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The balancing act of establishing a policy agenda: Conceptualizing and measuring drivers of issue prioritization within interest groups

Darren R. Halpin¹ | Bert Fraussen² | Anthony J. Nownes³¹ Australian National University² Leiden University³ University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Interest groups are important intermediaries in Western democracies, with the potential to offer political linkage and form a bridge between the concerns of citizens and the agendas of political elites. While we know an increasing amount about the issue-based *activity* of groups, we only have a limited understanding about how they selected these issues to work on. In this article, we examine the process of agenda setting within groups. In particular, we address challenges of conceptualization and measurement. Through a thorough review of the group literature, we identify five main factors that are hypothesized to drive issue prioritization. We operationalize items to tap these factors and then empirically assess this theoretical model relying on data from a survey of national interest groups in Australia. Our findings, from a confirmatory factor analysis, provide support for the multidimensional nature of agenda setting. We discuss how this provides a firm conceptual and methodological foundation for future work examining how groups establish their policy agenda.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Students of political science have invested heavily in enumerating the observable lobbying activity of interest groups. Many studies chart the instances of evidence giving to legislative committees (e.g., Berry, 1999), participation in administrative consultations (e.g., Yackee & Yackee, 2006), and even the lodgement of amicus briefs (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier & Christenson, 2014). Such research has provided compelling evidence that underpins important findings in the field. For instance, such work leads to the consistent finding of mobilization “bias,” with the largest volume of lobby activity accounted for by business interests (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012; Walker, 1991). It has also led to findings of skewed mobilization across policy issues—with most issues garnering little lobbying activity, but a small number attracting very high levels and demonstrating patterns of bandwagoning (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001). Finally, it has supported

population-level analysis of the demographics of lobbying (Gray & Lowery, 1996). In short, this work has enabled the discipline to draw important conclusions regarding the nature of interest group activity in contemporary political systems.

What this work cannot reveal, however, are the drivers that catalyze groups into the policy action we readily observe. We know that individual agents, political parties, parliaments, and bureaucracies, when faced with numerous calls on their attention, engage in a process of prioritization (Simon, 1957, 1985; see Jones, 1999, for a detailed overview). They decide what to act on, and what to leave to one side for the moment. For instance, recent work in this journal demonstrates how elite politicians rely on organizational procedures, heuristics, and self-confidence to deal with information overload (Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2016). They are extremely selective in identifying the pieces of information that are of relevance to them. Interest groups, as political organizations, are no different (Fraussen & Halpin, 2016).

The literature has long been comfortable with the notion that groups will monitor policy issues, and even develop policy positions, more frequently than is reflected in lobbying actions. We know, for instance, that groups generally have broad policy interests but tend to actively lobby on relatively few things at any one time (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998; Heinz, Laumann, Nelson, & Salisbury, 1993; Walker, 1991). Groups must winnow broad interests down when it comes to actual policy action (for a similar discussion on the distinction between “posturing” or position taking and actual lobbying, see Browne, 1990, p. 496). Recent work has highlighted that groups weigh whether or not to actively lobby on those issues that might reasonably be considered of interest to the constituencies they claim to represent: Prioritization is a core and ubiquitous process among groups. Even though a given issue may clearly fall within the policy remit of a group, whether or not the group actively lobbies on that issue is a conscious decision, a matter of strategy. For instance, Strolovitch (2007, p. 8) notes that women’s advocacy groups are far more active on higher education reform versus broader welfare reform, even though both issues are of importance to (different segments of) their constituency. Likewise, examining what shapes the policy preferences of firms, Martin (1995) notes that “managers struggle to locate their interest in a world of imperfect knowledge and both long- and short-term considerations” (p. 909). In short, one can safely conclude that set against all the issues a group might be reasonably considered to have a policy interest in, a group then needs to settle on a subset of those matters to work on.¹ The insight that groups do not—and in fact cannot—literally work on every issue of interest that they encounter raises the question, *what drives issue prioritization?*

