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Lobbying communities as organizational systems: theories and counts of politically active organizations¹

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Key words: interest group system, organizational ecology, niche theory, types of interest groups

Abstract: Any political system nurtures a community of organizations that attempts to influence public policy. The size and scope of this community of organizations importantly affects the which interests get voiced and which economic or social signals are more likely to be attended to politically. The population ecology of interest representation refers to a set of theoretical models that explain the numbers and types of organizations attempting to influence public. Population ecology assumes that the numbers of politically active organizations depends on the 'energy' in the policy process such as manifested in budgets and (new) initiatives, and the 'area' in society in terms of (potential) members, supporters or economic weight (Gray and Lowery, 1996a). Competitive pressure affects the birth (entry) and death (exit) rates of organizations in and out of politics and, via specialization and partitioning, sets the limits of the number of organizations in a given 'niche' environment (Hannan and Freeman, 1989; Gray and Lowery, 1996b). Communities of organizations active in public affairs may either be defined by their collective aims (from the 'bottom-up') or on the basis of observed activities in venues of political decision-making ('top-down'). The map-making approach and the actual 'maps' of organizational communities are important ingredients for the study of interest representation and its public policy outcomes.

¹ This chapter is a revision and combination of early work by the same author: Berkhout, J. (2023). 'Chapter 8: Population Ecology of Actors in Public Affairs. Types of Interests and Policy Domains' in : Timmermans, A. *Research Handbook on Public Affairs*, Elgar Handbooks in Public Administration and Management Series. ; Berkhout, J. (2020). Group Populations. In P. Harris, A. Bitonti, C. S. Fleisher, & A. Skorkjær Binderkrantz (Eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Interest Groups, Lobbying and Public Affairs* (Living ed.). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. & Berkhout, J. (2020). Population Ecology of Interest Representation. In P. Harris, A. Bitonti, C. S. Fleisher, & A. Skorkjær Binderkrantz (Eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Interest Groups, Lobbying and Public Affairs* (Living ed.). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan

Introduction

This chapter identifies the set of concepts and argument that jointly form the population ecological theory. This theory aims to explain the numbers and types of organizations active in public policy. In the second half of the chapter, attention is focused on the data and empirical approaches used to count the numbers of interest representatives in particular contexts.

The disciplinary roots of population ecology in studies of interest group politics within political science

From the mid-1990s onwards, population ecological models began to fill an important theoretical gap in the disciplinary knowledge on interest representation. Previously, scholars working in a pluralist, corporatist or political-economic tradition only showed a peripheral interest in the organizational composition of interest group systems. The limited scholarly attention in these traditional theories has several reasons.

To start, the American pluralists in the 1950s assume a 'natural' existence of 'latent groups' in any society and such groups may be triggered into political action by relevant disturbances (of policy or otherwise) (Truman, 1951). The starting point of pluralist studies lies in the organized voices in the policy process (e.g. Lindblom, 1968) and less in the underlying organizational 'background' on which these voices may rely.

Some decades later, European academics working in a corporatist tradition observe that (party-political or economic) institutions channel the organizational translation of disturbance. Interest groups, in their view (e.g. Williamson, 1989), relate to each other in a hierarchical manner and can be identified on the basis of the political-economic logic of conflict between capital and labor and/or align with the main dimension of conflict in the party system such as religious denomination of the 'pillars' in the Dutch case (e.g. van Waarden, 1992). A organizational analysis outside of these formal institutional contours is not considered of central political or academic interest. This narrow scope leaves corporatist theory to not attend to the increasingly predominant 'individual' firm lobbying (e.g. Aizenberg, 2021; Coen, 1998) or relatively informal manners of political action or engagement, such as the direct lobbying targeted at legislators, the reaching out to journalists or hiring a public affairs consultancy agency.

