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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

No borders, no bias? Comparing advocacy group populations at the national and transnational levels

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Abstract

Why are some advocacy group populations biased towards business interest representatives? In this paper, we assess an underexplored source of variation in advocacy populations, namely the governance level at which advocacy populations are located. More precisely, we analyse whether national advocacy group populations are more likely to contain relatively large proportions of business interest associations compared to transnational advocacy group populations. We examine three competing hypotheses: (1) biases are stronger at the national level than the global level, (2) biases are more pronounced at the global level than the national level and (3) no differences emerge in business mobilization across the national and transnational levels. We test our hypotheses based on a novel dataset of national, European Union (EU) and global advocacy group populations. Our results indicate that the global level is different from the EU and national levels, in that it contains relatively low proportions of business interest representatives.

Keywords Advocacy groups · Interest groups · INGOs · Business bias · Comparative politics

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Introduction

The ‘biased’ nature of interest representation before government is one of the perennial and central concerns driving the study of advocacy groups (e.g. Lowery et al. 2015; Schattschneider 1960). In a typical policy process, we find larger numbers of organizations that represent business interests than organizations with citizens as constituents (e.g. Berkhout et al. 2017). The relative presence of business interest representatives matters. Whoever sings in the chorus of group politics determines whose interests have a voice, and whose interest may gain access to the policy process, let alone exert influence on its outcome. As any lobbyist is to likely state, ‘If you are not at the table, you may be on the menu’.

However, the extent of advocacy group bias is notoriously difficult to identify given that the actual distribution of interests in society is conceptually and empirically impossible to determine (Lowery et al. 2015). Nevertheless, as a second-best approach, the assessment of bias (1) ‘should always entail comparison across time, jurisdictions or venues’ (Lowery and Gray 2004: 21) and (2) should be founded on existing population ecological models of advocacy groups density given that ‘inequalities in interest representation are deeply political’ (Lowery and Gray 2016: 52). To accommodate these objectives, we compare the *relative* share of business groups that are active in advocacy group populations *across* different jurisdictions: the national, the EU and the transnational levels. This comparison allows us to explore whether transnational politics is more or less skewed towards business interest than regional or national politics.

This systematic multi-level comparison is important for several reasons, also identified in introduction to this special issue (Dellmuth and Bloodgood 2019). First, although a focus on ‘business bias’ is one of the most common themes in the study of interest group politics, it is not in the study of International Relations (IR) (see Hanegraaff et al. 2012; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2017). In the latter area, bias is certainly a key concept; however, it commonly refers to the traditional IR focus on relations between countries and assesses the relative presence of non-state actors from developed and developing countries or across different types of NGOs (i.e. resources, insider status, etc.). We, however, hardly ever encounter direct comparisons between business groups and NGOs (but see Steffek et al. 2007; Hanegraaff et al. 2012; Nordang-Uhre 2014; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2017). We contend that business bias is also relevant for the IR literature. That is, NGOs, the more common foci of IR scholars, do not advocate in a vacuum, but often stand on opposite side of business organizations in policy conflicts. This means that a comparison must be made of business lobby activity at distinct levels of government in order to understand the role, impact and effectiveness of NGOs in global politics. Moreover, the relative presence of several types of non-state actors fundamentally shapes the organizational environment of international institutions, the nature of the transnational policy process and the likelihood and legitimacy of particular political outcomes. For instance, in its practices to engage with ‘civil society actors’, the European Commission attempts to increase its ‘input legitimacy’ for various policy initiatives (e.g. Greenwood 2007). The potential intermediary function of interest associations is especially important to venues that are largely outside of direct electoral or party political control, such as non-domestic politics. Civil society actors end up being the de facto only non-state watchdogs of transnational policy-making. At this point, however, we are mostly left in the dark about the relative scope of mobilization of business groups and NGOs at the transnational level. Second, comparativists struggle to identify the potential effects of the hospitable or hostile institutional environments on the relative presence of business and other groups in the relevant advocacy group populations. Hence, the issue of how biases differ across government levels, and whether one system is more prone to business dominance than others, remains unclear. Although we are certainly aware that our endeavour will not allow us to make bold statements on the 'biased nature of transnational politics', mapping the activity of advocacy groups across different jurisdictions is a necessary first step to this end (see Lowery et al. 2015).

In line with the objective of this special issue (see Dellmuth and Bloodgood 2019), we construct hypotheses from the IR[1] *and* Comparative Politics (CP)[2] literature. We identify distinct, a priori equally valid arguments that point in three different directions. First, the so-called world polity thesis posits that growing intergovernmental collaboration provides additional opportunities for domestic-deprived interests to ensure that their voice is heard (this thesis is embedded in the broader political opportunity structure literature, see Dellmuth and Bloodgood 2019). This mechanism would benefit non-business interests at the transnational level and should drive us to expect that the higher the level of governance, the lower the level of corporate political presence. Second, by contrast, collective action theory presumes that business bias increases with the distance between constituents and advocacy groups. Finally, recent studies argue that biases across jurisdictions are likely to stay *constant* after controlling for the issues on the agenda of the system studied. Specifically, the scope, salience and conflict on issues are likely to attract particular interest representatives, largely independent of the level of government (Berkhout et al. 2017; Hanegraaff and Berkhout 2018). Any differences we might observe in mobilization at the transnational and national levels are therefore the results of the type of issues central at varying levels of governance and not the institutional opportunity structure at the these levels. We theoretically develop and contrast these arguments and assess them empirically by comparing the proportion of business organizations that are active in policy domains at the transnational, European and national levels.

