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Forum Section

Measuring Interest Group Influence in the EU

A Note on Methodology

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ABSTRACT

How much influence do interest groups have on policy outcomes in the European Union (EU)? This question is highly relevant for both debates on the democratic legitimacy of the EU and our understanding of policy-making processes in this entity. Nevertheless, because of the difficulties inherent in measuring interest group influence, it has been addressed by only a small number of studies. The purpose of this research note is to stimulate further research by clearly identifying the methodological problems and suggesting ways of how to overcome them. In doing so, I distinguish three broad approaches to measuring interest group influence: process-tracing, assessing 'attributed influence' and gauging the degree of preference attainment. Although the review reveals that all three approaches have their shortcomings, I conclude that the difficulty of measuring influence should not be exaggerated either. Methodological triangulation, 'method-shopping' and larger-scale data collection should allow us to improve on the state of the art.

Introduction

More than half a century ago, James March (1955: 432) stressed the importance of measuring interest group influence when he stated: 'Influence is to the study of decision-making what force is to the study of motion – a generic explanation for the basic observable phenomena.' Little can be added to this affirmation; an analysis of interest group influence remains of crucial importance to the understanding of political processes. The increasing number of groups active in lobbying decision-makers throughout the developed world, for which influence is a major objective (if not the only one; see Lowery, 2007), arguably has even further boosted the importance of understanding interest group influence for the purposes of explaining and normatively evaluating policy-making. The normative implications are particularly significant at a time when governments and international organizations aim at increasing political participation by societal groups. Does this participatory engineering lead to increased influence by specific societal interests?

Alas, little can also be added to March's emphasis on the difficulties of measuring influence: '[T]here is lacking not only an immediately obvious unit of measurement, but even a generally feasible means of providing simple rankings' (1955: 434). These difficulties have meant that only few studies have attempted to measure interest group influence. Two recent surveys of the literature on interest groups in the United States (US) hence consider the question of influence as being 'exceedingly difficult to answer' (Loomis and Cigler, 1995: 25) and an area of 'confusion' in the literature (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998: 13). For the European Union (EU), a recent review even comes to the conclusion that 'there seems to be hardly any research dealing specifically with the policy consequences of interest representation' in that entity (Lowery et al., 2008).

In this research note, I review the relatively small number of studies that have tried to measure the influence of interest groups in the EU. In doing so, I distinguish three methodological approaches: process-tracing, assessing 'attributed influence' (March, 1955) and gauging the degree of preference attainment. The aim of this exercise is to provide a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of different measures used in the literature, to outline ways of improving this literature and to stimulate further research in this area. The discussion is premised on the idea that, although measuring interest group influence is difficult, it is not impossible. Analysing the impact of interest groups on political outcomes is not substantially different from other attempts at establishing causality. Progress on this question therefore is possible as long as researchers make a sustained effort.

The challenge

Influence is generally understood as an actor's ability to shape a decision in line with her preferences, or, in other words, 'a causal relation between the preferences of an actor regarding an outcome and the outcome itself' (Nagel, 1975: 29). At least three distinct problems hamper the measurement of influence: the existence of different channels of influence, the occurrence of counteractive lobbying and the fact that influence can be wielded at different stages of the policy process.

First, measuring influence is challenging because it can be exercised through different channels (Dür, 2008b). Interest groups can shape policy outcomes through *direct lobbying* of policy-makers (Hansen, 1991). They can also engage in *outside lobbying* (Kollman, 1998), aimed at influencing public opinion by way of campaigns and similar activities. Furthermore, they can influence the *selection of decision-makers* (Fordham and McKeown, 2003), for example by getting involved in election campaigns or by trying to have some bearing on the appointment of Rapporteurs in the European Parliament. Finally, interest groups may wield *structural power*, that is, influence decision-makers simply because of the impact that business decisions about whether to invest in a specific area can have on public policy (Lindblom, 1977; Bernhagen and Bräuninger, 2005). As will be shown below, it is very difficult for any method to take into account all of these channels to influence.

