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Berkhout, J.

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Comparing populations of interest organizations: Skating on thin ice?

Joost Berkhout,

d.j.berkhout@uva.nl,

Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam

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Introduction

Both US and EU studies on interest representation emphasize the importance of 'context' (Baumgartner et al. 2009, Beyers, Braun & Klüver 2014). The interest in 'context' is partially in response to earlier pessimistic assessments of the case-oriented nature of the field (Baumgartner & Leech 1998 174-180). Lowery and Gray (2004b) label contextual approaches, 'neopluralist studies', and see them as a symptom of progress in the field (Also: Hojnacki et al. 2012). Such progress is evident in the emergence of distinct disciplinary subfields, large-n explanatory frameworks and general agreement on several core concepts. A broad variety of studies may be labelled 'contextual': The context operates at system, policy issue or organizational field levels and all distinct parts of the influence production process are studied with this in mind. For instance, it has been hypothesized that the variety of policy frames used by interest groups depends on the substantial scope of the policy issue studied (Klüver, Mahoney & Opper 2014), that specific administrative identities lead to closer policy alignment to certain like-minded groups (Bernhagen, Dür & Marshall 2014) and that the salience of issues in public opinion leads to higher numbers of groups active on the issue (Rasmussen, Carroll & Lowery 2013).

Designing explanatory 'contextual' studies is challenging. Baumgartner and Leech (1998 174) would like them 'to combine the sensitivity to context of the case study and the generalizability of the survey'. The design of each of the abovementioned studies guarantees some variation in the context in which groups operate. In the examples cited, this variation is at the level of the policy issue or legislative proposal, but there are also large-n, explanatory studies with cross-country (Rasmussen 2010) or time series designs (Fisker 2013, Nownes & Lipinski 2005). The large majority of studies do not choose a country comparison. In their survey of recent interest group studies, Hojnacki et al. (2012 385) found only 10 out of 110 works that include more than one country. The units in these designs (issues, countries, years) vary on a lot of potentially important explanatory factors relative to the number of (comparable) cases that can feasibly be included in the study. This makes it very complex to design well-specified, generalizable explanatory models. And contributing to the complexity of such designs, some of these factors may not even be observed at the same level. Issues are part of policy fields, policy fields are part of institutional structures, and so on.

In this paper I will discuss the major challenges of designing 'contextual' models of interest representation. I focus on system-level contextual variables and, especially in the latter part, on the study of group populations. How can we design large-n, explanatory, comparative research on interest representation that is sensitive to contextual factors? I argue that the complexities in these designs can

be 'managed' by the careful subdivision of research questions along the lines of the influence production process. This facilitates the employment of relatively specific theoretical frameworks that allow researchers to empirically disregard various contextual factors. In a lot of ways this is already common practice. With this I add a positive note to the similar argument by Lowery et al (2008 1245-46) on comparative research. In the latter part of the paper, I provide an example of a design of a major, on-going comparative study into populations of interest organizations.

I first identify the challenges of comparative research based on a 'classic' discussion among early comparative political scientists. In the second section, I discuss two central classification schemes as illustrations of common understanding and potential coherence in the field. In the third section, I further illustrate the argument with examples from my on-going research project on organizational populations. Lowery et al (2008 1245-46) are 'somewhat pessimistic' about comparative research on interest representation and see only room for 'careful, narrow comparison across relatively similar systems'. I conclude that there is reason for cautious optimism in the comparative 'contextual' study of interest groups.

Comparing interest representation in different countries

In this section, I evaluate a 'classic' discussion on comparative research designs that took place among political scientists at the heights of the 'group approach' in the fifties (and that contributed to its decline in the sixties). This is a discussion that has been somewhat overshadowed by the simultaneous, disciplinary discussions about power and influence (e.g. Lowery 2013, Lukes 1974), the 'normative' nature of pluralism (Baumgartner & Leech 1998 44-63), various 'elite theories' (McFarland 2010) and between 'institutionalists' and 'behavioralists' (Goodin & Klingemann 1996 10-11). The discussion on comparative research designs merits at least as much attention as these other perennial issues in studies on interest groups.

In one of his earlier works, Dahl (1947 8, 11) points to the 'fundamental difficulties of drawing universal conclusions from the institutions of any one country' and argues in favor of comparative studies to 'determine what aspects of public administration, if any, are truly independent of the national and social setting'.¹ In his view, there is a 'a long way' to go before there is a sufficient 'body of comparative

¹ Dahl (Dahl 1947 8) is pessimistic about the institution-oriented nature of public administration and its parochial focus: '(...) as long as the study of public administration is not comparative, claims for 'a science of public administration' sound rather hollow. Conceivably there might be a science of American public administration and a science of British public administration and a science of French public administration; but can there a 'science of

studies' to validly identify 'general principles' or theories of government institutions (Dahl 1947 11). His concern about the social embeddedness of political phenomena, first, led him to be pessimistic about 'scientific' progress in the field because, due to substantial national differences, it would be very difficult to find universally valid theories. Second, it encouraged him to broaden the focus of the study of government beyond institutions and into group-based power struggles surrounding these. Such power struggles provide the link between formal institutions and their social context, and, as implied, is crucial in understanding country-differences. These arguments raised the bar for political scientists in the fifties. These are arguments in favor of the simultaneous study of a broad set of political practices (institutions and group behaviors) and to do so in various systems to uncover 'universal' regularities.