In the subsequent sections, we first describe the broader theoretical relevance of our paper. We then focus on our more specific question on how business group activity might differ across political levels, and formulate three hypotheses. We provide a description of our data sources and consequently test our hypotheses. We conclude our paper with a reflection on our results, including a link to the core message of the special issue, and a pathway for future research.

[1] This refers to the literature regarding 'INGOs', which more broadly is deeply embedded in the social movement literature (see Dellmuth and Bloodgood 2019).

[2] This refers to the 'interest groups literature', which is rooted in the Comparative Politics literature.

Theory: bias in advocacy group populations

The population ecology approach to group populations provides a theoretically advanced, comprehensive model for the numbers and types of advocacy groups in a given political system (Gray and Lowery 1996; Abbott et al. 2016). This model explains these numbers on the basis of societal, supply factors (area) such as the number of constituents, and political, demand factors (energy). The perspective also includes a number of mechanisms to clarify changes over time (density dependency, varying environmental sensitivity/contextual dependency) (Lowery and Gray 2016). Simply put, the population ecology model assumes that biases in advocacy group populations can be explained by differences in the policy process and between (socio-)economic bases.

In this paper, we focus on particular components on both the explanatory and explanandum sides of the model. First, on the *explanatory* side, we highlight the institutional differences in levels of government. Existing studies heavily emphasize the importance of institutional demand in terms of the information needs of policy makers or the attraction of groups to high-spending policy domains. With uni-level, single-country research designs, such studies do not cover institutional differences between systems as *wholes*. Our study is the first to compare similar types of advocacy communities across different levels of politics. We cannot empirically measure whether variation across levels is caused by discrepancies in institutional structure (the demand side) or factors on the supply side of advocacy mobilization, such as the existence of a fertile membership resource environment. In that sense, we cannot fully specify the causes for the variation we find. However, to eventually understand why the national and transnational levels are different (if they are), one first needs to analyse whether, and how, they vary. Therefore, this paper should be recognized as a first step, certainly not a final step, in assessing biases across levels.

Similar caution is essential with regard to the *explanandum* side of the model. That is, we focus on a very particular type of bias, namely variation in the relative share of business activity in advocacy group communities. This form of bias disregards other types, such as bias in access or influence among advocacy groups. Our interest in explaining business bias is motivated by the normative concerns outlined in introduction. Specifically, concerns about advocacy and lobbying are commonly associated with the influence of major businesses on public policy. Thus, our findings should not be interpreted as more general than our purpose: business *representational presence* across political *jurisdictions*.

Bias across levels: three competing hypotheses

We have several expectations regarding variation in business activity across the national, EU and transnational levels. In line with the objective of the special issue, we assess hypotheses with a strong theoretical foundation and empirical track record in both the IR literature and CP literature (e.g. Keck and Sikkink 1998; Dür and Mateo 2014). Nevertheless, the relative isolation within which these subfields operate seems to have contributed to the diverging empirical *findings*. Our first hypothesis is commonly empirically supported in IR, whereas the latter two, contrasting hypotheses find support in comparative studies on interest groups (i.e. in the CP literature). However, none of these hypotheses, individually or collectively, have been fully assessed, partly due to a lack of comparative data. More precisely, we do not find a single study that has actually compared advocacy populations across three governance levels. We specify our hypotheses in turn.

The first hypothesis is the *world polity hypothesis*. The so-called world polity thesis posits that growing intergovernmental connections and the increasing transnational mobilization by non-state interests provide additional opportunity for domestic-deprived interests to ensure that their voice is heard internationally (Finnemore 1996; Barnett and Finnemore 2004). As classically noted by Keck and Sikkink (1998), the losers of a political conflict have an incentive to shop for a more favourable venue [see for an EU application (and rejection) of this 'boomerang' hypothesis: Beyers 2002; Kriesi et al. 2007]. To illustrate, if an environmental NGO is confronted with a government that is unwilling to adopt necessary climate policies, it has the opportunity to mobilize at the EU or transnational level. This may lead to international pressure on national governments to adopt relevant climate policies. NGOs can thus shop for a more receptive venue with the aim to indirectly influence national policies. In this manner, the welcoming nature of global political opportunity structures should produce relatively more balanced patterns of transnational mobilization than we observe in domestic political systems. Business groups tend to outnumber NGOs at domestic political institutions; thus, domestic NGOs rather than business interest organizations should largely be the ones to attempt to 'shop' for a more favourable international venue to put pressure on their domestic governments. This perspective implies that we are likely to witness relatively large numbers of NGOs that have 'fled' the domestic, inhospitable political environment and are active in a more welcoming transnational environment where a moderately low bias towards business interest representation exists. In other words, business bias should become smaller at higher levels of politics. Some empirical work certainly gives credence to this view. For instance, at climate conferences, one of the few venues in which population-level data are available, scholars observe a reasonable balance between business mobilization and NGOs (Hanegraaff 2015). This finding stands in contrast to observations in other countries, in which we normally see much more business groups politically mobilized than NGOs (see Lowery et al. 2015; Berkhout et al. 2017). Our first hypothesis is that the transnational politics is less skewed towards business than domestic politics.