Answers to this question are numerous, yet at this point somewhat unstructured. One basic position is that groups simply conform to the stated preferences of their members. Others suggest this is naïve, citing inherent limitations based on resource availability. Another view highlights considerations of population dynamics among groups lobbying for the same constituency (Gray & Lowery, 1996). The expertise that groups possess and the fit of an issue with the stated organizational mission are emphasized by others (Minkoff & Powell, 2006). An insight that government activity drives mobilization, leads others to suggest that the political opportunity structure (POS) drives decisions on which issues to prioritize (Baumgartner et al., 2009). It is highly likely that each of these considerations is relevant to the prioritization process. What remains to be resolved is whether these are, empirically, distinctive factors in driving prioritization among groups. Put another way, is issue prioritization a multidimensional concept as the literature implies, or is it in fact unidimensional? And, if issue prioritization is indeed multidimensional, what are the main drivers shaping these processes?

Issue prioritization deserves sustained research attention because it is a process that sheds important light on the representative role of organized interests in modern democratic societies. It is a process that sifts and filters salient voices and perspectives on public policy *before* they become manifest in advocacy work. Thus, by shedding light on the process of issue prioritization we are afforded a deeper

appreciation of whose voices are heard, and why. While most scholarly attention with respect to lobbying has been focused on the output side, and the analysis of public policy action (but see Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), we redirect attention to the internal processes. Specifically, we focus on the micro-processes of position formation and prioritization that prestructure, in highly important ways, what we subsequently “find” by way of observable lobbying actions.

This article sets out to address this gap in the literature by conceptually and empirically examining what drives issue prioritization among interest groups. We define interest groups as formal organizations that are collective in nature (they have members/affiliates/a constituency) and are substantially engaged in public policy (Jordan, Halpin, & Maloney, 2004; see also Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008). In the next section, we first surface and formalize a range of different explanations within the literature that are connected to the concept of prioritization. Second, we develop a set of items that are designed to tap each of these theoretical explanations in the literature. Subsequently, we apply this to survey data on groups in the Australian national interest group system. We then test the fit of this conceptualization of issue prioritization to our original data through a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Finally, we review existing accounts of issue prioritization in the literature in light of our findings, with particular attention to the potential of our approach to assist further empirical applications.

2 | THE INTEREST GROUP LITERATURE: WHAT DRIVES ISSUE PRIORITIZATION?

Groups cannot literally engage in each and every issue that may conceivably be of some interest to them. That much we know. Yet the question remains: What considerations shape the decision to prioritize an issue for policy action? The “strategic concerns” that drive issue prioritization have not garnered sustained attention from interest group scholars, although notable exceptions provide us with valuable foundations from which to proceed (Strolovitch, 2007). Yet careful reading of the group literature enables us to distinguish five considerations that are claimed to shape the policy issue prioritization of interest groups: internal responsiveness, policy capacities, niche dynamics, POSs, and issue salience. Below, we organize a range of distinctive claims in the literature under these broader factors. We then develop these into a battery of questions that we use to measure issue prioritization among a population of national groups in Australia.

The identification of these five factors is based on our systematic reading of the literature and captures the possible drivers of issue prioritization that have received most scholarly attention. Our contribution here is to provide the first attempt at integrating these different perspectives in one comprehensive framework, which also enables us to empirically assess the importance of these distinct factors. While we believe that this framework captures the multidimensional nature of agenda setting within groups, we acknowledge the existence of alternative frameworks to study this question, such as the distinction between internal or external factors, or (somewhat related) the logic of membership versus the logic of influence (e.g., Schmitter & Streeck, 1999). As we will address later in the article, we think that the approach we outline in this article also speaks to these particular frameworks.

2.1 | Internal responsiveness

A baseline argument might be that groups focus their policy attention on policy issues when they accord with or infringe upon the *interests of their base constituency*. Such a proposition underpins the broadly pluralist position on the group basis of politics (Truman, 1951). At a more granular level, groups—like all formal organizations—might be expected to prioritize issues that are consistent with or further their stated *mission*, which tends to be quite stable over time. As Minkoff and Powell (2006)

explain, “We consider mission as both a charter and a constraint. Mission motivates activity but also limits the menu of possible actions” (p. 592). They elaborate, “As charter, mission serves to direct an organization toward specific combinations of ideology, organizational structure, and relations with members and sponsors. Mission also operates as a constraint with respect to how an organization responds to changed circumstances” (p. 605). Groups have an overall purpose that members/donors support, and against which group leaders and staff might be expected to set their policy priorities.