Second, the occurrence of counteractive lobbying (Austen-Smith and Wright, 1994) makes the measurement of influence tricky. Even if an interest group does not manage to move an outcome into a preferred direction, this does not necessarily mean that the group lacked influence. It may simply be that it had to counter the lobbying effort of another group (other groups) and was influential in the sense that it avoided an even worse outcome. Related to this is the impact of public opinion on policy outcomes, which has to be controlled for. If a group's position is backed by public opinion, its influence on policy outcomes may be overestimated (Burstein, 1998). Controlling for such other forces influencing the different outcomes is particularly difficult for studies that quantitatively gauge the degree of preference attainment.

Third, influence can be wielded at different stages of the policy process: in the agenda-setting phase, when final decisions are taken or when decisions are implemented. In the 'faces of power' debate in the 1960s and 1970s, influence at the agenda-setting stage was called 'the second face of power' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962), as distinct from the first face of power, namely influence at the stage when decisions are taken. Again, it is difficult for any one project to measure influence at all stages of the policy process. Imagine a researcher observing that a directive that was proposed by the European

Commission passed through the legislative process with hardly any lobbying activity. In light of this evidence, she may be tempted to conclude that interest groups were ineffective. This is not necessarily correct, however, because interest groups might have shaped the contents of the directive at the agenda-setting stage, namely before it was approved by the Commission. The groups then simply had no need to engage in lobbying activity at a later stage of the policy process.

Three methods for measuring influence

Measuring interest group influence hence is a difficult task. In the following, I discuss the strengths and weaknesses in tackling these challenges of three broad methodological approaches: process-tracing, assessing attributed influence and gauging the degree of preference attainment. This discussion sets the stage for an analysis of how we may be able to improve on the state of the art.

Process-tracing

Process-tracing is the most frequently used approach to measuring interest group influence in the EU (see, for example, Cowles, 1995; Warleigh, 2000; the contributions in Pedler, 2002; Dür and De Bièvre, 2007; Michalowitz, 2007). As defined by two advocates of this approach, the 'method attempts to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable' (George and Bennett, 2005: 206). In other words, scholars using process-tracing try to uncover the steps by which causes affect outcomes. With respect to measuring interest group influence, scholars scrutinize groups' preferences, their influence attempts, their access to decision-makers, decision-makers' responses to the influence attempts, the degree to which groups' preferences are reflected in outcomes and groups' statements of (dis-)satisfaction with the outcome.

Maria Green Cowles' (1995) study of the impact of the European Round Table of Industrialists on the passage of the Single European Act is a prominent example of how this method can be applied to determine the influence of a specific interest group. Cowles relied on the Round Table's access to key decision-makers, the reflection of ideas launched by the group in decisions taken, and the temporal coincidence between the activities of the Round Table and the re-launch of the process of European integration in the mid-1980s to back her case for the causal role of this grouping in getting the Act passed.

If carried out well, studies using process-tracing have several strengths. First, in small-*N* studies it is likely that researchers will have a reasonably good knowledge of nearly all factors influencing a political decision. This allows them to take into consideration several rival explanations of an outcome before determining whether or not the influence exercised by specific interest groups had an independent effect on the outcome. Second, many studies using process-tracing rely on semi-structured interviews. Such interviews can give researchers insights into developments that could not be gained from document analysis and/or surveys. The researcher can also probe the interviewee with challenging questions. Again, this should help researchers achieve a valid estimate of interest group influence regarding a specific decision.

Process-tracing, however, also faces a series of problems, which often cannot be overcome even in well-designed studies. Five difficulties stand out: collecting empirical evidence that is precise enough to cover all steps of a causal process; cross-checking evidence gained from interviews against other sources; identifying a yardstick to assess what 'influential' means; avoiding inferences about influence from the level of interest group activity; and generalizing from small-*N* studies.

First, even when using all sources that are available for a specific case – such as documents, press reports and interviewees – researchers tend to find it difficult to fill all the gaps in a causal chain from interest group activities to political outcomes (Loomis, 1983: 186). This can lead to an underestimation of influence if the method is applied too strictly. A researcher may conclude that no influence was exerted because she finds no evidence for one of the links in the causal chain, when actually she is encountering a problem of lack of sources. In other words, the absence of proof may be taken as proof of absence. For example, if lobbying took place behind closed doors, the absence of observed lobbying activity leaves a gap in the causal chain that may lead researchers using process-tracing to deduce a lack of influence.

