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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The paradox of collective action: Linking interest aggregation and interest articulation in EU legislative lobbying

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Olson's logic of collective action predicts that business interest associations face fewer collective action problems than citizen action groups. This article challenges this assumption by arguing that forming an organization comes with different collective action problems than voicing a joint policy position. This leads us to examine an important paradox: Citizen groups face challenges in establishing themselves as organizations but find it relatively easy to position themselves on policy issues, whereas the reverse is true for business associations. We study this paradox empirically based on interviews with spokespersons of interest organizations active in the European Union and find support for our hypotheses. Our findings demonstrate that citizen groups position themselves on policy issues more easily than business interests and that this competitive advantage is amplified when policy issues attract the attention of the media.

1 | INTRODUCTION

One can hardly overstate the influence of Olson's (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action* on the discipline of political science and other academic fields, such as economics, sociology, and psychology. The *Logic* identifies the organizational obstacles that stand between societal or economic disturbances and political attention. The free-rider problem makes the organization of diffuse interests more difficult than the organization of concentrated interests (Olson, 1965). In later work, Olson (1982) assumes that the relative ease of mobilization by concentrated interests leads these interests to be capable of strategically and efficiently responding to policy disturbances.

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The mechanisms underlying Olson's argument are still considered one of the main causes of the overrepresentation of business interest organizations before government (e.g., Baumgartner & Leech, 1998, 2001; Dür & Mateo, 2013, 2016; Klüver, 2012; Lowery et al., 2015). In Olson's time, this was a valid conjuncture as many interests in society were not yet organized into collective action organizations, and interest group scholarship had only partially identified the contingent nature of policy representation. Today, however, interest groups exist for almost every issue imaginable, and obstacles for organizational formation are therefore not the primary problem of groups when engaging in political activity. What is critical is what occurs after groups are formed, that is, the internal obstacles existing groups face before they can become politically active. This issue has not received much attention in the literature.

Therefore, the questions we ask are, first, which groups face more obstacles in forming a position on policy issues and are therefore less able to efficiently overcome internal impediments to initiating political activity? And, second, how does this relate to theories on group formation? For instance, can we assume that specific interests also initiate political activity more easily than diffuse interests, or are there perhaps different mechanisms involved? To answer these questions, we explore two avenues of explanation. Our first, and main, argument is that the obstacles interest groups face when establishing themselves as organizations are driven by a different dynamic than the obstacles these same groups face when seeking to engage in politics. In fact, we expect—and empirically illustrate—the exact opposite dynamics. As such, we hypothesize that diffuse citizen interests more easily voice their policy concerns in an efficient manner than specific business groups. This means that we cannot only rely on group formation and maintenance theories to explain why some groups are more politically active than others but also need to consider internal obstacles various groups face.

In addition to this main argument, we explore how specific policy *issues*—in this case, the salience of issues—may further facilitate or depress policy mobilization. Olson remains rather agnostic about such issue characteristics because he considers lobbying to be a by-product of some other function of the association. Contemporary interest group scholarship, however, almost univocally points at the importance of the salience of policy issues in explaining mobilization, strategies, and influence (for an overview, see Klüver et al., 2015). This is theoretically intuitive because issue salience increases the visibility of the policy activities for the constituents, something that is especially important for the mobilization of diffuse interests. Therefore, we also hypothesize that the salience of issues affects the ease with which groups formulate policy positions.

As a research case, we focus on European Union (EU)-level interest associations active on issues on the agenda of the EU. The EU can be considered a *most likely case* for interest groups to experience collective action problems related to both organizational formation and policy mobilization. This makes it an ideal case in which to empirically observe the distinct collective action problems presumed. First, establishing a presence in Brussels is a costly and cumbersome endeavor, which requires ample resources, manpower, and expertise (Berkhout & Lowery, 2010). The high costs involved, for instance, in establishing a Brussels office or in hiring EU specialists, maximize the threshold for interest groups to establish themselves as an organization. Second, interest groups working at the EU level, compared to national or local groups, must aggregate a larger and more diverse set of interests (e.g., Kohler-Koch, 2013). This increased size and heterogeneity of supporters and members suggests that the internal disagreements we seek to examine are likely more prevalent in the EU than in national or local settings where interest groups have a smaller and more homogenous constituency base.

To test our theoretical ideas, we draw from 110 semi-structured expert interviews with representatives of organized interests active on a set of 66 legislative proposals submitted by the European

Commission to the European Parliament between 2008 and 2010 (Beyers et al., 2014). We present several regression analyses on a data set of 332 issue–group dyads. The results confirm our hypothesis that diffuse citizen interests face *fewer* difficulties when positioning themselves on policy issues compared to business interests. Our evidence also confirms the expectation that this disparity is amplified by the salience that the news media attribute to certain policy proposals. These are important findings as they indicate that the collective action problems that interest groups initially face do not necessarily exacerbate in the policy process, as is often argued. Rather, the opposite seems true. The final section of this article critically reflects on the broader implications of these findings and suggests avenues for future research.

2 | THEORETICAL PUZZLE

The study of mobilization by interest groups has a long tradition. Perhaps the most influential study in this field is Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965). Most researchers refer to this work to explain the dominance of business interest groups and their disproportional influence the political arena (e.g., Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012). The *Logic* has certainly been contested in various academic studies (see discussion in Baumgartner & Leech, 1998, pp. 64–82) and, more empirically, in the decades following publication, when many diffuse interest groups still gained prominence despite Olson's prediction (Berry, 1999). Still, the basic logic that specific interests have a mobilization advantage compared to diffuse interest groups remains a key insight. As noted by Oliver (1993, pp. 273–274), prior to Olson's study, social scientists assumed mobilization to be natural, whereas post-1965, “they assume that collective inaction is natural even in the face of common interests, and that it is collective action that needs to be explained.”

