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Advocacy intelligence and competition: Assessing lobbyists' sharing of tactical knowledge in focus group interviews

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Abstract

Advocacy intelligence is a critical organizational resource fostering long-term survival and policy success. Policy-active interest groups such as non-profits, business associations and labor unions, seek to maintain their competitive advantage among peers and therefore have incentives to remain secretive about the details of their lobbying strategies and membership mobilization. We empirically evaluate this argument based on knowledge sharing interactions in 12 focus group interviews with approximately 50 representatives of interest groups in the Netherlands, Ireland and Denmark. Our research design manipulates the composition of the focus groups to vary the level of competition for political influence and membership among the participants. Strikingly, we find no evidence that either type of competition hampers knowledge sharing. Instead, our novel data point to three fruitful alternative explanations: the importance of socialization, mentorship and personalities of interest group leaders.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Advocacy knowledge is routinely identified as a critical explanation for policy access and influence. Experienced, knowledgeable actors belong to the core of lobbying communities (Berkhout et al., 2018), are likely to be more prominent in the eyes of policy-makers (Halpin & Fraussen, 2017) and act as relevant cue-givers who initiate policy-bandwagons (Halpin, 2011). Existing studies assume that “outsiders” face a steep learning curve because “insiders” remain secretive about the details of their policy encounters as a way to keep the system closed (e.g., Maloney et al., 1994). In this sense, knowledge about advocacy practices constitutes a form of “intelligence”, which is not widely available and ought to be kept confidential for competitive purposes (Mack, 2005). In this article, we put this view of *competition* as a potential inhibitor of knowledge sharing between interest groups to a test.

We explore the extent to which interest group representatives are willing to share advocacy knowledge, which we term “intelligence” (cf. Schlozman & Tierney, 1986, pp. 299–300). Advocacy intelligence comprises *tactical insights about the ways of reaching and convincing different target audiences in a lobbying effort*. More specifically, for organizations that aim to influence policy, it relates to political and strategic knowledge about how and when to interact with particular political gatekeepers. This includes the ability to identify and contact pivotal policymakers, and select strategies that satisfy their needs and attract their support (this is “political intelligence” in the words of Hall and Deardorff (2006, p. 74)). Intelligence can, additionally and separately, involve the mastering of communication between an organization and its membership through strategies that help to recruit, maintain and activate membership, or increase member contributions, voluntary work or donations (Jordan & Halpin, 2004).

An important potential source of such organizational advocacy knowledge is the interaction with and learning from other interest groups, *if and when* group representatives decide to share experiences and best practices with each other. The aim of this article is to assess *how competition between interest groups affects this willingness to share advocacy intelligence*. In our theoretical framework, we differentiate between competition for *influence*, that arises when organizations pursue conflicting policy goals, and competition for *membership* support between organizations that share the same recruitment pool of members or supporters.

Our main expectation is that representatives of *competing* organizations in both of these regards are less willing to share advocacy knowledge with each other than non-competing ones. More specifically, we expect that organizational staff will take the type of competitive relationship (for influence and/or membership) into account when deciding whether to share different types of advocacy intelligence (about political influence and/or member recruitment).

To test these expectations, we rely on elite online focus group interviews. This method of observation is novel in interest group studies, but is especially suitable for the observation of actual *interactions* among respondents (Cyr, 2019). We organized 12 focus groups (including ca. 50 interest group leaders) across three countries: Denmark (DK), Ireland (IE), and the Netherlands (NL). The topics addressed in the focus groups were the lobbying and fundraising experiences of participating organizations during the Coronavirus crisis. In this way, we keep the context and potential value of knowledge sharing during this crisis constant and examine how group leaders share their experiences in light of diverging competitive relations in differently composed focus groups.

Interestingly, we do not find any systematic evidence that competition affects the *level* or *type* of knowledge sharing among participants. Even in focus groups composed of participants that should, based on our framework, be more likely to compete for members and/or policy influence,

we see similar (or even higher) levels of sharing of advocacy intelligence as in focus groups where competition pressures are considerably lower. More specifically, participants across focus groups shared tactical knowledge on both member relations and influence strategies, even with groups that share a member pool or (often) stand on opposite sides of policy battles.

Our reasoning to explain this null-finding is that organization-level theories hardly take stock of the *individuals* that work for interest organizations (but see: Coen & Vannoni, 2016, McGrath, 2006). Public affairs professionals know each other, share professional interests, and have their personal preferences—all of which could counter the competitive forces between the organizations, for which they work. Our observation of these dynamics leads us to conclude that such individual-level factors are more important than usually acknowledged, and trump inter-organizational competition entirely. Based on our novel data source that allows observing the interactions between interest group leaders, we therefore formulate three alternative explanations for variation in sharing advocacy intelligence: socialization, mentorship relations and the personal traits of interest group staff.

In what follows, we first formulate our theory of competition as a hindrance for knowledge sharing. Subsequently, we discuss the design and implementation of our focus groups. We then test our hypotheses in the three country contexts, paying attention to both the levels and types of knowledge sharing in the differently composed focus groups. Given the lack of support for our hypotheses, we formulate alternative explanations for why organizational leaders are willing to share information with their peers. We end with a discussion of avenues for future research, which highlights both individual-level traits and the focus group method as highly fruitful foci for interest group researchers.

2 | THEORY: ADVOCACY INTELLIGENCE AND COMPETITIVE PRESSURES

In this section, we link the willingness to share advocacy knowledge to the competitive forces underpinning relationships between organizations. We conceptualize *advocacy intelligence* as tactical knowledge held by interest organizations about ways of selecting, calibrating and implementing their lobbying strategies (cf. Mack, 2005, p. 341). In addition to general ‘unteachable’ lobbying ‘instincts’ (e.g., Holyoke et al., 2015), this includes knowledge about how to ‘best’ choose lobbying targets (De Bruycker, 2019), the timing of the organization’s activity (Crepaz, Junk, et al., 2022), and how to tailor communication and mobilization strategies to the preferences of policymakers and members (Boräng & Naurin, 2015). We assume that this knowledge is, very much like issue expertise or technical information, a valuable resource for interest groups (Chalmers, 2013; Flöthe, 2019). However, we expect “intelligence”, which informs the selection and implementation of lobbying strategies, to be more confidential than these other forms of information.