Last, the political economist Olson (1965; 1982) focuses on organizational formation. In his view, free riding leads collective action to require selective incentives or coercion. This creates substantial organizational hurdles that are typically only passed by narrowly focused, 'specific' interests. But organizational establishment also entrenches such interests and leads societies 'to accumulate (..) organizations for collective action over time' (Olson, 1982, 41). This means that interest groups, in stable societies, tend to grow in number, plausibly to such an extent that they may create 'institutional sclerosis' that limit policy decisions to such an extent that it harms economic growth. In this view, what matters are the differences among interests in their capacity to organize selective incentives (this explains diversity) and the age of the system (this explains density in numbers of active organizations), but not the more complex and nuanced specifics of organizational communities in distinct systems or sectors.

These arguments are challenged by population ecologists who identify the characteristics of the organizational community as critical explanations for strategies and influence, and see a central independent relevancy of these characteristics. They note that earlier views are insufficiently attentive to the interdependency of interest groups among each other and their dependency on their environment, or, as regards the corporatist views, too much focused on particular countries only. Their alternative answer is further specified in the following section, followed by a couple of examples of contemporary studies. After a theoretical discussion, several methodological considerations on the counting of politically active organizations are presented.

Theory: limited carrying capacity for politically active organizations

Gray and Lowery's 1996 book *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation* is the seminal work in this research tradition. Gray and Lowery (1996a), and researchers following their approach, explain the density of *niches* (the numbers of organizations active in a domain) on the basis of the political 'energy' ('demand') factors such as political uncertainty or legislative activity, and socio-economic 'area' ('supply') such as the number and interest concentration of potential constituents. The age of domains or systems ('stability') should also matter. This so-called 'Energy-Stability-Area' model may be assessed over time, comparing states or policy/economic sectors. There are also several studies that rely on arguments from population ecology but avoid the technical terminology (see discussion of such studies in the Europe: Berkhout, 2015). For instance, two European studies explain the number of lobbyists per economic sector on the basis of the market size and structure (area) and amount of regulation pertaining to the sector (energy) but do so without extensively using the technical terms of the model (e.g. Berkhout et al, 2015; Kløver and Zeidler, 2019).

Population ecology conceptually departs from the idea that organizations or public affairs departments within larger organizational structures seek to survive rather than anything else (e.g. Lowery, 2007). A given environment can 'carry' only a finite number of similar organizations. This environmental resource space consists of organizations relying on the same resources and is called a guild or a niche (or sometimes domain or sector or [sub-]population). The *carrying capacity* of a niche refers to the number of organizations that can viably maintain operation and depends on the availability of organizational resources. In the case of organizations active in public policy on behalf of a relevant constituency such as associations of business firms or citizen-membership-based cause groups, such resources are primarily related to potential constituents willing to pay membership dues (the 'area' term of the model). Such willingness on the part of potential members is derived from a concern or interest in public policy. Such societal and economic interest leads political 'energy' such as sizable government budgets or regulation to be a relevant resource for organization survival because it incentivizes potential members into action and justifies the public policy activities of organizations. The public policy-originated organizational 'energy' is further strengthened by associated needs on the part of policy makers for information from relevant interest groups.

In terms of the organizational form of politically active organizations, a broad distinction may be made between membership-based associations and hierarchical commercial, semi-public or public organizations. However, these differences are not assumed to fundamentally affect the model. For both types of organizations there needs to be an internal justification of public affairs / political activities relative to other departments or functions.

At higher levels of abstraction, population ecology finds that the structure of economic production also structures interest representation. Therefore the numbers and types of interest representatives varies between economic sectors. Explanatory factors therefore are operationalized on the basis of structural business statistics of economic sectors (numbers of companies, market concentration etc.). In well-developed, 'mature' organizational systems, the scarceness of resources leads to a 'natural' limitation on the growth of the number of organizations actively attempting to influence public policy (Gray and Lowery, 1996). This argument directly and forcefully contradicts Olson's (1981) remarks on the indeterminate growth in numbers of interest representatives. For instance, population ecologists would find it unsurprising that the large number of corporate lobbyists that arrived in Brussels in the early 1990s chose to leave ('exit' the population) after the political energy surrounding the 1992 Maastricht Treaty waned, thus reducing the carrying capacity for corporate lobbyists in Brussels (e.g. Berkhout and Lowery, 2010). In short, the numbers and diversity of organizations active in influencing public policy relies on the political energy in the policy process and the base in society in terms of members and (socio-)economic interests.

