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Why Interest Organizations Network with Their Opponents

Hanegraaff, Marcel; Pritoni, Andrea; Junk, Wiebke Marie; Crepaz, Michele

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Marcel Hanegraaff¹ , Andrea Pritoni² ,
Wiebke Marie Junk³  and Michele Crepaz⁴ 

Abstract

Cooperation in lobbying is central to policymaking, and the formation of coalitions is a frequently used strategy by interest groups seeking to influence policy outcomes. While coalition formation between like-minded organizations is well documented, the literature has so far overlooked interest groups networking with groups that pursue *opposed* policy goals. In this article, we advance a novel theoretical proposition to explain an interest group's propensity to network with its political opponents based on the *logic of brokerage*. We argue that brokers between opposing policy positions can secure long-term advantages as political insiders across diverse issues, but risk damaging their reputation and alienating their members. We test our argument empirically based on survey data for roughly 2000 interest groups in 7 European countries. Our findings give robust support to our theoretical framework and shed new light on lobbying strategies and the logics that drive cooperation in lobbying, de-escalation, and access to policymaking.

Keywords

interest groups, lobbying, networking, brokerage, coalition building, Europe

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Introduction

A key insight in studies of public policy is that lobbying is a *collective* and *collaborative* endeavor (Junk, 2020b; Klüver, 2013; Mahoney, 2007; Mahoney and Baumgartner, 2015): while single interest groups are unlikely to affect policy on their own, their access and impact can potentially be magnified when they join forces. When studying such lobbying coalitions, the literature focuses on how *like-minded* partners reach their policy

¹University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

²University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

³University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

⁴Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK

Corresponding author:

Michele Crepaz, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 INN, UK.

Email: m.crepaz@qub.ac.uk

goals together. Sabatier's (1988) "advocacy coalitions" are united by the beliefs they share. Similarly, several scholars define "coalitions" based on shared policy preferences (e.g., Klüver, 2013; Lorenz, 2020). And even in cases where studies look at collaboration activities between "strange bedfellows," such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that join forces with business groups (Beyers and De Bruycker, 2018; Junk, 2019a; Phinney, 2017), the literature assumes that shared policy goals are the glue that binds these coalitions together.

This scholarly focus overlooks an important empirical phenomenon: interest groups sometimes partner up with groups that have *opposed* policy positions. Such cooperation is, for instance, important in climate politics. Already in the 1990s, coalitions of "the green and the greedy" (Maxwell and Briscoe, 1997: 276) developed between major emitters and environmental interests, and helped both sides leverage reforms like the Montreal process. Progress on climate regulation in the 2020s also seems to follow this recipe, where cooperation between opponents is partly required by governments, such as in the case of the Danish "green tripartite" including a major green NGO and business associations, which paved the way for developing emissions taxation in the agriculture sector (MIM, 2024).

These examples illustrate potential advantages connected to being able to talk to and negotiate with "the enemy": groups that can foster and maintain such cooperation might secure a seat at the negotiation table, also in future iterations of the negotiation of policy standards and their implementation. These opportunities make it highly relevant to study which organizations actually build networks with groups that they *oppose* in their policy-related work.

At the root of this phenomenon lies the fact that organizations share their political battlegrounds with both "friends" and "foes" in increasingly crowded interest group systems (Holyoke, 2009; Newmark and Nownes, 2019) and build networks on both sides of these positional divides (Pritoni, 2019). This is a theoretically puzzling pattern: given that cooperation with others bears a number of costs, including reputational risks (Hojnacki, 1997), it is a common assumption that such costs must be outweighed by expected benefits in form of a higher likelihood of reaching *shared* policy goals by joining forces (Sorurbakhsh, 2016). In case of cooperation between groups with *opposing* policy aims, there must be other benefits at stake, which the existing literature has, however, hardly addressed.

In this article, we argue that this neglect attests to an underestimation of one of the central logics of policy-oriented interest group activities: *brokerage* between opposing sides or conflicting policy preferences (see also: Holyoke, 2014). Organizations that hope to become or remain regular insiders in policy systems have to internalize this logic and cater to the interests of policymakers as compromise-seeking "brokers" between opposing (position or belief-based) coalitions (Sabatier, 1988).

Interest groups can directly cater to this demand by networking with their opponents, thus acting as policy brokers, whose "*concern is to find some reasonable compromise which will reduce intense conflict*" (Sabatier, 1988: 133). In other words, we see networking between conflicting policy interests as a signal that interest groups are interested in finding common ground and strategically benefiting from it. We suggest that although such interaction with opponents bears even more pronounced reputational costs than cooperation with allies, organizations that seek to secure lasting access to and long-term influence on policymaking will invest in cultivating networks with *unlike-minded* organizations. On the flipside, we expect organizations with strong membership ties and

organizations which have a strong need to protect their reputation to be less inclined to seek such brokerage roles. Building on seminal theories in public policy, we hence add the *logic of brokerage* to two long-standing approaches in interest group research, namely, *the logic of influence* and *the logic of survival* (Berkhout, 2013; Lowery, 2007). Our model theorizes how these three logics are related and inform interaction patterns between groups, paying attention to both short- and long-term effects of cooperation.

We test this argument among almost 2000 organizations based on data from the Comparative Interest Group (CIG¹) survey, which covers political and membership strategies of interest organizations in seven European countries: Belgium, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Poland, Slovenia, and Sweden. This dataset allows us to compare networking between opposing interest groups in a most different systems design within Europe while controlling for organizations' general propensity to form coalitions with *like-minded* groups. Using networking between policy opponents as an indicator of brokerage attempts, we shed light on the distinct phenomenon of cooperation with foes across several institutional contexts.

Our empirical evidence underlines, first, that networking with opponents is a frequent lobbying strategy: over 40% of the groups in our sample invest time in building networks with organizations representing interests in conflict with their own. Second, we document that this strategy is used especially by groups that pursue insider positions in the political system across a broad range of issues. While we do not find direct evidence that more member-focused groups avoid this strategy, we show that citizen groups are less likely to network with political opponents. We therefore conclude that the *logic of brokerage*, where some interest groups internalize the political need to de-escalate conflict and seek consensus through this form of networking, is an important—but so far overlooked—tendency among interest groups and that should be studied more extensively.