Related, a well-established normative view holds that groups would be expected to pursue those issues that accord with the wishes of key internal group stakeholders, whoever they may be. Groups are discussed in the literature as having multiple possible forms of internal responsiveness. The most obvious manifestation of this perspective would be *member responsiveness*—in other words, the belief that “members want or expect this” will drive issue prioritization. For instance, Dunleavy (1991) recounts the general consensus in the literature that “no group leader can publicly represent members’ interests without regular and open procedures for gauging their views” (p. 20). In a similar vein, studies such as that of Franke and Dobson (1985) probe the degree to which the policy positions put by leaders “represent” the views of members, the presumption being that they ought to do so. This reflects the aggregating function attributed to groups and the notion that they pursue the interests of “members.”

It also reflects an imperative for group maintenance and survival, a key consideration of which is being attentive to expressed member preferences (Wilson, 1974). That is, groups may well prioritize issues that face low prospects of success, as these policy activities are necessary to maintain membership support (or contributions) and good relations with policy makers (Holyoke, 2003; Maloney, Jordan, & McLaughlin, 1994). While it is hard to disentangle motives related to organizational maintenance and policy influence (as they often go hand in hand), much work has emphasize how considerations of organizational survival can trump policy objectives (e.g., Hanegraaff, Beyers, & De Bruycker, 2016; Lowery, 2007). Of course, groups may be less responsive to members and more responsive to either *institutional contributors* (such as corporate or private foundations) or *large (individual) donor contributors*. There is considerable worry in the literature about the effects of large donors and institutional contributors on group agendas and activities, and this concern is largely related to normative concerns about member responsiveness we mention above (see especially Walker, 1983, 1991).

2.2 | Policy capacities

The literature suggests that the issues groups take on will be shaped by limits in policy capacity. Just this point is made by the AFL-CIO’s policy director—cited in Levine’s (2015) excellent study of economic insecurity—when he remarks: “The tragedy of the excise tax was we had to devote so much energy to fighting it that we didn’t have the capacity to focus on other important issues as much as we could have” (p. 89). These constraints in capacity might be financial or skills-based in nature. The limitations resulting from finite *financial resources* feature highly in discussions of issue prioritization. Halpin and Binderkrantz (2011), for example, examine explanations for the breadth of a group’s observed issue activity, and tap level of resources as an important factor. The finding that “resources matter” is ubiquitous in the literature (see Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; Beyers et al., 2008). This work suggests the rather straightforward proposition that resources constrain groups in the issues they can take on. While they might consider some policy matters of importance, they might just not have the resources to engage in political action on these matters.

Beyond the question of financial resources, the literature shows that some groups have particular policy capacities, or *staff experience*, that might make engagement in some issues possible, but engagement in others less attractive. This relates to discussions regarding exchange relations between groups and policy makers (Moe, 1980; Salisbury, 1969). By policy capacities we mean the skill set and range

of potential policy actions available to a group at a point in time (Engel, 2007; Young, 2010; see also Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett, 2015). The literature makes various distinctions with respect to whether or not groups possess policy expertise, political knowledge, mobilization, or implementation capacities (Bouwen, 2002; Eising, 2004; Maloney et al., 1994; Truman, 1971). For instance, groups often have no problem engaging on issues that concern their “core business,” as they have staff who have years of experience working in this area, and a wide network of useful contacts as sources of relevant information. In contrast, engaging in new areas is more difficult, as there has been no process of knowledge accumulation within the organization, or there are no “institutional memories” about the issue in question.