As regards organizational diversity, competitive pressure lead organizations that best 'fit' the environment to maintain their existence in the long run. This process leads organizations to become more similar in their structure. This likeness is called *isomorphism*. Any measurement of diversity is thus within the scope of relatively similar organizations, such as all organizations that maintain a lobby function. Population ecology assumes that isomorphism results from the selective survival of some organizations rather from the adaptation of existing organizations to better fit their environment (Hannan and Freeman, 1989; Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976). Organizations find it difficult to change their core set of activities and goals (e.g. Hannan and Freeman, 1984), though there is some debate about extent to which this is the case for politically active organizations (e.g. Halpin and Jordan, 2009). The key source of differences in organizational structure or goals among organizations within a given population must therefore largely come from the *birth* or entry of new organizations or the *death* or exit of organizations. For instance, one of the key changes in the associational landscape in the United States has been the rise of so-called non-membership advocacy organizations. These did not seem to have arisen from the organizational structural adaptation of existing groups but were largely established as new organizations. For instance, the international interest community related to human-rights became organizationally more diverse and dense through the establishment of donation-oriented, 'new' organizations such as Human Rights Watch in the 1980s, complementing the 'older' membership-fee-based organizations such as Amnesty International, established in the 1960s. Indeed, as documented by Walker and colleagues (2011), by attending to similar but adjacent issues new non-membership but professionally run advocacy organizations developed mutually supportive relationships with existing membership associations. It is assumed that there is some variation in the structure of new organizations entering the system. Population ecologists are largely agnostic about whether this variation arises from a strategic calculation on the part of organizational leaders, or results from learning, or may be related to ideological conviction or some other driving factor. Be this as it may, the entry and exit of organizations is the key mechanism through which the organizational population is rooted in its environment.

Competition for organizational resources occurs within multidimensional niches and largely takes the form of an effective *partitioning* of particular sets of important resources (Gray and Lowery, 1996b). For instance, within the niche of environmental protection groups, some groups may focus on

relatively conservative potential members whereas others target relatively progressive citizens. Commonly, partitioning is positively related to organizational specialization. The availability of organizational resources, i.e. the carrying capacity in a given organizational environment, limits the extent to which specialization is a viable mode of survival. Sometimes niche specialization and the associated partitioning matches particular policy or political *goals* and interests (e.g. Browne, 1990; Heaney 2004), or is rooted in societal or economic *bases* (e.g. Salomon and Anheier, 1998), or related to policy-oriented *tactics* (e.g. Soule and King, 2008; Olzak and Uhrig, 2001; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2019). Niche partitioning in terms of policy interests commonly occurs between economic sector specific associations and more encompassing business interest associations. Policies affecting the whole business community such as particular taxes or broadly framed competitiveness policies are the operating terrain of encompassing associations whereas more specific policies such as on the regulation of chemicals are in the field of expertise of sector-specific associations. Tactical niche specialization occurs when similar environmental cause groups strategically avoid to use similar modes to influence public policy. For instance one organization may develop a repertoire of activities that have judicial procedures at its center whereas another fosters long-term relations with friendly party politicians as core mode of policy engagement.

These theoretical premises imply that, when comparing organizational environments, the number of organizations present depends on the carrying capacity and the extent to which the carrying capacity is already exhausted by existing organizations (*density dependence*). Comparisons can be cross-sectional such as between policy sectors or sub-national units, or over time. There are a couple of mechanisms that are commonly studied in longitudinal models. Such models identify a tilted S-shaped growth pattern in which (sub-)populations of organizations develop in three stages: nascent, growing, and maturely grown stages (Nownes, 2004; Fisker, 2015). In the early stages, organizations, as form, require *legitimation*. For instance, a gay-rights cause group is unthinkable prior to the 1950s. The political organization on gay rights only became organizationally 'legitimate' in the Seventies. This stage is followed by a period of growth in the number of relatively similar organizations, made possible by the abundance of resources available. Populations reach a mature stage when competitive pressures make themselves felt and the carrying capacity is effectively fully realized (e.g. Hannan and Carroll, 1992). At this stage, the number of organizations stays at the same level, even though there may still be entry, exit and therefore organizational turnover.

