The question of interest group influence

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Chapter 1

The Question of Interest Group Influence[1]

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Introduction

Interest groups are a major channel through which citizens can express their opinions to decision-makers.[2] Their participation in policymaking may improve decision-making processes by supporting policies that are in line with citizen preferences and blocking policies that solely reflect the interests of the governing elite. At the same time, however, intense interest group pressures may make it difficult for policy-makers to implement the most efficient policies since such policies often impose costs on parts of the public.

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[1] This chapter is a reprint of:
Dür, Andreas ; De Bièvre, Dirk (2007), The Question of Interest Group Influence, in: *Journal of Public Policy*, 27/ 1: 1-12.
The authors gratefully acknowledge the permission to reprint this chapter granted by Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

[2] We would like to thank the contributors to the special issue for incisive discussions of the issues covered in the introduction in our meetings in Budapest and Vienna. We also are grateful for the helpful comments received from Michelle Beyeler, Richard Rose, Frank Vipert, Arndt Wonka, and two anonymous referees. The Institute for Advanced Studies in Vienna deserves gratitude for hosting our second meeting. Finally, this publication has been possible thanks of the support of CONNEX, the Network of Excellence on efficient and democratic governance in the EU, funded under the EU's 6th Framework Programme of Research.

Competition among interest groups over the distribution of economic gains may also slow down the rate of economic growth (Olson 1982). Finally, if some groups constantly win, interest group politics may undermine the legitimacy of electorally accountable decision making in a democracy.

A normative assessment of the role of interest groups in democracies thus crucially depends upon how much power interest groups have, and how power is distributed among different groups. Moreover, an understanding of the role of interest groups in the policymaking process is essential for explanations of policy outcomes. Finally, analysts trying to advise government on policies also have to be aware of the power of interest groups, as this factor determines the political feasibility of different suggestions. In short, research into variations in influence across groups and political systems is important for a series of reasons. Recognising this fact, political scientists have long engaged in theoretical debates on this issue (Dahl 1961; Mills 1956; Almond 1988).

Over the last few decades, however, political scientists' attention to the question has rather waned, at the same time as the number of interest groups in developed countries has increased (Baumgartner and Leech 2001: 1192). In particular, only very few studies have addressed the question of interest group power and influence for the case of Europe, both at the national and at the European Union (EU) levels (for some exceptions, see Bernhagen and Bräuninger 2005; Henning 2004; Michalowitz 2004; Schneider and Baltz 2004; see also the review of this literature in Dür 2005). Instead, a large part of the field of interest group studies in Europe has been preoccupied with finding out why interest groups use access or voice strategies, why they form coalitions, and whether a specific system of interest representation could be classified as being pluralist, corporatist, or network like (Eising 2004). Others have analysed the determinants of interest groups' access to decision-makers rather than tackling the question of influence head on (Bouwen 2002;

Henning 2004). Although more work on the question of influence has been done for the case of the United States (Fordham and McKeown 2003; Gilligan 1997; Sheingate 2001; Smith 2000), also there the question of influence arguably remains an area of confusion (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 13; but see the recent attempt at resolving these ambiguities in Hall and Deardorff 2006). Last but not least, the potential for coming to generalisations through comparative research on both the US and the EU political system has been left largely unexploited (for an exception, see Mahoney 2006).

The authors in this special issue are keen on improving on this state of the art by renewing political scientists' attention to the question of interest group power and influence. The special issue is the fruit of two workshops where researchers presented specially commissioned papers using different approaches to interest group influence. We met for the first time as a panel during the General Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research in Budapest in September 2005, and for a second time during a workshop held at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Vienna in June 2006. As a result of the repeated exchanges of ideas, the special issue starts from a common core of questions and concepts.

We view the demise of research on the influence of interest groups mainly as a result of the notorious difficulty to operationalise the concepts of "influence" and "power", to construct reliable indicators, and to measure these empirically, whether qualitatively or quantitatively. Early studies of interest group power in the United States were criticised for their alleged failure to take into account the existence of different "faces of power". Initially, criticisms mainly focused on the neglect of the power that is exercised at the agenda setting stage (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). If certain issues are not even on the political agenda, groups interested in them are thereby deprived of an opportunity to exert influence or power. Later, it was

pointed out that some people may not be aware of their "genuine interests", an issue problematised in the debate about the "third face of power" (Lukes 1974; Shapiro 2006). Again, the workings of this face of power could lead to certain topics being kept from the political agenda because actors do not even realise that they have a stake in them. With the theoretical literature on power becoming increasingly elaborate as a result of these amendments, it gradually became more difficult to study power empirically without being criticised for violating some aspects of the concept. The response of scholars interested in empirically examining political processes has been to avoid the topic altogether. Rather than give up on this topic, we endorse a pragmatic response. Given the importance of different faces of power, no single analysis necessarily has to (or even can) consider all of them. Studies may concentrate on the possibility of actors not defending their genuine interests or assume stable actor preferences, as long as authors show awareness that their choice limits the generalisability of their findings.