Theory: Cooperation with Opponents and the Logic of Brokerage

State of the Art: Cooperation Between Interest Groups

As Heaney and Lorenz (2013: 252) note, “*working together in coalitions is one of the most common [lobbying] tactics that groups use.*” Yet, the existing literature describes cooperation between interest groups as a costly and risky enterprise, where coalition formation involves a delicate trade-off between conflicting organizational goals. On one hand, cooperation with other groups pools the resources that are available for pursuing political aims, eases the acquisition of information, and signals to policymakers that a particular policy position enjoys broad support (Hula, 1999). On the other hand, coalition building requires time and organizational effort, while making it more difficult to claim credit for the joint effort afterward (Hojnacki, 1997). Moreover, even between like-minded partners, cooperation will entail the need to *compromise* (Holyoke, 2014; Sorurbakhsh, 2016), for instance, regarding specific positions or action repertoires, which is likely to entail reputational costs *vis-à-vis* the group's own membership (Beyers and De Bruycker, 2018; Hojnacki, 1997).

To address these underlying theoretical trade-offs empirically, scholars generally link interest groups' likelihood of working together in coalitions to three main factors: (i) groups' organizational characteristics; (ii) the policy issue context; and (iii) the institutional setting.

The first set of factors, *organizational characteristics*, has received most attention thus far. Studies highlight that the type of interest, which an organization represents, is likely to influence the appeal of allied activity. Most here expect member-dependent public interest groups to engage in coalition building *less* frequently because of reputational concerns (Jenkins-Smith et al., 1991; Clark and Wilson, 1961, 162; Beyers and De Bruycker, 2018: 964; Mahoney, 2007), yet others also argue that public interest groups should be *more* likely to seek alliances because they need to optimize the use of already scarce resources for their cause (Hojnacki, 1997: 70). Connectedly, *organizational resources* are often seen as a key determinant for coalition building, and resource-poor organizations see them as an opportunity to boost their strength (Mahoney, 2007: 372; Dwidar, 2022; Hanegraaff and Pritoni, 2019; Junk, 2020a).

At the same time, given the entry costs involved in forming a coalition, there may be a *threshold* of resources that a group needs in order to be able to join coalitions (Mahoney and Baumgartner, 2004). With this in mind, some studies document that *better*-resourced groups sometimes need to invest their capacity to build interest coalitions (e.g., Sorurbakhsh, 2016: 215–216). Moreover, the decision to join forces in lobbying has been linked to the breadth of policy activity characterizing a particular interest organization (Heaney and Lorenz, 2013): intuitively, the more a group focuses on a given policy niche, the less it needs allies. Conversely, groups with many or broad policy interests, which run *across* multiple areas, are expected to be motivated to share the high lobbying costs with allies (Heinz et al., 1993: 378–380).

A second set of explanatory variables relates to the *characteristics of the issue* groups mobilize on (Beyers and De Bruycker, 2018; Gray and Lowery, 1998; Hojnacki, 1997; Holyoke, 2009; Mahoney, 2007). For example, Mahoney (2007) argues that issues with a wide scope, high level of conflict, as well as high salience, are more likely to attract lobbying coalitions. On such high-stake issues, coalitions help signal a broad base of support to policymakers, also pooling the high costs of effective lobbying and allowing groups to band together to face a common threat (Gais and Walker, 1991; Hojnacki, 1997; Whitford, 2003).

A final set of explanatory factors relates to the *institutional setting* within which groups are active (albeit this has rarely been tested). For example, as Mahoney (2007) suggests, the re-election concerns and level of democratic accountability of policymakers should affect how responsive they are to coalition signals of broad societal support for a policy proposal, which should, in turn, affect organizations' incentives to build coalitions in the first place.

All these studies share the underlying assumption that the central expected benefit of coalition formation revolves around the ability to reach common policy objectives more effectively, while the extent and importance of this benefit varies for different types of organizations, on different issues, and in different institutional contexts.

Interestingly, incentives for cooperation that go beyond short-term policy goal attainment are hardly addressed in this literature. In particular, a pattern that existing theories cannot explain, but may relate to long-term rather than short-term considerations, is the practice of establishing forms of cooperation that enable information exchange and collaboration *with opponents*, namely, between organizations with diverging policy goals. In the following, we present our theoretical proposition that this form of cooperation follows a “logic of brokerage,” where groups internalize the political demand for consensus, taking on the position of brokers between conflicting interests with the aim of securing a long-term insider position in the policymaking process.

“The Logic of Brokerage” in Interest Group Activities

To begin with, we conceptualize the *logic of brokerage* as reliant on networks between organizations. Networking is here understood as a form of exchange that builds on a permanent “net” of relationships which survives the simple interaction and facilitates future exchange (Henry, 2011). Networking is therefore defined as relation-building, which may include, but is not exclusive to, creating formal partnerships, platforms, and advocacy coalitions, but also captures informal exchanges aimed at establishing a relationship.

Our proposed theory about why organizations would engage in such networks with opponents then has roots in three observations. First, that networking with “foes,” meaning organizations that stand on the opposite side of policy battles, is more common than often assumed². Second and importantly, we reason theoretically that such strategic choice is fundamentally different from collaborating with friends and performs different functions from those generally associated with this lobbying strategy (such as resource-pooling and signaling of broad support). Third, we also see networking with opponents as analytically and empirically distinct from what was defined as “strange bedfellow” coalitions, where a one-off convergence of interests between actors who normally support divergent policy views (Beyers and De Bruycker, 2018) motivates them to join a coalition on an issue to achieve a policy goal. In contrast, we see the practice of *repeatedly* networking with organizations with divergent policy aims as an attempt to take on a *brokerage* role between stakeholders and secure long-term strategic benefits.

We argue that this role, which some interest groups take on, highlights important long-term dynamics that are usually overlooked in the lobbying literature. First, existing theories on *the logic of influence* and the *logic of survival* (Berkhout, 2013) give a relatively short-term picture of the strategic considerations of interest groups, usually focusing on one (isolated) policy battle at a time. Yet, we know that lobbying is a repeated game. Second, the above two logics place policymakers as the only mediator between the opposing “sides” of lobbying battles, neglecting that interest groups themselves may play broker roles as well.