This coherent set of assumptions pertains to the density of niches, or, more broadly, interest group systems as a whole. However, we would also like to explain the *diversity* of interests represented via interest group systems. There are recurring questions about to the extent to which the full breadth of salient interests in society are also represented before government by means of interest groups broadly conceived (Lowery et al 2015). This 'mismatch' for example, manifests as 'business bias' (e.g. Hanegraaff and Berkhout, 2019; Coen et al 2021). However, despite its importance, explaining the diversity of group systems is conceptually and empirically very demanding. There are only a couple of studies that manage to explain the differences in diversity between niche-based communities of interest organization in policy areas or states. In one complex model the predictions of several explanatory modes of the numbers of groups are all combined to predict the diversity (Lowery et al , 2005). To illustrate in a simplified manner, we could model the number of environmental cause groups on the basis numbers of citizens that are willing to donate to such groups, and at the same time model the number of chemical industry lobbyists based on the size and structure of that industry, and subsequently combine these models to estimate the relative presence of industry and

cause group representatives in a given state at a given moment in time. Even more advanced analyses have been used in cases where over time data exists. In that situation research may account for rates of entry into group communities. As follow from the remarks on longitudinal models, each niche (or guild) varies in its stage of development and its sensitivity to environmental change. These differences in stage of development lead to substantial variation in the growth rates across niches, similar to the variation in the effective scale of industrial organization. For instance, when the tourism sector in a given city grows, this may lead to larger numbers of interest representatives for that sector because more specialized groups are formed (e.g. the association of tourist bus companies splits off the association of taxi companies). In this case, the growth in the size of the constituency is more or less proportional to the growth in the size of the interest group community. In contrast, when the number of general hospitals grows in a given city without specialization, it that the growth rate of interest representatives lags or is only partially proportional to the growth of hospitals, as the structure of interest representation tends to follow the structure of production. The differential density growth rates across niches form the base for estimations and explanations for interest group diversity (Lowery and Gray, 2016). In light of these complexities, it is commonly conceptually and empirically highly challenging to precisely explain diversity in this manner. Researchers have therefore commonly chosen to focus on broader categories (business vs non-business) and more descriptive research questions.

The volume edited by Lowery and colleagues (2015) represents the state of the art of studies on the population ecology of interest representation (also see Halpin and Jordan [2012] for data and methods for mapping interest group populations). The theoretical assumptions have broadly been found to be empirically valid, or at least, of greater validity than any other conceptual model, most notably the theory of Olson. This is substantiated by empirical assessments of the core Energy-Stability-Area model (e.g. Gray and Lowery, 1996a; Messer et al, 2009; Holyoke, 2021), of specific parts of population ecology (e.g. Kattelman, 2015; Chamberlain et al, 2020), and of empirical studies that indirectly relate to population ecological assumptions, such as studies on the demand- or policy-maker side of lobbying related to the information needs in the policy process (e.g. Broscheid and Coen, 2003; Leech et al 2005; Coen et al 2021: 85-110).

Second, population ecology concepts have a balance between abstractness and concreteness that facilitates conceptual 'traveling capacity' to several political systems, contexts and circumstances. When allowing for some conceptual looseness (as proposed by Halpin and Jordan, 2009), it is a theory of the middle range that has shown to be valid in a broad range of advanced democracies ranging from the US, transnationally (Hanegraaff et al 2015) and via the EU to Eastern Europe (Labanino et al , 2021), comparatively (e.g. Hanegraaff, van der Ploeg and Berkhout 2021) and also at multi-level (Berkhout et al 2017; Berkhout and Hanegraaff, 2019). Third, macro-organizational studies are now a broadly accepted sub-field of study within the main field of interest group politics. This comes largely from the theoretical innovation that population ecology provided. Last, the current challenge lies in connecting these system- or macro-views to studies at lower levels of aggregation such as those related to policy access, strategies, or particular policy outcomes for specific issues (Holyoke, 2017; Lowery et al 2008). Such connections are certainly plausible: for instance, a lobbyist is more likely to develop an exchange relationship with a legislator in case there are no other lobbyists around, but will have to compete for access when issues are surrounded by a more crowded lobbying population (e.g. Hanegraaff et al, 2019).