Indeed, Mack (2005, p. 341) compares advocacy intelligence to military intelligence, which implies that groups will protect the information and maintain secrecy around it, in order to maintain a competitive advantage vis-à-vis other groups. This means that the willingness to share such intelligence can be expected to depend on *competition* dynamics between groups: Organizations should be less willing to share advocacy intelligence with competing groups, compared to organizations that are not in competition.

At the same time, there are incentives to share valuable advocacy intelligence with others. The literature on lobbying coalitions highlights several advantages associated with exchanging

information with other groups, such as pooling resources, building strategically valuable networks, and increasing the likelihood of lobbying success (Hanegraaff & Poletti, 2019; Hanegraaff & Pritoni, 2019; Heaney, 2014; Junk, 2020).

Interest groups are, therefore, subject to a tradeoff between the benefits of exchanging advocacy intelligence to strengthen their strategic position, and its costs in terms of risking giving an upper hand to competitors (cf. Holyoke, 2009, 2011). To understand how this tradeoff might play out, it is useful to define *competition* more precisely, and differentiate between competition in the realms of *policy influence* and *organizational maintenance*.

2.1 | Competition for policy influence

We start with *political competition*, which occurs when groups take opposing positions in policy conflicts within policy-specific arenas. This dimension of competition is deeply rooted in theories of political strategies, most notably in Schattschneider's (1960, 2) view, which departs from the notion that "the universal language of conflict" is at the root of all politics. In this view, conflict gives politics the public attraction and policy energy that is needed for policy change or stability. It also motivates the behavior of political actors and their strategic choices.

This assumption also tends to underlie political economy models of lobbying, which put emphasis on the competitive nature of lobbying (Becker, 1983), where opposing groups try to maximize their gains. This simplified model of lobbying depicts it as a fight between opposing sides trying to win policy battles. The recent empirical literature on advocacy 'camps' or 'sides' has attended to these arguments and analyzed how competing interest groups try to pull concrete policy decisions closer to their preferences (e.g., Dür et al., 2015; Klüver, 2013). In such a fight over outcomes, we can expect that interest group leaders, who we assume to internalize these competitive dynamics, will not be willing to share advocacy intelligence with opposing actors, or actors that might *soon* be on the opposite side of an issue, because this would reduce their chances to exert policy influence.

Of course, competition is only *one* of several possible dynamics that might unfold between interest organizations and their staff members. Clearly, not all competition is zero-sum, as portrayed by Becker (1983) for modeling purposes (see also: Holyoke, 2011, Egerod & Junk, 2022). The precise constellation of (member and policy) preferences varies between issues. These can also lead to potential synergies between organizations and the formation of coalitions (Holyoke, 2009, 2014; Junk, 2020). Some issues, indeed, bring 'strange bedfellows' together (Beyers & De Bruycker, 2018; Phinney, 2017), such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that coalesce with business associations.

Nevertheless, we expect *most* policy competition to take place between *different types* of interest groups *in the same policy area*, because these will presumably not share (all) policy preferences (e.g., Dür et al., 2015). Therefore, these actors have incentives to protect their potential strategic advantages from likely competitors in ongoing or future policy battles. Put differently, we expect interest group leaders to be most reluctant to share advocacy intelligence about their *influence strategies* when facing other groups that represent different substantive interests (e.g., businesses, trade unions, NGOs) in the same policy field.

H1. "Political strategy hypothesis": Interest group representatives are least likely to share intelligence on policy influence with *other* types of interest groups active in *the same* policy area.

2.2 | Competition for member support

The second dimension of competition is *competition for members*, donors or supporters. This dimension has roots in population ecology and organizational theory. The relatively uncontroversial assumption is that organizational behavior is driven by the aim to secure long-term survival (e.g., Hannan & Freeman, 1989), which is also routinely assumed in studies of lobbying (e.g., Lowery, 2007).

Specifically, a key source of funding for interest organizations comes from membership fees and related income such as constituency-oriented services. Yet, the resource pool of potential members is limited to the size of the potential constituency, and this creates incentives for competition for members among similar interest groups. This means that competition is likely to occur when groups rely on a similar or overlapping membership resource pool. For instance, an encompassing industry federation and a sector-specific industry association compete for the resources needed for the long-term viability of their organizations, such as organizational income and member support. Similarly, a foreign aid charity competes with other charities for donations, also when charities have somewhat distinct policy foci, such as on human rights.

Organizations and their staff should respond strategically to such relevant competitive changes in their membership environment, and seek to adapt their organizational practices in such a way as to secure long-term resources (e.g., Halpin & Daugbjerg, 2015). Hence, we expect interest group representatives to be more hesitant to share information on membership recruitment when there is higher overlap between member pools, because this may compromise the resource base on which the long-term survival of the organization relies. We expect *competition for members* to be highest, when organizations share the same organization type and policy area, for example, between NGOs in the same policy niche. Such organizations are potential competitors for resources (i.e., donations and volunteers) and this should make them most hesitant to share advocacy intelligence regarding membership maintenance.¹

H2. “Organizational resources hypothesis”: Interest group representatives are least likely to share intelligence on organizational maintenance with *similar* types of interest groups active in the *same* policy area.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

To test our hypotheses, we organized 12 online focus groups with four selected organizational representatives each. These were equally distributed in three countries: Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands, meaning we conducted four focus groups per country. We held our focus groups in April 2021, around the time when Covid-related restrictions meant that video-conferencing was the effective norm for meetings.²

The focus group methodology has developed substantially in the past decades, and is increasingly used in several fields of social science (e.g., Cyr, 2019). While different units of analysis are conceivable with this method (e.g., participant dyads), we use it to observe competitive relationships *at the meeting-level*. We believe that this level of analysis has relatively strong ecological validity, given our respondents are used to interacting in such diversely composed multi-actor settings. Furthermore, to test our hypotheses, we manipulated the composition of the focus groups at the meeting level, which makes it best suited for our analysis. In the following, we discuss the selection of countries, composition of focus groups and their structure.