In our view, neglecting brokerage gives a too antagonistic view of lobbying. We argue that some interest groups have incentives to actively work toward decreasing conflict in the policy system because they internalize the concerns of one of their target audiences, namely, policymakers. Seminal theories of public policy describe these decision-makers as typical *policy brokers*, whose dominant concern is with keeping the level of political conflict within acceptable limits and with reaching some “reasonable solution to [a policy] problem” (Sabatier, 1988: 141). As Sabatier adds himself, the “distinction between advocate and broker is, however, a continuum” (Sabatier, 1988). In this article, we are interested in understanding why individual interest organizations attempt to position themselves as such *brokers* by building networks with their opponents.³

Importantly, we reason that group’s attempts to take on a role as a broker are geared toward the goal of securing a long-term role as policy insiders, aiding in consensus-minded policymaking.⁴ There is tentative support for this assumption in what, to our knowledge, is the only study that analyses networking with opponents quantitatively. Based on data on Italian interest groups, Pritoni (2019) shows that interest groups perceiving themselves to be threatened by rivals’ influence in policymaking, or by environmental challenges within the system of interest representation, are more likely to engage in networking with their opponents. In particular, groups believing that rival organizations are more influential have an incentive to avoid open disputes and conflicts; instead, they are pushed to try to reach a

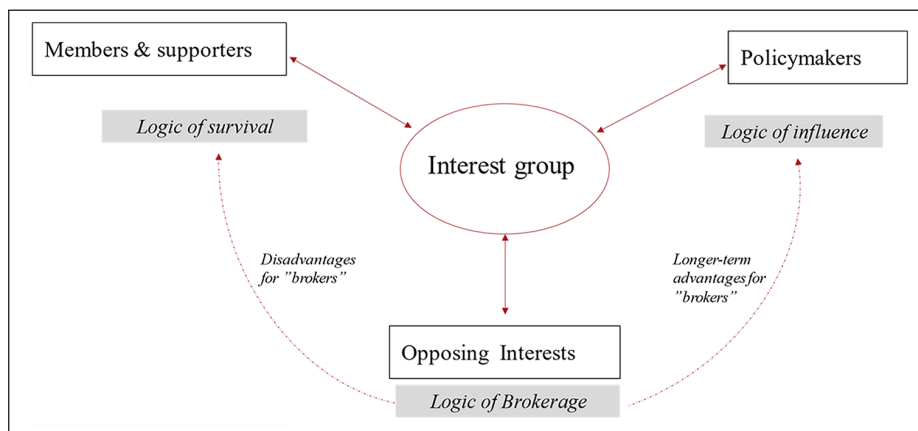


Figure 1. The Logic of Brokerage Related to the Logic of Influence and Survival.

compromise to defend their spot as relevant policy insiders. Based on these findings, the author tentatively interprets this as evidence that cooperation with opponents plays a role in *long-term considerations* such as the willingness to persist as a policy insider (*vis-à-vis* its rivals).

At the same time, however, we argue that there must be some parallels with the trade-offs faced by groups that consider coalition formation with allies because these long-term advantages are also weighed up against other organizational goals, captured in existing studies, and sometimes summarized by the *logics of survival* and *influence*.

In particular, we expect brokerage to be *disincentivized* by strong membership ties since members are expected to penalize the practice of working with “the enemy.” This is in line with the organizational literature (Schmitter and Streeck, 1999, Webb et al., 2017), which underlines the divergence between the preferences of members and organizations’ leadership, including when it comes to collaborating with actors in the organization’s external environment (cf. Moe, 1980; Scarrow, 2014), and the willingness to compromise (Kennedy et al., 2006).

In contrast, we expect brokerage to be *incentivized* by the logic of influence, though in long-term strategic considerations rather than in one-off policy battles. Following Sabatier, we assume policymakers to be used to taking a role as policy brokers between opposing (advocacy) sides or coalitions. When interest groups support this role by acting as brokers themselves, that is, networking with opponents, we expect policymakers to reward these organizations that position themselves as compromise-seeking mediators.

Put differently, organizations following the logic of brokerage signal that they “know the rules of the game” of policymaking, where policy problems require consensual solutions and mediation. Figure 1 illustrates these arguments about how our proposed *logic of brokerage* complements the other widely accepted logics underlying the exchange relationships in lobbying.

In the next section, we build on Figure 1 to develop hypotheses which allow us to test whether networking with opponents, that is, positioning the organization as a broker, can be understood in terms of long-term considerations about policy influence and survival.

Hypotheses: Brokerage as a Function of Influence and Membership Imperatives

Our first set of hypotheses links the logic of *brokerage* to the logic of *influence* as driving force behind why organizations choose to seek interaction with their policy opponents. When groups network with organizations that have opposing policy positions, they essentially signal openness for dialogue and consensus, potentially down-prioritizing a higher level of goal attainment on a single issue at hand in favor of longer-term advantages. We expect this to be motivated by the aim of gaining or maintaining an insider position in policymaking, translated into a permanent seat at the table on a larger number of future issues. A way to attain this, we argue, is building a reputation as a well-connected actor that facilitates effective and low-conflict policymaking. Existing research shows that lobbying strategies are responsive to political demand (Junk et al., 2024) and that policymakers prefer consulting umbrella organizations or their member groups (Fraussen and Beyers, 2016; Hanegraaff and van der Ploeg, 2020; Junk, 2019b), presumably because this can make the consultation process more effective.

Similarly, organizations that signal a consensus-seeking approach by networking with their opponents are likely to meet policymakers' demands for an effective and easy consultation process. Organizations that undertake brokerage attempts are likely to be seen as more moderate and more reliable interlocutors, with whom policymakers can be expected to negotiate with lower transaction costs. Such reputation is advantageous from the point of view of interest groups: Even if it means sacrificing the likelihood of full preference attainment on single issues, because strong positions need to be moderated, the potential reward is an increased chance to secure future access and institutional involvement, meaning a better position to be influential in various instances of policymaking in the long run. A typical example of this dynamic is tripartition with unions and business groups, which each in turn de-escalate confrontation in favor of compromise on issues with the return of having a permanent seat at the government negotiation table (Ebbinghaus, 2021).

With this idea in mind, we expect, first, that organizations which seek to protect or attain a prominent insider position in the policy system invest in building and maintaining good relations with other groups, including those on the other side of existing policy battles. Put differently, we expect political insiders to seek compromise (Minkoff, 2002), even with opponents. Political insiders are organizations which are part of the regular policy cycle and deeply involved in political networks (Dür and Mateo, 2016). Organizations that are or want to become insiders have a clear interest in establishing themselves as politically relevant, collaborative, and de-escalating actors. We expect such organizations to take a brokerage role in their policy subsystem by networking more with policy opponents.

We also expect organizations, which are focused on a *higher number* of issues, to prioritize the *logic of brokerage* and engage in collaboration with opponents. This is because organizations which focus on a broader set of issues need to consider the entire political landscape and balance gains in one political field with their aims in others. In other words, one cannot win all policy battles, and organizations active on many issues should therefore be more likely to signal the willingness to compromise on some of them, in order to secure a more advantageous position in others to come. Conversely, single-issue organizations, which are rooted in their "niche" and whose identity and legitimacy are built around it, are likely to prioritize shorter-term influence on these issues, and should work

either alone (Heaney and Lorenz, 2013; Heinz et al. 1993) or with partners having similar policy positions, rather than networking with opponents.

