influence and the relevance of political context

The question of interest group influence is crucial to political science, yet it suffers from the marginal status of interest group research within political science. In their much cited review „Researching Interest Group Politics in Europe and Elsewhere: Much We Study, Little We Know?” (2008: 1103) Beyers, Eising and Maloney emphasized that it is still regarded a niche field (i.e. Alemann/Weßels 1997, Weßels 2007: 84). Since the mid-1990s research interest has grown steadily, without ever getting close to the number of researchers working in related areas like party or policy research. Yet it is uncontroversial to argue that interest groups are considered to play a key role in understanding advanced democracies. On that account, this sub-discipline deals with questions about the system of interest intermediation (pluralist, corporatist, network), about access to policy makers, as well as advocacy coalitions and group strategies (Lowery 2013: 1, Dür/De Bièvre 2007: 1-2).

„In both the United States and the European Union (EU), scholars have focused on a whole host of lobbying-related phenomena – formation, organisation, access, activity – but not influence. This is especially ironic, since the question of influence is the first thing that comes to mind when anyone considers lobbying in a transatlantic comparison” (Mahoney 2007: 35).

Yet even if this range of phenomena and research topics doesn’t explicitly cover the question of interest group influence, it is still affected in the margins. Recent meta-studies get to quite similar conclusions. In his review „Lobbying influence: Meaning, measurement and missing” (2013) David Lowery shows that direct lobbying influence on US-Congress decision making is sometimes strong, sometimes marginal and sometimes close to non-existent. These findings match with three central research reviews by Richard Smith (1995), Baumgartner and Leech (1998) as well as Burstein and Linton (2002). They all show that evidence for interest group influence is inconclusive: some studies show little or limited influence, some even state that interest groups are influential in less than half of the observed cases (Hojnacki et.al. 2012: 383-384). Even more telling is that most interest groups fail to get their issues on the policy agenda. Consequently, uncertainty shapes the interest group and lobbying environment, especially in regards to goals, means and the relations between the actors (Lowery 2013: 2). Failing to produce inference between interest groups and the exertion of influence clearly flies in the face of both common intuition and social sciences’ current knowledge.

"Virtually all sociologists and political scientists publishing in the top journals hypothesize that [...] interest groups [...] influence public policy, and it is safe to assume that they generally expect the impact to be substantial. This hypothesis is not as well supported by the data as we might expect” (Burstein/Linton 2002: 398).

Strong theoretical expectations about the question of interest group influence are mismatched by contradictory and inconclusive results (Pedersen 2013: 28). One reason grounds in the common research practice that deviating and null results are unlikely to be published and excluded from further research. As long as these self-made limitations exist, interest group research will keep „the dirty little secret’ of lobbying literature – that lobbying is often not very effective” (Lowery 2013: 19).
So, how can new research projects contribute to improve interest group research? Most researchers recommend focusing on political context. Lacking both methodological and conceptual attention for the context in which interest groups interact is believed to be a central reason for the current uncertainties in the state of knowledge. With its range of variations, this context sheds light on the implications of interest groups in policy making. Systematically examining both context and its variations should improve our knowledge about interest groups and the political process as a whole (Hojnacki et.al. 2012: 386, 393). Therefore, research should emphasize on „when, why, and to what extent [interest groups] are powerful on what types of issues“ (Baumgartner/Leech 1998: 134). In dealing with this issue, forms of cooperative politics between governments and interest groups allow for new insights. These forms appear to serve as focal point at which their formal and informal interactions are pooled. From a conceptual perspective, political context shows that influence exertion on policy outcomes is merely one section of interest group influence as a whole. Studies that only focus on outcomes are prone to disregard power inequalities in the status quo, biases and the structural power of single interest groups. Using political context, research designs are able to integrate these disparities and their implications in their scope of work. This conjunction allows researchers “to enter into the broader scholarly dialogue about representation, much of which neglects groups” (Hojnacki et.al. 2012: 393-394). Which elements and factors have to be investigated via political context depends on the theoretical perspective. One way to deal with the challenges of interest group influence is to identify “mechanisms by which actors seek to exert influence” (Eising 2008: 20). Political context should consequently include „positive externalities that are not directly related to policy outcomes“ (Beyers/Eising/Maloney 2008: 1115), e.g. organizational maintenance, reputation and information management. New approaches can reconnect interest group research with government research to investigate the interdependence between interest group activity and institutional settings, and how groups and policy makers collaborate for joint advocacy e.g. in cooperative politics.