2.3 | Niche considerations

There is a long tradition of studies that demonstrate the tendency for groups, particularly those that occupy the same broad policy domain, to seek out *niches* in which to specialize (Browne, 1990; Gray & Lowery, 1996; Heaney, 2004; Wilson, 1974). As argued by Scott (2002), “organizations such as the Sierra Club and Greenpeace gain legitimacy from the broader environmental movement, but carve out limited goals around which to mobilize attention and resources” (p. 35, cited in Johnson, 2006). This niche behavior need not be signaled by an explicit decision to establish a “specialist” group. Sets of groups tend to partition the policy space even while maintaining the status as a kind of domain generalist. For instance, environmental groups—even when generalist in nature—may well tend to focus on, say, forest and wildlife preservation issues, leaving renewable energy, fishing, and food production issues to their compatriots (or they may change their policy focus over time; for a discussion, see Johnson, 2006). Thus, some groups may prioritize issues that *other like-minded groups are not dealing with*. When viewed in terms of issue prioritization, we might expect that some issues will be ignored simply because Group A knows that this matter is usually taken up by Group B.

However, it is also possible that groups prioritize issues that *other like-minded organizations are dealing with*. There is reason to doubt that niches are determinative. Some studies identify “policy bandwagons,” showing that groups often follow each other into engagement on certain policy issues (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001). Indeed, the social processes that may underpin bandwagons lead to the expectation “that an organization is more likely to lobby on a piece of legislation as the number of other organizations lobbying on that legislation increases” (Scott, 2013, p. 614). Thus, there is good reason to expect that groups, at times, will see joining their compatriots on an issue as a good way to amplify their voices. Even if the chances of policy success are low, groups might still join the bandwagon because they view lobbying as an iterative cooperative game (where helping friends today will make sure you can call on them tomorrow), or because their presence would be missed by policy makers (Godwin, Lopez, & Seldon, 2008, p. 355).

2.4 | Political opportunity structure

The external policy environment—including the signals of support or opposition from key policy actors—should also be a factor in decisions to prioritize issues for action. The group literature has long held the idea that exploitation of positive windows of policy change, or signals that existing wins need to be defended, will drive issue prioritization (Austen-Smith & Wright, 1994; Baumgartner & Leech, 1998; Kingdon, 1984; Kollman, 1998; McAdam, 1982). What might render conditions positive or negative? It is generally agreed that POS should not be thought of as a single variable but is best treated as a “cluster of variables” (Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Tarrow, 1988; for a discussion, see Princen & Kerremans, 2008). In our present context, we argue that several variables may be relevant.

In general terms, it is assumed that groups prioritize issues on which they believe there is a *high likelihood of victory* (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Mahoney, 2008). Groups would prefer to “push against an open door” where possible. One key facet of supportiveness is the disposition of government with respect to a given issue (Hojnacki, Kimball, Baumgartner, Berry, & Leech, 2012, p. 387). Here the proposition is that groups will prioritize an issue for action where and when they have *allies in government*. For instance, environmental groups indicate that when progressive governments are in power they seek policy change, and when conservative governments are in power they focus on defending gains (for a discussion, see Constantelos, 2010). The initial and general expectation is that when political conditions are positive with respect to the likelihood of success on a given issue, groups are more likely to prioritize that issue. Conversely, when conditions are unsupportive, they are more likely to let an issue rest in abeyance. Nonetheless, an opposite logic may also apply, as political action might result from policy developments that go against group preferences. That is, groups might prioritize an issue because they want to “counteract” or block certain policy initiatives (Austen-Smith & Wright, 1994, 1996). Previous work has demonstrated that this form of “negative lobbying” can be more powerful than the voicing of support, as it alerts policy makers to the risks associated with adopting a particular proposal such as public disapproval or electoral backlash (McKay, 2012). These unfavorable conditions can have two manifestations. The first focuses on governmental opposition: In such cases, *opponents in government* drive issue prioritization. The second focuses on opposing interest groups: The expectation here is that the presence of *interest group opponents* drives issue prioritization.