H1 'World polity hypothesis': the higher the level of government, the lower the proportion of business interest representatives compared to other representatives.

Our second hypothesis combines collective action theory with arguments on institutional strength. We label this hypothesis the *collective action hypothesis*. This hypothesis states the exact opposite of the world polity hypothesis, namely that the relative presence of business is higher at the international level compared to the national level. Similar to H1, it assumes that political opportunity structures are crucial intermediates of biases in advocacy populations. In contrast to our arguments leading to H1, we now recognize that the transnational opportunity structure is relatively weakly developed, rather than only being 'welcoming' (which it still may be). This premise implies that its structuring effect on group populations may be relatively weak and that other explanatory factors noted in the population ecology model (i.e. those factors on the supply side) are likely to be particularly consequential. In other words, weakly developed institutional environments such as transnational politics provide a fertile ground for the relative 'winners' of the logic of collective action. The 'winners' are commonly business groups, which therefore should dominate the advocacy population *more* in weaker institutional environments than in venues where institutional rules strongly structure access to the policy-making process. This is especially in cases where incentives such as (national) re-election or (European or transnational) legitimacy motives lead policymakers to create a relatively favourable structural institutional context for non-business interests. European, and to a stronger extent global, governance is relatively young and still weakly institutionalized compared to national states; hence, we should observe that institutions at the national level are structured in such a manner that non-business interests are attracted to them (e.g. via consultation mechanisms) and that the absence of such institutional structuration causes higher levels of business bias at the international and transnational levels. In other words, the relative ease of business interests to organize collectively commonly leads to larger numbers of business interest association compared to other groups (e.g. De Bruycker et al. 2019). This relative benefit is likely to persist in the policy process, unless institutional practices such as favourable access or government to non-business groups encourage more balanced interest representation.

In addition, advocacy groups have room to set the agenda themselves and act as creators of institutions (Kohler-Koch 1994; Wessels 2004: 199–203; Hanegraaff 2015), especially in an institutional vacuum such as on issues at very early stages of the policy process, and in nascent or weak policy environments such as in some transnational arenas. This situation provides opportunities for relatively strong groups to shape the institutional setup in a manner that is favourable for future policy battles (see Hanegraaff 2015). In other words, in this view, advocacy groups are not merely shaped by political opportunity structures but also change them for their own benefit. This argument commonly implies that the relatively strong presence of business interest representatives in a given political environment, in itself, triggers the political dynamics that encourage business interest mobilization, by, among others, incentivizing governments to deal with particular issues in narrow and exclusive policy circles (e.g. Hacker and Pierson 2014; Schattschneider 1960). Several studies suggest that such closing of policy circles also occurs in a transnational context, most notably on trade policies (e.g. Woll

2008). These two arguments lead to our second hypothesis, stating that the transnational level is more skewed towards business groups than the national level:

H2 'Collective action hypothesis': the higher the level of government, the higher the proportion of business interest representatives compared to other representatives.

These hypotheses start from the distinct, institutionally driven, political and organizational incentives present at different levels of government. Depending on our view of the strength and nature of these institutions, these incentives lead to contrasting outcome regarding the presence of business interest representatives relative to other interests. The first hypothesis stresses that transnational venues are more open to NGOs (relative to business interests) than national governments, leading NGOs to be more active at the transnational level. The second hypothesis suggests the opposite. In the following argument, building towards our third and final hypothesis, we posit that most of the differences between levels and venue arise from the *types of policies* addressed. For instance, we expect that venues dealing with market regulatory policies, such as dominant in the policy profile of the EU, will more strongly attract business interest representation compared to other representatives. NGOs are not less welcomed at this level, they simply show less interest.

This is a very different outlook on bias across governance levels, as this explanation starts with the idea that policies rather than institutions structure politics (Berkhout et al. 2017; Hanegraaff and Berkhout 2018). Any difference that we notice in mobilization at the transnational and national levels results from the type of issues on the political agenda rather than the institutional structure. This view is distinct from the former two in the sense that it identifies the relevant political context or political opportunity structures at the meso-level rather than the system or the macrolevel (see discussion of 'meso-level political opportunity structures' in Kriesi 2004). Political issues are located at the meso-level and vary in a lot of ways. However, the most significant matter for now is that the actual *substance* of particular policies attracts more business group attention, whereas other policy domains draw more citizen group attention. More specifically, the activities of businesses steer their interests to directly intersect with economic policies. Citizens certainly care about economic issues, but they also commonly have preferences on various other topics and causes such as human rights protection and a clean environment. At the same time, the policy agendas and competences of distinct levels of government vary as well. Most notably and as stipulated in treaties, European rules and regulation pertain to particular fields of policy and identify other fields as being of exclusive national competence. Similar differences indeed occur at the international level; for instance, trade or environmental policies are more prominent agenda topics due to their international implications.

The distinct policy profiles at any level of government and in terms of the policies acted upon should therefore drive the attraction of particular types of groups (Berkhout et al. 2017; also: Hanegraaff and Berkhout 2018; Leech et al. 2005; Baumgartner et al. 2011). This perspective signifies that any skewness towards business groups might be an outcome of the type of issues that are addressed rather than a function of the system-level institutional prioritization of business interests. To illustrate, environmental policies attract environmental groups and energy companies, agricultural policies attract farmers, and so on. As a consequence, and to revert to the former example of climate conferences, we might simply observe a balance between NGOs and business groups at these venues not because of the level of governance (i.e. national or global) but because the environmental policy domain attracts more NGOs than other policy domains, also at lower levels of politics. In this view, issues rather than political institutions structure conflict and produce biases. The final hypothesis therefore states:

H3 'Agenda hypothesis': there are no differences in the relative presence of business interest representatives (compared to NGOs) across levels of governance.

