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Berkhout, J.

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Interest Group Populations

Joost Berkhout, University of Amsterdam, November 2019

Definition

Scholars from a number of disciplines have shown interest in the enumeration of the interest groups active in particular political systems or the numbers of associations present in a given civil society (e.g. Halpin and Jordan, 2012). Descriptive 'maps' of the group population are of critical importance for a range of substantive scholarly interests and is a commodity for several adjacent research methods such as surveys, elite interviewing and issue sampling. This map will look somewhat different depending on the research interest at stake, and researchers will have to define the limits of their population, critically assess the adequacy of data sources available, and decide upon characteristics and categories of classification.

Introduction:

Mapping interest groups in a given setting have preoccupied scholars from a number of disciplines. The motivation to map the interest group population varies substantially across the disciplines. Students of public policy eventually would like to know whether the structure of the group-system is conducive to effective governance or a recipe for institutional sclerosis, as noted by Olson (1982). Political scientists depart from population data to, eventually, address inequalities of interest representation (e.g. Lowery, Gray and Halpin, 2015), or, assess the closed nature of the political process, the proverbial 'bubble' in Brussels, the Old Boys Networks on the Beltway or the 'Bell Jar' in The Hague (cross reference: entry on population ecology). Sociologists are interested in the density of associations as indicator for the quality of voluntary associational life and its potentially positive effects on social cohesion and the social capital of individual citizen active. They also assess the organizational density of particular movement industries, for instance, to assess the tactical specialisation of individual organizations (e.g. Soule and King, 2008). Last, the research interest of organizational theorists commonly focuses on the relative control of organizations over critical environmental forces (e.g. Hannan and Carroll, 1992). There is also non-academic, more practical interest in group populations, such as journalistic accounts, administrative counts related to transparency regulation, commercial 'who is who' directories and so on.

Behavioural versus organizational definitions of groups and populations:

A first step in mapping any population of groups, is to define what counts as an interest group. Attributes of interest groups include being organized, not being part of the state¹ and not seeking public office (Jordan et al 2004). These criteria differentiate interest group studies from other fields in political science such as social movement studies (which include 'unorganized' action), studies on political parties (which focuses on organizations participating in elections) or policy studies (which explicitly include state actors). Furthermore, 'organizational' and 'behavioral' definitions must be differentiated to facilitate the distinct mobilization- or policy-oriented research interests within the sub-field of study of interest group politics. For a more thorough discussion of different definitions see the chapter on Interest Groups.

The organizational definition focuses on the organizational function of bringing together the interests of members or supporters, commonly via voluntary membership associations. A typical example of recent use of this definition of the group population is in the descriptive, comparative study of Jordan et al (2012 143). The Directory of British Associations used in their study focuses on voluntary *membership* associations organized at the national level. This definition prioritizes interest aggregation, i.e. acting collectively to reach certain goals, over interest articulation, i.e. actual participation in the policy process. This means that associations are also included when part of the reservoir of organizations '*potentially* participating in national political processes' (Jordan et al. 2012 144) rather than having actually been or observably are active in the policy making process. Any potential political interest suffices for inclusion, but the focus is exclusively on collective action organizations, ie voluntary membership associations.

The behavioral definition focuses on organizations that actively attempt to influence public policy through direct contact with policy makers. A typical example of the use of the behavioral definition to demarcate group populations are the studies by Gray and Lowery (1996). Such 'behavior'-oriented studies prioritize the political interest or activity over organizational form. This leads to the inclusion of individual institutions such as hospitals, municipalities or firms who lobby. These are, as noted, explicitly excluded from organizational definitions of interest groups.

Some scholars combine these definitions and focus on membership-based interest associations observably active in politics. This may be labelled the 'transmission belt' definition because the equal weight given to interest aggregation and articulation potentially allows the organization to function as a transmission belt between the interests and preferences of members and policy makers. Such organizational 'transmission' or intermediation is conceptually distinct from the more frequently

¹ This criterion excludes bureaucratic actors as lobbyists. Sometimes cross-level or cross-agency lobbying by public agencies is included in studies of interest representation.

employed view that the interest group system as a whole ‘transmits’ or signals relevant societal concerns. Table 1 summarizes the different combinations.