But what happens when organizations are formed? Olson and others assume that the favorable collective action context for special (business) interests ultimately biases policy outcomes in their favor. Olson (1982, pp. 44–45) assumes that the influence of lobbying by special interests comes at the cost of society. He (1982, p. 41) notes that “small groups can usually organize with less *delay* than large groups,” and by implication, small, specific groups “have more lobbying and cartelistic power” than large groups (p. 41). Here, he fundamentally expands his original focus on interest group formation into theory about policy mobilization and policy influence.

Several studies have analyzed the policy implications of *The Logic of Collective Action* (e.g., Denzau & Munger, 1986; Wilson, 1974b). To start, Gray and Lowery (1996) reject Olson's (1982, p. 41) idea that one should see indeterminate growth in the number of politically active groups and argue that competitive pressures ensure that not all organizations will survive. Others, such as Dür and Mateo (2013, 2016), explicitly link the magnitude of collective action problems to strategic political choices on the part of groups, with diffuse citizen groups more likely to choose an outside lobbying strategy for reasons of membership recruitment (see also Gais & Walker, 1991; Lohman 1998). As such, the current literature tells us that the connection between organizational formation and political mobilization is more complex than Olson assumed.

Yet, what remains largely theoretically unspecified is the relationship between organizational formation and policy mobilization, and the distinct ways to manage different collective action problems at these stages. Drawing from Olson's predictions, the mentioned literature assumes that the collective action problems that groups face when forming an organization have a cumulative effect on the inability to become politically active. For instance, several studies explain the inequalities in interest representation with references to the logic of collective action. Klüver (2012, p. 1117) links successful Europeanization of interest groups to collective action problems: “Even if cause groups [such as

citizen groups] overcome the problem of collective action, they are considerably disadvantaged in comparison to sectional groups [such as business].” Baumgartner and Leech (2001, p. 1198) explicitly relate Olson's ideas of collective action to the agenda-setting opportunities for different groups: “[T]he sheer number of business lobbying groups [in Washington] and the level of resources they bring to bear means that businesses can afford to choose their issues, whereas consumer and ideological groups on most issues must hope that someone with cab fare is along for the ride.”

While it is tempting to concur with these conclusions as the empirical reality (i.e., more business groups) fits the theoretical prediction (i.e., based on Olson's logic of collective action), it is not as straightforward as it may seem because the link between the formation and maintenance of groups is rarely linked to the ease with which groups form policy positions. First, Olson (1965, p. 132) notes that “lobbies are ... the by-products of organizations that obtain their strength and support because they perform some function in addition to lobbying for collective goods.” He, however, remains agnostic regarding the nature of “some function.” He also does not speculate about variation in the levels of success that groups may experience in the provision of various functions and their by-products. Second, as noted, groups strategically combine their membership recruitment with their policy campaigns, especially for the mobilization of citizens. This is less likely to be the case for the mobilization of business interests. It is important to note that this strategic difference relates to the *survival* of organizations and does not disclose much about the organizational ease with which groups establish their positions on *policy issues*. As a result, it is not entirely clear how the organizational maintenance strategies to sustainably overcome collective action problems affect the abilities of interest groups to engage with public policy. To further clarify this issue, we explore why some groups face fewer obstacles in positioning themselves on policy issues and, hence, can engage in policy activity more easily and more swiftly. In this process, we explicitly link the policy mobilization stage to the initial incentives groups face in formation.

We focus on the obstacles established organizations encounter when forming a *political position*. While one can think of various obstacles groups might face to become politically active, we consider the difficulties interest groups experience in positioning themselves on concrete policy issues an important collective action problem that arises after organizations are formed. The reason is that once interest organizations face policy disturbances, a swift and univocal reaction by an interest group can make the difference between success and failure of the lobby activity because it highlights the unity of the organization's support base. Still, such a reaction is not evident as an interest organization constitutes a divergent and sometimes heterogeneous constituency of citizens and corporations. While this support base may have agreed on the *raison d'être* and overall objectives of the organization in an earlier phase of collective action, they may disagree when new political controversies arise. These disagreements impede swift, powerful, and coherent political action and thus constitute an important collective action problem. While the intensity of lobbying or the actual mobilization of an interest organization may serve as implicit indicators of this collective action problem, we focus explicitly on *the degree to which interest organizations experience difficulties in establishing a position on a specific policy issue* to illustrate how internal collective action problems vary across different types of organizations.

3 | THE MEMBERSHIP MOBILIZATION PART OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Before we discuss the collective action problems associated with establishing a position, we first need an overview of what incentives are considered key for the successful formation of interest groups. Specially, what does the literature tell us about how interest groups can sustainably overcome their

initial collective action problems? Successful (and sustainable) collective action of interest groups is commonly framed in terms of (a) the types of selective incentives provided to members and supporters (material, expressive, or solidary, or, negatively, coercion; Olson, 1965, p. 51; Salisbury, 1969; Wilson, 1974a, pp. 30–55) or (b) the type of *sponsorship* received from benefactors (private, public, or corporate; Walker, 1983). Both are outlined below.

3.1 | Selective incentives offered to members

Collective action problems arise when individuals benefit from the provision of a certain collective good regardless of their contribution (free riding). For instance, an environmentalist need not contribute to environmental interest groups because his or her individual contribution will not matter in voicing concerns about the environment. A hotel need not be a member of the hotel association to benefit from minimum prizes agreed on among the association's members. As noted by Olson (1965, p. 51) “only a separate and selective incentive will stimulate a rational individual in a latent group to act in a group-oriented way.” This (largely material) incentive or benefit must be selective in the sense that nonmembers can be meaningfully excluded from it. These incentives may be positive (material rewards), such as insurance schemes, or negative (subtle or manifest coercion), such as exclusion from a given profession.