This is one of the reasons why several prominent American political scientists started a collaborative, comparative research endeavor into interest group systems (Baumgartner & Leech 1998 49). They aspired to move away from a narrow focus on formal institutions and to 'differentiate more accurately between political systems as *wholes*' (Almond 1958 271). In the view of Almond and his colleagues, the intermediate position of interest groups in between public opinion, parties and government made interest groups crucial, and up to then omitted from comparative studies, for the understanding of the 'systematic conception of the political process as whole' (Almond 1958 271). By focusing on interest groups, one 'automatically' studies the 'broader' political process and potentially identifies the systemic political characteristics of countries necessary to understand the differences in the functioning of political systems (and the associated validity of group theories).² An optimistic and pessimistic perspective on comparative research designs arose from the disciplinary debates that were part of the collaborative ambitions described by Almond (Also see contributions to: Ehrmann 1958b).

The optimists are the 'functionalists'. They study the 'function of articulating and transmitting group interests', and, their eventual interest is directed towards a 'functional' theory of politics more broadly:

public administration' in the sense of a body of generalized principles independent of their peculiar national setting?'

² The move away from 'formal-institutional' approaches was, according to Almond also for 'urgent practical considerations', because there was, apparently, a great concern (among American scholars and their funders) about the support for communism among certain groups of voters in Western Europe. He notes: "The survival of parliamentary and democratic institutions on the European continent is by no means to be taken for granted. The political communities of the major Western European countries - France, Germany, and Italy- are fragmented into exclusive ideological movements. Large bodies of opinion appear to be alienated from the West, politically apathetic, or actively recruited to communism. The legal-historical-philosophical approach, which characterizes the scholarship dealing with these countries, is not by itself adequate to discover how serious these cleavages and alienations are, for by admission the basic problems of civic loyalty and political cohesion lie in large part outside of the formal governmental frame- work."(Almond, Cole & Macridis 1955 1043)

'the functions of political choice, and the ways in which these functions are performed in different societies' (Almond 1958 272, 281, also see: Garceau 1958). This function may be performed by different types of actors and through different structures in different countries. Through the comparative study of this function researchers identify the functional equivalence of certain actors such as pressure groups, 'informal groups' or bureaucratic 'cliques' in different countries (On the concept of functional equivalence, see: Dogan& Pélassy 1990 37-44). The high level of abstraction allows them to study a relatively broad range of Western and non-Western interest group systems, and its relation to public opinion, parties and the legislative process (Almond 1958, Ehrmann 1958b). Please note that a lot of studies around this time are not comparative, but country studies that are loosely connected through cross-references and workshops (Beer 1956, Braunthal 1965, Ehrmann 1958a, LaPalombara 1964).

The pessimists, first, posit that 'except at a level of abstraction that renders it useless and dangerous for empirical research, a general interest group theory does not exist' (LaPalombara 1960 30). This especially 'dangerous' in comparative research. As persuasively argued by Sartori (1970 1242) the research initiatives of the 'optimists' suffer from 'the travelling problem of comparative politics'. The 'travelling problem' occurs when concepts, in this case of 'groups', are broadened in order gain extensional coverage ('it applies everywhere') but therewith lose connotative precision ('it applies to everything') (Sartori, 1970, 1034-36). Sartori (1970 1243, 1248-49) blames the functionalists in general, and the group-students in particular, to climb the 'ladder of abstraction' without conceptual 'mid-level' steps between the 'indeterminate' group concept and the concrete definitions used in empirical research.³ This leads LaPalombara (1960, 1968) to conclude that comparative research on interest groups is in dire need of, what Merton (1968) calls, 'theories of the middle range'.

Second, like Dahl (1947) on bureaucracies, 'pessimists' emphasize the strong cultural, historical and institutional context in which interest organizations operate (Macridis 1961, Meynaud 1957). Macridis (1961, 45) points out that scholars who compare interest group systems are 'soon forced to the conclusion that 'interest' like any other activity in a system is conditioned by secular forces that have shaped the political culture of the community' and that only a 'a good understanding of the historical dimension' may allow for an explanation of certain cross-national differences in group behavior. For instance, Meynaud (1958) connects the structure of the interest group system in France with the (fragmented) structure of the party system and public more broadly (Cited in Macridis 1961, 37-38). Like

³ He notes that 'the plain fact is that the structural-functional analyst is a lame scholar. He claims to walk on two feet, but actually stands on one foot – and a bad foot at that' (...) [he] ignored the ladder of abstraction, but he has inadvertently destroyed, during his reckless climbing, his own ladder' (Sartori 1970 1247, 1248).