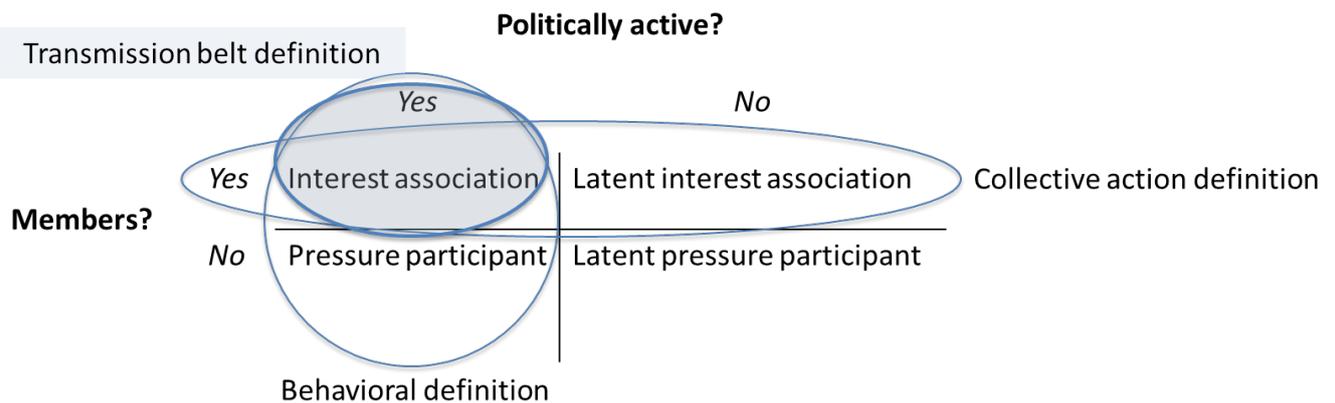


Table 1: Typology of group definitions

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

Bottom-up and top-down approaches to interest group populations:

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

First, bottom-up data sources, broadly following the ‘organizational’ definition above, commonly rely on some empirically relevant category of organizations, most notably non-profit voluntary membership associations, and subsequently focus on those organizations potentially politically relevant. A close to ideal-typical but infrequently used way to work in a ‘bottom-up’ manner, relies on formal administrative registers of organizations and filters the associations from those. There are several of such registers kept by relevant (semi-) state agencies such as the Dutch Chamber of Commerce, the (albeit private) Italian *Guida Monaci sul Sistema Italia* or the Belgian Kruispuntbank van Ondernemingen. Scholars subsequently focus on a particular statistical category in order to filter out (political) membership groups. Such administrative censuses commonly use a classification of economic activity, most notably the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC) which matches with the *Nomenclature statistique des activités*

économiques dans la Communauté européenne (NACE) used throughout Europe. The category for ‘activities of membership organisations’ is S94.² This is sometimes combined with a Boolean search string, among others, to capture the ‘national’ rather than local character of the organization (Beyers et al 2019). This approach departs from the actually, legally existing organizations and includes relatively few thresholds for inclusion. However, it does not cover very nascent or small organizations operating ‘under the radar’ and other approaches are needed for that (e.g. Mohan, 2012)

Somewhat easier, and more frequently employed, is the reliance on directories of associations, such as the OECKL directory in Germany, the Pyttersen’s Almanak in the Netherlands, the Directory of British Associations in the United Kingdom and the Encyclopedia of Associations in the United States (e.g. Johnson, 2014; US data available via: www.comparativeagendas.net). These directories have been, or are still being, annually published over several decades, commonly focus on associations with some national relevance and with classifications that allows for substantive research focus (e.g. dropping of hobby and sports clubs). The directories usually also provide some additional information such as address, name of the chairperson of the group, and so on. There is usually a time-lag for inclusion (and, in case of organizational discontinuation, exclusion) in these directories. Last, researchers have relied on several country-specific registers related to particular regulatory requirements, such as the register of charities in the United Kingdom, the Dutch register of organizations legally allowed to negotiate collective labour agreements, or the members of the French state council *Le conseil national de la vie associative*.

Second, a ‘top-down’ data collection approach departs from the apparent activities of organizations to attempt to influence public policy. This means that researchers depart from observable, formally registered interactions with authorities. As regards the US states, Gray and Lowery (1996, 7) note that ‘the most valid indicator of broadscale political activity now available is provided by lobby registration rolls’ (also at federal level, eg. see: Baumgartner and Leech, 2001; and more recent state data: Holyoke, 2019). The extent to which lobby registers are also valid indicators for ‘broadscale’ political activity depends on the country-specific registration requirements and the extent to which the registration is specific to a particular arena of politics. The voluntary EU transparency register, especially for those entries with a lobby accreditation to the European Parliament, provides an

² This division contains three **groups**: 941: Activities of business, employers and professional membership organizations, 942: Activities of trade unions, 949 Activities of other membership organizations. The four-digit, most-specific **classes** identified are: 9411 Activities of business and employers membership organizations, 9412 Activities of professional membership organizations, 9420 Activities of trade unions, 9491 Activities of religious organizations, 9492 Activities of political organizations 9499 Activities of other membership organizations not elsewhere classified

indicator for political activity with a level of validity that is similar to the mandatory US federal and state registers.