This short overview of interest group research depicts two issues to grapple with in order to work the question of interest group influence. There is quite a range of variation concerning (1) what exactly to investigate, that is which phenomena to use, and concerning (2) how – based on which concepts and definitions – to analyze the objects of study. As both of them are intertwined, the paper starts to take a look at the concepts of power and influence and proposes an indirect concept of influence (chapter 2). In its main part, the paper outlines a pathway to the question of influence, employing congruence analysis as a theoretical toolset (chapter 3). The following part takes a brief look at some thoughts about research design and case selection for the empirical application on the German states’ energy transition policy (chapter 4).
2. An indirect pathway: interest group influence as policy coordination

2.1 The problem of conceptualizing influence and its direct assessment

Despite the niche field status and the numerous challenges to tackle interest group influence, new approaches have improved our understanding of several factors (i.e. Baumgartner/Leech 1998, Bouwen 2004, Mahoney 2007, Dür/de Bièvre 2007, Beyers/Eising/Malony 2008, Klüver 2013, Lowery 2013, Pedersen 2013). What actors are influential to which degree is, according to their common conviction, essential to comprehend the role of interest groups in the policy making process. Over the decades, several seminal works have outlined both relevance and limits to this research area (e.g. Truman 1955, March 1955 Dahl 1961, Becker 1983, Salisbury 1984). They all discussed the problems that come along with defining power and influence, distinguishing universal concepts and theories from ad-hoc hypotheses and with ultimately operationalizing them (see Dür/de Bièvre 2007). Yet, none of the methods established any “gold standard” of influence assessment and measurement, let alone a commonly shared or natural scale of influence (Pedersen 2013: 28-29). In order to get some structure to the multilayered concepts of influence, Hart (1976: 289-303) suggests to distinguish (1) “control over resources”, (2) “control over actors” und (3) “control over events and outcomes”. The first approach focuses on economic and political resources that actors or groups of actors use to shape decisions. Counting resources seems easy enough to handle, yet it treats all interactions between actors as black box. It generates results that tend to describe existing power relations prior to decision making rather than the actual process. According to this approach, researchers charge up market power of business associations against electoral votes power of labor unions or public mobilization power of NGOs (Reutter/Rütters 2007: 127-131, Schmidt 2011: 114). The second approach is based on Robert Dahl (1957) and his Max Weber-like concept of power as a broadly defined ability to alter someone’s action according to one’s will. This approach opens the black box for interactions and is able to explain changing behavior. Yet it struggles with situations without visible behavioral changes, concealed interactions between influential actors or processes with multiple causes and interdependencies. Studies based on his approach depict influence via “inside” and “outside strategies” as well as informal exchange of political commodities between policy makers and interest groups (cf. Willems/Winter 2007: 40, Binderkrantz 2008). The third approach takes account of interdependencies between actors and spotlights the inference between initial actions and actors’ policy preferences on one side and events or consequences for specific outcomes on the other side. Hence it requires much more detailed data and interpretation. Generating comprehensive sets of (most of all qualitative) data is susceptible for methodological distortion, especially as actors’ statements about policy positions and interests might be (deliberately) skewed or incomplete. The research review (e.g. Hojnacki et.al. 2012, Lowery 2013) shows that numerous current studies apply a slightly modified version of this third approach as “control over policy outputs”. Interest group influence
Cooperative politics as an indirect pathway to the question of interest group influence

derives from the proximity between the central actors’ initial policy positions and the final outcome in legislation, respectively maintaining the status quo (cf. Baumgartner et.al. 2009).