In sum, we suggest that the *logic of brokerage* is informed by the *logic of influence*, adding strategic considerations which concern long-term access concerns, and goal attainment when multiple policy issues are at stake. Based on this reading, we hypothesize that having a strong focus on inside lobbying (H1) and having a broad issue portfolio (H2) make networking with opponents more likely.

H1: “*Insider hypothesis*”: *A higher focus on inside lobbying increases an interest group’s propensity to network with political opponents.*

H2: “*Issue breadth hypothesis*”: *Broader issue orientation increases an interest group’s propensity to network with political opponents.*

In addition, we expect the willingness of organizations to network with opponents to be informed by the *logic of survival*. Survival is a critical motivation for interest group strategies (Hanegraaf and Poletti, 2019) and is often seen as a hindrance for coalition building (Hojnacki, 1997; Hanegraaff et al., 2016). Similarly, we expect survival- and particularly membership-related concerns to disincentivize networking activities with opponents.

The organizational literature on political organizations, including interest groups (Schmitter and Streeck, 1999) and political parties (Webb et al., 2017), demonstrates that the preferences of the organization’s leadership and membership often diverge, and that the involvement of the membership in the identification of an organization’s political line varies considerably (Binderkrantz, 2009; Bolleyer and Correa, 2022; Maloney, 2009). Specifically, holding leadership positions within the organization entails a greater awareness of the need to interface with the external environment (Moe, 1980; Scarrow, 2014), which—in turn—is linked to a greater propensity to compromise and negotiate (Kennedy et al., 2006). In other words, the membership can afford the luxury of remaining firmly anchored to its ideal policy preferences, whereas the leadership is often aware of the impossibility of pursuing those preferences in splendid isolation.

Here we theorize about two observable implications of this reasoning. First, we expect strong *membership ties* to counter the potential tendency of organizations to work with their opponents. Members, like supporters of political parties, are less concerned with the strategic considerations that political organizations face navigating the sensitivities of the political landscape (May, 1973; Kennedy et al., 2006). The idea that politics is a repeated game, founded on relationship-building and continuous interaction is something that is closer to the worries of the interest group leadership than its members (Moe, 1980; Schmitter and Streeck, 1999). What is more likely to matter to members is proof that their interests are represented and clearly voiced—if needed, confrontationally defended—in each policy battle. A role as a *broker* that networks with opponents should therefore be less appealing for more member-focused organizations. Conversely, we expect organizations with weaker member ties to have more room to respond to political demands for consensus and de-escalation and to engage in networking with opponents more frequently.

Second, organizational survival does not only depend on the links between leadership and membership but is also related to the organization’s *reputation vis-à-vis* the broader public. This mostly applies to citizen groups, which—to run their operations—largely depend on public donations (Bolleyer, 2021), voluntary work (Bolleyer and Correa, 2022),

and a reputable media image (Hanegraaf and Poletti, 2019). For these reasons, we expect the logic of brokerage to be less appealing for this type of organization, because it threatens to blur the clear organizational profile which the groups need to uphold in order to maintain themselves. In the public and media debate, which is often characterized by conflict, competition for attention, and news value (Binderkrantz, 2005; Galtung and Ruge, 1965), brokerage is not likely to be rewarded. We therefore expect citizen groups, which are more dependent on attention in this political venue, to be less likely to network with opponents.

The above reasoning on the interplay between the logic of brokerage and the logic of survival leads us to our last two hypotheses: H3 and H4.

H3: *“Membership hypothesis”:* Higher levels of member orientation decrease an interest group’s propensity to network with political opponents.

H4: *“Reputation hypothesis”:* Citizen groups are less likely to network with political opponents compared to business organizations.

Research Design and Methods

Survey Description and Sample

To test our hypotheses, we rely on data collected for the CIG survey project (Beyers et al. 2020; www.cigsurvey.eu). In this project, research teams in different European countries mapped and surveyed their respective national interest group populations. The translated versions of the same questionnaire were fielded in all countries to collect cross-country data on organizational characteristics and the political activities of interest organizations.

This valuable data collection effort in Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Sweden, leaves us with information spanning around 2000 lobby organizations and their activities in up to 22 national policy domains. The surveys’ overall response rate lies at 38%, which is high compared with other online surveys (Marchetti, 2015). Moreover, the response rate is quite evenly distributed across countries: Belgium (41%), Lithuania (40%), Netherlands (38%), Poland (28%), Portugal (36%), Slovenia (36%), and Sweden (42%).

This dataset is well-suited to test our hypotheses related to the organizational motives for networking with opponents. First, the comparative survey allows testing our hypotheses across most different case designs (George and Bennett, 2005). The countries in our data vary on multiple factors that might matter for networking between interest groups or lobbying in general. For instance, networking with opponents might generally be more frequent in corporatist countries, where negotiations between representatives of employers’ and workers’ interests are more institutionalized. Moreover, the countries’ institutional setting varies with, for example, Slovenia and Portugal being more executively dominated systems than Belgium or the Netherlands (Fink- Hafner, 2013; Vatter, 2009). Our analysis spans these diverse sets of lobbying contexts and institutional settings. This is an ideal setting if the goal is to demonstrate the existence of a trend that we expect to be related to our key variables, regardless of the country-level confounders. Our analysis therefore includes fixed effects for countries to account for such differences and extrapolate associations between variables across such contexts.⁵

Similarly, our study includes interest groups across more than 20 policy areas. Also in this case, we are looking to disentangle effects from potentially confounding factors

related to policy areas. For example, market-related policy issues may be more prone to conflict than valence issues. As such, the level of conflict within a policy area may impact the propensity of organizations to engage in networking with opponents. Even the definition of opponent may vary depending on the level of conflict within the policy area. With this in mind, in addition to considering the breath of an issue an organization is involved in (H2), we also re-run our analysis in Appendix A3.6 across different subgroups, more precisely within the subgroup of the economic (market-related) policy fields, within the subgroup of the social policy fields, and for those organizations active in the environmental policy field. We test whether our hypotheses are supported within each of these subgroups or whether there are notable differences across policy fields.

Finally, the survey also provides data on a wide array of relevant control variables, not least general cooperation patterns with like-minded organizations. This allows us to isolate the patterns of choosing to work *with opponents in lobbying*. In what follows, we discuss the operationalization of all variables in our study.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is *brokerage*, which we operationalize as the frequency with which interest organizations in our sample network with their political opponents. We rely on the following question in the survey: “*How often do you network with organizations that have conflicting interests to your organization?*” Respondents could indicate whether they did this “never,” “once a year,” “once every three months,” “once every month,” or “once every week.”