Research design

To test our hypotheses, we compare the composition of national-level, EU-level and transnational-level populations of politically interested membership organizations. Our data collection strategy is in line with recent mapping studies of advocacy group populations (Berkhout et al. 2017; Halpin and Jordan 2012). Next to the transnational and EU levels, we study France, UK, Germany and the Netherlands. Our expectations deal with the differences between transnational- and national-level political systems; thus, we do not focus on the systemic differences between national-level advocacy populations. Through the selection of four countries considered to belong to different interest representation regime types (e.g. Balme and Chabanet 2008: 28)—UK as a pluralist system, the Netherlands and Germany as corporatist systems and France as statist system—we enhance the external validity of the observed differences between the global level, the EU and the four states. We collect data about associations and aggregate these observations in order to analyse clusters of associations within policy domains (our unit of analysis), given that 'business bias' is always a characteristic of groups of organizations. Also note that we deal with policy domains rather than particular policy conflicts within these (as is the case in, for instance, Beyers et al. 2014). This matches our research interest in the relatively structural, population ecological variation in numbers of organizations present (organization of interests into politics) rather than the more volatile, strategic policy mobilization (active on particular policy issues). These are conceptually and empirically distinct phenomena as policy mobilization may, for instance, be triggered by cue-givers and take the form of bandwagons of attention, whereas organizational mobilization is commonly explained in reference to the organizational resources available in a given environment (and requires 'disturbances' to produce actual political action, i.e. policy mobilization).

For our sample, we combine top–down (policy-oriented) and bottom–up (mobilization-oriented) mapping strategies to construct representative samples of the organizational populations selected. The use of different types of sources reduces potential sampling bias (cf. Berkhout and Lowery 2008; Berkhout et al. 2017). These sources include, first, directories of associations, most notably for the countries: OECKL Deutschland (2011), the Pyttersen Almanak, Netherlands (2014), the Directory of British Associations (2012) and, following the practice of the EUROLOB project, a combination of French lists of associations.[3] For the European level, we use the European directory of Public Affairs (2014). For the international level, we rely on the *Yearbook of International Organizations* (2017). These databases produce relatively similar lists; inclusion is based not on political activity but on the mobilization of groups in a certain geographical entity (see Dellmuth and Tallberg 2017, for a similar sampling strategy).

For our second sources (i.e. 'top–down population'), we include membership organizations that are active in their respective parliaments and sample organizations from the Lobby register of the Bundestag (2014) and from the participants in hearings and roundtables in the French (2011–2014), Dutch (2011) and British (2011) parliaments. The Dutch and British parliamentary lists were generously shared by researchers in the Interarena project (see for further details Pedersen et al. 2015). For Europe, we rely on the register of accredited lobbyists to the European Parliament as can be found in the EU Transparency Register (2014). For the transnational level, we rely on the UN accreditation database that lists all organizations with an official accreditation at any of the UN bodies (see Dellmuth and Tallberg 2017). The data sources are merged per country and subsequently sampled randomly.

We present data on the organizations with (1) members or supporters (and disregard individual firms, agencies, etc.) and (2) with at least some interest in public policy (to identify the policy areas of interest to them, which is required for the third hypothesis). We exclude firms and other individual institutions from the analysis because their political interest is impossible to validly observe from their websites.[4] This is a common practice in non-American studies of interest groups (e.g. Klüver 2013; Eising 2009) and leads us to underestimate the relative presence of business interests at all levels studied, but not the object of our study, the likely systematic differences in bias between the levels. While our coding choice contributes to this underestimation, our impression is that the selective practices of the data sources used are more important in this regard. That is, it seems that, compared to their plausible investments in public affairs departments, individual firms are relatively infrequently invited to parliamentary hearings and are not commonly targeted by the publishers of associational directories (only the EU PA directory includes them). For a valid study of the relative presence of individual firm lobbyists, one probably

[3] More specifically, the French sampling frame includes the 133 members (*Titulaire* and *Suppleant*) of the *Le conseil national de la vie associative*¸ the 220 professional member federations of the *Confédération Général des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises* (CGPME) and the 87 member federations of *Mouvement des Entreprises de France* (*MEDEF*).

[4] This includes 312 firms (62 from the Netherlands, 53 active in the EU, 95 from France, 84 from the UK, 6 from the German sample and 12 from our international sample). The infrequent presence of individual firms in the international sample compared to the other samples suggests that the empirical support for the 'world polity' hypothesis (as reported below) is likely to be even stronger had we found a way to validly measure the policy interests of firm lobbyists.

Table 1 Number of associations by country/region

Entity	Number of associations
France	184
Germany	192
Great Britain	171
Netherlands	138
European Union	252
International	225
Total	1162

needs a fundamentally different data collection approach that is outside the scope of our current study (e.g. see Aizenberg and Hanegraaff 2019). These steps result in a sample consisting of 1162 organizations, ranging from 138 in the Netherlands to 252 at the EU level (see Table 1 for an overview).