The three approaches highlight conflicting priorities for conceptual and methodological issues about the question of influence. Pritoni (2014) emphasizes the trade-off between the generality of conceptualizing influence and its validity for empirical analysis. Following Sartori’s assumption (2011), the higher the level of generality, the less precise and valid are the empirical indicators (and vice versa). Pritoni suggests dividing concepts of influence into the direction of lobbying mobilization (pro status quo, anti status quo) and the applied stage of the policy cycle (agenda-setting; decision-making; implementation) as range of validity. He then employs this typology to evaluate quantitative influence measurements with regards to status quo maintenance in decision-making. The systematic differentiation allows for a more nuanced description of structures and processes in the scope of interest group influence. In addition, it equally complies with the multifaceted research practices. Clarity and transparency of influence approaches are essential to compare and relate different concepts and methods and consequently help to enhance our knowledge about these phenomena. This way of thinking corresponds with the pragmatist attitude of interest group research: despite all challenges and limiting issues, the question of influence isn’t believed to be a “mission impossible” (Pedersen 2013: 29). According to unanimous consent, this question is too crucial for comprehending democracy and the practice of decision-making processes. Therefore researchers should turn their backs on abstract and non-verifiably concepts in favor of empirically observable effects of influence (i.e. Baumgartner/Leech 1998: 37, Dür/de Bièvre 2007a: 3, Pedersen 2013: 29-30). In addition, some propose to combine several methods and data sources to deduce influence by triangulating various results (e.g. Arts/Verschurent 1999). This pragmatist perspective is more adapted to facilitate meaningful results than the often-employed direct attempt to attribute policy outcomes to a definite and distinct exertion of influence by interest groups. Chalmers (2011) characterizes this straight attempt as a dead-end that even improved measurements and refined indicators can’t solve. He rather suggests a „fundamental rethinking of interest group influence itself“ (Chalmers 2011: 472). Following his point of view, this paper explores an indirect concept of influence.

2.2 Interest group influence as policy coordination

Acknowledging the challenges of straight and direct approaches to investigate interest group influence, this paper proposes an indirect concept of influence focusing on policy coordination. This indirect concept is part of a comparative approach to identify behavioral patterns within the political context of ‘government – interest group’ cooperation. These patterns are in turn expected to improve our understanding of political context as a condition for interest group influence on government action. This influence concept grounds in the main hypothesis, according to which a high de-
Cooperative politics as an indirect pathway to the question of interest group influence

gree of coordination between governments and key interest groups leads to a low level of conflict. On that account, participating actors are able to produce joint policy recommendations – as outcome for cooperative politics. The hypothesis refers to the empirically substantiated correlation between public attention (“salient issues”) and expended efforts for actors to convey their policy positions (e.g. Hojnacki et. al. 2012: 385-389). High levels of conflict tend to attract more publicity, leading to a higher number of diverse actors to engage in the issue. This likely results in growing uncertainty and complexity which in turn constrains the actors’ relative chance to gain attention for their concerns.

The indirect concept of influence as policy coordination consequently affects the scope of the influence perception. At this point, the previously mentioned typology of generality and validity for interest group influence (Pritoni 2014) helps to locate the concept within the broadly defined „function to influence public policy“ (Beyers/Eising/Maloney 2008: 1109). Systematically speaking, the indirect concept covers a much smaller area than the broad “control over (...)”-approaches. It restrains to a specific form of cooperative politics and to the ideal-typical stages of the policy-cycle connected to them. The forms of cooperative politics under study are employed to flank formal legislative processes and comprehensive policy change – e.g. to adapt states’ policy to federal energy transition legislation of the German government. They emphasize primarily on agenda-setting and prearranging decisions. Thereby, they bring the ideal-typical stages together and visualize coordination processes at their junctions. Consequently, these flanking forms produce different sorts of results than most approaches that observe legislative outcomes by „control over policy outputs“. Especially highly complex and consequential outputs like legislation are subject to a variety of causal factors. As the current research overview shows, isolating specific interest group related causes from the interdependence of causal elements is extremely difficult. By focusing on flanking policy coordination in cooperative politics, this concept avoids large parts of the issue of overdetermination. In contrast to legislation, the routines of cooperative policy coordination are less exposed to media coverage, its content is well-defined and its interactions are characterized by continuous and long-term relations between the participating actors. This is why conceptualized influence is less situational and isolated but rather conceived as patterns of influence. In addition, the concept gets around the widespread assumption that interest group actions and lobbying are inherently conflictual (cf. Chalmers 2011: 472). The classical lineup describes interest groups as active protagonists and government officials as mere lobbying recipients. Dropping this oversimplification allows for a more realistic view of ‘government - interest group’ relations. Influence as policy coordination turns towards practices that include interest groups in government actions e.g. for "political support in election campaigns or other issues of legitimacy" (Hassel 2009). It matches the consensual default orientation common to German politics to incorporate interest groups in formal decision making and to institutionalize interactions between governments and interest groups (Willems/Winter 2007: 36).
Configuring influence as policy coordination consequently means to limit both generality and scope to a specific object under study. According to this understanding, influence doesn’t cover individual properties of single actors but rather adapts to collective modes of behavior for policy coalitions or ‘sides’ of an issue. These collective modes of behavior are expected to reveal the patterns of influence in policy coordination by using congruence analysis with interest- and argument-based theoretical frameworks. On these grounds, actors (or sides/coalitions) are considered influential if they are able to provide and implement collective coordinative practices.