Lijphart (1968) for the Dutch case, Meynaud explains fragmentation of interest representation of professional and economic sectors on the basis of religious and political ideological fragmentation. Such phenomena can only be understood when the group system is studied in connection to various parts of the political system more broadly. The potential implication of this is that it leaves us to only be non-explanatory, descriptive country studies or system-specific theory formation (i.e. a theory of the French interest group system, a theory of the American group system and so on).

This opposition left the field with, on the one hand, a stock of 'functionalist' group research in which research results can only be compared at a highly abstract level, and, on the other hand, non-comparable, relatively descriptive country studies, sometimes within system-specific frameworks (pluralism, corporatism, *siu generis* EU studies) with explicit limited validity beyond specific cases. To a large extent this has hardly changed since (besides that no one aspires to construct a 'general theory of groups' anymore). Lowery et al (2008 1232) note that the literature on interest groups is 'remarkably self-contained' and avoid 'explicit comparisons' between countries and systems. They outline that the conceptual issues raised by the 'pessimists' have remained largely unresolved (Lowery, Poppelaars & Berkhout 2008 1235-36). This concurs with Meynaud's prediction that 'really satisfactory results' of comparative group studies will 'demand the efforts of several generations' (cited in LaPalombara, 1960 29).⁴ However, this is obviously an unsatisfactory conclusion because it may preclude researchers from even trying to design, even imperfectly, comparative studies. This leaves us with the question of how to deal with (1) the travelling problem and (2) the inherently contextual nature of interest representation.

First, the most important solution to the 'travelling problem' is to segment or narrow down the phenomenon under investigation (Dogan & Pélassy 1990 113-19, LaPalombara 1968 54, Lowery, Poppelaars & Berkhout 2008). This allows for the construction of 'theories of the middle range' that help to link specific studies to a broader field, and allows for the development of common standards of empirical measurement. These things are needed to properly move on the ladder abstraction through the careful handling of (attributes of) concepts (Sartori 1970 1044).

The proverbial 'cake' may be sliced in different ways. What is the most productive way to subdivide the field of study of interest groups? Several potentially valid answers are possible: to start, Dogan and Pélassy (1990, 35) posit that 'functionalism is the most useful of all theoretical frameworks'. According to them, the identification of universal functions of certain parts of the political system is the only way

⁴ Please note that Meynaud was not disturbed by this, because 'which is the sector of human understanding the construction of which has not demanded the efforts of several generations?'

to reach the level of abstraction needed to compare Western and non-Western countries. They would like to save the 'grand scheme' of structural-functionalism from, among others, Sartori's criticism. Further, according to LaPalombara (1968: 63) it does not matter 'whether these segments be institutional or behavioral in nature, whether their choice does or does not clearly relate to the validation or illumination of general systemic theories'. In his view, the state of research on interest organisation is at a very early stage of theory construction in which 'even straight descriptive information (...) is extremely limited' (63, fn29). In such a vacuum, any mid-level theory represents potential progress to the field. Last, speaking more generally, Merton (1968: 51) advises to start with 'special theories from which to derive hypotheses that can be empirically investigated' and on 'an interconnected plane', develop 'a progressively more general conceptual scheme that is adequate to consolidate groups of special theories'. He rejects grand schemes or comprehensive theories but sees opportunities for gradual progress through linking theories of the middle range into 'consolidate groups'. The development of the field over the past decades indicates that this is more or less the form of progress in the field of interest representation (Lowery & Gray 2004b). Most notably, Lowery et al (2008) suggest an ordering of the field of interest group research into distinct, in Merton's words, 'consolidate groups' of middle range theories. They follow Merton's advice by differentiating existing studies into subfields and linking specific subfield theories to each other. This is done by differentiating four stages along the so-called 'influence production process' (Lowery & Brasher 2003: 16-25, Lowery & Gray 2004b). I will not restate the precise scheme, it suffices to say that the four subfields of research are 'mobilisation and organizational maintenance', 'organisational populations', 'strategies' and 'political outcomes and influence'. This particular subdivision of the field also has become increasingly relevant in the European context, even though research specialization per organizational types most notably business interests, unions, social movements and civil society organisations, has a more important tradition in Europe than in the US. European scholars consciously narrow down their (comparative) research questions along the lines of the 'influence production process'. For instance, this is the case for recent studies on mobilisation (e.g. Maloney & Rossteutscher 2007), on organizational populations (Berkhout forthcoming, Halpin & Jordan 2012b, e.g. Messer, Berkhout & Lowery 2010), on strategies (e.g. Beyers 2004, Dür & Mateo 2013, Kriesi, Tresch & Jochum 2007) and on influence (Dür & De Bièvre 2007, Klüver 2013).