These sampling procedures do not produce perfectly comparable samples of advocacy groups. To start, with regard to the directories, in the French case we could not rely on a general inclusive directory and similar to other researchers (Kohler-Koch et al. 2013: 7–8) used alternative lists instead. This approach makes the inclusion of established, professionalized (business interest) associations in the French case more likely than in the other cases. This matter is not only a data issue, as previous research also points to the structured nature of French business interest mobilization (e.g. Saurugger 2013; Woll 2009). Second, concerning the parliamentary data, the Bundestag and European Parliament registers do not require 'invitation' on the part of members of the parliament, whereas the parliamentary hearing data in the UK, France and the Netherlands do. In all cases, there is some effective political–administrative threshold for registration: the EP secretariat requires recurring parliamentary appointments (otherwise guest or day passes are distributed), the Bundestag only administers national federations, and the invitation procedures for hearings tend to be very open but also filter out presumably inconsequential actors. We do not have strong a priori reasons to expect that these political–administrative practices systematically affect the relative presence of business interest representatives. We expect that it systematically affects the presence of (individual) bureaucratic representatives. These are relatively frequently invited to hearings but are less frequently present on the EP and German registers.[5] We exclude such bureaucratic representations such as of the association of municipalities from our measurement of bias. Although we are aware that these lists do not perfectly match each other, they are the most similar lists that we could reasonably combine. Moreover, we have no reason to doubt that this approach causes systematic errors in our sample. Nonetheless, we consider the limitations of our findings in the conclusion.

For our data collection, we rely on information provided on the websites of the advocacy groups. Several extensively trained master students coded the information.

[5] We exclude from policy areas classification (and analysis) 749 representatives from (semi-) public organizations of which 21 are from Germany and 11 at the EU level. Please note that we include a robustness analysis in Table A3 that addresses these differences.

These coders are fluent in at least two languages included in the project and are assigned organizational records from multiple sources and countries. The intercoder reliability test reveals that coders have a fairly high agreement on the policy interest scale (Krippendorff's alpha = 0.71) and especially the group-type variable (Krippendorff's alpha = 0.83). Note that when accounting for co-variation, these scores need not be interpreted conservatively (Neuendorf 2002: 152).

Our *dependent* variable is the proportion of the business interest associations per domain jurisdiction dyad (our unit of analysis). This is, for instance, our observation, through the procedure described above, of 33 per cent of business interest associations in the health care domain in the European Union (see also Tables 2 and 3 in the empirical analysis). We distinguish between business associations and other interests on the basis of the types of members of organizations. Associations with commercial firms as members are business interest associations. Associations with other types of members, most notably individuals or public agencies, are considered non-business interest groups. Coders also classify the policy domains within which the association is active using the major (or minor) codes of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) classification scheme (https://www.comparativeagendas.net/). Organizations may be active in multiple policy fields. In the analysis below, we present only the area that coders judged to be the most important to the organization. The policy domain is the relevant environment within which 'bias' occurs and is therefore the unit of analysis of our multivariate model. Simply put, our dependent variable allows us to distinguish business representation in specific policy domains and across political jurisdictions.

Our key *independent* variable concerns a systemic, institutional effect that causes the variation in advocacy group populations, in particular the distinction between global, EU and national-level political systems. We include this variation as dummy variables in the analyses. More precisely, we incorporate three jurisdictions in our analyses: the domestic level (i.e. France, Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands), the European level and the international level. The objective is to analyse whether the proportion of business groups that are active in each of these venues varies in a statistically significant manner. We also include the level on which the policies of concern to the organization are decided. This approach allows us to assess our 'agenda' hypothesis. The policy agenda topic codes of the CAP scheme are all classified in terms of the level of government that dominantly addresses the topic, using a five-point scale: subnational or national, mixed: national or EU, EU, including Eurozone, mixed: EU or international/transnational, including bilateral and international (see the conversion table in Online Appendix A3).

In our multivariate analysis, we *control* for the density per policy domain, as business bias could be a result of overall density, although previous findings are inconclusive in this regard.[6]

[6] Specifically, at the level of issues, Baumgartner and Leech (2001) suggest that business interest organizations are more likely than others to maintain presence on even very low density issues, whereas Hanegraaff and Berkhout (2018) indicate a higher relative presence of business interests on 'crowded' issues. Density is measured by proportions per policy domain per system.

Empirical analyses

We initially demonstrate the extent to which business activity varies across jurisdictions and policy domains, and subsequently assess our hypotheses in a multivariate regression model.

Descriptive analysis

We present in Table 2 the relative *density* per policy domain at three levels of governance. The data are structured as the relative share of groups per policy field and per jurisdiction. This approach allows us to assess the policy interests of advocacy groups, divided by the three political levels. To provide an example, of all the groups that are active at the national level, 18% lobbied on macroeconomic issues (see first row, first column); of all the EU groups, 16% lobbied on macroeconomic

Table 2 Distribution of advocacy groups by policy domain and governance level

	National (in %)	European Union (in %)	International (in %)
Macroeconomic issues	18	16	5
Human rights issues	8	4	13
Health	14	6	11
Agriculture	4	11	5
Labour and employment	8	1	2
Education	4	4	11
Environment	11	19	13
Energy	2	6	3
Immigration and refugee issues	3	0	0
Transportation	4	5	3
Law, crime and family issues	3	1	4
Social welfare	4	4	1
Community development and housing	3	0	1
Banking, finance and commerce	5	4	4
Defence	0	0	2
Space, science and technology	1	4	6
Foreign trade	1	2	4
International affairs and foreign aid	3	8	10
Government operations	2	2	1
Public and water management	1	1	1
Cultural policy issues	4	2	0
Skewness[a]	**1.6**	**1.7**	**1.0**