An important addition to Olson's idea of selective incentives is the identification of *nonmaterial* incentives (Clark & Wilson, 1961; Salisbury, 1969, pp. 15–17; Wilson, 1974a, pp. 30–55) and other similar arrangements to incentivize people to contribute to common causes (e.g., Ostrom, 1998). These are, first, expressive benefits; that is, individuals “are willing to join groups which provide mechanisms for the public expression of values” relevant to them (Salisbury, 1969, p. 16). These mechanisms, in contemporary terms, range from demonstrating or transferring money to forwarding Twitter messages. Second, solidary benefits “include such rewards as socializing, congeniality, the sense of group membership and identification, and status resulting from membership, fun and conviviality, the maintenance of social distinctions and so on” (Clark & Wilson, 1961, pp. 134–135). As noted by Clark and Wilson (1961, p. 135), in contrast to material incentives, these benefits are explicitly independent of the goals of the organization because these benefits refer to the process of coming together rather than the substantive interests represented. But these goals must “first and foremost be non-controversial” ... and “never relate to an issue” (the conflict of ends) because organizations dominantly relying on solidary benefits “seek to avoid conflict with other associations as well as avoid it internally” (p. 142).

Successful group leaders will offer (potential) members or supporters an attractive mix of these three types of incentives. Combining different types of incentives is important to maintain continuity as an organization. Salisbury (1969, p. 20), for instance, notes that expressive groups “will be easily established and as easily disappear,” and as later noted in various studies on the institutionalization of social movements (e.g., Kriesi, 1996), therefore, “organizers may be expected to infuse other types of benefits into the group in order to give it stability.” At the same time, this is a difficult task because the management of these incentives places different demands on the organization: For instance, providing solidary benefits (e.g., offering music at a demonstration) to expressive groups may partially be problematic (e.g., people interested in the music at the demonstration may not be interested in the political values expressed).

3.2 | Government sponsorship

Interest groups may receive routine and stable funding in the form of different types of sponsorship. Walker (1983) differentiates between private, corporate, and public sponsorship. Private sponsorship

refers to large donations by wealthy individuals separate from and in addition to normal membership contribution (Walker and Scheppele, 1991, p. 162; see discussion of this definition in: Nownes, 1995, pp. 207–208). Such donations may be channeled via charitable foundations or trusts, such as George Soros's Open Society Foundations. Corporate sponsorship refers to funding by companies and other institutional funding (see Nownes, 1995, p. 212). It also includes split membership structures of many trade associations, in which major companies pay disproportionately large membership fees compared to smaller players in the same market (Walker, 1983, p. 401). Public sponsorship comes in the form of structural or project-related subsidies by government agencies. For instance, the mechanisms that drive the European Commission to grant subsidies to civil society groups are well documented (Greenwood, 2007; Mahoney & Beckstrand, 2011; Sanchez Salgado, 2014).

The former strategies deal with methods interest groups use to establish and maintain themselves as organizations. What they do not tell us, however, is how this may affect the difficulties interest organizations experience when establishing a position on concrete policy issues. In what follows, we therefore examine how these constituency-based incentives and sponsorship structures affect the relative ease with which interest organizations can become active on policy issues or, specially, how different dimensions of organizational formation and maintenance affect the policy positioning part of collective action.

4 | HYPOTHESES: THE POLICY POSITIONING PART OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

How do the incentives of sustained collective action reverberate into political positioning? In this section, we identify two dimensions that affect interest groups' political positioning in policy processes: (a) the nature of the interests represented and (b) the relative reliance on any form of sponsorship.

Organizations representing interests (or causes) that are diffusely distributed across large groups of individuals typically focus on expressive selective benefits when establishing themselves as organizations. This is because of the fundamental nature of the interests and values expressed, as these “are not ordinarily divisible into units of value allocated to specific persons or charged against unit costs” (Salisbury, 1969, p. 16). Salisbury (1969, p. 16) cites “good government,” “peace,” and “civil liberties” as examples. The nondivisible nature of these values commonly ensures that almost anybody can potentially benefit from the realization of them, which makes free riding relatively easy and collective action cumbersome. Also, material selective benefits, such as insurance schemes, access to exclusive training programs, or networking events, are somewhat difficult to meaningfully offer to groups who come together for shared societal values or for a certain policy cause, whereas this is relatively easy for groups who act collectively for a given joint and concentrated (commercial) interest. Associations of well-established (and protected) professions, such as doctors, accountants, or lawyers, for instance, typically offer *de facto* compulsory training programs. These selective material incentives are unavailable to groups representing diffuse interests and are part of the reason concentrated interests establish themselves as collective organizational entities with more ease.

While different types of recruitment strategies create imbalances in how easily interest groups establish themselves as organizations, these biases will not necessarily be exacerbated in the policy mobilization phase of collective action. Groups representing specific, concentrated interests manage to mobilize because of a shared self-interest, without being disturbed by government action. The commonality of the interests arises from shared economic or social interests rather than political ones. The relative ease of interest aggregation does not automatically impact the organization's response to policy initiatives. That is, because of the initial nonpolitical nature of the mobilization around a trade,

profession, economic sector, or shared material interest, such groups will need to make a relatively substantial investment in managing the policy mobilization portion of collective action when they position themselves in public policy. Moreover, these groups must manage constituents who view the organization as a vehicle that serves to improve their self-interest rather than pursue common political interests. This requires the internal management of heterogeneous actors and market competitors motivated by (economic) self-interest, which necessitates ensuring all constituents that their heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting self-interests are accounted for. While the establishment of an organization may have served the self-interest of its constituents, these constituents will again promote their self-interest within the organization when new policy issues arise and the organization needs to position itself politically.