Other lobby registers do not necessarily capture legislative lobbying as political activity. The lobbyist list of the German *Bundestag*, for instance (similar to the now defunct European Commission list of recognized European associations), only registers associations or federations, and formally assumes that (potential) members of such associations do not engage in independent lobbying activities. This means that, for instance, major corporations, local government representatives or regional associations are not included in the list, whereas such organizations are likely to be politically active (and must be included in case a 'behavioral' definition is employed). In such cases, and especially outside of the US, lists of participants in parliamentary hearings may be used (e.g. Pedersen et al 2015), such as the Parliamentary Select or Bill committees in the United Kingdom, different types of appearances in the Spanish *Congreso de los Diputados* and interest groups mentioned in committee-agendas in the *Feuilleton* of the French *Assemblée Nationale*. These provide reliable information on the actors present, but they do not commonly validly indicate the full population active. One misses the groups active in other arenas, without access to legislative committee politics and working on issues that happen not to be on the legislative agenda in the time period studied. As noted above, for most research purposes one needs to use multiple data sources to construct a relevant map (e.g. Wonka et al 2009).

Some political systems also have other formal fora of interest representation such as the (online) consultation system of the European Commission, the public consultations in the Scottish policy process, membership in expert committees (Belgium, EU) and so on. In other cases, researchers have relied on the agendas of government ministers or letters sent to ministries. Furthermore, in particular cases there are also directories available that map the more informal public affairs 'bubble' in government center, such as the Washington Representatives Directory or the European Public Affairs Directory (Berkhout and Lowery, 2008). Last, there are attempts to observe the 'political activity' via newspapers, sometimes via automated content analysis, other times via targeted searches related to particular policy issues (cross ref Aizenberg) (e.g. Binderkrantz 2012).

Most of the sources mentioned do not always provide more information than the name of the organization. This may be sufficient for the analysis of the organizational density, but commonly researchers would like to classify organizations by group type and/or policy area of interest. In some cases, contextual data in the data sources itself can be directly used, for instance, the Encyclopedia of Associations provides a particular categorisation, and the parliamentary committee commonly refers to a particular policy area. However, researchers frequently either rely on a survey sent to

organizations. They use the group population data as survey frame and will collect data on a broad range of topics, especially the political activities of the groups found (cross ref survey; Marchetti, 2015). Others classify the organizations on the basis of online available information such as the websites of the organizations concerned.

The first characteristic that researchers are typically interested in relates to the 'type of group' observed. One usually first differentiates between membership and non-membership organizations, and commonly differentiates (semi-)public agencies and commercial companies in the latter category. Depending on the group definition chosen, these organizations may be excluded from further analysis, or not targeted in a survey where appropriate (depending on the data source, individuals or academic experts are also commonly excluded from the group population). As regards the membership associations, there are several classification schemes around that vary a bit in the relative emphasis on politically-recognized status (e.g. as 'social partners'), substantive sub-divisions (e.g. regarding the cause defended) and social base (e.g. types of interests / members: citizens, workers, professionals, businesses). One of the commonly used categorisations of membership groups is the INTERARENA scheme that differentiates between identity groups, hobby/leisure groups, religious groups, public interest groups, unions, occupational associations, business interest groups and associations of institutions (see chapter on 'interest groups' for further discussion of group classification).

Second, researchers commonly would like to know which interests are represented. Interests may conceptually be rooted in policy areas or in the ideas and activities of members. More to the point, interests are only effectively present when there is relevant interrelation of the activities of government and the activities or intended actions and ideas of group-members. As noted by Salisbury (1992), 'an interest arise from the conjunction between some private value (..) and authoritative action or proposed action by government'. The relational nature of this definition is conceptually convincing (reference to entry on interest / power). It, however, complicates the operationalisation of the substantive fields in which interest groups may have an interest and must lead researchers to choose or use multiple classifications. More to the point, classifications of 'interests' either refers to the 'private values' of members *or* the 'actions of government', or some combinations of both. For instance, an association for the chemical industry may be politically active in the policy area 'environment' as field of 'authoritative action' and, at the same time, its members are economically active in the chemical industry (the 'private value' noted above).