In this special issue we opt for a common approach that understands power as "control over outcomes", with the other two possible conceptualisations of power being "control over resources" and "control over actors" (Hart 1976). We use the term "influence" to denote control over political outcomes. Our approach regards actors as being powerful if they manage to influence outcomes in a way that brings them closer to their ideal points; thus, we are interested in studying the effect of power rather than in assessing power itself. A political outcome can come in two guises: the official position taken by public authorities or the actual implementation of that policy. Each offers different touchstones for a comparative analysis of actor preferences and political outcomes. This conceptualisation of influence does not attempt to measure an abstract, unobservable object, "power", but focus on its empirically observable effects in actual public policy, *as if* actors were really powerful (see also De Bièvre 2007). The approach assumes that actors have

clear preferences over outcomes. Of course, actors may not voice or have clear preferences at the onset of the policy process, or may change their preferences as a result of interaction with other actors. Despite these limitations, we consider the control over outcomes approach to be the epistemologically most sound and empirically most pragmatic route towards assessing interest group influence.

Factors shaping the influence of interest groups

The existing literature offers a range of hypotheses on factors that may systematically affect the relative influence of interest groups over political outcomes: institutions, interest group characteristics, and issue-specific factors (Dür 2005; Smith 1995; Van Winden 2003).

Variation in influence across institutional structures

Interest group influence is expected to vary depending on the institutions of government that they interact with (Mahoney, this volume). In particular, a series of authors suggest that institutions influence the domestic balance of interests. In this view, institutions may empower or disenfranchise specific interests. To pick one example, the EU's institutional structure may strengthen concentrated interests to the detriment of diffuse interests (Schneider and Baltz 2004). The idea behind this reasoning is that policymakers can give in to welfare-reducing demands from special interest groups only to the extent that voters do not punish them for doing so. Increasing information asymmetries between voters and their political agents due to higher costs of monitoring, then, encourage shirking by public actors. Consequently, the lack of transparency created by the complex institutional structure of the EU should decrease diffuse interests' control over policy outputs. A similar institutionalist argument has been made for the case of the United States, where the delegation of trade policymaking authority from

Congress to the president – an institutional change – supposedly empowered exporting interests to the detriment of import-competing interests (Gilligan 1997).

In addition, institutions may enhance or lower the access domestic groups enjoy to policymakers. The pluralist interest group system of the United States, according to one view, enhances interest group access to political actors. By allowing different groups to have equal access, however, the institutional structure also ensures that specific concentrated interests cannot monopolise the policymaking process, at least not in the field of agriculture (Sheingate 2001). Others point out that several layers of decision-making open up new channels of influence and make it easier for diffuse interests to influence policy outcomes, a reasoning that has mainly been applied to the EU (Pollack 1997; Smith 2001). The existence of additional venues in the EU even can lead to the break-up of established policy communities at the domestic level, thus allowing previously excluded actors to influence policy outcomes (Richardson 2000). This is so because additional layers of government enhance incentives for venue shopping, as actors can try and shift issues to more favourably disposed parts of government bureaucracies (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). At the same time, additional venues may increase the autonomy of public actors by enabling them to use commitments reached at one level to reject demands voiced by societal actors (Grande 1996; Moravcsik 1994; Pappi and Henning 1999). Following this line of reasoning, the president of the United States may have delegated specific authority to the North American Free Trade Area with the objective of committing the United States to a more liberal trade policy, thus undermining the influence of domestic groups lobbying for import protection (Goldstein 1996). Going beyond these two contradictory positions, one can hypothesise that the impact of additional layers of governance on interest

group influence may vary across different types of actors (Princen, this volume).

Finally, institutions can shape the resource needs of politicians. Whenever institutions make decision-makers rely on interest group resources, interest groups should gain influence over policy outcomes. For example, institutional systems that create electoral competition among politicians may make them dependent on campaign financing and public political support. In the United States, the existence of a presidential system, which weakens parties, in combination with an electoral system that concentrates electoral campaigns for members of the House of Representatives to relatively small districts, may be particularly prone to interest group influence to the detriment of the general electorate. It may well be that this direct electoral accountability raises politicians' reliance on moneyed interests for their re-election (Mahoney, this volume). In contrast, multi-member districts and coalition governments, as they often occur in European political systems, may make political parties stronger and less dependent on organised interests. Interestingly, in the case of the European Commission it may be the *lack* of direct electoral competition, and thus of procedural legitimacy, that increases this actor's eagerness for input from societal groups. In addition, relative to its extensive policy agenda, the European Commission can be understaffed and more dependent on outside input and information than other institutions (McLaughlin, Jordan and Maloney 1993).