3.1 | Selection of countries

We selected the three countries as a subset of countries covered in the larger InterCov project addressing the effects of Covid-19 on lobbying in 10 European polities (Crepaz, Junk, et al., 2022; Junk et al., 2022). The three selected countries are comparable in size and are characterized by some degree of corporatism in the interest group system. We do not have a priori theoretical expectations regarding differences between countries, but consider them to be reasonably similar in the extent to which competitive pressures potentially affect advocacy knowledge sharing. The inclusion of three countries, therefore, mainly serves to put our hypotheses to a more stringent test: observing similar patterns in all countries could give strong evidence for the hypothesized relationships in corporatist systems.

Notably, the selection of countries is also informed by the fact that the research team enjoyed good access to the interest group community in these countries, which is reflected in high success rates in recruitment for the focus groups. In Denmark, 20 groups were contacted to successfully recruit 16 participants (success rate 80%), whereas this was 84% in the Netherlands (16 participants out of 19 requests) and 47% (17 out of 36 requests) in Ireland. This is important, because it means that we were able to implement our streamlined sampling frame and can limit biases due to self-selection (e.g., opt-out by groups that do not want to share information). Groups were not informed of the composition of the focus group before signing up, and we did not have cancellations after the other participants were disclosed.³ Following the same sampling strategy and interview protocols across countries, as we will explain in the next sections, increases cross-country comparability.

3.2 | Composition of focus groups: Variation in focus group diversity

We selected our participants from the respondents of an interest group survey fielded in (Junk et al., 2020). The survey relied on a stratified sample of active interest groups. Given our interest in membership relations,⁴ we removed representatives of corporations from this respondent pool. Based on this sample of survey respondents, we constructed a new sampling frame to design focus groups with four participants in each group. We then approached respondents via email and sometimes followed up by phone to recruit them for the focus group.

The survey responses allowed us to select our participants in a way to vary the expected *level and type of competition* within focus groups by systematically varying *organization type* and *policy area* among the focus group participants. As we argued in the theory section, we expect the incentives for knowledge sharing to vary depending on whether the participants' organizations are competitors in terms of policy influence and/or member activation. We therefore varied the composition of the focus groups in a way to put participants into these different competitive contexts. Specifically, we constructed *four* distinctly composed focus groups using the same approach in each country (see Table 1).

Focus group 1 (FG1) is the group which is most *homogenous* across both the (potential) membership pool and the policy field in which participants are active. It includes only one group type: NGOs (also sometimes labeled "citizen groups" or "public interest groups"). As the "common" policy area, we chose the cross-country salient area of health policy. In Denmark and Ireland, for instance, this focus group is composed only of patient groups. In the Netherlands, due to the constraints of our respondent pool, we include patient groups as well as family planning and parent support groups, thus arguably locating the selection at the intersection

TABLE 1 Selection of focus group participants and group composition.

Selection of focus group participants		Policy Area	
		Health-related policy	Four diverse policy areas
Organization type	Only NGOs	<i>Focus Group 1: high member competition</i>	<i>Focus Group 2: low levels of competition</i>
	Four diverse membership groups (including professional, business interests etc.)	<i>Focus Group 3: high influence competition</i>	<i>Focus Group 4: low levels of competition</i>

between health and social policy. Importantly, in all cases, we expect included organizations to compete over members and supporters, and more so than in all other focus groups (FG2-FG4). In FG1, we therefore expect to observe the *highest* level of reluctance to share intelligence about *member maintenance*, because within the respective policy niches, NGOs recruit from a common pool of members and supporters. Specifically, the included patient (and parent support) groups compete to attract volunteers, supporters and donations from the same pool of citizens interested in health-related issues.

Moving to the upper right quadrant of Table 1, we compose focus group 2 (FG2) in each country in a way to ensure that participants still have their organization type in common but are active in different policy fields. More specifically, we here include NGOs in four different policy fields.⁵ Based on H2, we expect this composition to lead to lower competition dynamics for members and supporters compared to FG1, because these diverse NGOs draw upon members with different policy interests. As a result, organizations in FG2 are expected to be willing to share more membership activation intelligence compared to FG1.

Focus group 3 (FG3) contains different types of members (a business group, labor union, and profession organization, in addition to an NGO), all active in the same policy area of health-related policy. Like in FG1, we aimed to sample only from the health policy area, but, where necessary, included related organizations working on social and health-related issues, such as an association of social workers (in Ireland) and priests working in health care (in the Netherlands). These organizations found themselves in focus groups with business organizations, for instance from the medical and care provider industry. With this constellation, we expect *higher* reluctance among participants to share intelligence about *influence tactics*, since the organizations are potential competitors in the same policy field, advocating for different positions and/or priorities within the sector. When it comes to competition for members, we expect this to be *lower* compared to FG1, given different types of organizations typically recruit from different membership pools, such as businesses, workers and charity supporters.

Finally, the participants of focus group 4 (FG4) are most diverse: they belong to four different group types (like FG3) and four different policy areas.⁶ Organizations active in this FG face relatively *low* competition for members *and* for influence. Overall, according to our formulated theory, participants in this FG should therefore show the highest willingness to share intelligence regarding both organizational maintenance *and* influence, because this is least costly in terms of enabling potential future competitors.

