Workshop title: Methodological Challenges and Contradictory Results in the Study of Interest Groups

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Abstract

Interest groups are crucial political actors. In modern political systems they navigate in a highly complex setting. A great variety of different actors seek influence and attention through many different venues. Groups operate in multilevel decision-making structures and may approach decision-makers directly through parliament or administration or indirectly through - most importantly in modern societies - the media in all its varieties. The nature of group activities is difficult to classify and the impact of groups on public policy hard to estimate not only to the groups themselves but also to the scholars that study them leading to contradictory and ambiguous research outcomes. We believe that interest group research can benefit substantially from paying greater attention to research design, methodology, and data collection. The usage of very different research designs and methods make it hard to compare the findings of studies and arrive at more general conclusions. This workshop seeks to contribute to the development of compatible and complementary research. It does not so by proposing a unified methodology for the study of groups, but by enabling dialogue on standards of measurement which can be used over time and across different institutional settings. Therefore, the workshop welcomes papers emphasizing methodological aspects in the empirical study of interest groups.

Outline of the topic

Interest groups are crucial actors in modern politics. Billions of dollars and Euros are invested in campaigns, lobbyists, research, and more or less transparent monetary support of political allies. Groups strive to influence public policy trying to make it as beneficial to the members or ideas they represent. Interest group involvement in the decision-making process is on the one hand preferable to democratic systems. As groups seek influence they inform decision-makers about the preferences of the citizens and technicalities
of their policy area. This may lead to more representative and better-informed decisions. On the other hand, groups possess different resources for seeking influence. Unbalanced representation may lead to decisions favouring the wealthy, well-organized and well-integrated interests. These interests are not necessarily similar to the interest of the broader public.

Researchers must tackle substantial problems when analysing the involvement of groups in political processes. Empirically, interest group systems are composed of a large number of organizations, these organizations are quite heterogeneous, and many of them are not known or not well known. Furthermore, interest group theories and concepts such as corporatism or pluralism have developed partly incompatible propositions as to what factors account for interest group mobilization, maintenance, involvement and impact on political outcomes. Last, not least, different research designs, methods and procedures for data collection have contributed to contradictory conclusions and ambiguities when explaining group mobilization, maintenance, involvement, and influence, both within and across interest group systems (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998; Eising, 2007; Beyers, Eising, Maloney, 2008). We believe that interest group research can benefit substantially from paying greater attention to research design, methodology, and data collection. The usage of very different research designs and methods make it hard to compare the findings of studies and arrive at more general conclusions. This workshop seeks to contribute to the development of compatible and complementary research. It does not so by proposing a unified methodology for the study of groups, but by enabling dialogue on standards of measurement which can be used over time and across different institutional settings.

Papers in this workshop can be related to a variety of questions in interest group research, such as: First, how can interest group populations be studied over time, and how can samples of groups that are drawn from an unknown population of heterogeneous actors allow for meaningful generalizations? Second, how must multilevel and comparative studies of interest groups be designed, given that interest group research often highlights a profound interaction among political contexts, including political systems, party systems, and cleavage structures, on the one hand, and interest group mobilization, maintenance, involvement, and influence, on the other hand. Thirdly, many interest groups have a variety of strategies and tactics at their disposal, among them face-to-face contacts with bureaucrats and politicians, street protests, media outlets, or blogs. How can we conceptualize and measure the strategic choices groups make and connect them to the political contexts in which they are made? Fourthly, how do we measure the influence of groups on political outcomes? Defining influence is in itself an unsettled issue and operationalizing these definitions is even harder (Dahl, 1957; Riker, 1964; Dür and De Bièvre, 2007; Mahoney, 2007; Beyers, Eising and Maloney, 2008). The construction of reliable indicators and empirical measures raises important and
difficult questions: Where are we to look for influence? In the media or in the bureaucracy? In relation to the final decisions or in the process of agenda-setting? Through the formal venues of the decision-making process or through the informal networks of decision-makers? And how do we trace influence? Through detailed process-tracing or spatial modelling? The answer to such questions always involves important trade-offs (Dür, 2008). For instance, if we want to illuminate interest group influence across political arenas in more phases of the decision-making process and through formal as well as informal channels we will only be able to include a few cases in our analyses, and the generalizability of the results may be questioned. If we want to include a large number of cases we have to settle on a measure that only covers aspects of the complex context in which interest group influence is exerted which means that the validity of our results can be questioned.

Relation to existing research

Over the last twenty years interest group scholars have developed new methods for studying interest groups, and especially a more quantitative and explanatory approach has been applied (Klüver, 2009; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Binderkrantz et al. 2012). Larger research projects have ambitiously set out to develop common frameworks for making systematic comparative studies possible often combining quantitative and qualitative methods. This workshop seeks to bring interest group scholars together to work towards methodological progress in this research area and address the challenges we face.

Type of papers

The workshop welcomes original and innovative papers that emphasize methodological aspects in the empirical study of interest groups. We encourage papers using or discussing different methods for collecting and analysing data on various aspects of interest group research and in dealing with the question of how to arrive at valid and comparable measurement instruments in interest group studies. The workshop will be open to all scholars interested in contributing to the development of more comparable approaches and a better informed understanding of organized interests in politics.

Biographical note

Rainer Eising is Professor of Comparative Politics at the Ruhr-University Bochum. His main research interests are European Union politics, interest groups, and policy analysis. He has published in journals such as Comparative Political Studies, European Union Studies, International Organization, and Journal of European Public Policy. He has authored and edited several books on interest group politics.
Helene Helboe Pedersen is Assistant Professor at Aarhus University. Her main research interests are interest groups, political parties and institutions. She is involved in the INTERARENA project on interest group influence across political arenas and among her recent publications are ‘Is Measuring Interest Group Influence a Mission Impossible’ in *Interest Groups & Advocacy* (2013) and ‘Minority Coalition Governance in Denmark’ (with Flemming Juul Christiansen) in *Party Politics* (2013).

References