The population ecology theory of interest representation offers an exhaustive view on the numbers and types of interest groups, and it fills the macro-organization gap left unaddressed in earlier studies of interest representation. The empirical, organizational demographical material needed is demanding and the data collection experience associated with population ecological studies offers several important lessons, also for the study of other research questions or for practitioners. In the subsequent sections a number of data challenges and solutions are discussed..

X.3 Mapping populations of actors active in public affairs

Scholars from a number of disciplines have shown interest in the counts of organizations seeking influence in particular political systems or the numbers of associations present in a given civil society (e.g. Halpin and Jordan, 2012). Descriptive ‘maps’ of the group population are of critical importance for a range of substantive scholarly interests and is a base material needed for several adjacent research methods such as group surveys, elite interviewing and issue sampling. Researchers will have to define the limits of their population, critically assess the adequacy of data sources available, and decide upon the characteristics and categories of classification they use.

The motivation to map the interest group population varies substantially across fields of study. Students of *public policy* seek to understand the way in which the structure of the group-system is conducive to effective governance. *Political scientists* depart from population data to address inequalities in interest representation (e.g. Lowery, Gray and Halpin, 2015) or to assess the closed nature of the political process, the proverbial ‘bubble’ in Brussels, the Old Boys Networks on the Beltway or the ‘Bell Jar’ (*kaasstolp*) in The Hague. Furthermore, *sociologists* are interested in the density of associations as indicator for the quality of voluntary associational life and its potentially positive effects on social cohesion and the social capital of individual citizens (e.g. Saloman and Anheier, 1998). Finally, the research interest of *organization theorists* commonly focuses on the relative control of organizations over critical environmental forces (e.g. Hannan and Carroll, 1992). There is also non-academic, more practical interest in group populations, such as journalistic accounts, lists created for public administrative purposes such as those related to transparency regulation, lobby Watchdog NGOs, commercial ‘who is who’ directories and so on.

X.3.1 Behavioural versus organizational definitions of actors and populations

A first step in mapping any population of interested actors is to define what counts as such. Scholars of interest groups have made some relevant definitional progress in this regard. In a maximalist approach, attributes of interest groups include being organized, not being part of the state², and not

² This criterion excludes bureaucratic actors as lobbyists. Sometimes cross-level or cross-agency lobbying by public agencies is included in studies of interest representation.

seeking public office (Jordan et al 2004; Chalmers et al, 2022) but at least *potentially* participating in [national] political processes’ (Jordan et al. 2012 144). These criteria differentiate studies of interest group studies from other fields in political science such as social movement studies (which include ‘unorganized’ action), studies on political parties (which focuses on organizations participating in elections) or policy studies (which include state actors). This maximalist definition of interest groups is sub-divided into more specific ‘behavioral’ and ‘organizational’ definitions.

First, the *behavioral* definition of interest groups focuses on organizations that actively attempt to influence public policy through direct contact with policy makers or by other means. The term ‘group’ is confusing as individual organizations in the form of public affairs departments of commercial companies or (semi-)public agencies are commonly constitute sizeable proportions of lobbying communities. A typical example of the use of the behavioral definition to demarcate group populations are the studies by Gray and Lowery (1996) that rely on entries in state lobby registers as a data source. Second, the *organizational* definition prioritizes the organizational function of bringing together the interests of members or supporters, commonly via voluntary membership associations (e.g. Jordan et al, 2004). A typical example of use of this definition of the group population is in the descriptive, comparative study of Jordan et al (2012 143) who include any membership association

Some scholars combine these definitions and focus on membership-based interest associations that are observed as active in politics (e.g. Kluver, 2015; Beyers et al 2020). This may be labelled the ‘transmission belt’ definition. The activities aimed at both interest aggregation and articulation allows associations to function as a transmission belt or ‘intermediator’ between the interests and preferences of members and policy makers (e.g. Albareda, 2021). For instance, an individual hospital lobbying for additional government funding is excluded whereas a politically active association of hospitals is included in studies using this definition. Table X.1 summarizes the different combinations (terminology adapted from: Jordan et al 2004).