The columns add up to 100%. In total, 1162 organizations are included (France, 184; Germany, 192; Great Britain, 171; the Netherlands, 138; European Union, 252; and International 225)

[a] $\frac{n}{(n-1)(n-2)} \sum \left(\frac{x_j - \bar{x}}{\varepsilon} \right)^3$

Table 3 Proportion of business groups per policy domain and governance level

	National (in %)	European Union (in %)	International (in %)
Domestic macroeconomic issues	75	78	55
Human rights issues	4	0	0
Health	29	33	8
Agriculture	41	82	42
Labour and employment	43	0	0
Education	7	10	0
Environment	37	62	37
Energy	82	93	83
Immigration and refugee issues	50	N.A.	N.A.
Transportation	41	50	57
Law, crime and family issues	16	33	13
Social welfare	7	0	0
Community development and housing	26	N.A.	0
Banking, finance and commerce	59	70	38
Defence	N.A.	N.A.	0
Space, science and technology	33	60	38
Foreign trade	100	83	38
International affairs and foreign aid	0	5	0
Government operations	8	20	0
Public and water management	20	100	N.A.
Cultural policy issues	33	25	0
Average bias across sectors	**36**	**42**	**22**

issues (next column); and of all the groups identified at the international level, 5% focused on macroeconomic issues (last column, first row).

We derive several main observations from our analysis. First, systematic differences emerge between the policy interests of advocacy groups that are active at each political level. That is, typical national policy fields include health, labour and employment issues. Other policy fields are central at the EU level, such as agriculture, energy and environment. We find that the groups that are active at the international level tend to focus on issues such as human rights, education, foreign trade, international affairs and foreign aid. On a number of policy fields such as banking and transportation, however, we observe that equal proportions of groups are active across the levels studied. Certain issues match well at two levels, such as macroeconomic issues (across the national and EU levels) and science and technology (at the EU and global levels). In our subsequent analysis, we examine whether these distributions are associated with the topics that are commonly on the decision-making agenda of these jurisdictions.

Second, we notice a highly skewed distribution of groups over policy fields. This observation is consistent with earlier studies (see Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Berkhout et al. 2015; Halpin and Binderkrantz 2011). At the national level, only four policy domains capture half of the attention of the advocacy community (i.e. macroeconomic, health, environment and labour). At the EU level, we observe a similar situation with three policy areas (macroeconomics, agriculture and environment) occupying 46% of the attention of advocacy groups. At the transnational level, we observe a somewhat lower skewness score (see bottom row of table) and five policy fields gain the largest amount of attention (human rights, health, education, environment and international affairs).

Overall, the distribution highlights a substantial variation across policy domains on which groups focus, with typical national, EU and international areas, and policy areas that attract groups at all levels. We now explore the relative share of business presence per policy area and level.

Table 2 presents the exact values of our dependent variable (to be used in Table 4): the proportion of business interest associations per policy domain. To illustrate, the top left column demonstrates that of all the organizations advocating macroeconomic issues at the national level, 75% are business organizations; at the EU level, the proportion is 78%; and at the international level, the proportion is 55%.

A number of important observations must be noted. First, the bottom row indicates the average proportion of business interests per domain in each jurisdiction. The largest proportion is observed at the EU level ($\bar{x} = 42\%$), the second largest proportion is evident at the national level ($\bar{x} = 36\%$), and the international level is the least populated by business groups ($\bar{x} = 22\%$). The difference between the national and EU levels is substantially smaller than the difference between both and the international level. This finding suggests preliminary empirical support for the world polity hypothesis that advocacy communities at the international level are *less* skewed towards business interests than advocacy communities at the national level.

However, this observation is only part of the story. We also notice that the variation across *policy domains* is considerably larger than the variation across *jurisdictions*. To illustrate, the policy domains with a relatively strong business interest presence at the national level (i.e. macroeconomic issues, agriculture, energy, transportation, banking and foreign affairs) have similar levels of business interest attention in the other jurisdiction studied. Although some variation also occurs across jurisdictions in certain policy areas (e.g. the agriculture sector is far more skewed towards business groups in the EU than at the national or global level), the overall trends *across* jurisdictions are substantially more consistent than the variation across issues. This finding suggests that the theoretical mechanism identified in the agenda hypothesis (policies rather than institutions drive bias) seems empirically valid.

Overall, our descriptive data indicate that the relative share of business groups is smaller at the international level than at the EU or national level. This finding is in line with the world polity thesis. At the same time, we also observe a strong variation across policy domains that may explain these differences, as our 'agenda' hypothesis predicts. However, we cannot descriptively disentangle the effect of domains and jurisdiction; we therefore proceed with a multivariate analysis.

Multivariate analysis

Our ‘agenda’ hypothesis assumes that the typical nature of the political agenda in a given system drives the types of interests that are active. Earlier studies on the EU case reveal that issues decided at the EU level more commonly affect the interests of businesses and attract larger numbers of business interest groups (such as in agriculture, energy and transport), than issues in which the national government has sole legislative and substantive competence (such as in education, social welfare and community development) (Berkhout et al. 2017). A similar logic may occur at the international level, where most activity is on issues with relatively low business activity more generally, such as human rights, health and foreign aid.