Second, because of the difficulty of gathering the empirical evidence needed, researchers using this method often rely heavily on claims made in interviews with decision-makers and lobbyists. These claims are not reliable, because interviewees may consciously or unconsciously misrepresent a situation. In particular, interviewees may have reasons to over- or understate the influence of interest groups. As put in a survey of research on interest groups: 'The difficulty [of assessing interest group influence] is, in fact, compounded by groups' claims of impact and decision makers' equally vociferous claims of freedom from any outside influence' (Loomis and Cigler, 1995: 25). Moreover, well-known biases in the recollection of past events (failings of human memory, the imposition of current knowledge on recollections of the

past, the imposition of a narrative structure on unconnected events and so on; see e.g. Schacter, 2001) can lead to unconscious misrepresentations. Although in theory all evidence gained from interviews (or, indeed, any other source) should be cross-checked with other sources, in practice this tends to be difficult. The problem is further compounded if researchers interview those respondents who are most readily available. In the case of the EU, these are most often officials in the European Commission located in Brussels, who may have a stake in a particular reading of an event. The resulting bias in sources is likely to have an impact on the findings.

Third, for studies relying on process-tracing it is difficult to assess the *degree* of influence because a yardstick is lacking. It sometimes appears that interest groups have to be completely dominant for influence to be ascribed to them in these case studies. A case study on the attempts of the Oil Companies International Maritime Forum to influence EU decisions on the maritime transport of oil illustrates this point (Michalowitz, 2007). The forum was successful in avoiding the establishment of a European fund for compensation in the case of oil pollution damage, an issue that it had vehemently opposed. Moreover, the forum managed to push decisions to the international level, again in line with its preferences. Nevertheless, the author of the case study concludes that the group was not particularly influential, since the influence that was exerted 'only touched upon technical questions' (Michalowitz, 2007: 145). It could be argued, however, that as long as the Forum achieved its aims – that is, managed to bring outcomes in line with its preferences – it should be considered highly influential. This example just illustrates that it is often difficult to ensure the intersubjective verifiability of a qualitative judgement of influence.

Fourth, process-tracing leads to erroneous findings if too much weight is given to the level of interest group activity in making inferences about influence. Even when only little activity is observable, interest groups may have a substantial impact on outcomes. For example, it may be that groups lobby little on a specific issue simply because decision-makers adopted a decision that is in line with the groups' preferences. They may have done so to pre-empt a situation in which they have to confront powerful interest groups. An example is the Common Agricultural Policy, where the European Commission is likely to anticipate the reaction of farm lobbies to any proposal for reforms. Neither is it correct to argue that a strong lobby effort should necessarily be reflected in policy outcomes if interest groups are at all influential. Groups may engage in lobbying for objectives not directly related to influence, for example to attract new members or satisfy existing members (see Dür and De Bièvre, 2007; Lowery, 2007).

Finally, because of the data requirements involved in process-tracing, this method can be used only in small-*N* studies. This creates problems when

trying to generalize the findings beyond the cases studied. Although sometimes generalizations can be made based on small-*N* studies, especially if they involve least likely or most likely cases, in many instances this is not the case. Not even the meta-analysis of many studies based on process-tracing will lead to convincing generalizations because the population of such studies is likely to be biased in favour of particularly conflictive decisions, which receive the highest public attention. Moreover, in many studies no reason for the selection of a specific case is given, making it difficult to judge whether these cases are intended to be representative of a larger population.

The 'attributed influence' method

'Attributed influence' (March, 1955) is usually measured by way of surveys. In a survey, a group can be asked to provide a self-assessment of its influence or a peer assessment of the influence of other groups. In addition, a survey can be directed at (it is hoped, well-informed) observers who report groups' reputation for influence. Few such surveys have been carried out to assess attributed influence in the EU (for exceptions, see Edgell and Thomson, 1999; Pappi and Henning, 1999; Dür and De Bièvre, 2007).

A major advantage of this method is its relative simplicity. Although there are difficulties in designing a questionnaire, establishing the population from which a sample of respondents is taken and ensuring a sufficiently high response rate, these difficulties are minor when compared with the difficulties that researchers face when using one of the other two methods discussed in this note. Moreover, the method of measuring attributed influence is likely to capture all channels of influence. Respondents who are asked to assess the influence of British interest groups on the Common Agricultural Policy (Edgell and Thomson, 1999), for example, are likely to give an estimate that takes into account all four channels of influence distinguished above.

