Proposal for a limited n-case-based mixed design for the study of the factors explaining party-interest group relations

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Abstract

This paper discusses the selection of a mixed qualitative and quantitative method for the study of networking between political parties and interest organizations. At this point of the study which started about ten months ago we suggest to investigate the party-IG relationships in Flanders, Belgium, by means of a qualitative comparative design.

This research project is positioned in the broader literature on the advocacy of interests and the political translation of individual and group demands by both interest groups and political parties (as interest groups). When looking at the role that parties –i.e. party elites- play in starting, maintaining, and building or ending relations with IGs we, however, still fumble in a dark. Our knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of party-IG-networking and relationships remains very patchy: either it focuses on the activities of one or more IGs with a very specific interest in a rather restricted domain, or it is it about a (small) selection of political and non-political organizations in one or more policy areas. Studies may also zoom in on the roles played by a specific actor (a IG or a political party) and look at the networking strategies allowing political and non-political actors to assume their role (policy influencing, policy making or policy implementation). Or studies look at the channels used for lobbying or exerting pressure on political entities (individual MPs, parliamentary groups, ministers, their cabinets etc.). Less likely, however, these studies concern the factors explaining the relations built between political and non-political actors or the perceived impact of the interaction between political actors and IG(s).

One of the most important and tricky choices to be made is the one between depth and width in the study of relations or networks. First of all, a way to secure coherence in the research is to strive for thematic unity, hence, by selecting one overarching theme or topic. A way to secure sufficient variance in the observations or empirical data is to select organizations with opposite goals (for instance status quo versus non-status quo groups). We argue that the choice for a limited-n-case qualitative approach including extreme cases –hence most likely and least likely cases- is the most promising to generate insights. More to it, instead of looking at either the side of the political actors or the side of the IGs, we propose a two-sided more integrated approach which allows the detection of interactions between the political and non-political IGs. Thirdly, ideally the more cases of a certain population are included, the better. This explains our choice for the study of the recent developments of the socio-economic policy in Belgium and our focus on the relations between ‘all’ represented political parties and a broad selection of interest groups. Since the central theme of our choice is the socio-economic dimension of policy formulation, the latter include e.g. the official workers organizations and the representative trade unions, as well as the other Flemish parties included in the Group of Ten.

Note: this is work in progress – please do not cite!
1. Introduction

The paper starts with a brief introduction of the scope of our research of the factors explaining party-interest group linkages. Thereafter we give a summary of the operationalisation of the main variables and concepts in our study. In a third part we explicate the choice for a mixed qualitative and quantitative research design. And in the last part we make an interim evaluation of our research approach for the planned study of the relations between political parties and interest groups. The arguments for the choice to apply a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach are partly found in the limitations of purely quantitative or qualitative approaches and partly founded in the specific nature of the research object, the chosen unit and level of analysis and the time frame which we intend to apply.

2. Scope of the research

The large majority of the studies of interest groups (including political parties) focuses on either the channels or strategies used by the interest groups to advocate their desires and preferences or the effect of that lobbying on the policy outcomes. The later concern the decisions taken by the political entities concerned at different levels (MPs, ministers, the administration, the EC...). Little attention however is given to the particular role that the political parties themselves play in the process of interest aggregation (of different interest groups) and interest formulation (for the entire society) in relation to those of interest groups. With our project we want to shed a light on the role that parties play. Firstly, we aim to disclose how political parties deal with interest groups' claims and how parties build and conduct relations with interest groups. Moreover we want to discover what factors explain these relations. Why do political parties have linkages with certain IGs and not with others?

Central questions to answer in this research are:

1. Firstly, what relationships exit between the political parties and the interest groups that deal with socio-economic matters in Flanders?
2. Secondly, what factors explain the presence of such relations?
3. Thirdly, what is the perceived impact of the pressure or advocacy of certain claims made by the concerned interest groups on the policy formulation of political parties?

The above relations and causal factors will be analyzed empirically through the study of the programming function of political parties in the past 15 years (2000-2014).

2.1 Central topics and conceptualizations: parties, IGs and theme

What phenomena do we look at in the study of IGs foremost? When speaking of party-IG-linkages one of the main references in the research field is the study done by Allern (2007, 2010) and Allern and Bale (2012). Both authors look at the question what are complex relations (or links)? They refer to organizational links between parties and IGs that "seek to influence public decision-making from ‘without’." (Allern, Bale 2012:8) They differentiate between parties in government (attracting more attention of IGs) versus parties outside government agencies. Since only the parties are the central focus of the research, a categorization is made between 'old' mass parties, like the socialdemocratic and christiandemocratic parties (and the farmers' party), and the new parties (like the green). Because only the party-side of the relationship is looked at, the IGs as such are not placed in different categories. The study of party-IG-relations and networking concerns foremost the organization of the parties.