2.5 | Issue salience

Finally, the salience of an issue with a given audience might be expected to affect groups’ decisions regarding prioritization. For groups deciding priorities, signals that political elites are paying attention to a particular issue are likely to be valuable indicators that an investment of time and resources in one issue is less risky than in another issue. We conceive of salience as belonging to several audiences, including the government, the public, and the media. The literature reports that at an aggregate level, lobbying tends to be driven by changing *governmental agendas*. In the standard demand-side account of organized interest mobilization, government activity is the key explanatory variable of interest (Baumgartner, Larsen-Price, Leech, & Rutledge, 2011). Thus, we might expect that groups will prioritize issues when government prioritizes them. However, we also know that there is a link between issues on the *public agenda*—or public salience—and the work of groups (Rasmussen, Carroll, & Lowery, 2014). In addition, given that we know that some groups actively seek coverage in the media, or even prioritize this political arena (see Binderkrantz, Christiansen, & Pedersen, 2014; see also Danielian & Page, 1994; Kollman, 1998), it may be the case that they prioritize issues that are on the *media agenda*. Finally, the work on policy attention also flags the role of *recent events* such as policy failures, crises or disasters as “focusing events” that reshuffle policy priorities (see Birkland, 1998; Cobb & Elder, 1983; Kingdon, 1984).

2.6 | Summary

In the previous section, we have undertaken a comprehensive review of the interest group literature and identified five broad themes that we consider the prime dimensions driving issue prioritization. Within each dimension, we have surfaced a range of considerations that are discussed in connection with the prioritization of some issues over others. Table 1 summarizes this approach and points to key sources we have drawn upon. It is worth noting at this juncture that while five dimensions are evident, most of the literature assumes that issue prioritization is likely to be a complex process, where all (or at

TABLE 1 Summary of issue prioritization concept, derived from literature

| Dimensions | Basic considerations | Exemplar literature |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Internal responsiveness | Does the issue match the stated organizational mission, and preferences of members, donors or funders? | Minkoff and Powell (2006); Truman (1971); Walker (1983) |
| Policy capacities | Is progressing the issue within the resources/skills of the group? | Moe (1980); Salisbury (1969) |
| Niche considerations | Is the issue one that other like-groups are (not) working on already? | Browne (1990); Gray and Lowery (1996) |
| Political opportunity structure | Are the political conditions supportive of progress on the issue? | Austen-Smith and Wright (1994); Kingdon (1984) |
| Issue salience | Is an issue garnering the attention of key audiences? | Baumgartner and Leech (2001); Cobb and Elder (1983) |

last multiple) factors will be at play, or in the balance. This article provides a first attempt to integrate these different considerations into a coherent conceptual framework for understanding the range of factors driving issue prioritization, and to assess the presence of these drivers empirically within a national interest group system.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN: DATA AND APPROACH

3.1 | Operationalizing dimensions

Why do groups prioritize action on some policy issues over others? The literature points to a range of possible drivers of this process of prioritization. Our first contribution has been to organize these insights in the literature, to identify five potential and distinct drivers of issue prioritization, and to clarify some key expectations. We now turn to operationalizing these into a set of items that will tap these five underlying factors. Table 2 summarizes the structure of this argument. It presents individual items that were developed to tap the five broad dimensions identified above. Note that we present items in the form of questions that groups themselves might be able to answer. As will be discussed below, this is because we utilize these items for an empirical test among national interest groups of this theoretically derived model using survey data. In what follows, we use this battery of questions to measure issue prioritization among a population of national groups.

3.2 | Data

We explore the way the dimensions we identify above figure as drivers of issue prioritization using data on national interest groups in Australia. Our Australian data were derived from a survey of member-based interest groups that are national in scope. The online survey was conducted in September–November 2015. The population we surveyed was drawn from a list of national organizations compiled by the authors. While the list is drawn from the 2012 edition of *Directory of Australian Associations*, we took great care in identifying national organizations, as well as selecting out associations that are not politically active or do not have members.² Once this process was completed, our population list consisted of 1,353 interest groups (for more details on the *Directory* and our coding procedure, see Fraussen & Halpin, 2016). Subsequently, these groups