Unfortunately, this method for measuring interest group influence also comes with drawbacks, which vary slightly depending on the type of actors asked. Self-estimations can be biased both towards an exaggeration of influence and a playing down of influence. The former may result from associations stressing the relevance of their work to their members, whereas the latter may be a strategy to avoid the creation of counter-lobbies, which may spring up to stem the perceived influence of a specific actor. In peer assessments, respondents may find it difficult to answer a question on the influence of other actors owing to a lack of information and analytic capacity. In addition, the answers that researchers receive may again be strategic: minimizing the role of other actors to reduce their importance or inflating it to create a public backlash. An interesting result of these tendencies can be that self- and peer assessments differ substantially. Non-governmental organizations, for

example, frequently complain about their relative lack of influence over European trade policy, which they contrast with the major influence they attribute to business (Dür and De Bièvre, 2007). Business lobbyists, by contrast, grumble about their lack of influence as compared with the power of non-governmental organizations.

The method of asking expert observers to gauge the influence of different groups also has shortcomings. When asked to give an assessment of a group's influence across many issues, the assessment may unconsciously be shaped by specific, prominent cases. At other times, experts may simply recap the findings reported in academic studies using one of the other methods discussed here (because their perceptions are likely to be influenced by these studies), and in doing so may simply duplicate the problems of other methods. Expert judgements may also lead to the reification of widely accepted beliefs (e.g. 'big companies are powerful'). As a result, only few 'surprising' results will surface from studies relying on expert assessments.

A few problems are common to all variants of the attributed influence approach to measuring interest group influence. Most importantly, this measure assesses *perceptions* of influence, rather than actual influence (Polsby, 1960). In addition, surveys generally do not uncover information on what kind of influence interest groups had (what did they change in the real world?). Furthermore, if the question posed is about generic influence, the respondent is asked to provide an average across many issues, thereby neglecting potential differences from one issue to another. Sometimes, however, such variation may be of particular interest. Finally, problems that affect all surveys are pertinent: deficient respondent recollection, interviewer bias and respondents' tendency to avoid extreme values when asked to provide a numerical ranking on a pre-given scale are just some of the more prominent potential pitfalls.

Assessing the degree of preference attainment

The third method for measuring interest group influence is to assess groups' degree of preference attainment. In this method, the outcomes of political processes are compared with the ideal points of actors. At its most basic, the idea is that the distance between an outcome and the ideal point of an actor reflects the influence of this actor. In more complex approaches, researchers try to control for other forces moving outcomes closer to or further away from an actor's ideal point.

Several studies have applied this method to the study of interest group influence in the EU (Schneider and Baltz, 2003, 2005; Mahoney, 2007; Dür, 2008a). Schneider and Baltz (2003, 2005) analysed a sample of 15 legislative

proposals presented by the European Commission. For these proposals, they determined the initial position of the lead ministry, the final national position and the ideal points of various interest groups in four countries. They then calculated the degree of influence as the difference between two absolute differences: between a group's ideal position and the initial position of the lead ministry in the country, and between a group's ideal position and the final national position. Mahoney (2007) drew a random sample of advocates lobbying the EU institutions and then asked these advocates to identify the issue they had worked on most recently. The resulting list of 26 issues became her sample of cases. To assess influence, she coded whether or not an outcome reflected the preferences of the groups active on this issue. This allowed her to draw conclusions on which type of actor was more or less influential. In my own work, I distinguished 19 aspects of the EU's position in the Doha Development Agenda (2001 onwards) on which interest groups could have had an impact (Dür, 2008a). I then took a correspondence between the demands voiced by business actors and the EU's position across a large number of these aspects as indicating business influence.

Measuring interest group influence by assessing the degree of preference attainment has several advantages. Most importantly, this method can detect influence even if nothing visible happens, for example because all lobbying is secret or because structural power is at work. Through whatever channel it works (with the exception of selection in some approaches, see below), influence by definition should be visible in the outcomes that can be studied. As a result, this measure is more likely than process-tracing to find influence at work. Moreover, the degree of preference attainment can be assessed for a relatively large number of cases. The resulting large-*N* studies, if the cases were selected following the appropriate rules, allow for generalizations of the findings. Furthermore, it is plausible that errors made in the assessment of an actor's influence in specific cases will cancel out across many cases. Finally, even if for each individual case the coding of influence is only dichotomous, the adding up of these values across many cases allows for a measurement of influence at the interval level. This contrasts with process-tracing, where researchers are largely limited to stating that a group either did or did not have influence.