The theoretical frame used for the referred study by Allern is a combination of central ideas taken from different theories. First of all they refer to the evolutionary theory and institutional theory as a main source of elements (factors) which might explain why parties would get into contact with non-politicized interest
groups. The more democratic the institutions have become, the more new movements came to life and the more pluralist the political system has become. In sum, pluralistic societies have lead to party pluralism and the latter has lead to pluralistic parties. (Allern, Bale 2012:12) One conclusion is that pluralistic parties are more open for IGs than not so pluralistic parties. Another theoretical frame used by Allern is that of the economic transaction cost model and rational choice theory. In sum this model argues that the exchange of resources is a basis for building support networks, organizational support, knowledge and expertise etc. Thirdly, relations not explained by either the economic model or the institutional model would be explained by a normative principle. Basically this boils down to the fact that parties develop relations with IGs because that networking fits the party’s representation function or role. And, because the internal representativeness of parties (i.e. partisanship, mobilization rate etc.) has weakened over the past 50 years, parties are eager to give their representation role a boost by connecting to party-external entities, like IGs.

However, though those theoretical perspectives might seem very reasonable, the truth is that there are very large inter-party differences, even within one-country studies. In multi-country studies the differences are even bigger, both at the level of the party and at the level of the country. Based on these findings our study is rooted in the following central ideas:

- First of all, political parties are seen as membership organizations, promoting certain ideology-based social and economic targets which the members adhere (= internal representativeness)
- Secondly, political parties have based on their relationships with interest groups also an external orientation (= external representativeness)
- Thirdly, political parties strive for a balance between the internal and external representativeness.

What parties? At the one hand, it seems to be a true finding that because of the secularization, because of the erosion of the class society (de-ideologization and depillarization) the traditional linkages between voters, interest groups and political parties has weakened. (cf. Binderkrantz et al. 2014:5) Those societal changes have put all parties but foremost the old mass parties in an unpleasant position (characterized by ideological convergence, party detachment, and electoral volatility). On the other hand, because of the professionalization of parties and the particratisation of the democratic system (at least in Belgium), parties became more wealthy and powerful over time. Also the role of the party leadership (appointing the cabinets, making the candidate lists in case of legislative elections, appointing top ranking officials in a large number of state companies and so on) has significantly increased (at the cost of that of the MPs and the administration). Some authors are convinced both processes are intertwined: “One can argue that the increased dependence upon public subsidies has speeded up this important transformation process.” (Selle 1997:160) All in all, political parties in Belgium (Flanders) have gained power, both politically and economically, and they still do election after election or with each institutional transformation of change.

What theme or policy domain? Because of the increasing importance of the socio-economic themes in politics (pension, index, employment issues, workers rights etc.) since the subsequent economic crisis of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s not only the traditional parties but the modern parties (like the Flemish-nationalists or the green party) have spent more and more attention to the socio-economic part of policy programming. All Flemish parties to date have a seriously elaborated socio-economic section in the party programme and their election programme.

Even though because of that generally increased attention for the socio-economic dimension the theme has become less suitable for controlling for inter-party differences based on their relations with theme-related interest groups, we believe that this cannot be stated without seriously investigating the effect of the increased ideological width on the party-IG-relations. One element that argues in favor of our skepticism is
that whereas most parties converged on non-socio-economic issues over the past three or four decades or so, that was not the case for the traditional liberal and sociodemocratic parties on the socio-economic themes. There the differences between liberals and socialists are still big (for instance between parties that aim for a status quo and those aiming to change the welfare system). Those differences in ideology and in policy proposals are understood to have an impact on the way interest groups are attracted to a certain party and not to another. Or on the way IGs are willing to provide knowledge or expertise, or to share resources and cooperate with the party concerned (and not with other parties).

What interest groups? Because of the central topic, we would investigate the relations between the Flemish parties and first of all the traditional socio-economic partners. They are the organizations that are part of the centralized and structural socio-economic debate in Belgium: the three recognized representative unions (ACV, ABVV and ACLVB), the employers’ organization (VBO), the organization of small and medium-sized enterprises (Unizo), and the Farmers’ Union (Boerenbond). Those organizations are formally part of the Belgian neocorporatist economic democracy. However, over the past decades the role of the unions and the trade organisations have significantly changed. For instance the distance with the traditional ideologically allied parties has grown and that with other interest groups has become smaller. And some notably indicate that the traditional sister organizations – like the unions for the social-democratic and Christian-democratic party- have lost their preferential partner status over time. In general, most parties today signal a relative openness towards all kinds of interest groups, despite the ideological differences.