This scheme represents a middle way between the overly ambitious 'grand explanatory schemes' such as structural-functionalism and the 'anything goes' approach of early-stage academic fields that are dominated by descriptive efforts only. It also is better than alternative mid-range segmentations in the

field because it allows for the incorporation of a very broad range of studies and there are several logical connections between the stages. The sub-division per group-type such as the specialized theories on civil society actors, business interests or social movement organisations have relatively little theoretical linkages among each other. The subdivision along institutional lines (legislative politics, executive politics etc) only refers to policy strategies of interest organisations, and consequently does not speak to theories pertaining to, for instance, group maintenance. The subdivision along the lines of the 'influence production process' is, loosely, used in recent collaborative projects (Baumgartner et al. 2009, Beyers et al. forthcoming).

The second major concern of the 'pessimists' are the country-specific cultural and historical particularities of the social, economic, political institutional and other contexts in which interest groups operate. In contrast to other political phenomena such as public opinion or executive politics, interest group politics is shaped by a multitude of undifferentiated and complexly related 'contexts' rather than by a single relatively autonomous well-demarked context. This makes it very difficult to control for potentially relevant explanatory factors. Further, the pessimists suggest that the differences between countries are 'differences in *kind*' rather than 'differences in *degree*', which produces additional difficulties in designing controlled comparisons (e.g. Sartori 1970 1036).

These are serious challenges. However, they pertain to all fields of comparative political science. That is, also students of, for instance, strategies of political parties have to take diverse 'contexts' into account such as those related to the preferences of their supporters, the institutional setup of coalition politics and the policy-making process more broadly (e.g. Strom 1990). Further, the challenges mentioned also apply to time-series and cross-sectional research designs, and research over the past decades have shown that these challenges can be addressed in actual research designs. For instance, we know that interest group strategies and their effects differ greatly per policy area or political issue (e.g. Baumgartner et al. 2009, Hojnacki et al. 2012). Do we consequently need distinct theories per policy field as these are of 'different *kinds*'? No, probably not. A single explanatory model can include various contextual factors such as the nature of the policy (regulatory, distributive), the 'status quo' position and the salience of certain issues in public opinion (e.g. Rasmussen, Carroll & Lowery 2013). Time-series models have also shown to be robust, disproving the proverb that 'the past is a different country'.⁵ This has shown to be the case even when there are substantial institutional changes. Among others, Klüver's

⁵ This is the opening line of L.P. Hartley's 1953 novel *The Go-Between*. The full line reads: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'

(2012) results on the relationship between public opinion and legislative lobbying of interest groups are robust pre- and post-unification Germany. Fisker's (2013) analysis of the Danish interest group population includes the heights of Danish corporatism and more recent 'lighter' corporatist arrangements. Nownes (2004) also manages to control for important contextual factors over a long time period. Careful research design and empirical assessments of variance will indicate whether country difference trump variation over time or between sectors. Comparative research on media presence of interest groups indicates that differences between policy areas are more important than cross country differences (Berkhout 2010 151-179).

There are two issues in the design of comparative interest group research that have not yet been fully addressed. First, the magnitude of the challenges mentioned depends, of course, on the size of the differences between the countries under study. The early functionalists were very ambitious in this regard. They aspired to include all countries in the world in their studies: 'the discussion led to the conclusion that Western and non-Western political systems have much in common, and that the particular group of scholars present shared a common approach and theory of politics' (Almond 1958 281). Also, taking into account that comparison aims to assess the validity of a certain empirical relationship between variables in as many circumstances as possible, Sartori (1970 1035) points to the methodological grounds that such an 'enterprise must – in principle – be a *global* enterprise'. These aspirations are laudable and the methodological argument is valid. As said, recent research seems to be reasonably successful in creating concepts that travel between Western countries. However, Hojnacki et al (2012 383) note that 'interest groups scholars have not been able to bring common, overarching, theoretical questions to bear on ongoing streams of research'. In the absence of theoretical coherence in the field, it is, as outlined above, very difficult to design research that is sufficiently theoretically focused in that it can deal with the contextual variation between Western and non-Western systems. For most studies in the field, comparisons of reasonably similar countries is probably the most sensible strategy.