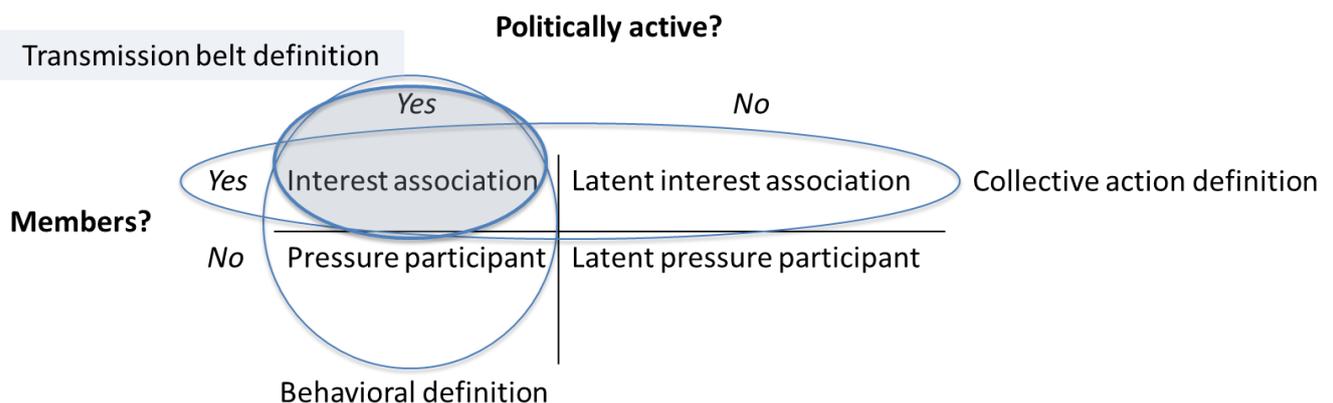


Table X.1: Typology of group definitions

As will become clear in the next section, the definition used largely dictates the types of data sources validly employed.

X.3.2 Bottom-up and top-down approaches to interest group populations

In their study of the EU population of interest groups, Berkhout et al (2018) identify bottom-up and top-down approaches to data collection for mapping group populations. For most research purposes, they recommend combining different types of data sources as a way to guarantee variation on a couple of dimensions (i.e. both ‘core’ policy participants and actors that are active in the periphery, both membership groups and individual institutions).

First, in a bottom-up approach researchers follow the ‘organizational’ definition and seek a register of non-profit voluntary membership associations from which potentially politically relevant associations can be filtered. There are several of such registers kept by relevant (semi-) state agencies such as the Dutch *Kamer van Koophandel* (Chamber of Commerce) (Poppelaars, 2009; Aizenberg, 2021), the (albeit private) Italian business information register *Guida Monaci sul Sistema Italia* (Lizzi and Pritoni, 2017) or the Belgian register for legal entities *Kruispuntbank van Ondernemingen* (Willems et al, 2020).

Somewhat easier, and more frequently employed, is the reliance on directories of associations, such as the OECKL directory in Germany (e.g. Jentges et al 2012), the *Pyttersen’s Almanak* in the Netherlands (e.g. Berkhout et al 2017), the Directory of British Associations in the United Kingdom (e.g. Jordan et al, 2012) and the Encyclopedia of Associations in the United States (e.g. Johnson, 2014; US data available via: www.comparativeagendas.net). These directories have been or still are published annually for over several decades, commonly focusing on associations with some national relevance and with classifications that allow for a substantive research focus (e.g. dropping hobby and sports clubs from the pool of data).