This formulation comes with advantages and disadvantages. We believe that the broad and general formulation has the upside of allowing for comparison between organizations engaging in diverse forms of engagement with policy opponents, assuming that the formulation of “conflicting interests” captures organizations’ positional conflict on policy issues. The term “networking” is also close to the way practitioners describe their relation-building exchange with other actors, which is why we believe that policy staff filling out the survey could relate well to the concept. At the same time, this comes at the expense of nuance. We cannot distinguish the type or quality of networking. Moreover, by asking about the frequency of networking, rather than networking attempts, we cannot shed light on those actors that seek networks but fail to actually establish any such contact with opponents.

Still, as we show in the descriptive overview, the practice of networking with opponents is no rare phenomenon, at all: Over 40% of the respondents answered that they engage in it at least once a year. In our analysis, we model this outcome (i) as an ordinal variable in the five categories and (ii) as a binary variable contrasting those organizations that network with opponents (1) from those that do not (0). Using these measures has the advantage of capturing both the potential general difference between *brokers* and *non-brokers* (see other binary measures of the choice to work in a coalition: e.g., Beyers and De Bruycker, 2018; Hojnacki, 1997), as well as the frequency of this practice (i.e., measures of the intensity of coalition lobbying, e.g., Junk, 2020a).

Independent Variables

Four independent variables help us test H1-H4, based on survey items that capture: (i) whether the organization focuses on inside lobbying, (ii) the breadth of issues the organization works on, (iii) membership influence, and (iv) the organization’s type.

To identify the organization's focus on inside lobbying, we rely on two alternative operationalizations. First, we draw on the following question: "*Looking at the list below: Which activities is your organization involved in? Please tick all boxes that apply.*" Respondents could choose from the following list: *Advocacy/lobbying, Representation, Mobilizing members, Media campaigns, Research, Support or advice to members, Support or advice to clients or beneficiaries, Fundraising, Promoting volunteering, Recruiting members/supporters/donors, Monitoring the election campaigns of political parties.* For the first operationalization of an insider orientation, we conceive of organizations which ticked the first two boxes (*lobbying/advocacy and representation*) as organizations which aim to influence government (inside venues), coded as 1, and compare them to organizations which did not tick these boxes (0). As a second operationalization, we measure the *degree* of inside orientation, based on the share of the organization's political activities that were categorized as *inside* lobbying. In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of their entire lobbying efforts that was dedicated to inside lobbying (defined as direct contact with policymakers) and outside lobbying (defined as lobbying via indirect means, such as talking to journalists, publishing a press release, etc.). On average, respondents indicated to rely 43% on inside lobbying and 57% on outside lobbying. This second operationalization of inside orientation uses an organization's stated percentage for inside lobbying.

Our second independent variable measures the *breadth of issues*, which the organization works on. In the survey, respondents were asked to tick all policy areas, in which the organization is involved.⁶ To capture issue breadth, we transform this into a count variable of the number of boxes (policy areas) the respondent selected.

Third, we operationalize the level of membership influence on organizational decisions (Berkhout et al., 2021) by relying on the following question: "*Thinking about your organization's position on public policies, how would you rate the influence of your membership?*" Respondents could indicate that members were "very influential," "somewhat influential," "not very influential," or "not at all influential." In the analysis, we reversed the scale to make the interpretation more intuitive and treat this as a continuous variable. This means that a high score indicates more membership influence and a low score indicates less membership influence. Unfortunately, we are unable to benchmark this against a measure of leadership control over the organization or test the common assumption that leaders view cooperation with opponents more favorably than members. The mechanism we theorize should, in fact, be particularly relevant when members and leaders disagree over strategic paths of collaboration, but the organization's members have a strong say over the internal decision-making process. Nevertheless, we are confident that our measure of membership influence provides a decent proxy for the theorized mechanisms by testing whether membership dependence influences the propensity to engage in networking with opponents.⁷

Finally, we operationalize group types based on the INTERARENA⁸ coding scheme (Binderkrantz et al., 2020). This includes a host of actor types: business associations, labor unions, professional organizations, public interest groups, identity groups, institutional organizations, leisure groups, and a rest category. In this article, we aggregate the respondent's self-identification among these categories in three groups to distinguish between "business" (this includes business associations and professional associations), citizen groups (combination of public interest groups, leisure, and identity groups), and other organizations (including trade unions, institutional organizations, and a rest category). This distinction follows our theoretical focus, which emphasizes the differences

between citizen groups and business organizations. Table A2.2 in the Appendix summarizes the dependent and independent variables and their distribution.

Control Variables

We control for several potential confounders. First, we control for the frequency of networking with *like-minded organizations*⁹. This is a crucial variable to include as—without it—our results might partly be driven by the propensity of an interest group to network in general. Respondents could indicate whether they “*establish coalitions with like-minded organizations*” “never,” “once a year,” “once every three months,” “once every month,” or “once every week.” In the analysis, we treat this as a continuous variable.

Second, we control for the *resources* that organizations have at their disposal. It may be that more resourceful organizations are keener on working with opponents because they might feel they have the upper hand in such negotiations. At the same time, resources are likely to correlate with some of our independent variables, for example, organization type. To measure resources, we use the self-declared annual operating budget of the organization in the year prior to the survey. Respondents could choose from 8 options, ranging from under 10,000 euros (1) to over 10 million (8). In the analysis, we treat these eight categories as a continuous variable.

Third, we include the level of *professionalization*. This is an important control variable as more professionalized organizations should have a better grasp of the political landscape and will thus be better placed for a potential role as brokers that seek consensus between sides (Bolloyer and Correa, 2022). To measure professionalization, we rely on the number of key organizational attributes that more professionalized organizations tend to have, such as a board of directors or executive committee, in-house legal experts, and so on. Our variable is the additive score of these characteristics whereby higher values mean more attributes that indicate (more) professionalization.

Fourth, we control for the level of *competition* groups face from like-minded organizations. The level of competition organizations encounter may affect several strategic decisions, including cooperation with opponents. Respondents could choose between “no,” “little,” “moderate,” “strong,” or “very strong” competition.

Fifth, we control for the government *funding* an organization receives. Organizations which depend on governments for funding may feel more pressure to internalize the logic of “brokerage” and make political decision-making easier (Bolloyer, 2021). We use the percentage of funding the organization reports to receive from national governments to account for the size of the organization’s dependence on this funding.

Finally, we control for *country* variation. In our dataset, we include countries (i.e., Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, and Sweden) having different political-institutional systems and interest groups may have different lobbying practices. To account for this variation, we use country fixed effects in our statistical models.¹⁰ In Appendix 2, we provide a concise summary of the entire research design.

Analysis

Our analysis is divided into two parts. First, we provide a descriptive overview of how frequent networking with political opponents is in general and in the different countries in our study. Next, we test our four hypotheses in a multivariate analysis.