To make sure that this ‘policy-level’ effect does not drive the results, we model the proportion of business groups that are active in each policy field as the dependent variable, and explain this variable by the *jurisdiction* of the population (i.e. national, EU or global), the *density* of policy communities and the *competence* of the policy field (ranging from national to global, see Online Appendix). The model is estimated in a multi-level manner with fixed effects for the 21 policy fields. This makes it possible to control for unobserved systematic differences between policy areas (which are likely, given the substantial policy area similarities reported in Tables 2 and 3). The results are presented in Table 4. As a robustness check, we provide a different modelling strategy (fractional logit regression, see Online Appendix A1). Remember that the distribution of our dependent variable is highly skewed (see Table 2), and therefore, a fractional logit model potentially produces better specified estimations. The results are similar, and we therefore choose to present the simplest

Table 4 OLS regression estimates of the proportion of business interests per policy field

	(1)	(2)
Intercept	0.190*** (0.051)	0.267* (0.151)
Governance level		
International (ref.)	Ref.	Ref.
National	0.138** (0.057)	0.131** (0.058)
European Union	0.208*** (0.073)	0.208*** (0.073)
Density		0.586 (0.796)
Competence (H3)		−0.056 (0.073)
Observations	116	116
R^2	0.28	0.32
F-test	2.43	4.39
Prob. > F	0.05	0.01

The model is linear regression with fixed effects at the level of policy fields (N = 21, not displayed)

Significance: *p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

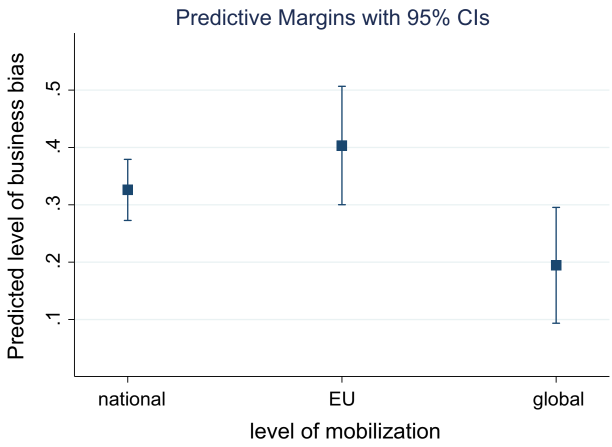

Fig. 1 Predicted business bias per level

model. In Online Appendix, we also report an alternative organization-level model (see Online Appendix A2). We present the main model and the main model with control variables to assess whether any change in the results occurs.

In all three models, we observe a substantial and statistically significant difference in business activity across jurisdictions. The positive and significant coefficient reported under governance level indicates that at the international level, we find smaller proportions of business interest groups than at the national and EU levels. Model 1 restates our earlier descriptive observation of this difference. The insignificant coefficients on density and competence reported in the bottom rows of model 2 denote that business bias is unaffected by the total number of interest group representatives in a given policy domain and business bias is also not larger in domains where decision-making commonly occurs at relatively high levels of governance. The density finding is in line with the inconclusive state of the literature on this topic, with some studies finding a negative relationship (Baumgartner and Leech 2001) and other studies establishing a positive one (Hanegraaff and Berkhout 2018).

To assess the size of the difference between the levels, we present a marginal effects plot based on model 2 in Fig. 1. The figure illustrates that the predicted proportion of business groups that are active at the international level is approximately 20%. The proportion at the national level is 33%, whereas it is roughly 40% at the EU level. Nevertheless, the overlapping confidence intervals indicate that the difference between the EU and the national levels is not significant. This finding is in line with earlier work (see Berkhout et al. 2017). The difference between the international level, on the one hand, and the EU and national levels, on the other hand, is statistically and substantially significant. These analyses imply that the transnational level has lower relative numbers of business interest representatives than the EU and national levels, when we also control for the issues on the agenda at these distinct levels. Importantly, this finding is confirmed if we rely on a fractional logit regression (see Online Appendix A1) or use a different, actor-centred modelling strategy (see Online Appendix A2). Our analysis provides substantial empirical support for the world polity hypothesis (H1).

Conclusion

We started this paper by stating that the 'bias question' is one of the most central issues in the interest group literature. Notwithstanding the vast attention to this issue, studies that analyse how bias differs across the national and international levels are lacking. We proposed three hypotheses to explain potential variation across these jurisdictions, which all have a strong embedding in the broader IR or CP literature.

We find that business bias becomes smaller at higher levels of politics. This finding strongly supports the world polity hypothesis. The welcoming nature of global political opportunities apparently results in relatively balanced patterns of transnational mobilization. After controlling for several issue characteristics, we observe that the business interest community is less active at the international level compared to the national level. However, our data cannot precisely tell us about the motivations of advocacy groups to be present at a given level. Future studies could therefore assess the exact mechanism that underlies the pattern observed. More precisely, they could ascertain whether groups 'flee' inhospitable national interest systems or whether these groups are largely attracted to transnational opportunities.

