

## **Unpacking Interest Groups**

### **On the intermediary role of interest groups and its effects for their political relevance**

**Adrià Albareda Sanz**

Interest groups are crucial political actors in western democracies due to their ubiquitous presence and participation in the process of formulating, adopting and implementing public policies. One key aspect of the normative value of interest groups in public policy processes is their ability to provide relevant policy input that is representative of their membership-base. In that regard, interest groups are frequently characterized as transmission belts that connect their members with policymakers. In fact, public officials in charge of developing and implementing legislations often interact and listen to interest groups' spokespersons because they assume that their message is representative of the whole membership-base. However, interest groups struggle to reconcile their dual function of representing their members while being politically active. Consequently, the intermediary function that interest groups play is not a straightforward endeavor, yet it has important normative implications as it signals whether those claiming to act on behalf of members in public policy processes are in fact representing their constituents.

In this dissertation I claim that we need to better understand the intermediary role of interest groups and, to do so, we need to unpack how they are internally organized. More specifically, I ask the following research questions: (1) How and when do interest groups organize themselves as transmission belts? and (2) How does the transmissive role and interest groups' policy capacities affect their political relevance? By addressing these two broad questions, I examine the reasons why certain interest groups are more likely to organize and function as transmission belts and, at the same time, the consequences of interest groups' organizational structure and policy capacities for their political relevance (i.e., their level of access to public officials and influence in legislative processes). Ultimately, the dissertation provides new

insights to the intermediary function of interest groups by paying attention to their organizational ability to function as a transmission belt.

Empirically, the dissertation relies on two datasets linked to two large projects: '2-Capture – The Driving Forces of Regulatory Capture' and 'INTEREURO: Networks, Strategies and Influence in the EU'. Both datasets provide valuable quantitative and qualitative data to explore questions of interest groups' internal organizational structure, their ability to function as transmission belts, and the effects of different organizational formats on the political relevance of groups among public officials. Importantly, both projects and the databases related to them focus on interest groups mobilized at the EU level.

In order to address the two-fold overarching research question, this dissertation is structured in two blocks, each of them containing two empirical chapters. The first block examines "How and when interest group organize themselves as transmission belts". More specifically, Chapter 2 conceptualizes and empirically examines the occurrence of transmission belts among the EU interest groups system. More specifically, transmission belts are conceptualized as those interest groups that invest in organizational attributes related to 'member involvement' for representation and 'organizational capacity' to efficiently interact with policymakers. The results of a cluster analysis show that approximately 33% of the EU groups are organizationally equipped to function as transmission belts. In that regard, the majority of the groups only invest in one of the organizational dimensions related to the transmission belt ideal (i.e., member involvement or organizational capacity). Additionally, the chapter finds a positive relationship between groups having a homogenous membership base and being organized as a transmission belt. That is, when the members of the group are more similar among themselves, it is more likely that the group can become organized as a transmission belt by investing in member involvement and organizational capacity.

Chapter 3 takes a step back and focuses on one specific organizational dimensions of the transmission belt which critically determines the representative function and the legitimacy claims of interest groups: member involvement. More specifically, by relying on 32 in-depth interviews with top representatives of interest groups mobilized at the EU level, the chapter examines how and under which circumstances interest groups involve and engage their members when establishing policy positions. The results indicate that unequal resources among the membership-base of umbrella groups as well as issue features shape member involvement in different ways, hence affecting the representative potential of groups. Building upon the results of Chapter 2, the qualitative data also shows that membership diversity, in terms of resources, critically affects *which* members are actually involved in the process of establishing policy positions. In addition, policy issues that generate internal conflict are characterized for having more involvement of members, whereas particularistic policy issues (i.e., those that only affect a subset of the members and thus are characterized by less internal conflict), only attract the attention of those members with a stake on the issue.

The second block of the dissertation examines "How the transmissive role and policy capacities of interest groups affect their political relevance". In other words, chapters four and five address the implications of interest groups' organizational structure and policy capacities for their degree of access among public officials and their perceived influence on policymaking processes. Firstly, following an exchange-based approach, Chapter 4 examines the effects that the two organizational dimensions that serve to conceptualize the transmission belt ideal (i.e., member involvement for representation and organizational capacity to efficiently interact with policymakers) have on the level of access that interest groups gain to EU public officials. The results of the regression models indicate that groups that invest in organizational capacity have more access to public officials, whereas groups that invest in member involvement and those that are organizationally prepared to function as transmission belts do not have a higher likelihood of gaining more access to EU public officials.

Chapter 5 argues that political and analytical capacities are demanded by policymakers when developing policy issues and thus affects the level of influence interest groups have on policy issues. The exchange approach perspective is complemented with a behavioral approach and it is argued that public officials' heuristics and routines affect the perceived influence of interest groups. The chapter shows that political and analytical capacities matter for becoming influential on policy issues' outputs. Yet, it also demonstrates that behavioral routines play an important role as they make those groups that are considered policy insiders (i.e., familiar and regular partners) more influential when the degree of advocacy salience is high (i.e., when many stakeholders mobilize in the issue under discussion). That is, public officials rely more on heuristics and shortcuts when dealing with highly salient issues, which may hamper the democratic output of the legislation as relevant alternative views, perspectives and voices might not be taken into account.

What are the key findings of the dissertation? In the first block I find that interest groups have varying organizational formats and implement different processes to involve their members in policy issues. More specifically, only a minority of the groups mobilized at the EU level are organizationally prepared to function as transmission belts, and those who operate as such tend to have homogenous a membership-base, implying that these groups are rather specific and niche-oriented. Moreover, qualitative data indicates that the functioning of the transmission belt is issue-contingent, that is, it depends on how the policy issue under debate (un)equally affects the members of the group. This brings us to the second block of the dissertation aimed at assessing how the organizational structure of groups and their possession of certain policy capacities affects their political relevance. On the one hand, when focusing on access, we observe that public officials prioritize the interaction with professionalized organizations that are able to efficiently respond to public officials' demands and/or provide policy expertise, which can be normatively problematic as we cannot know whether these groups are actually representative of their membership-base. On the other

hand, the last empirical chapter, which focuses on influence as outcome variable, shows that the capacity to provide political support and legitimacy (i.e., political capacities) as well as the ability to gather and offer policy expertise and technical knowledge (i.e., analytical capacities) matter for interest groups' perceived influence among EU public officials. In other words, the two capacities linked to the transmission belt dimensions matter for the level of influence groups achieve in legislative processes.

All in all, the four chapters of the dissertation underline the empirical as well as normative relevance of unpacking interest groups as this has a direct effect on their ability to function as intermediary actors and affects their political relevance in public policy processes. Ultimately, this dissertation provides new insights to a long-lasting question in the public policy field, namely: how do we know that those claiming to act on behalf of members in the pressure system are in fact representing their interests?