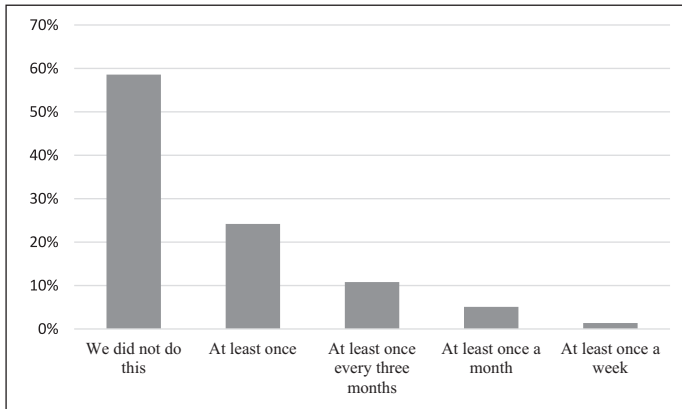


Figure 2. Distribution of Networking with Opponents.

Note: Question asked: “How often do you network with organizations that have conflicting interests to your organization?”.

Descriptive Overview

Figure 2 shows how often respondents indicated that their organization networked with political opponents, and highlights a number of important patterns.

First, we see that the majority of organizations never engage in networking with opponents: 58%. Still, a substantial portion, 42%, of the respondents do make use of such a strategy, hereby supporting our call to focus more on such activities. If we consider the *frequency* of use of this strategic option, it is not very high. Only 1% of respondents indicate to network with opponents *at least once a week*, and less than 6% of the respondents indicate to do this *at least once every month*. Yet, occasional brokerage is more frequent: Around 11% of respondents indicate using this option *at least once a quarter*, and 24% report to network with opponents *at least once* (over the course of a year). These patterns show that only a small share of organizations are what we define as regular *brokers*, while most interest groups use this rarely.

In addition, Table A2.4 in the Appendix displays considerable variation in the distribution of our dependent variable across countries. The category “not at all” is still the most frequent, yet percentages of observations falling in this group vary among countries.¹¹ Interestingly, however, we do not see much evidence that this variation may be understood in terms of macro-factors such as the level of corporatism¹². In our analysis, we now explore organization-level factors that might explain the propensity to network with opponents. All analyses include country fixed effects.

Multivariate Analysis

Our dependent variable, brokerage, is based on the ordinal survey item of networking with opponents with five outcome categories. Yet, as shown in Figure 2, the distribution is skewed toward organizations which did not network with opponents. We therefore opted to present two sets of regressions to account for its distribution. We first present an ordered logistic regression analysis, followed by a logit model where we juxtapose all organizations which did not network with opponents (0) and all that did (1). Importantly, both sets of analysis highlight the same results which support three of our hypotheses.

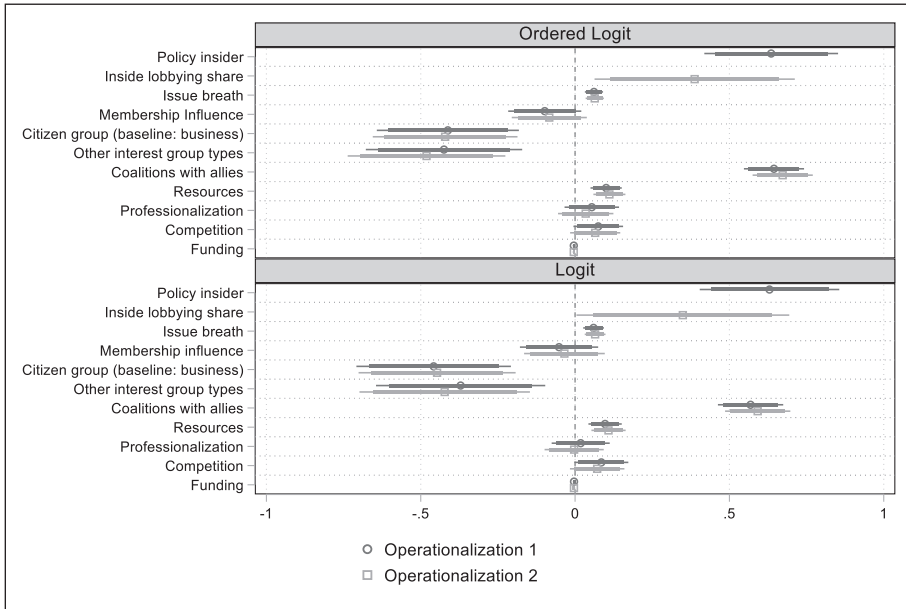


Figure 3. Coefficient Plots Predicting Networking with Policy Opponents.

Notes: Ordered logistic regression and logistic regression on networking with opponents. Two alternative measures of Inside Lobbying capture (i) organizations that identify their activities as “lobbying/advocacy” and/or “representation” (binary) and (ii) the share of strategies that are dedicated to inside relative to outside lobbying (continuous). Coefficients and 95% and 90% confidence intervals are shown. N = 1996 (Operationalization 1) and N = 1898 (Operationalization 2). Fixed effects for countries and clustered standard errors for sectors included. For results in table form, see Appendix A3.1—A3.2.

Moreover, as outlined in the method section, we include alternative operationalizations of organizations’ focus on inside lobbying. Figure 3 presents our results in the form of coefficient plots including independent variables and controls (country coefficients not shown) with alternative operationalizations. The regression tables can be found in Appendix A3.

Figure 3 shows that, as we expected according to H1, lobbying insiders have a higher propensity to network with opponents. Across models, we see that this is the case: Being a lobbying-oriented organization is clearly a predictor of networking with opponents (all results at $p < 0.01$). This indicates that when organizations specialize in lobbying and advocacy, they are more likely to network with opponents compared with other organizations with other priorities, such as service-oriented organizations. As the models with Operationalization 2 show, these results also hold when using an alternative measure for lobby insiders, namely, the use of inside lobbying as a *percentage* of total lobbying ($p < 0.05$ in all models): Organizations which rely more heavily on inside lobbying are also more likely to network with opponents. Jointly, these models provide strong support for H1. We see this as support for our argument that organizations that want to be political insiders internalize the need to seek consensus and take the role of “brokers” themselves.

Second, with regard to *issue breadth* (H2), we argued that a broader issue focus should lead to a higher willingness to network with opponents. This is also supported by the results in Figure 3 (and Appendix A3). There is a clear positive relationship between issue

breath and networking with opponents ($p < 0.01$ in all models). We attribute this finding to special advantages for “brokers” that are active in several issue areas: Their willingness to mediate between sides and compromise in some policy areas may be compensated by giving them insider advantages in other policy areas. Hence, the analysis supports both H1 and H2, which we formulated based on our argument that *brokerage* can be advantageous for (longer-term) *influence* inside the political system.