At the same time, FG4 is likely to be the one that occurs least frequently in 'the real world'. While we expect focus groups F1-F3 to mirror some of the regular exchanges interest groups have

in their interactions with peers and opponents in and beyond their policy field, FG4 potentially brings representatives of groups together that would normally be unlikely to interact (outside the focus group setting). We reflect again in the conclusion about this variation in the ecological validity of the differently composed focus groups.

Importantly, this selection of focus group participants (see Table 1) was designed to vary the assumed levels and types of competition between included organizations. In our analysis, we assess how this variation affects the willingness of interest group representatives to share information among each other. Our main expectation derived from hypotheses H1 and H2 is to observe more sharing of advocacy intelligence when competition is low (FG2 and FG4) compared to when it is high (FG1 and FG3). To nuance this analysis, we distinguish between the sharing of particular *types of intelligence*, that is, related to political strategies or membership, as we will outline in the following sections.

3.3 | Topics and moderation of focus groups

The main content and communicated goal of the focus group interviews was to exchange 'best practices' during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. This presented a well-suited setting to observe interactions and advocacy intelligence sharing between groups, because the pandemic meant a need for, interest in and supply of new advocacy knowledge for a diverse set of interest groups.

This design is also sensitive to the properties of advocacy knowledge as relational and context-dependent (e.g., Carlile, 2004, pp. 556–557 about *novelty*, *dependency* and *difference* between participants). Focusing the conversations on lobbying tactics during the pandemic guarantees high levels of *novelty* of the situation and increases the *value* of advocacy knowledge for all actors involved, making it a good case to observe the sharing of new tactical knowledge. We believe that our case and selection strategy simultaneously guarantee sufficient *similarities* among organizations to allow knowledge sharing without unreasonable effort.

The focus group interviews lasted for 45–60 min. We moderated our focus groups in a relatively open manner and aimed at providing as much space for interaction among the participants as possible. We tried to create an atmosphere of informal and professional conversations. Our moderator interventions were only informative (in the introduction) or summarizing in response to participants' remarks. We did, however, prepare a thematic structure (see details of moderator memo in Appendix A), in which we first asked respondents to introduce themselves, subsequently share their experiences regarding *membership relations* during the Covid-19 pandemic and then their *strategies and influence* in the policy process.

We operated the focus groups following the *Chatham House* principle, where participants commit to confidentiality with respect to the identity and affiliation of other participants, but are allowed to use the information obtained during the meeting. This anonymity principle may somewhat increase the willingness to share information. Yet, we reason that our hypothesized relationship (i.e., the effect of competition *within the focus group* on the sharing of intelligence), is unlikely to be affected by the Chatham House rule, because *the informational content* (which is revealed and can be used) should be the valuable resource for (competing) organizations.

3.4 | Coding of knowledge sharing interactions

We recorded and transcribed all focus group meetings and coded meeting-level interactions in these transcriptions. We coded each focus group in terms of *three indicators* related to the level and type of sharing between participants.

First, we coded the *level of interaction* among participants. We understand this as the frequency with which participants directly seek contact with or directly react to other participants (and not through the moderator). To illustrate, in one of the focus groups (FG4, DK) one participant directly responded to a remark by another respondent and said: 'I can completely recognize what [other participant] says, that all other agendas have stood still'. In this case, the participant did not respond to a question of the moderator but engaged in a direct conversation about experiences during the Covid-19 crisis. We label this type of direct discussion among participants (not solicited by the moderator) as 'direct interaction'. In our view, this is a first proxy for the willingness to interact with others and share information.

Second, we took the informational content into account by coding all instances where participants shared concrete information about their advocacy tactics (concerning both *membership* and *policy influence*) to measure the *level of intelligence sharing* overall. Third, we distinguish between the latter two types of intelligence individually to take *intelligence type* into account. Regarding membership tactics, we counted the number of times respondents shared *specific* information about their organization's strategies to maintain members/supporters or recruit new members or donors. To illustrate, in FG3 (IE) one participant indicated that the organization "looked at other kinds of communication tools" with members and that it had "completed a survey with members in relation to what their experience of work during the pandemic was and of advocacy concerns". Whenever new pieces of information were given about best practices of this kind, we coded these, also when coming from the same respondent. We used the same process for influence, yet in relation to information on the organization's *specific* influence strategies. To illustrate, in FG1 (NL) one participant said: "[policymakers] expect you to talk about money when you get into contact with them. I never do that. I talk about their problems... That works."

A challenge in such coding is that remarks can vary in their actual information content. We worked with a relatively strict categorization of the sharing of 'intelligence' as concrete and non-trivial information about the organization's tactics. Groups unwilling to share such "intelligence" might, however, choose to fill the talking space with "noise"-like information (Kahneman et al., 2021), which is strategically less valuable for competitors. Ways of evading the topic, such as general remarks about Covid-19, government responses or general remarks on video conferencing that do not actually share best practices, were therefore coded as 'low-threshold information', interpreted as instances of "non-sharing" of advocacy intelligence and only included in a robustness check in Appendix C. In this way, we can distinguish more and less information-rich focus groups, since high levels of noise reduce the number of coded interactions.⁷

Coding was conducted by three coders divided by country and with ongoing discussion and coordination in the process. A satisfactory intercoder-reliability assessment was conducted on 200 potentially code-able lines.⁸ Importantly, in order to control for country- and coding-variation, our analysis compares *the share* of direct interaction and intelligence sharing that takes place *in a specifically composed focus group relative* to all instances of interaction/knowledge sharing *in that country*. This has the advantage of including a baseline in the analysis, controlling for the general volume of (coded) interactions per country. In this way, we test our hypotheses of whether sharing is least likely in some (competitive) contexts. The next section presents our results based on this coding.