3. Constructing the pathway: congruence analysis with interest- and argument-based frameworks

3.1 Congruence analysis as theoretical toolset

The study subject to this paper aims to take a closer look at the interactions of governments and interest groups within institutionalized forms of cooperative politics. It pursues to identify patterns of influence inside these interactions to coordinate German states’ energy transition policy. The study uses congruence analysis (CON, i.e. Blatter/Blume 2008, Blatter/Haverland 2012) as a theoretical toolset to improve our understanding of policy coordination and political context as a condition for interest group influence. Following CON’s logic, the study employs two rival comprehensive theoretical frameworks to interpret concrete observations in order to understand the cases under study. The frameworks, discursive and actor-centered institutionalism (DI and ACI), build on arguments versus interests to explain coordination. DI suggests that coordination is a result of arguing. Key elements include enacting consensus, common perceptions and sustained motivation to act. For ACI, coordination is a result of bargaining, focusing on (non-)exercised vetoes, compromises and mutual trust. Both theories are compatible with the main hypothesis that a high level of coordination leads to a low level of conflict, which in turn enables (meaningful) joint policy recommendations.

Congruence analysis (CON) as an approach originated from comparative and case study research that emphasizes the role of theories and theory-guided investigation. Initially it was developed to contribute to the methodological debate about the quantitatively-oriented template of social science research, most prominently presented in King, Keohane and Verba’s (KKV) „Designing Social Inquiry“ (1994). Therein, the three authors laid out a strict set of rules and requirements for scientific inference. Focusing largely on causal explanations, their understanding of causality derives from an experimental logic that highlights statistical variance to connect factors (KKV 1994: 7-9). The main research goal is testing existing theories, subordinating other goals to the label ‘causal description’ (KKV 1994: 75-77). As a seminal work, KKV started a broad and intense debate that brought out the relevancy of different research goals (e.g. George/Bennett 2005, Brady/Collier 2010, Mahoney 2010). Blatter, Blume and Haverland (Blatter/Blume 2008, Blatter/Haverland 2012) differentiate three approaches for research designs with both specific research goals and focus. Their first big alternative
Cooperative politics as an indirect pathway to the question of interest group influence

to the dominant Co-Variational Analysis (COV) of the quantitative template is (Causal-) Process-Tracing (CPT). Instead of testing which variation in explanatory variables leads to different outcomes, CPT takes an interest in what elements constitute a particular outcome. Therefore, it focuses on causal configuration, i.e. both sequential and situational combinations of conditions and mechanisms. Thus, CPT’s main research goal is inductive theory development (Blatter/Haverland 2012: 23-28). As third approach, CON points out both descriptive and explanatory merits of different theories. Based on comprehensive theoretical frameworks with competing or complementing properties, CON examines which theory generates new or better insights.

„In the congruence analysis approach (CON), theories are not reduced to single independent variables (as in the COV approach) but are treated as comprehensive worldviews that are specified through a set of constitutive and causal propositions. Case studies are used to elucidate and to compare the explanatory merits of competing or complementary theories“ (Blatter/Haverland 2012: 24).

Theoretical frameworks correspondingly take on quite an important role in this deductively-oriented approach. Theories are selected according to their relevance in scientific discourse and the researcher’s theoretical aspiration. Derived hypotheses and expectations from the theories specify what empirical evidence to observe in order to generate data. As a result, the approach creates a set of confirmations and contradictions for the employed theories. Then, researchers draw conclusions from the differences between theories and their (non-)congruence of theoretical expectations and empirical observations. These conclusions allow to refine the selected theories or to combine theories for comprehensive explanation. Unlike statistical generalization of results in COV approaches, CON promotes theoretical generalization. Drawing conclusions about theoretical frameworks and their application to the object under study addresses the scientific discourse about the question of interest group influence and aims for theory elaboration (Blatter/Blume 2008: 325-331, Blatter/Haverland 2012: 28-32).