The collective action hypothesis states that business bias is relatively strong at the international level. In weaker institutional venues, we should expect the relative 'winners' of the logic of collective action, commonly business groups, to dominate the advocacy group population. We find no evidence for this hypothesis. However, we are not ready to fully reject the hypothesis. Under particular circumstances, strong advocacy actors may manage to control the institutional setup in such manner that they can exclude the meaningful participation of others. Future studies could therefore assess such practices at relatively low levels of aggregation (i.e. on particular issues rather than policy domains) and include data on relatively 'narrow' policy circles or venues.

The agenda hypothesis states that bias is deeply entrenched in policy fields. The distinct policy profile of any level of government drives the attraction of particular types of groups (see Berkhout et al. 2017). In this view, 'policy drives politics' and policy characteristics rather than political institutions primarily structure conflict and produce biases. Our observation that the proportion of business groups varies much more systematically and to a greater extent across policy areas rather than across jurisdictions confirms this expectation. This pattern signifies that issues are indeed key sources of bias. Nevertheless, the issue effect does not mitigate the difference across the international and lower levels of government. This result is in contrast to studies on the EU case (see Berkhout et al. 2017). We find that policy agendas indeed affect biases at the transnational level, but the effect is not as strong as the hypothesis suggests. This weakness may be due to the fact that the political agenda at the international and transnational levels is insufficiently specified or strong for a precise assessment of this effect. That is, authoritative decisions in any policy domain are hardly ever fully made at the supranational level. Furthermore, the attraction of advocacy groups to the international level probably does not relate to immediate concrete attempts to shape policy, but such attraction is more diffuse, long term and focused on agenda creation. Future studies could assess these arguments in more detail, for instance by comparing different policy domains at the transnational level, or also consider the characteristics such as salience, conflict and scope of particular issues within domains.

More broadly, our paper connects studies of interest groups politics and IR in two ways (see Dellmuth and Bloodgood 2019). First, we combined theoretical insights from both fields. Both the IR literature and interest group literature have analysed and incorporated ideas from each of the three hypotheses, but the interest group literature has found more confirmation of the collective action (*H2*) and issue explanations (*H3*). The IR literature, instead, tends to emphasize the welcoming nature of global political opportunity structures for advocacy groups (*H1*) that are deprived of political opportunities in domestic political environments. We also empirically combined a focus on the national and EU levels with the international level, the main emphasis of IR scholars. We believe this endeavour has been fruitful, as both fields provide a unique perspective on a relatively similar area of interest.

Nevertheless, our study also leaves unanswered several questions on the nexus between IR and interest group studies. In addition to the aforementioned directions of research, we deem that further research is necessary on at least a few questions. First, we could not precisely identify *why* the transnational domain is more receptive to non-business organizations compared to business organizations. Our analysis provides a largely descriptive account of business mobilization at each governance level per policy domain. That is, we demonstrate the important differences across these jurisdictions, but we rely on theoretical arguments rather than empirical observations about the exact reasons for these differences. As argued, our 'best guess', building on the world polity thesis, is that it has to do with the particular political opportunity structures of the global domain relative to national politics. We assume that national opportunity structures are rather inhospitable to citizen groups and international opportunities are relatively favourable to them, whereas the reverse opportunity arrangements apply to business interest organizations. Indeed, earlier studies indicate that many business groups, at least those business groups from developing countries, are less frequently active at the international level, because they have such strong influence on the positions of national governments on global issues (Hanegraaff 2018). As stated, we require more specific empirical studies on this mechanism.

Moreover, we assume that interest communities are located in distinct jurisdictions. Although this assumption is valid to some extent (groups are targeting the EC, the UN or their national governments), these communities are fluid and overlapping in many instances (see Berkhout et al. 2018). How this fluidity might affect our results would be interesting to consider. For instance, pivotal questions could address the following points: Do advocacy groups coordinate among each other about the relative attention they pay to particular institutional levels? Are groups active at multiple levels at once? Do particular national groups financially support the establishment and maintenance of groups at higher or lower levels of government? We welcome studies that examine these complex mechanisms underlying the biased nature of global politics.

Third, we analysed a very particular type of 'bias', namely bias in terms of the relative presence of different types of advocacy groups at several governance levels. Other patterns of bias are not explored, such as the access or influence these groups have on global decision-making (see Lowery et al. 2015). Pertinently, one could rely on a different operationalization of diversity in interest communities. We made a distinction between business interests and other groups, which is relatively common in the interest group literature. However, the IR literature teaches us that many more types of diversity may be explored, including the variation in the organizational authority of groups and how this characteristic affects their presence at the international level (Stroup and Wong 2017), the types of networks groups engage in Keck and Sikkink (1998) and the hierarchy among advocacy groups at the international level, such as those from the global North and South. Also, our conceptualization of business bias could be extended to include firms. We focused on membership groups because the political priorities of firms are not easily identifiable. But, as several studies highlight, we do not have conceptual reasons to exclude them and firms increasingly lobby individually (see Aizenberg and Hanegraaff 2019). These questions once again are beyond the scope of this paper, but they are important avenues for future research.

Last, we are hesitant to support the idea that democratic governance, at any level of government, may be strengthened by including various stakeholders in the decision-making process. As our study shows, the set of interests organized around particular domains and at distinct levels varies a great deal, and the nature of that variation suggests that it is unlikely to be fully reflective of the actual variation in interests in society. It seems to be driven by particular (institutional) demands, needs or opportunities on the part of policy makers, rather than actual concerns, needs or interests in society. This is a pessimistic conclusion, which in our view deserves even more serious scrutiny in future studies.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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