Second, as said, the segmentation of the field along the lines of the 'influence production process' may offer some solution for the challenges of designing comparative research. It also creates a new challenge. That is, as highlighted by Lowery et al (2008 1244), there are probably relationships between the distinct stages that systematically vary between polities. This requires researchers to 'develop integrated models accounting for the differences between countries in the ways the several components of the influence production process are linked'(Lowery, Poppelaars & Berkhout 2008 1244). However, this is probably

likely to 'be difficult given that the kinds of variables that are likely to account for how patterns of mobilisation or processes governing the construction of interest communities or variations in influence strategies or their policy consequences across very different kinds of political systems are likely to address variables going far beyond organised interests themselves' (Lowery, Poppelaars & Berkhout 2008 1244). In other words, it may not be possible to simultaneously and comparatively focus research designs and to specify the effects that relate to the broader process of interest representation. This is a serious issue and echoes the concern of the 'pessimists' about the interrelationship of interest groups with their socio-historical context. It is also largely an empirical question and a matter of how much we want to explain. In part, due to these contextual effects, researchers will have to accept that comparative research designs will, necessarily, be not have the explanatory power that we would like them to have.

In conclusion, comparative research designs probably do not meet the levels of specification that may be reached in other designs. But this can be compensated by the greater claim of external validity of comparative designs compared to country cases. To summarise, the major challenges of comparative research on interest representation that is large-n and sensitive to context, are (1) the simultaneous need to narrow down the research question and maintain links to intermediate theory, (2) the socio-historical particularities of the broader context of interest representation, and (3) the relatively small differences between countries that can be accommodated in current theories. In line with this, recent progress (e.g. Dür& Mateo 2013, Mahoney 2008) is based on sensible segmentation (no aspiration for 'grand' theory and a preference for parsimonious theory), a focus on 'proximate' contextual factors, and, a 'Western' country selection.

Travelling concepts? Groups and agendas

Let's look into the use of systems of categorization in which researchers climb/descend the ladder of abstraction in order to compare between countries. The systematic use of such schemes of what Sartori (1970 1053) calls 'intermediate categories', in various contexts show their capacity to 'travel' and facilitate cross fertilization among distinct research projects. In the following, I discuss the current use of definitions of interest groups and policy agendas, respectively.

First, the central 'intermediate category' must be on the types of organisations included in studies on interest representation. A typical example of recent use of the concept of interest groups is in the descriptive, comparative study of Jordan et al (2012). They consciously and pragmatically deal with the

definition of the organisations included (Jordan et al. 2012 143). That is, the directories used in the study include organisations with (1) voluntary membership and that are (2) organized at the national level (and regional associations with national relevance). This ‘collective action’-oriented definition prioritizes interest aggregation, i.e. acting collectively to reach certain goals, over interest articulation, i.e. participation in the policy process. The authors are not immediately interested in the purposeful political orientation of associations. They intend ‘to capture the entire reservoir of organizations actually and *potentially* participating in national political processes’ (Jordan et al. 2012 144). This is in contrast to studies that interested in interest organisations that exhibit some behavior indicating their political interest, such as establishing lobby offices in Brussels or register in lobby registers (Halpin& Jordan 2012a 11-17). Such ‘behavior’-oriented studies prioritize the political interest or activity over organizational form, and consequently include individual institutions who lobby.

The conceptual focus on lobbying behavior in this so-called functional or behavioral definition of interest organizations makes it, as critically discussion by Jordan et al (2004), impossible to distinguish between interest organizations and politically active universities, companies or other institutions (see also: Salisbury 1992 43). Such a differentiation is needed in order to conceptually account for the phenomena associated with the aggregation of interests, such as problems of collective action. This argument is probably only partially convincing as it assumes that only associations have such problems. Organizations such as companies or schools also aggregate interests. We know that such institutions have to deal with important internal politics that may be similar to those faced by membership organizations. Heinz et al. (1993 384) note that ‘the government affairs officers of corporations, the executives of trade associations, and the heads of citizen-government groups must justify the cost of their operations to their respective organizational constituencies – whether the constituency is the CEO, industry members, or contributors’ (see for a similar argument: Hart 2004, Hillman, Keim & Schuler 2004, Wilts 2006). This latter conceptualization of internal politics of firms leads to the empirical inclusion of the same organizations as in functional or behavioral definitions, but adds a conceptual interest in intra-institution relationships, typical for studies of ‘collective action’-organizations.

The differentiation between behavioral or functional definition on the one hand and collective action or associational definitions on the other hand, is one of the most important definitional differences within the field (Jordan, Halpin & Maloney 2004). That is, the inclusion or exclusion of any of these two selection criteria on policy-interest and membership substantially influence the choice of theories, research approach and substantial implications of the research. The other attributes of interest groups

differentiate interest group studies from other fields in political science (such as social movement studies or policy studies). These attributes include being organized, not being part of the state and not seeking public office (Beyers, Eising & Maloney 2008 1106, e.g. Jordan et al. 2012 12).

We thus find that scholars in the field have consistent views on the types of organisations included in their studies, and add or exclude certain attributes from their definition of interest groups, depending on their precise research goals, and level of abstraction needed in case of comparative research. Table 1 suggests some labels for the different combinations of political orientation and organizational forms.