On the one hand, for researchers interested in the resource base of the organization, the classifications used commonly refer to 'private values' of the constituents of organizations. These

typically are sectors of economic activities such as ISIC or, when it comes to citizen groups, causes of political interest such as the International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (ICNPO). For practical purposes, the effective coding of the 'interests' of citizen groups is sometimes done by subdividing distinct causes in the 'group-type' classification. On the other hand, researchers with potential interests in policy outcomes may wish to identify in which policy areas the interests of the group most commonly manifests itself and rely on categories of government activities, most frequently the Comparative Agenda Project scheme (<https://www.comparativeagendas.net/>) and in some other cases the UN-defined classification of functions of government (COFOG).

Subsequently, the distribution of interest groups over these categories merits explanation: for instance, why are there larger numbers of groups active in health care than there are on foreign military intervention? From the mid-Nineties onwards, the field of study of interest group politics contains an important sub-field with a focus on such macro-organizational research questions. Population ecology is the most-frequently used theory to explain the numbers and types of groups in a particular context. It provides a coherent set of theoretical ideas to explain group populations. Population ecology is treated elaborately in a separate entry to this encyclopaedia (see XX). This theory departs from a number of important assumptions: the numbers of organizations depend on organizational resources available (*carrying capacity*) and the organizations already present (*density dependence*), competitive pressures lead to *partitioning* of resources and organizational specialization in multi-dimensional resources *niches*, the growth of numbers of organizations within niches follow a tilted S-pattern, and the *diversity* of interest groups depends on these density-related processes.

Population ecological research designs are relatively flexible as regards the precise operationalisation of the explanatory factors (ie resource bases for organizational survival) and the particularities of the population studied. However, the key empirical challenge lies in the connection between the data on organizations (numbers and types of groups) and the data on explanations such as legislative activities of relevance to particular groups and the size of the potential constituency of particular interest niches. Such connections tend to work best when the interests of groups can be uncontestedly classified, such as is the case for economic sector classifications (e.g. Berkhout et al 2015; Kluver and Zeidler, 2019; Lowery et al 2005).

Conclusion

To conclude, any 'mapping' of populations of interest groups is directly conditioned upon the definition of interest groups used. This determines the types of data sources required. Scholars using

an organizational definition of interest groups as politically interested membership associations will use 'bottom-up' data sources, such as directories of associations. A behavioral definition of interest groups necessitates the use of 'top-down' sources such as registers of lobbyists. In both cases, or when interested in the transmission belt function of interest groups, researchers are well-advised to rely on multiple data sources. For instance, when one has theoretical reasons to believe that interest groups differ among each other in terms of their focus on particular arenas, it makes sense to combine different 'top-down' data sources such as parliamentary hearing data and information of ministerial meetings. For other research purposes, for instance when constructing a survey sampling frame aimed at associations, researchers may be able to rely on existing directories of associations (e.g. cigsurvey.eu).

There are several opportunities for future research: first, one may note that 'politics is not basketball and numbers are not results' (Jordan and Halpin, 2012), and that we should therefore be careful with overinterpretation any map of the interest group system. However, we need not be too cautious in this regard. Descriptive maps are more than lists of organizations, and, especially when multiple data sources are combined, show us, among other things, something about the political hierarchy among the organizations. That is, such lists show variation in the length of time in which organizations are active, the number of venues organizations target, or the breadth of their policy interest. In other words, they help us identify the core and the periphery of the group system, and previous studies identify a law-like skewness in the distribution attention to particular groups (e.g. Baumgartner and Leech, 2001).

Second, most of the data sources mentioned contain information on the organization that is commonly disregarded. These are, among others, the particulars of the legislative committee meeting, the additional information in the associational directories or the names of the persons representing the organization at a meeting or as board-member or chair. Future studies could make more extensive use of this information, for instance by assessing the composition of the lobbying community in terms of the persons working in it (gender, education, career paths and so on) and their relations.

Third, the maps are commonly excellent starting points for relatively case-specific work. This may deal with the development of the interest group system in a particular country (e.g. on Italy: Lizzi and Pritoni, 2017; on Denmark: Binderkrantz et al 2017; on Slovenia: Novak and Fink-Hafner, 2019) or address the particular interest representation in a sector (e.g. on health care: Gray and Lowery, 2013).

Last, existing population ecological models may be employed more extensively. As noted, several data sources can be used to design studies assessing distinct assumptions of the population ecological research program, including its implications to adjacent research questions. For instance, do we find that groups active in relatively crowded areas receive more access than those working on less densely populated fields?

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