Olson (1982, pp. 53–58) acknowledges that specific interest groups tend to “make decisions more slowly than the individuals and firms of which they are comprised.” But, he assumes that most interest group mobilization has a relatively narrow character and, consequently, that the interests of members must be so closely aligned that this does not lead to meaningful variation in their policy-oriented activities (for a similar argument on the relationship between narrow membership mobilization and internal homogeneity, see Schmitter & Streeck, 1999).

Groups representing diffuse interests that mobilize because of shared ideological or noble values will find it easier to translate these values into explicit policy positions in concrete policy processes because these values are often already linked to specific political goals and issues. Their motivation to mobilize goes beyond the self-interest of constituents and relates to the political interests of broad segments of society, the common good, or public interest. While some disagreement may arise about how specific values and ideals should be pursued, internal decision-making processes are less dominated by complex and lengthy bargaining processes between competing, self-interested actors. Indeed, the ideals that the organization supports and the expressive benefits offered to constituents often already relate to specific policy goals. As such, diffuse interests' motivations for mobilization are often political to start and are often linked to specific policy issues. Diffuse interests organize themselves collectively around policy goals, while specific interests pursue policy issues, which may threaten their industry or maximize their financial profits. After the organizational formation portion of collective action, which is sometimes difficult and politically motivated, diffuse interests mobilize relatively easy when a specific policy issue arises. This produces a paradox, in the sense that for specific interest groups, whose maintenance strongly depends on material selective incentives, the definition of policy goals necessitates a time-consuming process of internal consensus formation, which is not necessary for interest organizations, which are already organized around values related to policy goals. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Business interest organizations find it more difficult to position themselves on policy issues than citizen groups.

Furthermore, the relative reliance on *government subsidies* affects the ease with which organizations operate on policy issues. First, this should largely work, as with expressive selective benefits, via the nature of the values represented. That is, we assume that government subsidies via charitable foundations benefit groups working on diffuse interests or values associated with indivisible goods, such as good government, clean environment, and so on. This is, for instance, the practice of the European Commission (Sanchez Salgado, 2014). Second, policy makers are likely to prioritize subsidizing relatively moderate organizations over more radical associations (e.g., Vermeulen, 2013). This selection bias leads us to observe that groups that receive substantial government subsidies are more likely to agree with ongoing or proposed policies than others and, therefore, may face fewer obstacles when

positioning themselves on policy initiatives. Third, it is possible that government subsidization has a moderating effect, in the sense that the interaction between groups and policy makers, in the context of subsidies, increases the procedural policy capacities of the interest organization (in terms of the language used, the issues at stake, and the organizational structure). This is similar to the more widely documented effect of cooptation. In a critical analysis by Selznick (1949, p. 220), such cooptive subsidies may create “a pattern which simply transforms an unorganized citizenry into a reliable instrument for the achievement of administrative goals.” Even if we assume that Selznick overestimates the normative implications, we may still find a positive effect of public subsidization on political action. In all these cases, government sponsorship creates a substantive alignment between the goals of policy makers and those of interest groups. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Groups with a greater financial dependence on the government find it easier to take a position on policy issues.

H1 and H2 deal with the relationship between organizational formation and policy positioning, much in line with Olson's theory. As mentioned earlier, interest groups face collective action problems not only because of internal organizational characteristics, but also because of the issues on which they seek to mobilize politically. Recent empirical research demonstrates that organizations are largely driven by the issue context in which they operate. To analyze how this affects the incentives of organizations to form policy positions, we explore one important contextual factor driving political activity (and outcomes), as highlighted by many scholars (e.g., Dür & Mateo, 2013, 2016; Hanegraaff, Beyers, & De Bruycker, 2016; Kollman, 1998; Rasmussen, Mäder, & Reher, 2017; Stokes, 1960), namely, the importance of the *salience* of the policy issue. That is, the anticipated difference between citizen organizations and business organizations is expected to be amplified by the salience of policy issues in political debates. This works via the perceptions of policy participants about the salience and popularity of policy positions with the broader public.

As proposed by Kollman (1998, pp. 155–164), groups working on salient issues and that defend popular positions respond differently to changes in salience than groups with relatively unpopular policy positions. That is, when policies, which are favorable to a certain group, are not supported by a broad public, but the public considers the policy important, the group will avoid signaling its position because it “will take care to avoid expanding the conflict too much to spark the opposition” (Kollman, 1998, p. 160). This is, in Kollman's words, “classical interest group politics” and is likely to be the common situation for groups representing specific interests. Interest organizations representing diffuse interests on broadly supported “valence issues” (Stokes, 1960, p. 373) are likely to want to exploit the favorable public opinion by increasing the salience of the (latent) issue or, when salience is already high, explicitly take the popular position. Issues that receive ample media and public attention provide value-based civil society groups with the opportunity to promote their ideals and beliefs and to reach out to their diffuse constituency. This is different for special (business) interests that provide material and economic (non-value-based) benefits to supporters. Such groups usually do not represent ideals or interests that resonate with the broader public. Excess attention to their cause can amplify the limited political support their goals receive, which encourages these organizations to redefine their policy positions so that they are acceptable to a broader, more vigilant audience mobilized around salient issues.