	<i>Only membership groups</i>	<i>All types of organizations</i>
<i>Explicit political goals</i>	Interest intermediators	Pressure participants
<i>Goals need not be directly policy-oriented</i>	Associations in 'civil society'	(Unorganized) social movements

Table 1: Typology of group definitions in the field of interest representation by political interest and organisational form

This agreement at 'intermediate' level of abstraction masks some small, but substantial differences at the level of sub-categories used in individual projects. Baroni et al (2013) find a 'closer link between group attributes and group type in narrower classification schemes based on group organizational characteristics than those based on a behavioral definition of lobbying'. This is an argument in favor of the development of common practices on the group attributes such as membership type and structure used to classify interest groups. This would facilitate focused comparisons between projects and provides the conceptual tools needed to vary in levels of abstraction.

Second, another substantively important scheme of 'intermediate classification' is the classification of policy agendas in the 'comparative policy agendas' network (see: www.comparativeagendas.info). For instance, Jordan et al (2012) use this scheme in their comparison of populations of associations in the United States and the United Kingdom. They qualify the changes in numbers per sector in the United Kingdom, and point to the, substantial but still no explosive, growth in the United States associational universe. Their use of the main categories of the policy agendas classification allows for a direct comparison of the organizations in the (British) Directory for Business Associations and (American) Encyclopedia of Associations.⁶ This classification of fields of activity of government is sufficiently abstract that it can 'travel' between countries (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen & Jones 2006) and, at the same time, sufficiently close to empirical reality to use in concrete research designs to assess theories of the middle range . This is testified by the employment of the scheme, with slight adaptations, in a broad

⁶ A couple of sectors were added to the Policy Agendas codebook: Ideological, Arts, Culture, Hobbies and Other.(Bevan et al. 2013 1756). See Johnson (2013) for a similar use of these directories of associations.

range of (Western) countries and on a variety of sources such executive sources, public budgets and legislative agendas (see: www.comparativeagendas.info). The hierarchical nature allows using very specific policy fields (over 300). Researchers can validly climb the ladder of abstraction by using the main policy categories (around 20) in comparative research. Jordan et al's (2012) research aim is primarily descriptive, but the use of this coding scheme makes it possible to link to mid-range theories common in comparative research on policy agendas. Several recent research projects use the scheme to classify the policy interest of interest groups (Baumgartner et al. 2011, Berkhout 2010, Hanegraaff, Beyers & Braun 2011, Rasmussen 2014).

In addition to the conceptual benefits of the hierarchical nature of policy fields, researchers also make use of the systematic relationships between policy fields and other fields of activity of interest groups, such as economic sectors or interest guilds. That is, in a number of recent projects, scholars innovatively link the agenda scheme to other schemes (Baumgartner et al. 2011 5, Berkhout et al. 2013, Leech et al. 2005 23). The linking of classification schemes allows for the examination of explanatory factors from multiple 'contexts' in which interest groups operate without having to force all contexts into a single scheme. The latter has, for instance, been done by Messer et al (2010). They classified government activities by economic sector in order to simultaneously assess the influence of government activities and economic activities on the number of interest groups. Among other coding procedures, they classified which economic sector was most directly affected by a certain legislative proposal of the European Commission (see for a similar linking of public opinion and government activities: Rasmussen, Carroll & Lowery 2013). This entails a lot of work because one cannot rely on existing classifications of policies, although some of the work may be done through sophisticated use of Boolean search strings (Berkhout et al. 2013). The creation of a conversion table between different schemes tends to be less time consuming. However, such linking sometimes involves the raising of the level of abstraction. For instance, an interest organization may have registered to lobby on a very specific legislative proposal such as emission norms for cars for which a very precise legislative category has been used. This category is then linked to a more aggregate category in the agenda scheme. Some schemes are more different than others. For instance, Leech et al (2005, 23) demonstrate that fifty-six of seventy-four specific issue areas in which US lobbyists are required to register their activities, could be linked to the topic coding system used in the Policy Agendas Project, covering about 85 percent of the lobbying reports (Also see: Baumgartner et al. 2011 5). Berkhout et al (2013), as another example, point to the substantial challenges in linking economic sectors to policy sectors. This only works for economic sectors that are closely connected to government policies, such as agriculture, health, education, and energy.

The selection of only 'closely connected' sectors may consequently produce an overestimation of the effects of government activity on various aspects of interest representation. This linking of schemes that are commonly used within distinct parts of the influence production process makes it possible to conceptually bridge different segments of the field of study. This suggests that the conceptual challenge of linking, identified by Lowery et al (2008), may be somewhat alleviated by the careful empirical research strategies.