4 | ANALYSIS

In this section, we present quantitative evidence that speaks to our hypotheses and illustrate this with relevant *verbatim* quotations from the focus groups. We first compare the observed patterns of information sharing in the differently composed focus groups and then reflect on the extent to which these support, or add to, our hypotheses.

4.1 | The effect of competition on intelligence sharing

To begin with, we focus on the *overall levels of interaction* and the *overall levels of sharing advocacy intelligence* across focus groups. Table 2 below presents the relative frequency expressed as *proportions per country* of (1) direct, unsolicited interaction between participants (first column) and (2) the sharing of advocacy intelligence related to influence and membership-oriented tactics (second column). The last column reports the absolute number of coded instances of knowledge sharing in each focus group (the sum of the absolute numbers from the first and second column).

The proportions of all coded interactions in the country allow us to evaluate support for our hypotheses. For instance, the first upper-left percentage tells us that, out of all direct interactions coded in Dutch focus groups, 24% were observed in the first focus group. In the hypothetical scenario where all focus groups had attracted equal levels of interaction and sharing, all cells in the table would report 25%.

The distribution of the coded instances over the differently composed groups indicates little systematic effect of competition on the willingness to engage in exchanges. The focus groups with *highest member competition* (FGs1), in which we would expect to observe lower sharing of advocacy knowledge, are, in two out of the three countries (Denmark and Ireland), the FGs with *most sharing*, both in terms of direct interaction and advocacy knowledge shared.

To illustrate, participants in the Danish FG1 had comparatively higher direct interaction (49% of all coded interactions in Denmark). Participants in this group engaged with each other from

TABLE 2 The number of times participants interacted with each other and shared advocacy knowledge in the Netherlands ($n = 57$), Ireland ($n = 118$), and Denmark ($n = 84$), expressed as proportion per country per category.⁹

Competition	Focus group	Direct interaction	Total shared advocacy knowledge in country	Number of coded sharing instances
High member competition	FG1 NL	24%	28%	16
	FG1 IRE	37%	25%	29
	FG1 DK	49%	45%	38
Lower competition	FG2 NL	41%	32%	18
	FG2 IRE	15%	25%	30
	FG2 DK	28%	19%	16
High influence competition	FG3 NL	21%	21%	12
	FG3 IRE	22%	30%	35
	FG3 DK	18%	21%	18
Lower competition	FG4 NL	14%	19%	11
	FG4 IRE	27%	20%	24
	FG4 DK	5%	14%	12

the onset of the meeting, where participants spontaneously shared impressions from a recent meeting with health authorities that they had attended. We observed a similar eagerness to engage with each other in the Irish FG1, where participants started using similar expressions to describe the challenges of the “community and voluntary sector”, in which they work. Despite their potentially competitive relationships within this niche, participants were keen to share their recent initiatives, like successful press events, that had been organized in-house because “the phones were not being answered” at the newspapers (FG1 IE).

Comparatively and contrary to our theory of competitive forces between organizations, these exchanges are not systematically *less* frequent than in FGs2 and FGs4, in which the level of competition (of different types) is lower. On the contrary, in FGs4, in both the Dutch and the Danish case, we observe the *lowest levels* of direct interaction and sharing of advocacy knowledge. Similarly, in the Danish FG2 we see less interaction and knowledge sharing than in FG1.

Patterns are relatively inconclusive when we look at FGs3 with *high influence competition*. Here we see lower levels of interaction and sharing of advocacy knowledge compared to FGs1 (*high member competition*), in all but one quadrant. Compared to the groups with lower competition (FGs2 and FGs4), however, the differences are more mixed. There seems to be less interaction and sharing in FGs3 than FGs2 but more than in FGs4. All this means that, when looking at the aggregated frequencies, we see little support for our expectation that competition among interest groups affects the willingness of staff members to share information.

4.2 | Variation in the two types of intelligence sharing

We now turn to our specific hypotheses concerning the willingness to share particular *types of advocacy intelligence*. We expected that representatives of *different types* of organizations active in the *same policy area* compete most fiercely for policy influence and are, therefore, especially reluctant to share information about influence strategies (H1). Likewise, we discussed that competition over members may hinder information sharing about membership strategies between the *same type* of organizations in the *same policy area* (H2). To test these hypotheses, we compare FGs1 (high member competition) and FGs3 (high influence competition) to the focus groups with lower levels of competition (FGs2 and FGs4).

Figure 1 shows the subset of intelligence sharing instances from Table 1 (the second column expressed in absolute numbers) that specifically addressed a) member tactics and b) influence tactics. It provides proportions of knowledge sharing about membership and influence strategies over the total sharing of such advocacy intelligence. For instance, where we observed 4 instances of sharing membership tactics and 6 instances of influence tactics, this means 40% of knowledge sharing related to membership tactics and 60% to influence tactics. If the sharing of intelligence is driven by specific resource competition stemming from membership, then we should observe lower knowledge sharing related to member tactics in FGs1, in which participants compete more over members in the policy niche than over influence. In contrast, in FGs3, in which participants compete more over influence than over members, we expected to observe the opposite trend.