2.2 What factors explain P-IG-relations in the social economic domain (social economic democracy)?

From our first round of interviews (pre-research phase, December 2013-February 2014) the following four factors explaining why parties and IGs build relations reached the surface:

- ideological connectedness,
- inter-personal relations and trust,
- size and structure of the organization and participation in government, and
- the representativeness of the IGs concerned (organization, structure, membership, activities and so on).

Each of those factors is positioned on a different level: personal relations are situated on a micro-level, ideological connectedness is situated on the macro-level of the party system organization. In between are the organizational level of parties and interest groups (meso-level). That is why apart from the above organization-specific factors there are other non-organization specific environmental elements that shape party-IG relations:

- contextual or societal factors: growth of the middle class, rise of the mass media, new social media,…
- constitutional, legal, electoral and political structures, and
- historical factors and legacies.

To conclude this section, the research concerns the party-IG-relations and the factors explaining such linkages. We do not investigate how and with what success IGs influence the policy-making process. Nevertheless, from the normative perspective one could argue that the more frequent and more in depth relations have become, the more likely the influence on the policy outcome will be. Measuring influence however remains very difficult: "...the scholars’ ability to measure the influence of IGs has always been very poor." (Baumgartner & Leech 1998 in: Pitroni 2014:14) Can we measure the impact of IG-influencing by the
(mathematical) difference between the goal and the real policies (based on word count)? Are we better of relying on more general perceptions of influence? Because there might be plenty of reasons other than the influence of IGs that determine policy choice and because the perceptions of the interviewees can be blurred or biased in more than one way, we do not intend to unravel the mysteries of policy-influencing. Rather, like Bursens et al. (2014) we argue that because there is no perfect way to measure the influence, we only look at the process of taking part in the policy formation process.

Next to the above mentioned elements explaining why parties and IGs get connected, the interviews also showed that the communication channels used are of importance. Sometimes a party’s communication policy, plan or strategy is crossed by that of an IG. New forms of communication used by parties are: online (public) consultation or 2.0 facebook or twitter communication. Like studies abroad learn, also in Belgium there are not only large inter-regional differences, but also large inter-party differences concerning those relatively new modes of communicating with the larger community of stakeholders.

Apart from the communication channels in place, also the position of the interest group might be an important factor to look at. (cf. Varone et al. 2014) What IGs are part of a so-called amici network (cf. large eigenvector centrality) or what IGs are central of a coalition network (cf. betweenness score) which both have a positive effect on that IG’s information gathering and policy brokerage position? (cf. Beyers & Braun, 2013)

In sum, what is the strength of strong ties? If it is correct to state that the quality of the networking position (the strength) is indeed more important (for policy influencing) than the quantity of relations (the number), than looking at the factors explaining the centrality of the networking position is relevant for the study of party-IG-linkages. For example, “(...) there is no immediate correlation between the number of times that an individual has exerted pressure on another and the outcome of these attempts of pressure.” (Pritoni 2014:3)

More to it, the centrality of the party’s network position could learn us a lot about the democratic function performed by the party and the legitimacy of that party for the network of IGs concerned.

Referring to the post-cartellianisation of parties: “(...)cartel parties are vulnerable and have therefore already experienced a need to re-incorporate society into politics since separation from society does not seem to be a successful strategy in the long run.” (Yishai 2001 in: Allern, Bale 2012:16) This gives support to the political exchange argument based on cost/benefit evaluation between parties and IGs. On the other hand, parties themselves have a strong desire to function as transmission-belt organizations that aggregate interests, responding to the demands of IGs.

But also, the negative ties need to be controlled for: what IGs that are not in a central node position do perform a brokerage function? What is the strength of weak ties? How stable are the relations built with political parties? Are they comparable with those built with bureaucrats (foremost technical issues), or with MPs (political issues, innovative views), or with ministers of cabinets (socio-economic issues)?

2.3 Linkage versus influence

Political parties do not compete for attention by placing emphasis on different issues, but parties seek direct confrontation on the same issues. The opposite, however, is true for interest groups. Interest groups may combine strength and in doing so enlarge their shared influence or control to determine policy.

3. Operationalisation

Regarding the operationalisation of p-Party-IG linkages, we refer to the definition of Allern and Bale (2012) of a political party and an interest group, the latter being basically a non-party group. Formal links are those “means by which parties and interest groups communicate.” (Allern, Bale 2012:11) For instance, we discern:

- joint/corporate membership,
- joint committee membership,
- leadership overlap, or
- regular elite contact.