Second, a ‘top-down’ data collection approach takes as a starting point the apparent activities of organizations to attempt to influence public policy. This means that researchers are oriented on observable, formally registered interactions with authorities. As regards the US states, Gray and Lowery (1996: 7) note that ‘the most valid indicator of broadscale political activity now available is provided by lobby registration rolls’ (also at federal level, eg. see: Baumgartner and Leech, 2001; and more recent state data: Holyoke, 2019). The extent to which lobby registers are also valid indicators for ‘broadscale’ political activity depends on the country-specific registration requirements and the extent to which the registration is specific to a particular policy-making institutions. The EU

transparency register, especially for those entries with a lobby accreditation to the European Parliament, provides an indicator of political activity with a level of validity that is similar to the mandatory US federal and state registers (but see eg: Nastase and Muurmans, 2020).

Other lobby registers do not fully capture legislative lobbying as political activity. The lobbyist list of the German *Bundestag*, for instance (similar to the now defunct European Commission list of recognized European associations), only registers associations or federations (Klüver, 2015). This means that, for instance, major corporations or regional associations are not included in the list. In such cases, and especially outside of the US, lists of participants in parliamentary hearings may be used (e.g. Pedersen et al, 2015), such as the Parliamentary Select or Bill committees in the United Kingdom, different types of appearances in the Spanish *Congreso de los Diputados* (Chaqués Bonafont and Munoz Marquez, 2018), the committee meetings of the German Bundestag (e.g. Cross et al, 2021) and interest groups mentioned in committee -agendas in the *Feuilleton* of the French *Assemblée Nationale* (Berkhout et al, 2017). Given that each policy venue may attract slightly different groups, researchers may want to use multiple data sources to construct a more encompassing valid mapping (e.g. Wonka et al, 2009).

Some political systems also have other formal fora of interest representation such as the (online) consultation system of the European Commission (e.g. Rasmussen and Carroll, 2013), the public consultations in the Scottish policy process (e.g. Halpin et al, 2012), membership in expert committees (Belgium, EU) (Fraussen et al, 2015) and so on. In other cases, researchers have relied on the agendas of government ministers, their administrative cabinets (such as in the European Commission), or letters sent to ministries. Furthermore, in particular cases there are also directories available that map the more informal public affairs 'bubble' in government centers, such as the Washington Representatives Directory (Baumgartner et al, 2009) or the European Public Affairs Directory (Berkhout and Lowery, 2008). Finally, there are attempts to observe political activities by analyzing newspapers using manual or automated content analysis, or via targeted searches for tracing specific policy issues (e.g. Binderkrantz 2012; Aizenberg, 2021). Some of these registers provide relevant information on group type and policy interest that can be readily used by researchers. For instance, the data of the European Transparency Register has been fruitfully employed by Coen et al (2021; 85-110) to map distinct policy areas differences in the type of interests represented, using combining information on policy interest and group type to identify clusters or domains of organizations. However, most of the sources mentioned do not always provide more information than the name of the organization and online information could be used

identify important basic characteristics of organizations; the type of members and the types of interests represented.

The first characteristic that researchers are typically interested in relates to the ‘type of group’ observed. For instance a categorizations of membership groups used in the past decade in a number of European project differentiates between identity groups, hobby/leisure groups, religious groups, public interest groups, unions, occupational associations, business interest groups and associations of institutions (Binderkrantz et al, 2020). Second, researchers commonly want to know which interests are organized and politically represented. These primarily relate to the core economic activities of the constituents of organizations. These typically are sectors of economic activities such as ISIC or NACE or, when it comes to citizen groups, causes of political interest such as the International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (ICNPO). As regards classifications of policy areas researchers rely on categories of government activities, most frequently the Comparative Agenda Project scheme (<https://www.comparativeagendas.net/>) and in some other cases the UN-defined classification of functions of government (COFOG).

Subsequently, the distribution of interest groups over these categories calls for explanation: for instance, why are there larger numbers of groups active in health care than there are on foreign military intervention? Population ecological research designs are relatively flexible as regards the precise operationalisation of the explanatory factors (i.e. resource bases for organizational survival). However, the main empirical challenge lies in the connection between the data on organizations (numbers and types of groups) and the data on explanations such as legislative activities relevant to particular groups and the size of the potential constituency of interest niches. Such connections tend to work best when the interests of groups can be classified with relatively high levels of validity, such as is the case for economic sector classifications (e.g. Berkhout et al, 2015; Kluver and Zeidler, 2019; Lowery et al, 2005).