Just like the other measures of interest group influence discussed above, this one also comes with a few drawbacks. The first problem concerns the determination of preferences (Tsebelis, 2005). In some policy fields, establishing the preferences of actors is quite straightforward. In monetary policy, for example, it is relatively uncontroversial to assume that internationally oriented industries have an interest in exchange rate stabilization, whereas import competitors have an interest in devaluations (Frieden, 2002). In trade

policy, similarly, export-oriented businesses and agricultural producers can be assumed to favour trade liberalization, whereas import competitors have a preference for protectionist policies (Dür, 2008a). In studies dealing with other policy fields, or with many issues across many policy fields, however, the preferences of actors have to be established empirically for each issue that is to be decided (Schneider and Baltz, 2003; Mahoney, 2007). This is mostly done by way of interviews, with the problem that such interviews are likely to uncover the – possibly strategic – positions of actors rather than the underlying preferences. Even in interviews that take place after the events under investigation have finished, the participating actors are likely strategically or unconsciously to misrepresent their preferences. Neither are experts necessarily a reliable source of preferences (see the discussion in Dorussen et al., 2005). Since this measure of interest group influence relies heavily on information on the preferences of actors, this is a critical problem.

A second problem with this measure of influence is that it can be difficult to control for alternative factors explaining a coincidence between preferences and outcomes. Some authors maintain that random selection (Mahoney, 2007: 38) or a large number of cases (Schneider and Baltz, 2003: 257) should lead to the cancelling out of alternative explanations. Others try to examine their hypotheses against alternative explanations, using either qualitative (Dür, 2008a) or quantitative evidence (Frieden, 2002). Nevertheless, excluding all possible rival explanations is difficult, whether random selection is used or alternative explanations are tackled head on.

A further problem associated with this measure is the black-boxing of the process through which influence is exercised. Although it is an advantage that this method can consider different channels of influence, it is at the same time problematic that it does not make it clear through which channels influence is exerted. Moreover, some studies using this measure cannot take into account influence that is exerted through the selection channel. If decision-makers share the preferences of societal actors, because voters selected them based on these preferences, measuring influence as the *change* in decision-makers' positions resulting from lobbying underestimates the extent of influence exerted. Decision-makers may also adopt a strategic position, which already takes into account interest group demands. Selection effects and strategic behaviour may explain why Schneider and Baltz (2003: 265) find that on many of the issues they studied there was little controversy, with no societal actors contesting the position of the lead ministry.

At least two problems also arise at the time of quantifying the degree of influence. For one, there is a problem with multidimensional topics, because issues have to be very specific to allow researchers to code whether or not a group was successful. It is plausible to imagine a situation in which a group

manages to influence one specific aspect of a legislation that is important to it, but not the rest of the legislation. This calls for a disaggregation of political decisions to very specific issues; however, the greater the disaggregation, the more difficult it is to get data on the preferences of actors for each dimension identified. Related to this issue is the difficulty of controlling for the salience that an issue has for an interest group when using this measure of influence. If a group is successful on 20% of the issues and unsuccessful on 80%, a simple quantitative analysis would suggest that the group has little influence. It may be, however, that the group is successful on all of the issues that are highly salient to it (e.g. because it invests more resources on those issues) and unsuccessful on those that are not salient to it. In that case, even if the group is successful on only 20% of the issues, it should be considered quite influential. Thus, although the salience of an issue for an actor is evidently a very important variable, measuring it empirically for a large number of cases is very difficult.

Where to go from here?

In short, measuring interest group influence is a tricky business. How can we move ahead and tackle the difficulties inherent in studying interest group influence in the EU? I stress the need for methodological triangulation, 'method-shopping' and larger-scale data collection to allow for improvements on the state of the art.