Project: The comparative study of the population ecology of interest representation in Western Europe

In the following, I present the research design of my ongoing research project into the population ecology of interest representation in the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands and Germany. It exemplifies the points made earlier about limitations of designs that include multiple countries. I highlight the 'middle range' nature of the theory used, the relative 'proximate' context included and the country selection.

The project aims to describe and explain the variation in the number (density) and character (diversity) of interest organizations in policy domains in the United Kingdom, Germany, France and the Netherlands. It departs from recent theoretical innovations from the United States; more specifically, the so-called Energy-Stability-Area (ESA) model. This model includes 'contextual' factors related to the 'supply' of interests from society (area) and the 'demand' for interest representation on the part of policymakers (energy). The ESA model integrates elements of other approaches, and it has demonstrated to have substantial explanatory power in the United States and the European Union (Gray & Lowery 1996, Messer, Berkhout & Lowery 2010). This is a typical 'theory of the middle-range' and clearly falls within a distinction stage of the influence production process (organisational populations).

The project assesses the validity of the ESA model in four countries that are considered to belong to different interest representation regime types (e.g. Balme & Chabanet 2008 28). The countries are 'most-different' in terms of the regime type to which they belong (pluralist, corporatist, statist). At the same time, they are all Western European countries and the level of abstraction of the ESA model should make possible to travel. As outlined above, interest group scholars disagree on the extent to which interest systems can be compared across countries. A minority of 'comparativist enthusiasts' include multiple countries in a single study (e.g. Dür & Mateo 2013, Mahoney 2008, Woll 2012). A large majority of more culturally sensitive scholars highlight distinct 'lobbying cultures' or 'consultation traditions' and develop country-specific theories (e.g. Coen & Richardson 2009, Pijnenburg & Thomas 2004). As should

be clear from the argument of this paper, this project takes a 'middle' position in favour of the cautious assessment of the validity of relatively narrow middle-range theories with carefully adapted but comparable indicators for each country studied.

In terms of country differences, I expect that the model can be applied to other countries, but that the importance of the various explanatory factors varies somewhat per regime type. Because of the stronger 'political market for activism' in the United Kingdom, I expect British domains to be more sensitive to the area term (potential constituents) than domains in other countries (Jordan & Maloney 2007). Furthermore, I expect to find a weaker effect of the energy term (government activity) in the United Kingdom than in the other countries because of the more formal nature of the links of interest organizations to government decision makers in the continental European countries (e.g. Grossman & Saurugger 2004, Woll 2009).

In addition, the project also expands upon the ESA model by exploring explanations for specific dimensions of diversity. The model has been developed to explain the density per domain (the number of organizations), but it assesses the diversity of organized interests in only abstract terms (Gray & Lowery 1993, Lowery & Gray 2004a). A specific conceptualisation of diversity, as included in this project, tells us more about which interests are represented, and which are not.

Interest organizations operating in the same setting and time period are referred to as members of a population (sometimes labelled 'interest system'). The 'population' of interest organizations is sliced up into domains based on common organizational resources such as members and subsidies, on which the interest organizations in that domain ultimately rely. These resources may be related to the policy area which is lobbied, the economic sector whose interests are represented, or the socio-political base from which members are attracted. The number of interest organizations in a domain indicates the density of the domain. Density informs us about the policy areas in which interest organisations are most active.

So far, little work has been done on the organizational diversity in a policy domain. I classify a very broad range of organizations by their organizational base, and by their organizational characteristics (Minkoff 2002). The organizational base denotes whether an organization relies on members or operates individually, as do public affairs departments of companies and (semi)public institutions. This is a conscious incorporation of the variety of group definitions discussed earlier. Members-based organizations are further differentiated by the type of constituents: companies, public organizations, citizens or professionals. A distinct domain is diverse in its base when the group of interest organizations

which is part of it, depend on different types of resources such as government funding, citizen-membership fees and business-membership contributions. The factors explaining density should, albeit in a more complex way, also explain the diversity of interest domains. Complexity arises, for instance, from the fact that domains consisting of relatively large proportions of company- or (semi-)public organizations can be very dense without being or becoming diverse (Lowery, Gray & Fellowes 2005).

The ESA model is premised on the expectation that environmental constraints ultimately determine the contours of interest populations by bringing selective pressures to bear so that not all interest organizations survive. The ESA model suggests that three contextual factors determine the carrying capacity of interest domains for the number of interest organizations. First, the number of potential constituents (members) in a domain is expected to be positively related to the number of organizations that can form and survive. This is measured by the economic value added in the sector of concern, or the number of citizens that are members of organizations in the domain (Wessels 1997). This is the 'area' or 'supply' term of the model and is expected to be self-limiting in nature as competitive pressures and economies of scale at some point reduce the establishment of new organizations. The second expectation is that relatively large numbers of organizations are active in domains in which the government is also relatively active (Baumgartner & Leech 2001, Leech et al. 2005). Third, it is expected that more organizations can form and survive when there is policy uncertainty. Together with the actual government activity in the domain, this provides 'energy' that organizations can use to mobilize. Policy uncertainty is operationalized in terms of the extent to which political parties attend to, and have diverging positions on, on-going issues in the domain.