The distance between parties and interest groups can be measured on the basis of:

- the degree of organizational relationships (at the meso-level): aligned, interlinked, tied or connected (as organizations) (ibid.)
- the degree of dependence: independence, P-dependence, IG-dependence or mutual dependence (interdependence).

When looking at party-IG relations, we can look at two different kinds of dyads:

- firstly, party-IG pairs, or the organizations with same interests, leading foremost to organized interactions
- and, secondly, party-IG-networks, made of organizations with different interests, involving mainly loose, ad hoc interaction.

In the first instance the independent variable is party-IG relationship. This relationship may well be characterized by a certain number of interventions (= repeated player) or just by one (= singular player). In the second instance, the central idea concerns the extent of being part of one or more coalitions (cf. degree of centrality or being a team player) or the betweenness in several venues (multi-venue player). In fact both elements can be plotted on an X-Y axis, with the structuredness of the interventions or contacts on the X axis and the number of interventions or contacts on the Y axis. The more structured the relations, the stronger the party-IG bonds and therefore the more frequent the contacts and interventions are expected to be.

**What cases?**

Comparable to other studies we want to look at content that is fully verifiable. The cases under investigation on the basis of which we determine the outcome of the party-IG networking are the 2012-2014 party manifesto-making process. (Selle, 1997; Allem, 2007, 2010) We are foremost concerned with the party manifestos being prepared for the May 2014 legislative (regional, national and European) elections, and within those manifestos with the socio-economic policy proposals.

Dealing with the party manifesto creation means that this research looks at the stage of ‘policy formulation’ only. It does not concern policy decision-making nor does it concern the policy implementation or execution. When studying the party manifestos we search for elements, phrases, text parts or words that are taken from memoranda, notes, letters of other written sources coming from the selection of interest groups. Some of them will strive for change, others will envisage a status quo. Unlike Pitroni (Pitroni 2014:6-8) we will not calculate the impact of the IGs on the policy formulation as a share of the policy change – ranging from zero to 100 and thus as a measure of the stand-still (cf. “any reforming attempt that produces no change represents the maximum influence by pro-status quo IG.”). Rather we will use the overlap in the IG’s proposal and the party’s manifesto as a dependent variable. A high overlap would indicate a high influence of the IG on the party’s policy formulation. Based on the information collected from party officials during the pre-research phase we tend to agree with Pitroni (2014) that “the process is as brief as possible”.

However the question whether or not the status quo or change is due to the influence of the IG (only) lays open. It may just well to do with the absence of IGs. Therefore we need more contextual information. Case-
based studies, whether or not they include rather limited samples and even though we look for general features or generalizable results, deserve nuance, i.e. the core of the social network analysis of political parties as organizations.

4. Quantitative versus qualitative design

We have the option or choice between a fully qualitative design (with a small number of cases, possibly just one) or an n-limited cases study approach or a comparative or cross-sectional design.

The decisive factor in the choice of a research design is the data. Are data available? If so, how abundant are they? If not, can we collect them properly? Bursens et al, 2014 for instance relied partly on data already collected by other researchers (Donas & Bursens, 2013). Those data allowed for the combination of existing parameters into new indicators. Not only the data, also operationalizations by other authors were applied (like IRI, RAI). And the data were enriched by the data of an own original dataset regarding participation in EC consultations (yes/no question). That sort of data collection and handling is well suited for a quantitative approach (of the data analysis and hypothesis testing).

But qualitative data can be added during the process. This data give the result more body. The empirical data from questionnaire based surveys, for instance expert surveys, are the flesh around the skeleton of the crosssectional large databased quantitative approach. Based on the variety of the panel of experts or specialists (academics, professionals, IG executives, policy makers or bureaucrats) the color of the flesh might change. In any case, “the higher the number of experts, the greater the reliability of the data” (Pitroni 2014:15)

Last but not least, when there’s no data available or when large datasets will not provide us the detailed information that we are looking for, a research needs to turn to the practice of field research (observation, document analysis and interviews). This approach is only suitable for a limited cases design and will eventually entail in text coding and analysis. The latter implies manual hand-coding techniques, the development of a categorization scheme, dividing text into sentences or quasi-sentences and assigning these to the coding categories (Pritoni 2014:4). Several statistical programmes are being used for the analysis of the coded text (parts): (1) NVIVO, (2) WORDSCORES (cf. Laver, Benoit & Garry 2013) which compares reference texts pinpointing policy positions know with virgin texts and whereby the quality of the research results is determined by the quality of the reference texts (known policy position), or (3) WORDFISH which is a statistical scaling model estimation of policy positions in texts on predefined policy dimensions (it is based on relative word frequencies in texts) and whereby the quality of the research results is determined mainly by the definition of the policy dimension and the selection of the docs dealing with it, outselecting all passages that do not refer to the policy dimension. The latter is ideally for the study of longer texts, i.e. “mostly very complex and multifaceted documents as well as political documents” (Pitroni 2014:6), like party manifestos, party congress speeches and election programmes. The longer the text, the more reliable the analysis. Not very useful for legal texts, because non-political.