Starting point for this congruence analysis is the specific theoretical figure of scope-of-action corridors („Handlungskorridore des Regierens“, e.g. Korte/Fröhlich 2009). As an underlying institutionalist framework, it defines the room for maneuver and policy discretion available to actors between the poles of structural and agent-centered elements. It opens up the angle to investigate how actors (government and interest groups) operate in different institutional settings and thus afflicting change to these institutions (George/Bennet 2005: 245). Scope-of-action corridors cover institutional, situational, actor-related and political factors to assess interest group impact on government action. This theoretical figure serves as a relevancy-filter to reduce the complexity of political context (cf. Sabatier 2007: 3-4). Inside this underlying framework, the rival theories of CON are located. Both theories outline different explanatory approaches to grasp institutionalized policy coordination between governments and interest groups. The line of thought of actor-centered institutionalism grounds in
(bounded-)rational actors and interests, while discursive institutionalism attributes to beliefs and argument-based perspectives. Together they outline an area of conceptual and theoretical tension that is utilized by congruence analysis.

3.2 Bargaining and arguing in policy coordination of government and interest groups

The *actor-centered institutionalism* (ACI, Mayntz/Scharpf 1995, Scharpf 2000a) is located on the rational choice and sociological side of the new institutionalisms (Hall/Taylor 1996). Fritz Scharpf himself judged the new institutionalisms as being too deterministic. According to his view, policy making is able to change even if institutions remain constant, as long as central actors alter their cognitive and normative orientations (Scharpf 2000b: 770-772). Other scholars have built on ACI’s heuristics to shift the thematic priority e.g. to strategic government action (e.g. Korte/Fröhlich 2004, 2009). Based on Scharpf’s evaluation, they developed a broadly defined political rationality composed of policy-, mediation-, and implementation rationales. Attributing (bounded-) rational actions embedded in an institutional and agent-centered setting therefore visualizes room for manoeuvre and blockades. The ACI then contains the elements of political pressure, actors, constellations, forms of interactions and political decisions. Its focus is on informally institutionalized interactions connecting the central decision making in government, parliament and parties to the actors in field of organized interests and the media (Korte/Fröhlich 2009: 187-192, 224-226, Florack/Grunden 2011: 20). To assess ‘government - interest group’ cooperation, the ACI extends to the structural characteristics of the “negotiated-competition democracy” (Florack/Grunden/Korte 2008: 67, cf. “administrative arena” Korte/Fröhlich 2009: 231). It explicitly addresses interest group participation at the intersection of hierarchy, competition and negotiation. Government, administration and interest groups reach decisions via negotiated agreements and consensus, as reconciling competing interests is considered more suitable than implementation by hierarchy or majority. The process of decision making remains deliberately non-public, facilitating compromises and package deals (Korte/Fröhlich 2009: 232).

The „argumentative turn“ of policy-research (e.g. Fischer/Forrester 1993, Nullmeier 1993) gave rise to ideas, discourses and narratives as explanatory elements. In reference to the new institutionalisms (Hall/Taylor 1996), the framework of discursive institutionalism (DI) advanced to become its fourth variety (Schmidt 2008: 304). Vivian A. Schmidt (i.e. 2008, 2010) uses the label to subsume several different approaches and versions.

“DI simultaneously treats institutions as given (as the context within which agents think, speak, and act) and as contingent (as the results of agents’ thoughts, words, and actions). These institutions are therefore internal to the actors, serving both as structures that constrain actors and as constructs created and changed by those actors.” (Schmidt 2008: 314).
This combination of varying and context-related properties of institutions increases the scope of action for actors. Besides ideas and discourses, interest-based behavior still remains part of DI „but it involves ideas about interests that may encompass much more than strictly utilitarian concerns“ (Schmidt 2008: 316). As an explicit institutionalist theory, DI links communicating ideas and statements to the institutional context where they enter the discourse. Yet, its institutions go beyond the three older institutionalisms that tend to depict merely their constraining side, e.g. by rational incentives, historical path dependencies or cultural frames. DI simultaneously treads institutions as constraining structures and enabling constructs of meaning which are internalized by the actors (Schmidt 2010: 4). Regarding the practice of interaction, DI distinguishes the mode of “coordinative discourse” between actors of the policy-sphere and the mode of “communicative discourse” between political actors and the (broader) public. Crucial to the study and its institutionalized cooperation forms are “coordinative discourses” covering decision makers in parliaments and administration as well as interest groups. Participating actors introduce their policy arguments to the discourse with varying degrees of influence. They often band together to informal groupings in order to influence agenda-setting, shaping and adoption of policies (Schmidt 2011: 100). Key approaches merging within DI are e.g. „discourse coalitions“ (i.e. Hajar 1993), „epistemic communities“ (i.e. Haas 1992) and notably „advocacy coalitions“ (i.e. Sabatier/Jenkins-Smith 1993, Sabatier/Weible 2007). In its role as relevancy-filter, the coordinative discourse of DI structures ‘government - interest group’ interactions within the forms of cooperative politics.