Next, we explore the link between the logic of brokerage and the *logic of survival*. First, regarding the effect of *membership influence* in the organization (H3), the Figures show that the coefficients are in the expected direction, but the effect is not statistically significant ($p > 0.10$ across all models). In Appendix A3.3, we show that this also holds for an alternative measure of membership importance¹³. The results show that there is no significant effect of membership importance on the decision to network opponents. This means we find no support for Hypothesis 3.

Finally, we argued that citizen groups, compared to business groups, incur a higher risk of damaging their reputation by networking with opponents (H4). The results of the regression analysis support this hypothesis. In all models in Figure 3, we find that citizen groups are significantly less likely than business organizations ($p \leq 0.01$) to network with opponents. Interestingly, a similar difference applies between the “other” category and business groups. To further understand the relationship between group type and networking with opponents, we disaggregated the analysis into its original categories (see Appendix A3.4). The results show that professional organizations (i.e., organizations which represent professionals, such as architects or doctors) and unions do not statistically differ from business organizations. On the flipside, identity groups, leisure groups, and public interest groups (which we consider as citizen groups) are statistically different from business organizations. This fits our logic of reputational costs: these types of groups could face backlash from their members if they sought cooperation with policy opponents. Consider, for example, *Amnesty International* were to network with an international weapons producer, for instance, on the issue of the production and use of cluster munition. It is unlikely that *Amnesty International* members (and large parts of the general public) would condone this cooperation. Such reputational costs are lower for professional organizations and unions, of which members (and the general public) expect to (eventually) come to a compromise with opponents¹⁴. More generally, these findings corroborate the logic that organizations which have more to lose in terms of their reputation are less inclined to network with opponents, supporting our Hypothesis 4¹⁵.

Our *control variables* also highlight some interesting trends. Importantly, our findings are not driven by organizations’ general propensity to form coalitions—which we controlled for. As Figure 3 shows, the level of lobbying with allies is a strong predictor of networking with opponents ($p < 0.01$). Organizational resources ($p < 0.01$) and government funding ($p < 0.10$) also seem to matter: Having more resources leads to more frequent engagement with opponents. The effect of getting government funding, however, works in the opposite direction than expected: Less government funding leads to a higher propensity to network with opponents. It could be that precisely those organizations that are less funded by the government, in order to show credibility and accountability for future funding, are more inclined to network with organizations having conflicting interests. On this, however, more research is needed in the future. Finally, an organization’s level of professionalization and its competition with other groups are not significantly related to networking with opponents, albeit competition is significant in some model specifications ($p < 0.1$). Finally, while our analysis includes country fixed effects, we did

run some additional analysis across countries. Most importantly, one could argue that corporatism would lead to less confrontational lobbying and, therefore, a higher inclination to network with interest groups with opposing views. To systematically test this, we run the analysis separately for countries with the highest score on Jahn's corporatism index and across the countries with the lowest scores (see Appendix A3.7). The results are however very similar to one another. We take this as a strong indication that our results hold across different countries.

Conclusion

In this article, we offered a theoretical and empirical exploration of a so far under-researched phenomenon: the formation of networks between interest groups that lobby for opposed interests. We argued that such cooperation with opponents balances the long-term goals of the organization to secure a seat at the negotiation table across a large array of issues with the concern to satisfy member demands and uphold a good public reputation.

Our findings especially underline the importance of networks with opponents for organizations that want to be or stay political insiders (supporting Hypothesis 1) and organizations with a broad issue focus (supporting Hypothesis 2). We interpret this as support for our proposed *logic of brokerage* where groups meet the demand of political gatekeepers to “*find some reasonable compromise which will reduce intense conflict*” (Sabatier, 1988: 133) in the hope to secure access and potential influence across a larger number of issues.

Second, we find limited support that this tendency is hampered by member relationships. Interest groups with higher levels of member influence are not less likely to act as brokers with their opponents (no support for Hypothesis 3). However, we find that citizen groups are significantly less likely to foster networks with opponents than business groups (supporting Hypothesis 4). This latter finding might help explain why citizen groups enjoy lower access to (some) inside venues of policymaking (e.g., Binderkrantz et al. 2015, Crepez et al. 2022), adding the important perspective that networking strategies between interest groups are geared toward long-term access advantages. If long-term access really depends on groups' willingness to de-escalate and seek consensus with opponents, as we suggest, this penalizes the types of groups that are less able or willing to do so. Future research should assess these relationships further, for instance, evaluating the actual effects of networks between opponents on both the groups' members and their relations with policymakers. It could also assess how groups navigate the potential pressure to act as brokers in the policy process, for instance, based on qualitative investigations.

We also hope that future research takes some of the limitations of our study into account. First, our dependent variable captures the frequency of networking with opponents, which we interpreted as a signal of the willingness to seek compromise—that is, act as broker. Yet, there may also be other reasons why interest groups network with their political opponents, such as the hope to gather information, or exchange on non-policy related issues. Our data does not allow us to differentiate between such reasons and capture brokerage beyond this operationalization. Future research should seek to measure brokerage in other ways and/or try to unravel why interest groups, next to seeking compromises, network with organizations on the other side of the political landscape. For this purpose, the mapping of dyads or knots between organizations could be particularly prolific, given that networking with opponents ultimately depends on the willingness of pairs or sets of organizations to bridge positional or ideological divide.

Second, we think there is scope to improve the study of the impact of internal dynamics on the logic of brokerage. While we found no effect of membership influence on the propensity to network with opponents, we cannot exclude that membership does not factor into such strategic considerations. It may, for example, play a role when organizational membership and leadership misalign. To improve our study, we would therefore find it fruitful if future studies include more detailed perspectives of the internal relationships within organizations, especially when disagreement between members and leaders exists.

Most importantly, the goal of our article was to introduce the *logic of brokerage* and explore how it links to the logics of *influence* and *survival*. We interpret our observed patterns as evidence that strategic interactions among opposing organizations are sensitive to political demand, but also to internal dynamics related to group type characteristics and reputation. We add to previous studies by documenting the frequency of this strategy, thereby underlining that the strategic behavior of groups goes beyond calculations to affect single policy issues. Some interest groups have strong incentives to overcome conflict and take a role as mediators in their relationship to their political opponents, with profound implications for the way interests are represented *vis-à-vis* policymakers. Long-standing theories of lobbying expect interest groups to translate conflict and pressure politics into the political system (Schattschneider, 1960). Our findings suggest that consensus-seeking and potential de-escalation are (also) important roles that interest groups perform when they want a place inside the political system.