As regards the collection of data. For each country, I use (1) 'top down' data sources related to the policy process such as registers of letters written to the parliament, membership lists of public affairs associations, or contributions to consultation-rounds, and (2) 'bottom up' data sources, based on organizational type such as directories of associations and chamber of commerce registrations. Making such a combination is relatively labour-intensive as it requires triangulation between the various sources (e.g. Jentges et al. 2012). Nonetheless, compared to relying on a single source, it crucially reduces potential sampling bias (Berkhout & Lowery 2008, Berkhout & Lowery 2010, Sorurbakhsh 2014, Wonka et al. 2010). Based on previous research, I expect to find sampling frames of 7000 to 10000 organizations per country (e.g. Jordan et al. 2012). I make use of comparable, weighted samples of 1000 organizations per country. These organisations are classified by membership type, economic and policy sector of interest, policy orientation, participatory opportunities, and the strategic focus of interest organizations

(Berkhout 2013, Berkhout 2010). Thus, the project aims at a dataset with a minimum of 20 domains per country with reliable relative density measures and indicators of diversity on various dimensions.

To summarise, first, the project clearly focusses on a specific aspect of interest representation only, i.e. the organizational population. The specific focus on the research question allows for the use of a typical ‘theory of the middle range’ that is abstract enough to travel, but concrete enough to derive observable implications from. At the same time, some of the potential findings of the project potentially have implications for, and could be used in, theories pertaining to strategies or influence of interest organisations, creating empirical and conceptual links beyond the immediate research question at hand. Second, the ‘contextual’ country-level variables are interaction-terms rather than independent variables themselves. That is, I expect the influence of the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ factors to be mediated by country-level contexts. In a very general manner, this acknowledges the socio-historical context of interest representation without the need to distinguish a particular unique ‘model’. Third, the countries included in the study are sufficiently different to provide a reasonable claim to external validity to similar Western countries. At the same time, and similar to a lot of research in comparative political science, this project does not aspire to produce theories that can be validly applied outside a Western context.

Concluding remarks

Is it possible to design large-n, explanatory, comparative research on interest representation that is sensitive to contextual factors? I argue that this largely depends on the capacity of theories to travel across countries. When carefully focused on distinct segments of the ‘influence production process’, most current, specialized theories of interest representation may be applied in Western countries. This conclusion signals ‘cautious optimism’, compared to the earlier ‘somewhat pessimistic’ assessment by Lowery et al (2008).

This paper started with a restatement of a discussion among early comparative political scientists. In this disciplinary debate, ‘optimists’ aspired to develop a general, universal theory of politics in which the behavior of interest groups took a central position. ‘Pessimists’ cautioned against such a position. They pointed to the conceptual problems involved in the construction of a ‘grand theory’ without sufficient ‘intermediate categories’, the impossibility to isolate interest aggregation and articulation from the socio-historical country-specific contexts, and, to a lesser extent, the universal aspiration of comparative group studies. Current scholarship, mostly implicitly but sometimes explicitly (e.g Lowery et al 2008), accept these problems. However, recent ‘integrative’ literature reviews (Hojnacki et al. 2012, Lowery&

Gray 2004b) provide some grounds for more optimism. That is, we find some theoretical coherence within subfields of research on interest representation that makes it possible to design research in which country-contexts are controlled for.

Furthermore, as noted in the second section, there appears to be an increasingly similar common understanding of the classification of some of the central notions in the field such as on interest groups, policy agendas, political issues, strategies and so on. Such 'intermediate classifications' are prerequisites for conceptual travelling without conceptual stretching. I discussed the definition of interest groups and classification scheme of policy agendas as an illustration of the function of such schemes in the field of research on interest representation.

In the last section, I presented, as another illustration of the limits and opportunities of comparative research, my ongoing research project into the population ecology of interest representation in Western Europe. The project is (1) narrow in its theoretical focus, (2) acknowledges the broader country-specific socio-historical context and (3) selects 'most-different' countries within Western Europe. These are precisely the limitations that follow from the 'classic' discussion summarized in the first section.

More generally, the aim of this paper has been to encourage a broader use of comparative research designs in studies on interest representation. Currently, the most 'advanced' collaborative projects in the field, such as INTEREURO (Beyers et al. forthcoming) or the Lobbying and policy change project in the US (Baumgartner et al. 2009), and more than ninety percent of the publications in high-ranking journals (Hojnacki et al. 2012: 385), are system-specific studies with potentially severe limitations on external validity (e.g. on the EU case: Grande 2003). This means that a lot of the assumptions that are broadly accepted have never been examined in direct cross-system comparisons.

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