3.3 Developing a coherent framework to assess policy coordination in cooperative politics

After outlining ACI and DI, both frameworks need to select theoretical key aspects to analyze the coordination practices inside of ‘government - interest group’ cooperation. In order to develop a coherent framework, the study takes into account four issues concerning political context raised by corresponding approaches. (1) Growing complexity in governance of advanced democracies has increased the level of uncertainty. Systemic and structural challenges limit the decision making capabilities of governments and interest groups. As a result, central actors tend to cooperate to restore some reliability of expectations. Cooperation facilitates trust building that enables actors to anticipate positions and preferences of other participants (Töller 2008: 293-294, Rüb 2011: 75-77). (2) Long term processes from agenda-setting to implementation require shared perceptions about the nature of problems and their possible solution. Establishing and maintaining common rationales is essential for informal groupings and advocacy coalitions in policy sub-systems. Thus, cooperation helps to orchestrate windows of opportunity by staging media events or by applying public pressure to deviant participants (e.g. Sabatier/Weible 2007, Rüb 2009: 361-362). (3) Public perception of jointly agreed actions and consensus increases acceptance and legitimacy by appealing to general public
Cooperative politics as an indirect pathway to the question of interest group influence

interests. At the same time, incorporating expertise of relevant interest groups helps to create commonly accepted knowledge and information, scaling up the persuasiveness of the cooperation as a whole (i.e. Mahoney 2007: 54, Willems/Winter 2007: 36, Bandelow 2007: 155, Florack/Grunden/Korte 2011: 194). (4) Finally, any compromises in cooperation are prone to constrain the participants’ ability to act. By exchanging access for public support and reputation, institutionalized cooperation depends on the participants’ willingness to proceed, especially if individual interest and group interests clash (i.e. Willems/Winter 2007: 40, Bandelow 2007: 153).

Considering these four issues from the theoretical perspectives of ACI and DI, the study concludes its analytical framework accordingly. Its key elements for the argument-based part include enacting consensus versus dissent, the presence of common perceptions as well as for sustained motivation to act. The interest-based part involves the presence of (non-)exercised vetoes, policy concessions versus minimal consensus and the level of mutual trust. Following the logic of congruence analysis, these theoretically deduced expectations will be applied to be confirmed or contradicted by empirical data in order to distinguish relevant interaction principles as anticipated by (or opposing) the theoretical frameworks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical Approach: congruence analysis with interest- and argument-based frameworks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cooperative Politics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutionalized policy coordination</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction of participating government and interest group actors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interest inclusion: presence of (non-)exercised vetoes +/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Content: Policy concessions versus minimal consensus +/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uncertainty: level of mutual trust +/-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**actor-centered institutionalism – ACI**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>discursive institutionalism – DI</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Discourse inclusion: enacting consensus versus dissent +/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Content: presence of common perceptions +/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Uncertainty: sustained motivation to act +/-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**outcome: policy coordination WITH/ WITHOUT (meaningful) joint policy recommendations**

political and institutional context
4. Research design and casing: coordinating German states’ energy policy with cooperative politics

After having discussed the theoretical toolset to grasp the question of interest group influence, this paper presents some thoughts concerning the comparative research design. One of the main issues of comparative research with smaller-n cases is that case selection and data collection are part of the same iterative process (e.g. Blatter/Janning/Wagemann 2007: 24). Whether cases are relevant for comparison depends on data that has to be collected during the research process. In the worst case, researchers get to a point, where the collected data suggest that the initially selected cases have too little variation for an informative comparison or even are not comparable at all. The study employs a method-based approach using qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to guide case selection, casing and data collection to ensure both sufficient comparability and variance. It starts with easily collectable data like reports and official statistics and funnels step-by-step to less accessible data like expert interviews.

Casing: institutionalized cooperation in German states’ energy policy adaptation.

Preliminary casing uses the presence of (meaningful) joint policy recommendations as outcome of coordination. If coordination efforts aren’t successful, the outcomes are most likely to be general expressions of intention and symbol politics. Cooperative politics between governments and interest groups from the conventional and/or the renewable energy policy coalition are used in all German states to coordinate policy after the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima and the subsequent energy transition legislation on German federal level in 2011. Casing is therefore focused on new and existing coordination formats in the period after the external policy shocks, ensuring similar levels of public pressure, expectations to react and similar references to public debate.