TABLE 2 Issue prioritization: Dimensions and individual items

| Dimension | Item (We prioritize an issue when . . .) |
|-------------------------|---|
| Internal responsiveness | a. the issue is in the <i>interests of the people or institutions this organization represents</i> ^a |
| Internal responsiveness | b. the issue is explicitly mentioned as a priority in our organization's <i>mission</i> statement, policy statement, or similar document |
| Internal responsiveness | c. the issue is among the stated preferences of our <i>members</i> |
| Internal responsiveness | d. the issue is currently of interest to the <i>leaders</i> of this organization |
| Internal responsiveness | e. the issue is among the stated preferences of some of our <i>institutional contributors</i> (e.g., private foundations) |
| Internal responsiveness | f. the issue is among the stated preferences of <i>large donor contributors</i> (i.e., members who contribute in excess of membership dues) |
| Policy capacities | g. the issue is one that can be effectively addressed given existing in-house <i>staff experience</i> . |
| Policy capacities | h. our financial <i>resources</i> allow us to adequately address the issue |
| Niche seeking | i. the issue is one that <i>other like-minded organizations are dealing with</i> , and that this organization believes can be addressed more effectively with further attention |
| Niche seeking | j. the issue is one that <i>other like-minded organizations are not dealing with</i> , and this organization believes needs attention |
| POS | k. the issue is one that is being addressed by this organization's <i>organizational opponents</i> , and thus needs to be addressed so its point of view is heard |
| POS | l. we have <i>allies within government</i> to help this organization "win" on the issue |
| POS | m. we have <i>opponents within government</i> who work against us on the issue |
| POS | n. the <i>likelihood of victory</i> on the issue is high |
| Salience | o. the issue is currently on the <i>governmental agenda</i> (i.e., it is being given considerable attention by the government) |
| Salience | p. a <i>recent event</i> such as a crisis or a disaster highlights the importance of the issue |
| Salience | q. the issue is currently on the <i>public agenda</i> (i.e., it is being given considerable attention by the public at large) |
| Salience | r. the issue is currently on the <i>media agenda</i> (i.e., it is being given considerable attention by the media) |

^aFor brevity this item is labeled "constituency" in the models that follow.

were contacted to participate in an online survey, which primarily contained questions concerning organizational structure, policy capacity, engagement with policy makers, and their policy agenda. We received a completed survey from 370 organizations (for a response rate of 27%). The distribution of group types in our population and among those who responded to our survey are virtually identical. This gives us a high degree of confidence that what we report below is representative of the Australian national group system.

For the analyses that follow, we relied on survey responses from groups to the battery of items presented in Table 2. The question asks respondents to assess various drivers for prioritizing policy issues.

The second column in Table 2 contains the actual text of the survey item, while the first column marks the basic concept the survey item is intended to measure. Preceding the items in our survey was this introduction:

Regardless of its general policy interests (e.g., the environment, health, trade, education), an organization must choose which specific set of issues to prioritize at any given time. For each factor listed below, please indicate your level of agreement.

Thus, the responses are registered on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree). The items in the scale were randomized in the online survey to avoid possible order effects.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Descriptive analysis

Before proceeding to the CFA, it is worth briefly discussing the responses by groups to the individual items that seek to capture the various processes that might shape issue prioritization. Table 3 reports the mean responses, across all groups, to each of the 18 items (in descending order).

The results give basic support to our claim in the preceding section that issue prioritization is likely to be a complex concept, as multiple items are relevant to issue prioritization. These findings also suggest that, in general, drivers related to “internal responsiveness” are critical in determining issue prioritization. We say this because members, leaders, mission, and interests are on average deemed highly relevant (all having a mean score higher or equal to 4, with at least 75% of all groups agreeing that these factors are important drivers of issue prioritization). As per Minkoff and Powell (2006), mission is profoundly important for interest group priorities. Furthermore, the preferences of members and the interest of leaders are also considered key drivers of a group’s policy agenda. Noteworthy is that the wishes of institutional contributors and large donors, two other items related to “internal responsiveness,” are the two least strongly supported items; less than 25% of the groups agreed that these are important considerations. Of course, it is in the interests of our respondents to downplay how much large donors and institutional patrons affect what they do, and we cannot exclude that a social desirability bias was at play here. But as preliminary evidence, this finding suggests that normative concerns about “outsiders” or institutions controlling group agendas may be somewhat misplaced, or at the least not capture the full picture.