Methodological triangulation

A first way forward derives from the previous discussion of the strengths and drawbacks of the three methods of measuring interest group influence. If, as has been argued above, process-tracing is likely to underestimate interest group influence and the measurement of preference attainment is likely to overestimate it, combining the two may correct these biases. Methodological triangulation – the combination of different methods in one study – hence may sometimes resolve problems that cannot be tackled in studies that rely on only one method. In fact, several studies have successfully combined two or more methods to study interest group influence in the EU. Coen (1997), for example, brought together evidence from a survey of large firms on the effectiveness of different influence strategies with evidence gained from interviews with decision-makers. Dür and De Bièvre (2007) combined a survey of interest groups with process-tracing to assess the influence that non-governmental organizations have on European trade policy. Schneider and

Baltz (2005) used a comparative case study to illustrate the findings reached in a quantitative assessment of the degree of preference attainment. The 'EAR instrument', a specific combination of the attributed influence method and process-tracing, provides for an even more systematic approach to triangulation (Arts and Verschuren, 1999). This instrument uses the self-perception of actors (E, for ego-perception), perceptions from other key players (A, for alter-perception) and process-tracing (R, for researcher's analysis) to come to a sound assessment of influence.

Nevertheless, methodological triangulation should not be seen as a panacea either. Some of the problems mentioned above are compounded rather than solved when several methods are integrated in a research project. For example, gathering the necessary evidence for process-tracing will be even more difficult if a researcher also has to invest time in applying other methods. This is likely to lead to a further restriction in the number of cases analysed, which undermines the possibility for generalizations. Moreover, methodological triangulation brings up the problem of what a researcher should do if, for example, process-tracing leads to different results from the attributed influence method. How should competing results be reconciled? Despite these drawbacks, on many occasions methodological triangulation is likely to lead to more reliable results than the ones we currently have.

Method-shopping

Not all methods available to researchers to gauge interest group influence have been applied to the context of the EU. 'Method-shopping' hence could improve the sophistication of the literature on EU interest group influence. One such available method is 'paired comparisons' (Verschuren and Arts, 2004), which is a variant of the preference attainment approach discussed above. It involves measuring, for each pair of actors, which actor's preference was closer to the final outcome. Expressed as an equation,

$$PR_i = \mid P_{i0} - FD \mid \sim \mid P_{j0} - FD \mid, \tag{1}$$

where P_{i0} and P_{j0} are the positions of actors A_i and A_j, respectively, and FD is the location of the final decision. A_i receives a score of 1 if $\mid P_{i0} - FD \mid > \mid P_{j0} - FD \mid$, 0 if $\mid P_{i0} - FD \mid < \mid P_{j0} - FD \mid$, and ½ if $\mid P_{i0} - FD \mid = \mid P_{j0} - FD \mid$. In a second step, influence is ascribed to an actor only if preference realization is owing to influence rather than alternative causes, such as coalitions with more powerful actors or external factors. Adding up the scores for each actor across all pairs then results in a set of values that capture the relative influence of all actors on the outcome.

The method comes with several advantages: even in single case studies, it allows for influence to be assessed at interval level; the way influence is assessed is made transparent; biases may be cancelled out owing to the large number of measurement steps involved; and counteractive lobbying can be taken into account in a systematic manner. Although the method is a handy addition to the toolbox available to researchers of interest group influence in the EU, it obviously also comes with some drawbacks. In particular, the data requirements are so high that mostly this method will be applied to single cases only, again leading to the difficulty of generalizing beyond the case studied. Even in single cases, the method may not be applicable if many actors are involved, since the number of pairs that have to be analysed rises steeply with the number of actors (the number of pairs is $\frac{1}{2}n(n - 1)$, where n denotes the number of actors).

Moreover, although the process of measuring influence is made transparent, paired comparisons still rely on a series of qualitative judgements about the impact of external factors and the possibility for bandwagonning on the influence of other actors. Finally, the method disadvantages actors with extreme preferences, because it looks at the closeness between actor positions and final outcomes rather than the extent to which an actor was able to move a counterfactual outcome towards his or her preference. This latter drawback may explain why in the example given by Verschuren and Arts (2004), namely the negotiations concerning the Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992), the US was assigned substantially less influence than the EU and Japan, and only slightly more than the oil-exporting countries.