The results are not consistent with these expectations. Instead, there is a remarkable stability in what participants wanted to share across FGs and countries. Interestingly, participants shared information about influence tactics more frequently than about membership tactics. Overall, roughly one-third of the sharing related to membership and two-thirds were dedicated to influence tactics. This was remarkably consistent across *all* FGs (except FG2 and FG4 NL). Most

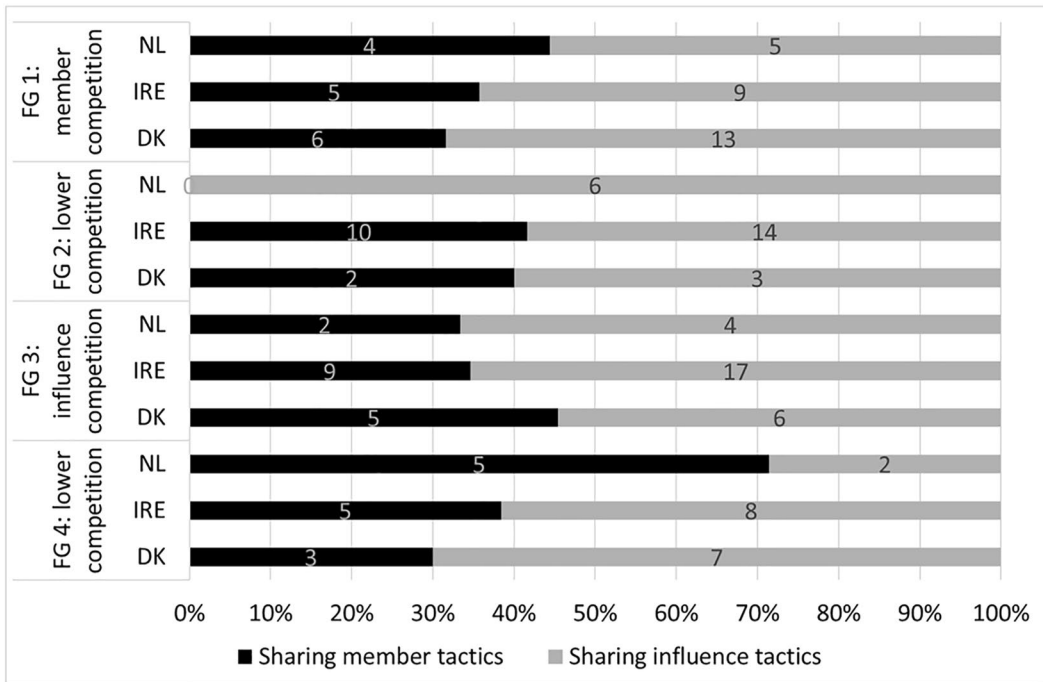


FIGURE 1 Relative share of advocacy intelligence sharing about membership maintenance and influence in the Netherlands, Ireland, and Denmark.

notably, we find no systematic difference between FGs1 and FGs3 in what type of tactics they shared, although participants needed to navigate different types of competition.

Participants of FGs3, who compete especially over influence, repeatedly shared insights on lobbying tactics. One representative of a professional organization, for example, explained how they had built a partnership with an NGO active in the same policy area with the aim of mobilizing membership *and* improving the chances of exerting influence on policy: “We’ve shared expertise, we shared media links with them, and when we’ve had a media platform, we asked one of them to come along and ensure that their voice is heard” (FG3 IE).

Participants of FGs1, who compete most over members, still shared membership tactics in somewhat similar proportions as in the other FGs. For instance, a participant shared detailed accounts of a zoom-project they started in March 2020 called “Together, everyone for him/herself”(translated) to reach and train members to become “zoom masters” (FG1 DK). The participant also explained, how zoom helped to gather data, for instance, that by the end of 2020 the group’s local branches had held 486 zoom meetings, including ‘steering committee meetings, meetings of the board of representatives, coffee meetings, Friday bars, bingo, all sorts of wonderful things, even walk-and-talk’ (FG1 DK). Moreover, several participants in this focus group shared details on how the organization tried and/or succeeded in attracting funding from different sources, including crisis-related public funds and member support. From a perspective of competition for funds and organizational survival, this high willingness to share is surprising.

Moreover, the interviews gave evidence that such instances of sharing are, indeed, highly valuable for participants. One participant in FG1 DK shared that (s)he was ‘deeply concerned’ about the implications of the pandemic for volunteers and that it had triggered new fears of human contact, which is what many of the organization’s activities revolve around. “We have not

managed, to the same degree, to replace them with digital means [...], said the participant, “and here I am very interested in what you say, [other participant’s name]. I will call you at some point and would like to hear more, because I think that is a really good idea.” A similar response was triggered by an influence-related tactic raised by a participant in FG3 IE. When the participant shared that the organization had invited all members to send an email to selected members of parliament, an other respondent said: “I’m going to rob all of your ideas, these are great!”

Overall, these results show that representatives of interest groups share precious advocacy intelligence, even with organizations that are *competitors* when it comes to policy influence or member support. The use of the word *rob* in the latter example stresses the value interest groups place on this kind of information. However, competition as conceptualized here does not appear to impede its sharing.

4.3 | Alternative explanations: Socialization, mentorship and personality

What does this all mean? Our analyses provide no support for our theory that competition inhibits the sharing of advocacy knowledge among interest groups. We interpret this as evidence that theories of *competition between organizations* are ill-suited to understand dynamics around advocacy intelligence, at least in the setting we designed. This may be because theories that portray lobbying and advocacy as a competitive endeavor overlook that, much more often than not, organizations try to find synergies and learn from each other (cf. Holyoke, 2009, 2011, 2014; Junk, 2020). Moreover, it could be that the competitive forces *between organizations* poorly translate into informal exchanges *between staff members*. We assumed that organizational leaders partaking in focus groups act as representatives of their respective organizations and therefore reflect competitive dynamics between organizations. Based on our results, it seems that their role as *individual professionals* that socialize in this setting trumps their role as organizational representatives of competing organizations. Importantly, this socializing role of individual lobbyists might exactly be why *organizations* end up having less competitive relationships than one expects.

We believe this to have been the case in our focus groups. Our finding that organizational leaders shared advocacy intelligence, even though they had to navigate a competitive environment, may be explained by commonalities between these individuals, such as their professional experience, career path, and educational background (Coen & Vannoni, 2016; McGrath, 2006).