Variation in influence across interest groups

Several hypotheses link interest group characteristics to groups' influence over policy outcomes. Groups with more resources should, *ceteris paribus*, have more influence than groups with little resources. Following Dahl (1961: 226), resources can be defined as "anything that can be used to sway the specific choices or the strategies of another individual." Interest groups may have

different types of resources: campaign funding, information on constituency interests, expertise on policy issues, and information on the opinions of other policy makers. As long as politicians depend on resources either for re-election or to achieve their policy aims, interest groups may exchange their resources for influence over outcomes. Domestic groups disposing of private information may thereby gain influence over policy outcomes (Henning 2004; Lohmann 1998). When all interest groups are endowed with the same resources, however, politicians are likely to play out one group against another, making sure that interest groups cannot exchange their resources for influence. Under some circumstances, interest groups may even depend on resources from the state for their organisational survival, making them available for instrumentalisation by public actors.

Influence may also vary according to the type of actor, namely whether or not a group defends diffuse or concentrated interests (Dür and De Bièvre, this volume; Mahoney, this volume). Diffuse interests should find it more difficult to get organised than concentrated interests (Olson 1965). In the extreme case, such interests can influence political outcomes only through elections as they are unable to overcome collective action problems. Interest groups defending diffuse interests may also be disadvantaged to the extent that specific resources, such as money or expertise, are important. The general expectation is for nongovernmental organisations to be less well endowed with these resources than concentrated interests. By contrast, groups defending diffuse interests may have an advantage whenever they can make use of grassroots members and the possession of the "moral high ground". Business groups, as a specific subtype of concentrated interests, can benefit from firms' structural power. They can use firms' threats to relocate investment and employment across borders to gain influence (Frieden and Rogowski 1996; Bernhagen and Bräuninger 2005). Such structural power, however, does not necessarily run counter to diffuse interests, at least if it

leads to the implementation of policies that increase the competitiveness of an economy.

Variation in influence across issues

The most important distinction explaining why interest group influence varies from one issue or policy field to another is that between distributive, regulatory, and redistributive policies (Lowi 1964), since the type of policy should influence the likelihood of the existence of counterlobbies. Opposing groups are most likely with respect to regulatory policies, where often both sides on an issue face either concentrated costs or concentrated benefits from a policy. The existence of heterogeneous interests among major constituencies, in turn, may open the way for state actors to pursue their preferred policies, by compensating opponents and creating coalitions in support of specific policy options. In distributive policies, by contrast, it may be easier for groups to find coalition partners that all support each other in a logroll, as major constituencies have homogenous interests. In such a scenario, interest group influence should be substantial. As redistributive policies produce diffuse costs for many people, but also small benefits for many people, interest group collective action and hence their influence should be rather small in comparison to distributive or regulatory policies.

Interest group influence may also depend on the salience of an issue (Mahoney, this volume). The more attention the public pays to a specific decision, the more difficult it should be for special interest groups to influence outcomes. On such issues, a legislator cannot easily deviate from voters' interests without fearing punishment in the next election. However, salience is an elusive concept. It may be endogenous to the policy process, if actors raise the saliency of an issue in the public's perception for strategic reasons. For NGOs defending diffuse interests, for example, increasing the salience of an issue may be an efficient strategy to enhance their influence.

The "technicality" of an issue may also explain variation in influence across issues, insofar as it determines the resource requirements of politicians (Woll, this volume). As the level of technicality of an issue increases, decision-makers' need for input from societal actors, such as expert information, should increase as well (Coen and Grant 2005). At the same time, interest groups able to supply the necessary information should gain in influence. Finally, variation across issues in interest group influence may also stem from variation in the strategies chosen by lobbies, as groups do not always pick the most effective strategy to influence policy outcomes.

Overcoming Some Obstacles

Several obstacles make the testing of these rival hypotheses in empirical research difficult. This special issue seeks to show how these obstacles can be overcome. For one, the problems associated with any attempt at establishing preferences (Tsebelis 2005) makes measuring the degree of influence difficult. Often, it may be erroneous to equate voiced positions with preferences. When different actors are engaged in a bargaining game, it makes sense for them to exaggerate their demands in order to get as good a result as possible (Ward 2004). Therefore, a relatively large discrepancy between final policy outcomes and the positions voiced by some interest groups does not necessarily serve as an indication of their weakness. Instead, a specific policy outcome may satisfy a group's preferences to a large extent, even if it is still far from the group's previously voiced position. In this special issue, some articles find it easier to deal with preferences than others. Illustratively, it seems less problematic to establish the preferences of the tobacco industry in the antismoking debate (Princen, this volume) than of rather diffuse citizen groups in the case of the access to medicine campaign (Dür and De Bièvre, this volume).