This implies that the salience of the issue strengthens the hypothesized difference between diffuse and specific interests. Namely, specific business interests are constrained by media and public pressures when issues become salient. In that case, they need to adjust their position in a way that will not increase public opposition but also in a way that complies with the demands of their constituents.

Value-based citizen interests are less constrained in this way because they generally adopt positions that enjoy broad support among the public and the media and are more familiar to public lobbying activities (Hanegraaff et al., 2016; Kollman, 1998; Rasmussen et al., 2017). This argument results in the following hypothesis:

H3: The saliency of issues negatively affects the ability of business groups to position themselves on policy issues, yet it does not affect the ability of citizen groups to position themselves on policy issues.

5 | DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

We empirically tested our theoretical expectations in the most likely case of EU legislative politics. The research project examined a stratified sample of 125 European legislative proposals (Beyers et al., 2014). All Commission proposals for regulations and directives between 2008 and 2010 were mapped and archived, along with all media coverage from five media outlets¹ related to these proposals using electronic keyword searches. A set of 48 directives and 41 regulations, which gained media coverage in more than two media outlets, was sampled from this population of proposals. In addition, we included 18 proposals in which the Commission organized online consultations with organized interests. We also randomly added 18 proposals that gained little or no media coverage and in which no Commission consultation took place. This means that the sample of 125 proposals is stratified, in the sense that we overweigh cases that gained media attention or in which public consultations were held by the Commission.

Our analysis draws from 110 face-to-face interviews conducted with 88 different interest organizations active on 66 of the sampled proposals on which lobby activity was identified.² During these interviews, 237 issues were identified. Issues are specific aspects of a legislative proposal on which stakeholders or political elites adopt diverging positions and disagree on the preferred policy outcome. This provided us with a data set on 332 interest group–issue dyads.³ One observation in the data set constituted an interest group, which established a position on an issue on which it was active.

To measure our dependent variable, we asked groups how difficult it was to establish a position on an issue on which they were active and provided groups with four answer categories ranging from “very easy” to “very difficult.” “The establishment of a position” was understood as the presence of internal agreement on whether legislative action would be taken, and which legislative action would be desirable for an issue compared with how the issue was addressed by the European Commission in its legislative proposal. These positions ranged from complete opposition to complete support of the European Commission's proposal. Respondents faced no notable problems with answering this question, and we observe substantial variation on this question (see Table 1). Moreover, the reported difficulty in establishing a position was positively and significantly related to the time interest groups took to establish their position on an issue, which endorses the construct validity of our dependent variable. To illustrate, interest groups that established their position “very easily” took an average of 1 month (1.33; $p < .001$), while this process took 3 months (3.11; $p < .001$) for groups that faced “difficulties” in establishing their position.

To examine our first hypothesis, we distinguished between business interest associations and civil society groups based on members. Business or professional interest associations are membership organizations with firms or professionals as members, and civil society groups have individuals as members (directly or indirectly via lower level associations). The largest segment (70%) of the

TABLE 1 Frequency distribution by group type of the answers to the question: “How difficult was it to establish a position on this issue?”; $N = 329$

	Business interests	Civil society groups
Very easy	35%	41%
Easy	53%	50%
Difficult	14%	9%
N	218	111

respondents came from business interest associations. This distribution corresponds to the overall population of interest groups active in EU politics (Wonka, Baumgartner, Mahoney, & Berkhout, 2010). To assess our second hypothesis regarding government sponsorship, we asked what percentage of their organizations' budget comes from national and EU-government contributions. To test our third hypothesis, we examined the media salience a legislative proposal received. Media salience was measured on the total numbers of articles (logged) that discussed the proposals sampled from six media outlets (*Agence Europe*, *European Voice*, *Euractiv*, *Le Monde*, *The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Financial Times*).

Furthermore, we included several control variables. First, we controlled for the number of staff (logged). It is possible that more staff allows an organization to be better able to cope with the transaction costs involved in coordinating and establishing a position. Second, we added the positions interest groups adopted on the 236 issues. Lobbyists were asked whether their activities regarding a specific issue were aimed at “blocking or shaping most of the proposal,” “shaping specific parts of the proposal, not blocking it,” or “supporting the Commission.” The idea is that it is relatively more difficult to establish a critical position on an issue than a supportive position. Third, we controlled for organizational salience. We asked respondents whether they perceived the issue in question (1) “as more important,” (2) “as important,” or (3) “as less important” than other issues they had worked on and were familiar with. When organizations deem an issue important, the stakes are higher, which will likely lead to a longer, more cumbersome process of forming a position. Fourth, we added a control for lobbying in a coalition or not. Lobbying in a coalition may lead to increased legitimacy or representativeness but also involves increased coordination and transaction costs (Beyers & De Bruycker, 2017). Coalition building typically involves a negotiation process about the division of cost and labor and about which positions will be articulated (Holyoke, 2009). Each organization will seek to maintain its own unique identity and secure the interests of its constituency in this negotiation (Hula, 1999), which will likely affect the ease with which a position is adopted on a specific policy proposal. Fifth, we also added a control for how interest groups establish their policy position internally. Different modes of internal decision making may lead to increased or decreased collective action constraints. Interest groups that decide on their policy position without consulting their members or supporters may act more swiftly when policy disturbances occur. Therefore, we controlled for whether the organizational position was taken “independently from members by the organizational leadership,” “through a vote among the members,” or “by seeking consensus among members.” Finally, one could imagine that position taking becomes more difficult in more crowded political environments. When more stakeholders mobilize on an issue, interest groups may strategically want to anticipate the positions of others or consult with other involved actors. This leads to additional transaction costs and therefore potentially affects the difficulties interest groups face when establishing a position. Finally, we added the number of organized interests identified on a legislative proposal (logged) as an additional control variable.