But researchers will turn to the qualitative techniques, like interviews, in search of nuance or more detailed understanding of the general processes or found relations. Bursens et al (2014) for instance had additional interviews with the administrations of SNAs ‘about the use of coordination mechanisms with private interest organizations’ (p. 18) More to it, the researchers performed an additional analysis of the submitted position papers using quantitative text analysis. Also Varone et al (2014) executed a document analysis in order to reconstruct and fully describe the entire policy-making process: what venue? With whom? However, when the wanted to answer the question whether or not IGs occupying a central network position have more successful advocacy activities, Varone et al. turned to an explanatory design using quantitative techniques. In sum they found that repeat players are more successful (hypothesis confirmed), also when controlled for IG-
type and coalition behavior. Hence, number of contacts seems to have a positive effect on the influence of IGs. Also, it the multi-level players were found to be more successful. On the other hand, IG being part of multiple coalitions were not more successful than other IGs, not being team players.

5. Towards a qualitative comparative approach?

In this part we propose a concrete research approach for the planned study of the relations between political parties and interest groups. The arguments for the choice to apply a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach are partly found in the limitations of purely quantitative or qualitative approaches, but also partly founded in the research object, the scope of the research and the time frame which we intend to apply.

We already observed that in the study of party-IFG-relations we need to link IGs strategies to concrete policy-making process. (cf. Varone et al. 2014:19-10) To this end it was suggested to put the survey in a policy context (a concrete policy-making process) and to observe the real policy behavior of IGs. In order to do so we intend to interview the main policy-players (policy-makers and policy-takers) in the field. The preference of looking at both sides of the interaction was also suggested by Allern (2006) and Allern and Bale (2012). “A truly complete analysis would also analyse relationships from the viewpoint of the interest groups. It takes two to tango – and in many cases to divorce after a long-established ‘marriage’.” (Allern 2006:345)

Based on the limitations of the strictly qualitative approaches (high internal validity, low external validity) and quantitative approaches (high external validity, low case validity), we propose to investigate the relations between the Flemish political parties that are represented in the regional and/or federal parliament and a number of interest groups in the socio-economic policy domain in the following way.

5.1 Partly qualitative design

In preparatory phase of the study a informative interview has been organized with one of the party elite members, having a good knowledge of the party’s networking strategy and a good view on the organization of the contacts with external stakeholders. In most cases this was the political director of the party or the head of the research department or study service of the party. There has also been one interview with the overarching organization of the interests groups, called the Verenigde Verenigingen.

The purpose of those interviews was:

1. First of all, to discuss the topic of interest and to delimit the research topic and the research focus. The focus is on the descriptive analysis of existing party-IG-relations, how they originate, what factors are important and what kind of networking has been successful in terms of the inclusion of IG-claims into the party programmes or election programmes over the past 15 years.

2. Secondly, to evaluate the already formulated research questions and to test their validity and relevance.

3. Thirdly, to refine the research questions and to add new ones.

4. Fourthly, to discuss the most appropriate research method (taking into account feasibility, timing, the possible sensitivity of issues like party funding, party mobilization, party influence, IG-relations etc.).

5. Finally, to get a sense of the societal and political added-value of this research project.

The result was very positive. All Flemish parties were open for an interview. More to it, the choice to include not only the three traditional parties but all parties was actually suggested by the interviewees themselves.
In a next step we intend to look at the party programmes and the claims adopted in the memoranda made by the interest groups. One way to operationalize the factor ‘influence’ would be to look at the overlap in the number of issues and the way those issues are put (copy-paste or no deviation to strong deviation).

Once we have a impression on the overlap between party programmes and the claims formulated by interest groups concerned, we will organize a next round of interviews to find out precisely what factors explain the adoption of rejection of IG claims or proposals, which were communicated to the party officially (hence, in writing). In some cases parties themselves invite IGs to inform them about their preferences. In other cases parties leave the initiative to the interest groups. Often parties receive memoranda or wish lists through their MPs. In other cases interest groups directly address the party leadership or the study or research service. Since there is a wide variety of entrances to the party, it is useful to look at what are the more successful ones and what are less successful, or not successful at all. This part of the study will be largely based on perceptions of what the persons concerned in the process feel what is important. Because a strong recollection bias might play when the analysis concerns the older programmes, this will not so much be the case for the preparation of the election programmes for the 2014 regional and federal elections. Therefore the focus of the impact analysis will only be at this year’s process of IG-influence of party programmes and election programmes.