With this idea in mind, we use the remainder of this section to offer an alternative interpretation of our findings at the level of *individual professionals*. Specifically, we identify three *alternative factors* at the individual level, which, based on our focus groups, seem crucial for advocacy knowledge sharing, and seem to have overridden the competitive relationship between organizations. These are: socialization, mentorship, and personal traits. We think these findings are of critical importance as they potentially challenge the dominant organizational focus in the current literature, paving the way for an approach that integrates individual-level analyses more firmly in interest group studies.

First, we observed *socialization*, and the importance of being acquainted with each other. We noticed in almost all FGs that when (some of) the participants knew each other, they seemed more willing to share information in the group setting. This is likely to be a trend that directly counters the potential effects of higher competition *within a policy field*: Given that representatives of organizations that repeatedly work on related issues get to know each other over time, socialization between these staff members might take the competitive edge off their

interactions. Informal lobbyist-legislator interactions have been shown to be relatively effective but also potentially exclusionary for those without long-term relevant socio-professional political contacts (e.g., Grose et al., 2022). In the focus groups, we observed that socialization may also unfold an inclusionary dynamic: In several instances, personal familiarity among participants seemed to lead to a welcoming, sincerely collaborative and open atmosphere. For instance, in FG1 in Denmark (highest member competition), all participants were well acquainted. Participants were constantly chatting with each other, sharing many details of their work. It was clear that this was something they did more often, and they seemed to have a solid base of shared experiences. This might explain why this group had the highest levels of sharing of advocacy intelligence compared to all other FGs. In FG2 in the Netherlands, we witnessed a somewhat similar process: Here two participants knew each other relatively well, although they did not work in the same policy area. These participants constantly referred to each other and shared many details about how they reached out to members and lobbied the government. In that sense, their acquaintance seemed to spill over to the entire focus group by triggering intelligence sharing in the group.

We also observed the opposite relationship: when participants did not know each other, they were more reluctant to share information. This was apparent in each of the FGs4. These FGs included organizations, which did not share a membership base and were not active in the same policy area. According to the competition logic, this should have led to a lot of sharing of intelligence, because it is 'costless' from a competition perspective. Yet, the reverse was true. In these FGs, we observed the lowest level of sharing of advocacy intelligence, potentially because participants lacked common ground and points of reference. Participants then talked mostly about the technical issues related to reaching out to members or policymakers, without going into detail. In FG4 in Ireland, for example, participants sought to find common experiences to share and spent extensive time talking about challenges with communication technology (zoom, teams, skype etc.), a theme that revealed very little specific knowledge related to advocacy tactics.

Second, we also noticed that some participants took different, and somewhat surprising, roles as *mentors* in their exchanges with each other. Based on an organization-level perspective, we might expect lobbyists from larger organizations to adopt a hierarchical and/or disinterested mode of interacting with lobbyists from smaller, less 'important' organizations. In the focus groups, we witnessed several situations, where there was a clear distinction among participants in terms of the size of the organization they work for, or the prominence their organization has in the political arena (e.g., Halpin & Fraussen, 2017). In these situations, we surprisingly noted that 'higher ranking' interest group representatives tended to readily share information with other interest group representatives in a way that one might understand as *mentoring*. For instance, in the Dutch FG1 there was one relatively experienced lobbyist representing a large organization. The others worked for smaller organizations with limited resources and the organizational representatives expressed a lower level of familiarity with the intricacies of the policy process. The meeting unfolded a telling dynamic, as the experienced lobbyist almost provided a "workshop" on how to effectively lobby in Coronavirus times with precise details on contacts in parliament and how to approach them. The other participants were clearly impressed by the respondent's knowledge and the level of detail of the shared information. As one participant expressed it: "I learn from this [*the meeting*,] although our organization has a different background, it is a moment of awareness of what we should be doing!" Such remarks led to even more sharing by the experienced lobbyist, who seemed to enjoy the status (s)he had in the meeting, rather than feeling constrained by a strategic calculation that the inexperienced lobbyists would outcompete the organization in the next advocacy battle. Instead of competitive dynamics, we observed an

interactive setting which incentivized the more experienced “insider” to provide strategic policy cues, somewhat opening up the policy system to less experienced competitors.

Last but not least, *personal traits* seemed to matter. While the personalities of lobbyists are hardly studied in interest group research, we noticed that this may be a missed opportunity. Some representatives were quite reserved and talked little, while others could hardly be stopped from sharing information. It is usually assumed that staff are selected into organizations partially based on particular traits. An activist campaigner of an NGO, for instance, is expected to be more expressive than a legally-trained business interest representative. Interestingly, our impressions of the personalities in our focus groups did not align in a systematic manner, such as based on organization type, level of seniority or the like. For instance, the representative of an important Dutch association was very reserved and did not talk much. Yet, when directly asked about strategies, (s)he readily shared advocacy intelligence with the group. In contrast, one lobbyist for a small patient organization was very open and talkative. This participant shared more details about strategies, but, rather than a strategic choice, this might have partly been due to personal preferences: The person simply liked to talk.

Future research could address the importance of these three alternative explanations for knowledge sharing and their role in lobbying practices more broadly.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this article, we identified *advocacy intelligence*, meaning valuable tactical knowledge about the choice of lobbying and fundraising strategies, as an important factor for a range of interest group phenomena including the policy influence, adaptability, and long-term survival of interest organizations. While plausibly of great importance, interest group studies rarely theorize explicitly about tactical advocacy knowledge, and hardly employ empirical methods that focus directly on observing knowledge sharing.

In this article, we therefore put the spotlight on processes of knowledge exchange among interest group representatives. We theorized that incentives to cooperate and share advocacy intelligence with others are hindered by *competition* for membership support and political influence between interest groups. To test these expectations, we conducted focus group interviews with differently composed sets of organizations in three countries. This method allowed us to directly observe the extent to which interest group leaders were willing to share information about strategic choices in a partially controlled context.