6 | RESULTS

We present the frequency distribution of our dependent variable and subsequently two ordered logistic regression models. To start, as noted, our dependent variable was the relative difficulty interest groups face to establish a position on a policy issue. Because of the low number of responses in the highest category, “very difficult” (1%), we combined this category with the “difficult” category in the analysis, producing a 3-point ordinal scale. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of the answers by group type. In most cases, both business (88%) and citizen interest groups (91%) find it easy or very easy to establish a position. The somewhat higher proportion for citizen groups indicates support for our first hypothesis, though the effect size is small.

The regression results are presented in Table 2. In our data set, the elite respondents are nested in proposals. We therefore estimate random effects at the level of proposals ($n = 61$). This improves the fit of the models compared to those at the level of respondents, indicating that our proposal-level variables matter a great deal. The coefficients reported in the top section deal with our hypotheses and the bottom rows present those related to the control variables.

First, regarding our first hypothesis on group type, the negative coefficient for nonbusiness groups reported in the top rows of Table 2 demonstrate that civil society groups indeed face significantly fewer difficulties in establishing a position than business groups. The earlier observation in the frequency distributions reported in Table 1 that citizen groups find it easier to establish a position (H1) was confirmed while controlling for alternative factors in the regression models. This is exemplified in the predicted probabilities. Calculated based on Model 1, the probability that business groups face difficulties in establishing a position is 19% (SE = 0.04) while this is only 6% (SE = 0.02) for civil society groups. A similar qualitative impression emerged from the interviews with experts. For instance, on the Commission proposal concerning the provision of food information to consumers (COM/2008/0040), a representative from a business umbrella group noted that it was “difficult” to establish a joint position for this proposal, and it took “about three months’ time.” The representative indicated that “especially for issues where members can get a strategic advantage towards another member, we face difficulties in establishing a common position.” A citizen group lobbying on the same issue reported to have established its position already “after one month” and that this was a relatively “easy” process as there was wide consensus among the members.

As expected, civil society groups seem to face fewer collective action problems in terms of establishing a policy position compared to business groups. This result underscores our thesis that the collective action problems interest groups face when establishing themselves as organizations do not automatically translate to the policy mobilization phase of collective action. Conversely, opposing dynamics and constraints seem to be involved. For interest groups whose organizational establishment strongly relies on serving the economic and specific self-interest of its constituents, the definition of policy goals necessitates a time-consuming process of internal consensus formation, which is not necessary for diffuse interest organizations because they are often already organized around values related to policy goals.

Our second hypothesis about government sponsorship was not supported in the regression analysis. The relevant coefficient about financial dependence on government is significant, but in the opposite direction of what we hypothesized. Namely, organizations that depend largely on governments for financial resources face significantly more difficulties when establishing a position than groups that depend more on membership fees or donations. Groups that are dependent on government subsidies for 100% have a predicted probability of 30% (SE = 0.11) to face difficulties when establishing a position, while this probability is 10% (SE = 0.03) for groups that receive no

TABLE 2 Mixed effects ordered logistic regression of the relative difficulty to come at an organizational position

		I		II	
		β	SE	β	SE
Intercept i		1.03	(1.34)	1.37	(1.39)
Intercept ii		4.53***	(1.40)	4.96***	(1.45)
<i>Explanatory variables</i>					
Group type	Civil society groups	-1.80***	(0.53)	-0.15	(0.90)
	Business groups (ref.)				
Financial dependence on government (%)		0.02**	(0.01)	0.02**	(0.01)
Media salience (Ln)		0.72*	(0.33)	0.90**	(0.36)
Media salience × group type (civil society)				-0.72**	(0.35)
<i>Control variables</i>					
Decision taken by	Voting among members	1.46	(1.48)	1.66	(1.50)
	The organizational leadership	-3.26***	(1.01)	-3.24***	(1.02)
	Consensus among members (ref.)				
Position	Block or shape most of the proposal	0.61*	(0.41)	0.62*	(0.37)
	Shape parts of the proposal	0.25	(0.37)	0.26	(0.42)
	Support the proposal (ref.)				
Part of coalition	Yes	0.44	(0.40)	0.50	(0.39)
	No (ref.)				
Ln staff		0.23	(0.16)	0.29*	(0.17)
Mobilization intensity (Ln)		-0.35	(0.48)	-0.44	(0.49)
Organizational salience	More than other issues	0.76*	(0.41)	0.77*	(0.41)
	Equal to other issues	0.17	(0.49)	0.19	(0.49)
	Less than other issues (ref.)				
<i>Random effects</i>					
Legislative proposal (n = 61)		2.27	(0.99)	2.42	(1.04)
<i>Model fit statistics</i>		n = 283		n = 283	
		Wald chi2 = 34.35 df = 12		Wald chi2 = 37.93 df = 13	
		Prob > chi2 = .00		Prob > chi2 = .00	

Note. Coefficients are presented with standard errors in parentheses and significance level indicated by *.

* $\alpha < 0.10$; ** $\alpha < 0.05$; *** $\alpha < 0.01$.

government subsidies. It seems that interest groups take their financial relationship with government into account when positioning themselves on public policy. Consequently, interest groups may find it difficult to balance the expectations of the governments that fund them and the constituents they represent and rely on. This potentially leads to a difficult internal policy formulation process. This finding speaks to a broad literature focusing on how government subsidies alter the strategic choices groups make (Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; Neumayr, Schneider, & Meyer, 2015; Sanchez Salgado, 2010), the issues groups focus on (Boris & Mosher-Williams, 1998; Child & Gronbjerg, 2007; Ebrahim, 2003; Ostrander, Silver, & McCarthy, 2005), and the criticism groups have toward governments (Anheier, Toepler, & Wojciech Sokolowski, 1997; Sanchez Salgado, 2010). Our findings add to these debates and demonstrate that government subsidies also have a constraining effect on the ease with which organizations position themselves.