Both scope and depth of research are affected by the number of cases selected for comparison. The number of selected cases depends in turn on the research goals and the vision of research the project strives to achieve. Following the logic of congruence analysis, the main research goal is theory elaboration by comparing the descriptive and explanatory merits of the two selected theoretical frameworks (Blatter/Haverland 2012: 23-24). To ensure sufficient opportunities for theory-based (non)-congruence of concrete observations, the number of cases shouldn’t be too small. This choice corresponds to the secondary research goal of classification regarding the patterns of influence (“typological theory” cf. George/Bennet 2005: 244). Both variance and intimacy to the case are necessary to identify theory-guided patterns of influence in government-interest group coordination. The project makes a choice for a smaller-n comparison of five to ten cases.

This choice also represents the project’s vision of research to work (relatively) closely on the selected cases without losing sight of the political context. The participating interest groups and governments don’t limit their actions to the coordination forms, just as these forms aren’t the only factors in a
state’s policy deliberation. Therefore the project doesn’t restrict the research to one or two singular cases but aims to include several varying federated states as “case families” for case selection.

Case selection: Multiple Cases – Most-Similar (cases) Different Outcome MSDO

Forms of cooperative politics are used in all German states to coordinate the policy adaptation to the energy transition. However, the states’ policy reactions vary both in scope and format. As mentioned before, the study develops a method-based approach using QCA to guide case selection, casing and data collection in order to assure both sufficient comparability and variance. To limit the number of cases to a manageable amount, an applicable strategy seems to be to group them to “case families”. These “case families” are federated states with specific outcomes of their own on the macro level. The “familiar” property of these groups is in the shared political context of the involved actors of the cases (e.g. strength of industry, relevance of renewable energy (RE) industry).

In a first step the research looks for policy adaptation in all federated states after the events of 2011. Using QCA and multiple combinations of conditions, a cluster of three key states, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg, is identified for a more in-depth analysis. All three states share important features, e.g. high population, a highly industrialized economy, importance of conventional energy and they are among the biggest producers of renewable energy. According to theory, (1) both conventional and renewable energy coalitions are considered to be strong in these states, and (2) promoting RE can’t be seen merely as an attempt to stimulate the own economy as a means of location policy.

In a second step, the actual cases are selected by identifying institutionalized coordination forms from within the cluster of these three states. All cases belong to the highly institutionalized spectrum of observable ‘government - interest group’ interactions, but they vary in their outcome. The theoretical framework suggests that policy coordination is considered successful when the involved actors can agree on clear and relevant policy recommendations. In some situations the involved actors – governments and interest groups from the conventional and/or the renewable energy coalition – aren’t able to reach a common conclusion. They silently end the coordination process without any meaningful policy recommendation. Case selection is therefore based on a typology that distinguishes coordination outcomes as with/without meaningful policy recommendation. The case selection follows the “most-similar different-outcome design” (MSDO, Przeworski/Teune 1970, Berg-Schlosser/De Meur 2009: 21-23; for case list see appendix).

For the third step, this method-based approach helps to reduce the amount of qualitative data to a more manageable extent. Thus, it decreases the risk to invest research energy in cases that ultimately don’t make the cut for the final evaluation and analysis.
Tackling this research puzzle requires a complex and case-oriented view when it comes to data collection and analysis. In this sense, ‘useful’ data helps to understand the specifics of the case. Its collection has to be rather flexible and concept-driven in order to obtain a sufficient level of intimacy with the cases. Only a limited amount of already compiled material is useful for this project, covering the macro-level and outcomes on the state level. Most of the relevant information for the interaction on the meso-level of government and interest group actors has to be gathered during the research process. In qualitative and case study research, data generation is a crucial task where researchers need to invest both time and intellectual energy. This is especially true for interest group research in the context of lobbying, as its main characteristics are discretion and informal arrangements. This raises the threshold for scientific access to viable information, mostly obtainable via interviews.

Once again, the project follows the logic of congruence analysis. The relevant observations from the cases deliver information that corresponds to the expectations (propositions, hypotheses, predictions) deduced from theories. Resulting data will be a set of confirmations and/or contradictions for the two theoretical frameworks that helps to distinguish relevant interaction principles as anticipated by (or opposing) the theoretical frameworks.