Hence, this part of the research concerns mainly qualitative methods: interviews and document analysis.

5.2 Partly quantitative design

In this part of the study we look more closely at the factors explaining party-IG-relations. There is a large literature that argues that the position of political parties (and that of interest groups) has changed over the past 50 years because of societal changes (Binderkranz et al, 2014:5) Factors influencing the position of parties (responsiveness, legitimacy) are the number of members, the electoral score, the general perception of trust in political parties and politicians, the participation in elections, the mobilization rate of parties and so on. Similarly we could define the position of interest groups like trade unions, green movements, or other specific groups based on their memberships, mobilization rate and the general trust that people have in their organization, people and activities. More to it politics is more than before influenced by new groups, like academia, the ‘big four’ and alike, with (supposedly) different degrees of relations with political parties.

Because large datasets (with cross-sectional or longitudinal data) on the existence and policy relevance of party-IG-relations exist, we need a methodological approach which is different from the strictly quantitative method.

5.3 Combination of qualitative and quantitative approach: the qualitative comparative design

Most of the technical issues discussed in this part are taken from edited volumes by Charles Ragin (1987) and Rihoux and Ragin (2009), discussing the use of the comparative method in social sciences. Referring to what Varone et al. noted in their paper that the study of policy influence (what venue (multi-level player or not), with who (team player or not) and when (repeat player or not) should be looked at from a perspective that: “maximizes the variations between IGs (business groups versus public interest groups) and policy sectors” (2014:11), the chosen large case qualitative design to study the when and where questions (research question 1) in combination with the quantitative regressional analysis of the influence of the relations is justifiable. Only, when looking at the “why?” of the venue(s) chosen or the “why?” of the perceived success rate, the chosen research design fall short.
In such cases we need a different approach, taking into account (a selection of) specific conditions that either theory or the facts of reality could explain a certain outcome. Overall for our study we propose a limited n-case research approach allowing for the study of multiple conjunctural causations for multiple cases (three to 20). The two conditions that need to be fulfilled when studying combinations of conditions explaining certain outcomes are met in our research project:

- First of all, we study a homogeneous population (of political parties, operating in the same context at the same level)
- Secondly, we suppose that there is a variety in the outcome for the cases: we have reason to believe that different outcomes (in terms of number of relations, strength of relations, perceived impact on policy definition etc.) will be observed, and that that variety can be explained by a combination of one or more conditions.

Therefore, the core of the comparative method used here is in the selection of properly chosen conditions (at least two; maximum eight) and de setting of the outcomes. This set of multiple conditions is small enough to guarantee statistical significance of the causation. And it is large enough to guarantee the requested variety in the possible combinations. If those conditions are fulfilled the problems that we can study with the comparative design are basically numerous; and this approach may tackle complex political phenomena.

As said already, the study of causal complexity is based on (a combination of) theoretic frames. This results in a selection of a (combination of) conditions that are mutually exchangeable in the comparative process. That process is based on the systematic comparison of cases (e.g. political parties, for instance segmented based on their IG-networking profile, or based on other criteria (age, resources, number of staff, electoral score...)). The purpose of the comparative approach is that result of the comparison of the cases will render evidence of causal relations explaining why certain combinations of conditions apply for certain cases and why not for other cases. The process to unfold the combination of differences or similarities that together form a causal complexity, is called multiple conjunctural causation. In fact, comparing one case with another is the basis of all scientific though and the engine of scientific knowledge. Just as comparing is part of our daily lives ‘all the time’. Comparing the combinations of conditions in which parties (successfully) network with interest groups or vice versa, the combinations of conditions that explain why interest groups seek contact with parties, lead to complex causal relations.

There are two main forms of qualitative comparative analysis: crisp set QCA (that handles only dichotomized conditions) and fuzzy set QCA (that handle more variation in the conditions and the outcome value). In the annex I present more details about the different methods applied in QCA and the entire work flow of the analysis. The base line principle for QCA is the method of comparison of two (or more) cases of J.S. Mill (1971). In this method the outcome of two cases is compared based on a set of conditions.

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The techniques allows both for the testing of theoretical propositions (hypothesis testing) as well as theory formulation (theory development).