Furthermore, our third hypothesis was supported by the analysis: Media salience conditions the effect of group type, which can be derived from the significant interaction effect reported in Model II. Generally,

as indicated by the significance of the group type variable in Model I, civil society groups face fewer difficulties than business groups in establishing a position, and this advantage is amplified as a legislative proposal receives more media salience. The size and mechanism of this effect are shown in Figure 1.

Regarding the size of the effect, Figure 1a reports the relative differences between civil society groups (plotted) and business groups (red/gray reference line at 0) in their propensity to experience difficulties when establishing a policy position for different levels of media attention. This marginal-effects plot (Figure 1a) demonstrates that the more attention a policy proposal receives, the fewer problems civil society groups face in establishing a position when compared to business groups. For instance, when a policy proposal receives 54 media hits (Figure 1b: x -axis logged value = 4), civil society groups are 30% (SE = 0.09) less likely to face difficulties when establishing a position on an issue when compared with business groups. The differences between civil society groups and business interests are only significant for proposals that received more than 3 media hits (logged value = 1). When issues receive no media salience, civil society groups and business organizations face similar difficulties in establishing a policy position.

Regarding the mechanism, Figure 1b reports the predicted probabilities for the likelihood that civil society groups and business groups, respectively, face difficulties in positioning themselves at different levels of media salience. Remember that we, based on Kollman (1998), hypothesized that nonbusiness groups would use public support for their policy positions strategically in their policy lobby and that media attention works in their favor. This expectation finds confirmation in our analysis. The predicted probabilities portrayed in Figure 1b indicate that this effect does not seem to follow from strategic choices made by civil society groups, but from strategic challenges business lobby groups face. Indeed, the practically flat horizontal line of black dots in Figure 1a indicates that civil society groups find it equally difficult to position themselves on salient and nonsalient issues. In contrast, business interests find it more difficult to establish a position on relatively salient issues. Media salience creates a competitive advantage for civil society groups because of the increased difficulties business groups face when establishing a position. Indeed, business groups are less accustomed to relying on outside lobbying strategies and prefer to work behind the scenes (Culpepper, 2010; Dür & Mateo, 2013; Hanegraaff et al., 2016). Once issues become salient, business groups must strategically adjust or frame their position in a way that aligns with public interests. This is less problematic for

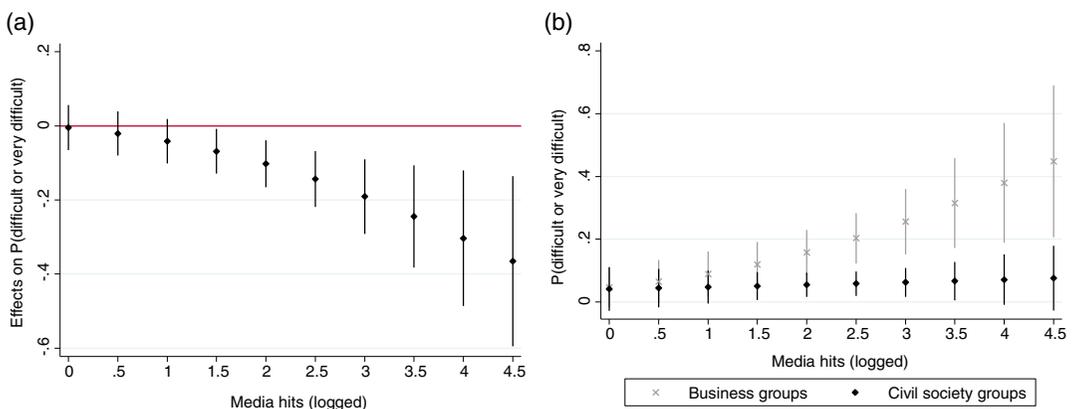


FIGURE 1 Marginal effects and predicted margins of being a civil society group (vs. a business group) on the chance a position is established (very) difficult for different levels of media salience (with 95% confidence interval): (a) marginal effects and (b) predicted margins

civil society groups, which often defend public goods or ideals (Binderkrantz & Krøyer, 2012; De Bruycker, 2017).

Several control variables yielded interesting results. First, the nature of internal decision-making procedures of interest groups makes it easier or more difficult to reach a joint decision. A position is more easily established when the organizational leadership independently decides on the position. Second, the number of staff members an organization employs significantly ($p < .10$) impacts the difficulties groups face to adopt a position. Interestingly, groups with more staff members face more difficulties agreeing on an organizational position than groups with fewer staff members. This is intuitive in the sense that when more people are involved in coordinating a position, this requires more overhead and transaction costs. Having more organizational resources is, thus, no guarantee for swift position taking. The importance organizations attribute to a specific issue, another control variable in our analysis, is also significant. Issues that are deemed important engender more difficulties in adopting a position. When more is at stake, interest groups experience more obstacles to settling on a joint position. The goal of an interest group is also consequential in position taking. Interest groups that seek to change parts of a proposal face more difficulties than those that completely support a proposal, seek to alter most of a proposal, or seek to block a proposal. Adopting a more nuanced position comes with more difficulties than simply being in favor of or against it. The number of interest groups that mobilize on an issue, another control variable we included, does not affect the relative ease interest groups experience in establishing a position. Finally, lobbying in a coalition does not affect the difficulties interest groups face when forming a position.