Another obstacle is that a group's lobbying may not be the only force pushing outcomes in one direction. If a group takes a position that is also supported by public opinion, its influence over outcomes may appear larger than it actually is, insofar as public opinion is an independent influence. The opposite case is a situation in which a group's attempts at influence are countered by lobbying efforts of other groups, public opinion and political parties. In such a case of counteractive lobbying (Austen-Smith and Wright 1994), the power of a group is likely to be underestimated. One possibility for how to deal with such countervailing pressures is to use counterfactual reasoning (Lebow 2000), considering what would have happened in the absence of the lobbying of a specific group. In practice, this means that the researcher has to be explicit about the model of decision-making that she uses in order for her to be able to engage in comparative statics. The necessity of spelling out the causal mechanism, however, involves a trade off, as it makes generalisations more difficult at the same time as it increases the validity of the findings. In this special issue, all contributors are aware of the need to deal with countervailing pressures. Doing so proves to be particularly straightforward in studies relying on process-tracing, while for quantitative analyses data requirements make it a very difficult task.

Finally, the existence of several pathways to influence (Dür 2005) poses an obstacle for the measurement of influence. Societal actors may try to influence policy outcomes by (1) seeking direct access to decision-makers, (2) influencing the selection of decision-makers, (3) using voice strategies to shape public opinion, and (4) employing structural coercion power. Access refers to interest groups' direct expression of demands to decision-makers (Beyers 2004; Bouwen 2002; Hansen 1991). Influence may also be wielded before the policy process has really started, at the moment of selecting public actors (Fordham and McKeown 2003; Moe 2006). Another pathway to influence is interest groups' use of "voice" to try to influence public opinion

through manifestations, rallies, petitions, press statements, and campaigning (Beyers 2004; Gerber 1999; Kollman 1998). Finally, economic actors may employ structural power by making their decisions on when and where to allocate their funds dependent on the implementation of specific policies. A threat of exit or promise of entry may induce political actors to implement policies that are in line with the interests of these investors without the latter engaging in actual lobbying. In this special issue, contributors pay attention to different pathways to influence.

The collection of articles in this special issue illustrates the strengths of different approaches in dealing with these obstacles. Quantitative studies drawing on a random sample allow for generalisations across issue areas. Studies using process tracing in specific policy fields can provide more in-depth assessments of actor preferences and a relatively comprehensive survey of countervailing forces. Comparisons of several cases are often a good compromise between the more detailed analysis of process tracing and the greater generalisability resulting from a larger number of cases.

Structure of the special issue

Christine Mahoney undertakes a quantitative analysis of interest group influence in the United States and the EU across 47 policy issues, building on 149 interviews with advocates in Washington, DC, and Brussels. She assesses the relative importance of issue specific and interest group variables, and of institutional factors such as electoral accountability and legislative rules in determining the influence of specific societal actors. While she finds some variation between the EU and the United States, issue-specific factors such as the salience of an event and the degree of conflict over an issue play a more important role.

In a case study of public health policy, Sebastiaan Princen criticises the literature that dealt with the question of the effects of an additional level of governance for conceptualising the state and society as unitary actors. He contends that we should inquire which societal and which state actors gain from the existence of several layers of decision-making. Using the concept of advocacy coalitions, Princen suggests three causal mechanisms through which international activities can impact upon the national level: establishing rules, providing new allies, and supplying information that may affect beliefs and expectations. He also sets out a series of conditions under which the addition of an extra layer of decision-making should impact the domestic balance of interests. Two case studies of anti-smoking and alcoholism policies reveal some significant differences. The effect of the internationalisation of anti-smoking policy on state society relations was more pronounced than the effect of the EU taking up alcoholism as an issue.

In a further contribution, Andreas Dür and Dirk De Bièvre ask whether the inclusion of new societal groups concerned with the environment, labour, and development in EU trade policy making has caused a shift in policy outcomes. We theorize that such diffuse interests should not have gained influence over policy outcomes, as they often cannot provide decision-makers with valuable resources. A survey of these actors, and two case studies of the negotiation of Economic Partnership Agreements with developing countries and of the debates over improved access to medicines in developing countries, largely confirm our reasoning.

In a final contribution, Cornelia Woll contends that two problems often cripple attempts at studying interest group influence. First, it may be difficult to establish the genuine preferences of domestic actors. Economic actors themselves may find it difficult to figure out which policy they should prefer, making preferences unstable. This creates a substantial problem for attempts at

measuring influence as the distance between initial preferences and outcomes. Second, the lack of conflict between actors may make it difficult to establish influence. When actors are dependent on each other, they may be dissuaded from pursuing short-term goals in order to maintain cooperation in pursuit of long-term common goals. After studying exchange relationships between business interests and public authorities in three case studies of transatlantic trade negotiations over financial and telecommunications services and air transport, Woll concludes that in certain cases it may be preferable for research not to tackle the question of influence directly.

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