Normatively, this is not necessarily good or bad. In a time of increasing political polarization in some countries, this can be good news: Interest groups might here contribute to de-polarization (but see: Crosson et al., 2020). However, if certain types of legitimate, but non-de-escalating, groups lose access to policymaking, the logic of brokerage might contribute to biases in interest representation. Finally, if the brokerage role by interest groups means that *citizens* feel less represented, not just by political parties, but also by the interest groups they have joined, this trend could worry them. Given these important potential implications, we hope that future research pays more attention to brokerage by interest groups in policymaking.

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ORCID iDs

Marcel Hanegraaff  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0971-1864>

Andrea Pritoni  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9619-3641>

Wiebke Marie Junk  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6230-6158>

Michele Crepez  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4139-1875>

Supplemental Material

Additional Supplementary Information may be found with the online version of this article.

Appendix 1 – Comparative Interest Group Survey.

Table A1. Distribution among group types across countries (in %).

Appendix 2 – Summary research design.

Table A2.1. Research design and question wording.

Table A2.2. Summary of Variables.

Table A2.3. Correlation Matrix.

Table A2.4. Average level of networking with opponents across countries.

Appendix 3 – Regression tables and robustness checks.

Table A3.1. Multivariate regression predicting the level of cooperation with policy opponents: Ologit and Logit.

Table A3.2. Multivariate regression predicting the level of cooperation with policy opponents: alternative measure of lobby insiders (percentage inside lobbying/total).

Table A3.3. Multivariate regression predicting the level of cooperation with policy opponents: alternative measure of membership ties.

Table A3.4. Multivariate regression predicting the level of cooperation with policy opponents: alternative measure of group type.

Table A3.5. Multivariate regression predicting the level of cooperation with policy opponents: controlling for level of corporatism and policy field.

Table A3.6. Multivariate regression predicting the level of cooperation with policy opponents: different policy fields.

Table A3.7. Multivariate regression predicting the level of cooperation with policy opponents: high vs low corporatist countries.

Notes

1. Data are publicly available at: <https://www.cigsurvey.eu/>
2. We use “friends” and “foes” exclusively in policy terms. This describes the relationship between organizations when they pursue aligned or opposing goals and interests in policy battles. In abstract terms, we imagine policy battles as camps or a continuum in which organizations find a position that represents their views and objectives. Like in coalition games between political parties, interest groups are able to “look around them” and identify organizations that are either close or distant from their position and consider networking accordingly.
3. We here choose the organization as our unit of analysis to allow us theorizing about the strategic considerations (logics) behind networking with opponents. While this is a common approach in studies of coalition lobbying (Hojnacki, 1997), we also see the benefits of studying the dyads or knots that result from individual decisions to (try to) network with opponents. We hope that future research will build on our study in this regard.
4. Note, however, that the causal effect might go in both ways for this relationship. The propensity to compromise may favor involvement in policymaking, and, at the same time, involvement in policymaking may also lead groups to be more inclined to compromise. A mutually reinforcing mechanism plausibly exists between the two phenomena.
5. In Appendix 3, Table A3.5, we also replicate our analysis controlling for whether interest groups work in countries with different levels of corporatist settings. We find no significant effect of corporatism and no difference in the significance of our key variables. Furthermore, Table A3.7 runs the analysis separately in corporatist and non-corporatist countries to test how generalizable our findings are across countries: Again, we find no significant differences.
6. The respondents could choose between the following policy fields: Migration and asylum policy, Economic, fiscal and monetary policy, Health policy, Fight against crime, Energy policy, Education policy, Gender policy, Social policy, Environmental policy, Consumer protection, Agricultural policy, Citizens’ rights, Development cooperation policy, Foreign policy, Defense policy, European integration and cooperation, Scientific research policy, Regional policy of the EU, Human rights, Transport policy, Cultural policy, Employment policy, and Other.
7. To probe the plausibility of this, we provide an additional robustness check with a different proxy of membership importance for the organization’s positions in Appendix A3.3.
8. <http://interarena.dk/>
9. For the wording of all survey questions that are relevant to the control variables, see Appendix A2.
10. Moreover, in Appendix A3, we also run models where we include more specific country characteristics, such as whether a country is corporatist or not.
11. This percentage is the largest in Portugal, followed by the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, and Lithuania.
12. For instance, in corporatist countries, one might expect a higher propensity for seeking compromise with opponents. This seems to apply to Sweden, a classical corporatist country, but not to the Netherlands and Belgium, which are also considered corporatist (Jahn, 2016).

13. We asked respondents to indicate how important members were in establishing organizational positions on policy issues. For question wording and results, see Appendix A3.3.
14. For instance, unions actively negotiate with business groups (and individual firms) which oppose their views on industrial relations matters and only if no compromise is found, members will strike.
15. To exclude the possibility that what our model picks up is an effect driven by lobbying in social policy fields (which correlates with citizen groups as organizational type), we distinguish the policy issues organizations indicate to be most active in, contrasting between social policy fields and the rest. The social policy fields include health, gender, social policy, consumer protection, citizen's rights, and human rights. We added this variable to the regression (see Appendix A3.5, right column), but did not find a significant effect or a change in the effect of citizen groups. Moreover, we run the regression among organizations which were only active in social policy fields or economic policy fields (see first two columns in Appendix A3.6). The results stay the same. As a final test, we also run the analysis for organizations active in the environmental policy field only, as a least likely case, and even there the results were the same (see last column in Appendix A3.6). We take this as an important indication that our results hold among different types of policy fields, and likely across different issue characteristics.

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Author biographies

Marcel Hanegraaff is an Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. His research agenda includes the politics of interest representation in a transnational and EU context, as well as the functioning of international organizations in the fields of climate change and global trade. In 2023 he was elected as a member of Parlement in Limburg.

Andrea Pritoni is an Associate Professor in Political Science at the Department of Arts, University of Bologna (Italy). His main research interests are the study of the Italian political system, the comparative analysis of lobbying and interest group politics, and comparative public policy (with a particular focus on labour policy and higher education policy).

Wiebke Marie Junk is an Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen (KU) with a focus on public policy and comparative politics. Her research examines the influence of interest groups, firms and expert actors on political decision-making in European countries and at European Union (EU) level.

Michele Crepaz is a Vice Chancellor's Illuminate Fellow in Political Science at Queen's University Belfast with a focus on comparative politics and public policy. He is also an affiliated scholar at The Good Lobby and Secretary of the Political Studies Association of Ireland. His two areas of specialisation are interest group politics and transparency research.