X.4 Conclusion: empirical demands and conceptual innovation

To conclude, the mapping of populations of interest groups is conditioned by the definition of interest groups used. This is a key choice in the empirical investigation of interest populations, and it determines the types of data sources needed for analysis. Scholars using an organizational definition of interest groups as politically interested membership associations will use ‘bottom-up’ data sources, such as directories of associations. In contract, a behavioral definition of interest groups requires the use of ‘top-down’ sources such as registers of lobbyists. In both cases or when the aim is to explicate the transmission belt function of interest groups, researchers are well-advised to use

multiple data sources. For instance, if the theoretical point of departure is that interest groups differ among each other in their focus on particular policy-making or public arenas, it makes sense to combine different 'top-down' data sources such as parliamentary hearing data as well as information from reported ministerial meetings. For other research purposes, for instance when constructing a survey sampling frame to analyze associations, researchers may be able to rely on existing directories of associations (e.g. cigsurvey.eu).

There are several opportunities and ways for future research. First, based on the notion that 'politics is not basketball and numbers are not results' (Jordan and Halpin, 2012), it is important to be careful with overinterpretation any mappings made of interest group systems. At the same time, precisely constructed mappings provide important political information. Descriptive maps are more than mere lists of organizations, and, especially when multiple data sources are combined, help researchers assess the political hierarchy among the organizations. Well-constructed descriptive 'maps' show variation in the length of time in which organizations are active (Toshkov et al, 2013; Sorurbakhsh, 2014), the number of venues that organizations target (Berkhout et al, 2018), or the breadth or scope of their policy interest (Halpin and Binderkrantz, 2011). In other words, they help us identify the core and the periphery of the group system (e.g. LaPira et al, 2014), and previous studies identify a law-like skewness in the distribution attention to particular issue (e.g. Baumgartner and Leech, 2001; Braun et al, 2020). This is plausibly related to the political power of different groups.

Second, most of the data sources mentioned contain additional information on the organization that could be used for further study. For instance, the written minutes or video recordings of the legislative committee meeting provide information on issue-positions of interest representatives and their formal political interaction with the legislators in the committee. The associational directories frequently also list the names of the board-members or chairs, which could be used for analysis of interlocking board memberships or career-path analysis. Future studies could also make more use of this information, for instance by assessing the composition of the lobbying community by looking more specifically at the persons working in it (gender, education, career paths and so on) and the relationships between them (e.g. Junk et al 2021).

Third, the interest population maps are a good starting point for more case-specific work. Such work may deal with the development of the interest group system in a particular country (e.g. on Italy: Lizzi and Pritoni, 2017; on Denmark: Binderkrantz et al 2017; on Slovenia: Novak and Fink-Hafner, 2019; on Sweden: Naurin and Borang, 2012; on Australia: Fraussen and Halpin, 2016) or it may

address the specific pattern of interest representation within a policy sector (e.g. on health care: Gray and Lowery , 2013; on energy policy: Horvantova et al, 2021).

Last, existing population ecological models may be employed more extensively. Several data sources can be used to design studies for examining assumptions made in the population ecological research approach, including its implications for adjacent research questions. For instance, do we find that policy participants active in relatively crowded areas receive more access than those working in less densely populated fields (e.g. Hanegraaff et al 2021)?

Finally, important questions on interest representation require descriptive mappings and explanatory models of the numbers of organizations active and the types of interests represented. Academic studies relying on the coherent set of assumptions and concepts of 'population ecology' help us explain why interest group or public affairs communities consists of the type of organizations as they do. Researchers of interest groups in several political systems have developed classifications of policy, political, economic and social interests. They also have experience in deriving large-n data from a variety of sources, ranging from consultative committees to associational directories. Future academic work can build upon those experiences, and practitioners such as lobby consultancies may find it useful to use similar methods to construct issue-specific mappings as input for strategic decision-making.

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