Application of QCA in research involves the following elementary steps:

1. Dichotomisation of the data

Is the variable applicable to the case? (yes/no – partly (not) – fully)

What data forms the basis?
- Qualitative data
- Quantitative data: an indicator or a threshold

2. Make a Truth Table and produce Venndiagram (with Tosmana or fsQCA)

3. Deal with Contradictory Configurations [basis = ITERATIVE DIALOGUE]
   1.3.1.1 Reconsider the thresholds based on the information that comes out of later steps
   1.3.1.2 Add extra conditions
   1.3.1.3 Redefine the outcome
   1.3.1.4 Even reformulate the research question or add a new one.

5.4. Proposed mixed research design

For this project we will examine all seven Flemish parties that are represented in the regional and/or federal parliament. We will investigate what interest groups (IGs) they have a relationship with which the party leadership considers relevant for the policy programming in the socio-economic domain. More precisely the case that we want to explore is that of the content contribution into policy programs made for the May 2014 regional, federal and European elections.

The number of possible cases of influence equals the number of parties times the number of IGs that are withheld by the parties. There are basically two types of IG-categories:
- Those formally represented in the Group of Ten (selection based on the formal representation in the neocorporatistic socio-economic debate)
- Those not represented in the Group of Ten (in- or outselection is based on the opinion of the party leadership).

We discern most likely cases of cooperation and influence (e.g. CD&V – ACW relation) from least likely cases (e.g. Vlaams Belang – ABVV relation). On top of that we look for positive and negative ties between parties and IGs.
As argued by Heinelt (2014:17) “Data collection for evaluation network relations shall be primarily carried out by face-to-face interviews with network actors.” And “the survey will be complemented by archival analyses and the evaluation of official documents. This evaluation will help us to decide whether or not or to what extent there is a strong relation between a party and an IG. The percentage of overlap between both programs signals the influence by the IG. (cf. the ‘Outcome’ in the below example) If several IGs put the same issues on the agenda, they are considered a group of IGs, or a network. In that case a secondary order analysis will be done based on the party-IG networks dyads. Therefore two QCAs might be performed: a first QCA for all party-IG dyads, and a second one for possible party-IG network dyads.

The question “What factors explain the relations?” will be explored based on the study of the conditions set in the QCA. The question what factors explain what relations can be rephrased into “Why have certain IGs an influence on the policy programming of parties and others do not?” The result of this analysis gives one or more sets of combinations of conditions that causally explain the outcome for groups of outcomes. The cases therefore are the dyads, the independent explanatory variable for each case is the combination of conditions, and the dependent variable is the outcome (policy overlap). In order to limit the number of cases, the least likely cases (a lot of cases will render a zero or a small value for the outcome) are separated from the irrelevant cases. In the latter there is simply no relationship possible. Unlike the least likely cases, the irrelevant cases are simply deleted from the list of possible cases – increasing the homogeneity of the population that we want to investigate. The thumb rule for a well balanced QCA is that the population of cases includes around at least one third of positive cases (influence), and at least one third of negative cases (no influence). The more dyads or the larger the population is, the more likely a sound balance will be reached.

When turning to the conditions, the main sources to determine the factors explaining the party-IG relations are the literature, the interviews (the practice) and the expert opinion. As said before, the main factors influencing party-IG relations are the ideological overlap, a common history or past, interpersonal trust and organizational characteristics like the availability of resources, the representativeness of the IG or the position of a party (in the government or not). If certain conditions (factors) fully overlap (cf. collinearity), those conditions are to be replaced by a new overarching condition.

Why use QCA to study the factors explaining party-IG relations?

- First of all, we expect the explanation to be complex, in other words multiple conjunctural causation is the core of our explanation. There will not be one condition that explains all influence for all cases.

- Secondly, we want to compare (groups of) cases, for instance based on the party-IG dyads. QCA is best fitted to do that kind of comparative analysis.

- Thirdly, different paths or combinations of conditions might lead to the same outcome. A downside of QCA is that the number of conditions, however, is limited to seven or eight. But such a set of conditions is understood to be sufficiently broad to investigate complex phenomena like social or political networks. In order to maximize the nuance in the analysis, we opt to use fuzzy set QCA for our analysis. In this fsQCA the conditions can be dichotomous, but the outcome cannot. As indicated already the outcome (influence) will be a measure of the overlap between the party and IG programs.
Here is an example of how a truth table—presenting a summary of the fulfillment of the conditions for each outcome—might look like, summarizing the relative presence of factors in explaining the overlap in policy programming (= Outcome) for parties and the members of the Group of Ten only.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>IDEOLOGY</th>
<th>GOVERN</th>
<th>PARL REPRES</th>
<th>HISTORY (years)</th>
<th>INTERN DEM</th>
<th>RESARCH DEPT</th>
<th>TRUST</th>
<th>SHARED RESOURCES</th>
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<tr>
<td>CD&amp;V-ACV</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>CD&amp;V-ABVV</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD&amp;V-ACLVB</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>70</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD&amp;V-Unizo</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD&amp;V-ACM</td>
<td>IRR</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography


Annex: QCA methods and analysis (work flow)

What we look for = Multiple Conjunctural Causation

1. Basis:
   a. Sufficient conditions / subset (example: STUDY + ATTEND ⇒ PASS EXAM): combination of conditions leads to the outcome but other configurations might not
   b. Necessary conditions / set (example: ATTEND ⇔ PASS EXAM): the one condition(s) that is/are always present of absent, but relation condition-outcome is not necessarily reversible
   c. No real independent VAR because all VARn in the model are more or less interdependent or linked to one another

2. Characteristics:
   a. Conjunctural Causation (example: STUDY + ATTEND → PASS)
   b. Equifinality of Multiple Causation (example: CHEAT + ATTEND → PASS)
   c. Asymmetrische causaliteit (example: cheat + study → pass; attend → slagen)

3. Selection of conditions = context specific !!

4. INUS-condition = “Insufficient but Necessary part of Unnecessary but Sufficient combination”
   a. In its own right not sufficient to explain the outcome (will not always lead to the outcome) but will be a necessary part of the explanation
   b. But INUS-C is a part of a sufficient condition that always leads to the outcome

2. Theoretic foundations of QCA in social research
   1. Crisp set logica (basis = venndiagrams)
   2. Truth Table
      2.2.1 Combinations of conditions (cases)
      2.2.2 Contradictory configurations (C) (Outcome for at least one case and not for another): meer cases en minder condities doe de kans op C toenemen
      2.2.3 Logical remainders (no cases) (R): the more conditions, the higher the chance for more R
   3. Boolean Algebra
      2.3.1 Logical AND (∗); logical OR (+)
      2.3.2 Necessary condition (⇔) versus sufficient condition (⇒)
   4. Prime Implicants (PI)
      2.4.1 Sum of PI = collection of instances where the outcome is absent
      2.4.2 Formula = less complex, but less detailed and exact information
2.4.3 No way to reach or maximise parsimony!

5. Boolean Minimisation

2.5.1 Separately for 1-outcome and for 0-outcome

2.5.2 Deletion of all necessary prime implicants based on the following rule: “If two Boolean expressions with the same outcome differ in one aspect (condition), thus in one case the condition is absent/present and vice versa for the other case, than this condition may be deleted.” All rows of configurations are compared to each other.

2.5.2.1 It makes expressions more simple
2.5.2.2 The expressions are still correct
2.5.2.3 Parsimony is higher

2.5.3 But there will be ‘Logical Remainders’ (R)

2.5.4 The result will always be a ‘complex formula’

6. Logical redundant Prime Implicants

2.6.1 Result of Boolean minimisation
2.6.2 Empirically no added value
2.6.3 Retain if theoretical added value ...
2.6.4 ...if not delete them

7. Necessary conditions

8. Coverage = subset/set (0 to 1 (= full coverage))

2.8.1 For 1 and 0 outcomes separately
2.8.2 Necessary conditions (NC): n cases NC & outcome / n cases NC
2.8.3 Sufficient conditions (SC): n cases MCC / n cases outcome

2.8.3.1 Raw coverage: n cases sufficient combination / n cases outcome
2.8.3.2 Unique coverage: n cases ONLY sufficient combination / n cases outcome

2.8.4 Empirical relevance of configurations

9. Parsimonious Formule: used to simplify other complex formulas (to make them more parsimoneous)

2.9.1 Deletion of all irrelevant conditions (= simplifying assumptions)
2.9.2 Increase validity of the formula

10. Enhanced Parsimonious Formule

2.10.1 Only remainders where the necessary condition is present
11. Intermediate Formula

2.11.1 Easy counterfactuals

2.11.2 Hard counterfactuals

12. Logical redundant Prime Implicants (enhanced) parsimonious and intermediate formula

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Used Remainders</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complex formula</td>
<td>Geen</td>
<td>Combinations cases 1-outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parsimonious formula</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Minimal differences between 1-outcome and 0-outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced parsimonious formula</td>
<td>Necessary condition present</td>
<td>Minimal differences between 1-outcome and 0-outcome + necessary conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate formula</td>
<td>More likely than present combination (of conditions)</td>
<td>Minimal differences between 1-outcome and 0-outcome + conditions of the complex formula with positive impact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>