Larger-scale data collection

Lastly, I submit that it will not be possible to make truly satisfactory progress on the question of interest group influence in the EU without an attempt at larger-scale data collection (for a similar call for large-*N* studies on interest groups in the EU, see also Coen, 2007). A large-*N* project would allow us to better judge the extent to which the findings reported in small-*N* studies are representative of the universe of decisions taken. In addition, we would be able to test issue-level and contextual variables, which have to be held constant in studies that are restricted to specific issues or policy fields. A large-*N* study of randomly selected issues may show, for example, that interest group tactics are driven by the issue context and hence have no independent effect on the degree of influence wielded by groups. The approach of starting with a sample of randomly selected issues would also help us overcome the problem that many existing studies consider only a

specific type of actor, such as trade associations or firms. Finally, a large-*N* project comes with the advantage that it may be replicated after a few years (whereas qualitative studies are difficult to replicate), thereby allowing for comparisons over time.

What is needed for the case of the EU, therefore, is a project similar to the one on lobbying and policy advocacy that produced a wealth of empirical information on interest group lobbying in the US (Baumgartner et al., 2001). In the framework of that project, researchers selected 98 issues by asking randomly chosen lobbyists what issue they had spent time on most recently. They then identified the actors lobbying at the federal level on each issue and asked them about their position on the issue, their resources and the coalitions they enter into. Among other things, the resulting novel data revealed that a group's financial resources are a weak predictor of success in influencing policy outcomes (Leech et al., 2007). Moreover, an interesting finding of the project is that business actors are only slightly more successful than other actors in influencing outcomes.

Evidently, for the EU, a slightly different approach may be needed to identify issues (but see Mahoney, 2007). Particularly problematic for the case of the EU is that, whereas in the US all lobbyists have to register under the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995, in Europe a similar obligation is missing. As a result, it is difficult to establish the universe of actors whose objective is to influence EU policy outcomes. Contacting only lobbyists who are listed in EU lobby registers, for example, will overlook lobbying that takes place through national channels. The resulting bias in the selection of actors who are asked to identify issues may translate into a bias in the sample of issues identified. Another approach for arriving at a sample of issues is to select among the legislative proposals that are included in the Commission's Prelex database (for such an approach, see Schneider and Baltz, 2003). This database lists all proposals, recommendations and communications transmitted by the European Commission to the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The evident weakness of this approach is that it fails to capture potential legislative initiatives that are blocked by interest group lobbying before the Commission takes a decision on them. This selection bias will lead to an underestimation of interest group influence. The selection of cases in the EU hence is more difficult than in the US, but the problems mentioned can be overcome. One way of doing so may be by combining the two methods of selecting issues, therefore correcting the biases that arise when using only one method. Whatever the solution finally found to the problem of selecting cases, a large-*N* project would definitely add new impetus to the study of interest group influence in the EU.

Conclusion

Is the attempt at measuring interest group influence in the EU necessarily doomed to failure? Is researching interest group influence really like 'searching for a black cat in the coal bin at midnight' (as put by a lobbyist, quoted in Loomis, 1983: 184)? My response to these questions is that, although research on interest group influence in the EU evidently is difficult, the issue of influence is too important to be neglected. On the one hand, an understanding of interest group influence is essential for explanations of policy outcomes. On the other hand, the impact that interest groups have on policy outcomes in the EU is central to debates concerning the EU's democratic legitimacy (Greenwood, 2007). Among the many normative questions whose answers depend on the measurement of influence are: can the involvement of interest groups in EU decision-making processes compensate for the lack of party competition for office; and does the European Commission's strategy of consulting civil society at least partly offset the shortcomings of the EU's political system with respect to democratic institutions?

I have also argued that the difficulties of measuring interest group influence in the EU are not insurmountable. Indeed, important advances have been made over the past decade in furthering our understanding of the impact of interest groups on policy outcomes in the EU. Further progress seems possible by tackling remaining problems head-on, being adamant and not giving up too early. Already a better awareness of the problems inherent in measuring interest group influence as outlined in this research note should improve future studies. If researchers were more conscious of the biases that are likely to result from specific methodological choices, they could take them into account when designing their projects. For example, they may combine two methods in the same project or employ methods that have not yet been applied to the case of the EU. Moving forward would also become easier if researchers had at their disposal better data on the universe of interest groups and their involvement in EU decision-making. Indeed, a larger-scale project that gathers data on interest group lobbying across many issues would not only provide novel insights but also make future small-*N* studies more effective by giving researchers some idea of how the cases they pick fit into the larger universe of interest group activity in the EU.

Notes

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