Our results are quite striking in that we found hardly any evidence in favor of the competition hypotheses we formulated. Based on our cross-country data, competition does not seem to be a hindrance for sharing advocacy knowledge, neither in general terms, nor specifically when it comes to member and/or influence tactics. Yet, this does not mean that knowledge sharing was constant across all our focus groups. Based on our observations, we suggest that factors at the individual level, such as the level of *socialization* and acquaintance among lobbying professionals, *mentor-mentee* dynamics and *personal traits*, were potential drivers of knowledge sharing, instead of inter-organizational competition.

These results pose theoretically and empirically important questions that have remained on the periphery of lobbying scholarship for too long. First, the competition-based theoretical foundations of the sub-field seem to have stronger validity at relatively aggregate levels of analysis, such as group populations or interest group-networks, than at lower levels of analysis, such as staff members in their recurring social interactions. Put differently, the *social* behavioral processes

in which lobbyists interact within relatively small communities do not seem to be driven by strategic cost-benefit calculations, but (also) by other processes. While competition-based theoretical viewpoints commonly (and pessimistically) point to *exclusionary* dynamics among lobbyists, the dynamics we observed in our focus group meetings were much more *inclusionary*. This finding might lead to more *optimistic* accounts of the openness of interest groups systems.

Of course, an important question in this regard is how well findings from our focus groups travel to settings in which interest groups *normally* interact. Especially our fourth set of focus groups (FGs4), composed of different types of interest groups from different sectors, is likely to be a rare occurrence in the real world of politics. In this group, we systematically saw lower than average levels of sharing of advocacy intelligence. A substantive insight from this might be that when organizations *lack common ground*, knowledge sharing is hindered (even more so than between familiar opponents).

In general, we see the focus group method as well-suited to *observe actual group interactions* in a controlled setting. Our case focused on lessons-learned when adjusting strategies to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is certainly conceivable that groups, on average, were more willing to share intelligence in this crisis context, and perhaps especially so in the health sector (FG1 and FG3). Still, we see it as striking that group representatives readily shared knowledge irrespective of whether they interacted with competitors or not.

In other words, 12 focus group interviews with ca. 50 interest group representatives conducted in a crisis context are certainly not enough to give a final verdict on the complex question of whether and when interest group leaders are cost-benefit maximizing or more socially driven. Still, our findings give clear evidence that the explanatory power of competition dynamics is much more limited than commonly assumed. We hope that future studies, especially at micro- or meso-levels of analysis, can benefit from the inclusion of some of the multiple alternative theoretical points of departure that we suggest.

We identify socialization, mentorship and personal traits as plausible alternative explanations, and fruitful directions of theory development. Some literature exists on what personal traits characterize the 'ideal lobbyist' (McGrath, 2006) and what biases exist in the traits of lobbyists, partly due to socialization processes (Junk et al., 2021; LaPira et al., 2020). Yet, these are currently neither centrally studied, nor considered in relation to group-to-group interactions. We hope our findings lead to a new focus on *the lobbyist* as an important, and observable, unit of analysis in interest group studies. This will also allow new reflections on *power* relations in the world of lobbying. On the one hand, the socialization of individual lobbyists might lead to closed (male dominated) circles in the world of lobbying, where outsiders have difficulties to enter (Junk et al., 2021; LaPira et al., 2020). On the other hand, our study points to the willingness of some high-ranking lobbyists to share their knowledge about the lobbying tradecraft quite liberally, providing opportunities for less central players to gain access.

Overall, we hope our findings clear the way forward for a broader understanding of how advocacy knowledge may contribute to the adaptive, mutually supportive and constructive organizational fabric of systems of interest representation. Based on our findings it seems that advocacy knowledge is not preciously guarded *intel*, only held by a few long-term insiders and barricaded in political camps, but more equally and more openly shared than theories of competitive lobbying would lead us to expect.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors do not have any conflicts of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All persons studied consented to the academic use of the data provided or derived. The supplementary material provides additional information on the data collection method and replication material where appropriate.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Yet, organizational competition is not restricted to the same types of organizations only: NGOs, for instance, also compete over members with trade unions, because people's willingness to support organizations is finite. However, we expect member competition to be *most pronounced* within a niche of organizations that share their organizational type and policy area.
- ² For reflections on *online* focus groups see: Berkhout et al. (2022).
- ³ Exceptions are one no-show and one scheduling problem in two Irish focus groups, which then had to be conducted with three (FG3) and five (FG2) participants.
- ⁴ Members are broadly understood to include formal members, financial supporters, volunteers and other associations. For details, see Appendix B.
- ⁵ These include, Education, Environment, Sport & Culture and Development/Human Rights, in addition to Health and Social Policy. The selection was subject to the respondent pool from the survey (see Appendix B3).
- ⁶ Namely, Agriculture and forestry; Education; Transportation, Storage & Hospitality, Sport & Culture in addition to Health and Social policy (see Appendix B3).
- ⁷ These results in Appendix C mirror our main analysis: We do not find support for H1 or H2.
- ⁸ A Cronbach's Alpha metric of intercoder-reliability would be highly inflated, given the strong agreement among the coders on the majority of text that does not include interactions. In raw numbers: out of these 200 lines, coder 1 and coder 2 produced slightly different frequencies: interaction 14 versus 15, membership information 6 versus 5 and policy influence information 11 versus 9.
- ⁹ We conducted Chi-squared tests to compare the observed, raw-number distribution of interactions and sharing instances over the four focus groups per country to the situation in which our observations had been equally distributed over the four focus groups (i.e., with 25% in all cells). In the Dutch and Irish cases, these distributions did not produce Chi-square scores that indicate a significant difference compared to the situation of equal distribution of observations across the groups. In the Danish case, the distribution is more skewed especially due to the large numbers of interactions in focus group 1 and the Chi-square scores are significant in that case. In either case and as discussed, these scores contradict our hypotheses.

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