While the literature accepts that groups will need to resolve contending pressures (e.g., Berkhout, 2013; Schmitter & Streeck, 1999), the heavy emphasis in the literature on professionalization and lobbying activities does raise the expectation that issues tend to be identified based on cues from the political system, to the detriment of responsiveness to the concerns of members. In this regard, our findings are highly salient, as it appears that groups are as much proactive as they are simply reactive. For instance, it is telling that POS items rank near the bottom. The *likelihood of victory*, and the existence of *allies (or opponents) in government* are among the items with the lowest mean score. While this contradicts work that has highlighted the importance of political allies (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2009), this finding does sit well with a long-standing observation that groups often engage in lobbying because members demand or expect it, despite the knowledge that these efforts are politically ill-advised or likely to not be well received by policy makers (Maloney et al., 1994). This finding also indirectly addresses the finding that “negative lobbying”—done to oppose change—is often most effective (McKay, 2012).

TABLE 3 Mean scores across items

| Dimension | Item (We prioritize an issue when . . .) | Mean |
|-------------------------|---|------|
| Internal responsiveness | a. the issue is in the <i>interests of the people or institutions this organization represents</i> ^a | 4.4 |
| Internal responsiveness | b. the issue is explicitly mentioned as a priority in our organization's <i>mission statement, policy statement, or similar document</i> | 4.3 |
| Internal responsiveness | c. the issue is among the stated preferences of our <i>members</i> | 4.2 |
| Internal responsiveness | d. the issue is currently of interest to the <i>leaders</i> of this organization | 4.0 |
| Salience | o. the issue is currently on the <i>governmental agenda</i> (i.e., it is being given considerable attention by the government) | 3.8 |
| Niche seeking | i. the issue is one that <i>other like-minded organizations are dealing with</i> , and that this organization believes can be addressed more effectively with further attention | 3.7 |
| Salience | p. a <i>recent event</i> such as a crisis or a disaster highlights the importance of the issue | 3.6 |
| Salience | q. the issue is currently on the <i>public agenda</i> (i.e., it is being given considerable attention by the public at large) | 3.5 |
| Niche seeking | j. the issue is one that <i>other like-minded organizations are not dealing with</i> , and this organization believes needs attention | 3.5 |
| Policy capacities | g. the issue is one that can be effectively addressed given existing in-house <i>staff experience</i> . | 3.5 |
| Salience | r. the issue is currently on the <i>media agenda</i> (i.e., it is being given considerable attention by the media) | 3.4 |
| POS | k. the issue is one that is being addressed by this organization's organizational opponents, and thus needs to be addressed so its point of view is heard | 3.3 |
| Policy capacities | h. our financial <i>resources</i> allow us to adequately address the issue | 3.0 |
| POS | l. we have <i>allies within government</i> to help this organization "win" on the issue ^b | 3.0 |
| POS | n. the <i>likelihood of victory</i> on the issue is high | 3.0 |
| POS | m. we have <i>opponents within government</i> who work against us on the issue | 2.8 |
| Internal responsiveness | e. the issue is among the stated preferences of some of our <i>institutional contributors</i> (e.g., private foundations) | 2.8 |
| Internal responsiveness | f. the issue is among the stated preferences of <i>large donor contributors</i> (i.e., members who contribute in excess of membership dues) | 2.7 |

Note. The *n* varies between 350 and 356 for all items, except for Questions e (institutional contributors; *n* = 173) and f (large donor contributors; *n* = 286), as groups were asked to skip these survey items if they were not applicable to them.

^aFor brevity this item is labeled "constituency" in the models that follow.

^bThe term "government" refers to the executive, for example, in the Australian case the Cabinet.

If we look at the next set of items in the first half of the table, we note that most of them relate to salience and niche seeking. A majority of groups considers the *governmental agenda*, the *public agenda*, and *recent events* to be rather important in affecting group prioritization, as are *issues that other like-minded organizations are dealing with*. This supports to some extent research that has identified government activity as an important driver of group behavior (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Lowery & Gray, 1995). It also consistent with work that finds lobbying bandwagons (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; Godwin et al., 2008; Scott, 2013), whereby much lobbying activity is concentrated on a small set of salient policy issues.