Sources for data generation for these case-oriented observations are official reports and statements from participating governments and interest groups as well as expert interviews. The interviews will be conducted with representatives from the three groups – government, interest groups from the conventional and from the renewable energy coalition – with a total of five to six interviews per “case family” (federated state). The data will be compiled using scaling qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2002) to assess differences in the level of congruence between theoretical expectations and observations. As a conclusion the results should shed some light on the relative importance of specific aspects of both theoretical frameworks. They might allow for a more comprehensive explanation through combining both theories to a single analytical framework.

5. Concluding remarks

The question of interest group influence is a vivid example that social science is challenged by a complex and highly interconnected world. This paper outlined a double-indirect approach to tackle the question in a theory-guided context. Using an indirect concept of influence as policy coordination, the paper elaborated on how to apply congruence analysis to identify behavioral patterns within the political context of institutionalized cooperation between government and interest groups in German states’ energy transition policy. By combining interest- and argument-based frameworks (actor-centered institutionalism and discursive institutionalism), this approach helps to utilize political context as a condition to improve our understanding of interest group influence.
However, this indirect research strategy comes at the cost of limited generality regarding influence and restricted area of empirical validity. Quantitatively assessing a single, non-controversial value of influence for specific interests groups in a broadly defined set of varied situations isn’t part of what this approach is set out to do (or even aspiring to achieve). But with an eye to the current research review, supposedly simple answers to the crucial question of interest group influence aren’t suited to overcome the “conceptual, methodological and disciplinary barriers [that] militate against the accumulation of knowledge” (Beyers/Eising/Maloney 2008: 1103). Consequently, the approach aims to advance the scientific discourse about this question by theoretical generalization according to the logic of congruence analysis. Data collection, evaluation and interpretation will show to what extend the results between theoretical expectations and empirical observations are qualified to contribute.

Additional limitations have to be considered that are inherent to a qualitative approach and the ex-ante selection of cases based on limited knowledge. First, in respect of data quality, the gathered information might be biased or skewed. All observations need to be mirrored carefully with other sources or contextual information to increase their validity. Second, due to the limited knowledge about the discreet surroundings of lobbying-related interactions, the relevant cases can’t be directly selected based on their coordination principles as anticipated by theory. Even with some evidence from reports and the varying outcome of the cases within the selected “case families”, there is still the danger of omitted cases or insufficient variance. Yet, the concept- and method-guided approach creates sound arguments to justify the pursued course for the proverbial “proof of the pudding” in the research process.
Cooperative politics as an indirect pathway to the question of interest group influence

References


Beyers, Jan; Eising, Rainer; Maloney, William (2008): Researching Interest Group Politics in Europe and Elsewhere: Much We Study, Little We Know?, West European Politics 31 (6), S. 1103-1129.


Dür, Andreas (2008): Measuring Interest Group Influence in the EU: A Note on Methodology, in: European Union Politics, VOL 9, NO 4


Cooperative politics as an indirect pathway to the question of interest group influence


Hart, Jeffrey (1976): Three approaches to the measurement of power in international relations. In: Int. Org. 30 (02), S. 289.


## Appendix: Case selection: Policy coordination in forms of cooperative politics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of Cooperative Politics</th>
<th>„Case family“ (federated state)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Outcome (joint policy recommendation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordination Group in the Climate Protection Plan</td>
<td>NRW(^1)</td>
<td>since 2012</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working groups in the Climate Protection Plan</td>
<td>NRW</td>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working group in &quot;Dialogue creates Future&quot; (formally Alliance for Industry and Sustainability)</td>
<td>NRW</td>
<td>since 2009/2012</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(poss.?) Energy efficiency program „NRW saves energy“</td>
<td>NRW</td>
<td>since 2007</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working group &quot;climate protection by saving energy&quot;</td>
<td>Bavaria</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum sustainable hydropower</td>
<td>Bavaria</td>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEKO am IEKK Participation format for the energy concept</td>
<td>Ba-Wue(^2)</td>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring-Group “Energiewende”</td>
<td>Ba-Wue</td>
<td>since 2012</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIN Economy Initiative Sustainability</td>
<td>Ba-Wue</td>
<td>since 2010</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(poss.?) Council for sustainable development</td>
<td>Ba-Wue</td>
<td>since 2012</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) North Rhine-Westphalia, \(^2\) Baden-Wuerttemberg