7 | CONCLUSION

Most theories on collective action consider the obstacles groups face when establishing themselves as organizations, but few have asked what obstacles for political mobilization remain once groups have already formed. In this article, we addressed this question by exploring the reasons why some groups find it more difficult to establish a position on policy issues than others. Our findings illustrate that, in contrast to organizational formation mechanisms, citizen groups find it easier to come to a position than business groups. The values and ideals pursued by citizen groups in the initial stage of collective action are often directly connected to policy goals, whereas material benefits are not necessarily policy related but rather are oriented toward maximizing profits or reducing costs. After the potentially difficult and politically inspired organizational formation part of collective action, citizen groups position themselves more easily than business organizations when the European Commission proposes new legislation. Moreover, the media attention an issue receives amplifies this effect. As policy processes become more salient, business groups experience more difficulties in positioning themselves, which is not true for citizen groups. Finally, our results demonstrate that groups funded by the government face more difficulties in establishing positions.

Our findings speak to several debates. First, the current literature on interest group formation and political activity often conflates the drivers for the formation of organizations with factors underlying policy activities (e.g., Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; Beyers, 2002; Dür & Mateo, 2012; Klüver, 2012; Leech et al., 2005; Lohman, 1998). For instance, many have attributed the dominance of business groups in Washington and the EU to the Olsonian collective action problems these groups face and have noted that this dominance is likely to translate into effective political action and efficient lobby interventions. In most cases, the groups that become active in these policies exist long before they mobilize politically. Therefore, we need to attend to obstacles groups face when mobilizing on policy cases, rather than simply attending to their organizational establishment and maintenance

strategies. We have shown that distinct types of collective action problems underlie organizational formation and policy positioning and that these parts are *not* necessarily cumulative. While we do not claim that our study completely dismisses the notion that certain cumulative effects still exist, either in different contexts or on different indicators, our findings warrant increased attention to differences between these distinct stages in collective action. In future research, we recommend that research designs focus more on connecting the organizational formation and maintenance activities with the policy-oriented activities of groups (see also Jordan & Halpin, 2012).

Second, our findings bridge studies on mobilization and *influence*. Recent studies, in contrast to earlier studies on the structural power of business, have found that business interest groups are not more influential in political decision making than civil society groups (De Bruycker, 2018; Dür, Bernhagen, & Marshall, 2015). Yet, as follows from Olson's model of collective action, we observe that there are far more business groups able to overcome the organizational formation part of collective action. The literature is still in disagreement about how to link these contradictory findings. By highlighting the opposing mechanisms between the organizational formation and the policy positioning portions of collective action, we provide a potential link between these puzzling observations. These findings also help explain why business lobbies are less successful when lobbying under salient conditions (Culpepper, 2010). Our findings suggest that this may not only be the result of an unfavorable political context but also internal constraints business groups face when lobbying on highly contentious and visible dossiers. Future studies could more closely examine how internal policy formulation dynamics affect the impact groups have in the political arena.

In this article, we have illustrated that we cannot readily conflate first-stage and second-stage collective action problems, but we have only scratched the surface in this debate. Many questions surrounding the internal collective action problems groups face remain to be explored in future studies. For instance, we have focused on a particular type of obstacle for collective action, namely, the difficulties to establish policy positions. The question is whether there are other types of obstacles for groups to engage in (or refrain from) political activity. Moreover, a key question is whether these constraints can become so severe that certain groups refrain from political activity altogether. For instance, it may be that internal frictions become so detrimental to a group's functioning that political activity is no longer a viable option. These questions are well beyond the scope of this article but are important avenues for future research to further validate our findings.

Moreover, while our theoretical rationale is not tied to the EU case, we cannot generalize our empirical findings to domestic or global settings without additional research. Indeed, the EU is a case in which collective active problems are "most likely" to emerge, but our argument can be applied and empirically tested in other polities. That is, the validity of the logic of collective action refers to group formation rather than policy positioning, and this challenges the common wisdom on why business organizations are more politically active. Ample empirical evidence shows that business groups still dominate politically active interest group populations (Binderkrantz, Bonafont, & Halpin, 2017; Wonka et al., 2010). Our study suggests this domination is not (only) a result of collective action problems, but we cannot yet offer alternative explanations with the data at hand. Although business groups face greater difficulty in establishing a position, this may not render them incapable of political mobilization and may still allow them to prevail in policy debates.

From a normative perspective, our findings provide a silver lining for those who see the EU as a business-driven entity. Our study suggests that business groups face substantial constraints in forging internal consensus and in coordinating policy positions. This suggests that self-interested or economically interested business associations are, compared to citizen groups, relatively inefficient vehicles for advocacy campaigns.

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ENDNOTES

¹These are: *European Voice*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Agence Europe*, *Le Monde*, and *Financial Times*.

²A total of 40 proposals were dropped because no lobbying activity was identified in the EU-level media or in interviews carried out with the Commission. Another 8 proposals were dropped because no interest groups could be convinced to interview or because nobody in the contacted organization remembered enough about the specific proposal. For 12 other proposals, we conducted telephone interviews, but no face-to-face interviews were conducted. This left us with 66 proposals for which interviews were conducted. Some groups were interviewed twice or more if they were identified as crucial actors in several proposals. As described elsewhere (Beyers et al., 2014), the main goal of the interview project was to interview EU-level interest organizations on each side of the issues identified for the legislative proposals.

³In total we identified, through interviews with Commission officials, members of the European Parliament, and interest group representatives, 339 issues connected to the 125 sampled legislative proposals. Within the same project, extensive interviews were also conducted with 95 experts in the Commission and 29 officials in the European Parliament. We were unable to interview interest groups for all 339 issues because some issues were only relevant for the European Parliament or the European Commission.

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