At face value, many of the items in our table would seem to be linked with one another. For instance, the POS might reasonably be thought of as linked to the salience of a given issue.³ To assess possible associations between items we conducted a bivariate analysis. The results confirmed that while there is a significant positive correlation between most items, the coefficient size is generally rather low, with very few beyond 0.3. (Appendix Tables A1 and A2 provide a more detailed overview of the responses for each survey item, while Figure A1 shows the number of items which each group agreed or strongly agreed). We also looked for any significant differences across responses according to group type. There is a strong argument within the group literature that diffuse and concentrated interests approach politics differently (Binderkrantz, 2008; Dür & Mateo, 2013). Utilizing a classic distinction between citizen and business groups as a proxy for diffuse and concentrated interests, respectively, we conducted a Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test to assess the differences between these two groups and found very few statistically significant differences in mean item responses. In fact, only two items were significantly different: whether an issue was consistent with group mission (Item b; $z = -2.042$, $p = .0411$) and whether the issue was on the political agenda (Item q; $z = -2.626$, $p = .0086$). Citizen groups exhibited higher levels of agreement on both items.

4.2 | Confirmatory factor analysis

Next, we deploy CFA to test the fit between our data and the model that we derived from the relevant literature—namely, five factors that drive issue prioritization. We are predicting whether the various individual drivers (presented as items in our survey questions) will cluster together to form a set of latent variables that match the structure hypothesized in the literature. The CFA approach is recommended where there are firm theoretical expectations already in play, and the aim is to test their empirical veracity (for a similar approach, see Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; for more background, see Kline, 2016). The advantage of this approach compared to other forms such as exploratory factor analysis or principal component analysis is that theoretically derived expectations regarding conceptualization are stated in advance, which are then fitted to empirical data with measures available to determine the level of fit between the data and the formulated expectations.⁴

The model that we fitted is shown in Figure 1, which is a graphical representation of the operationalization of issue prioritization outlined in Table 2.⁵ It summarizes the expectations regarding the way these separate items should fall into the five latent constructs that exist within the interest group literature. The results of the CFA are shown in Figure 2. The factor loadings for all the included items were all positive and significant (.01 level); the standardized coefficients (which can be interpreted as correlation coefficients between the item and the factor) range from .28 to .81. Measures of fit for the five-factor model approximate acceptable levels (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Jackson, Gillaspay, & Purc-Stephenson, 2009). Both the comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) are slightly below the optimal 0.95 threshold for a well-fitted model (a value close to 1 indicates a good fit), while root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is somewhat above the optimal 0.06

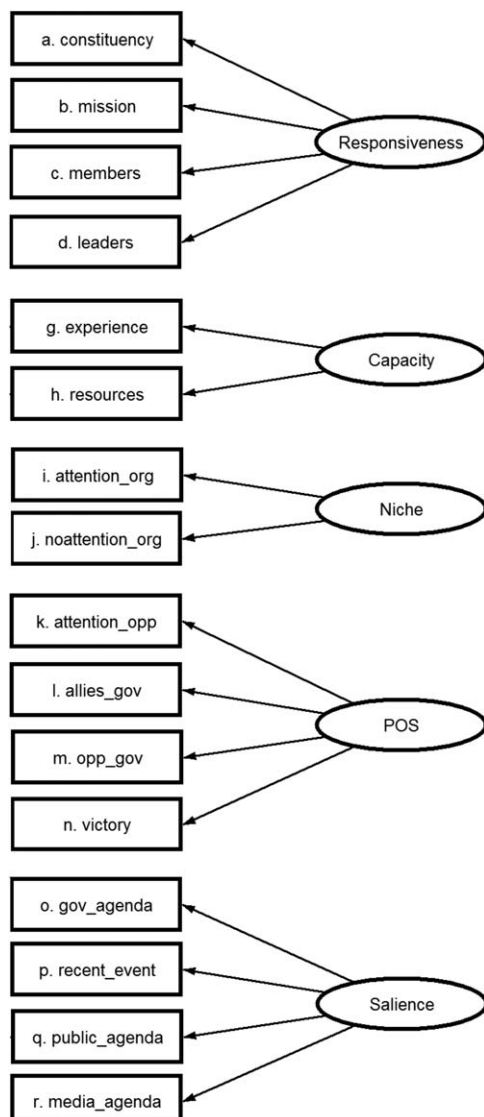
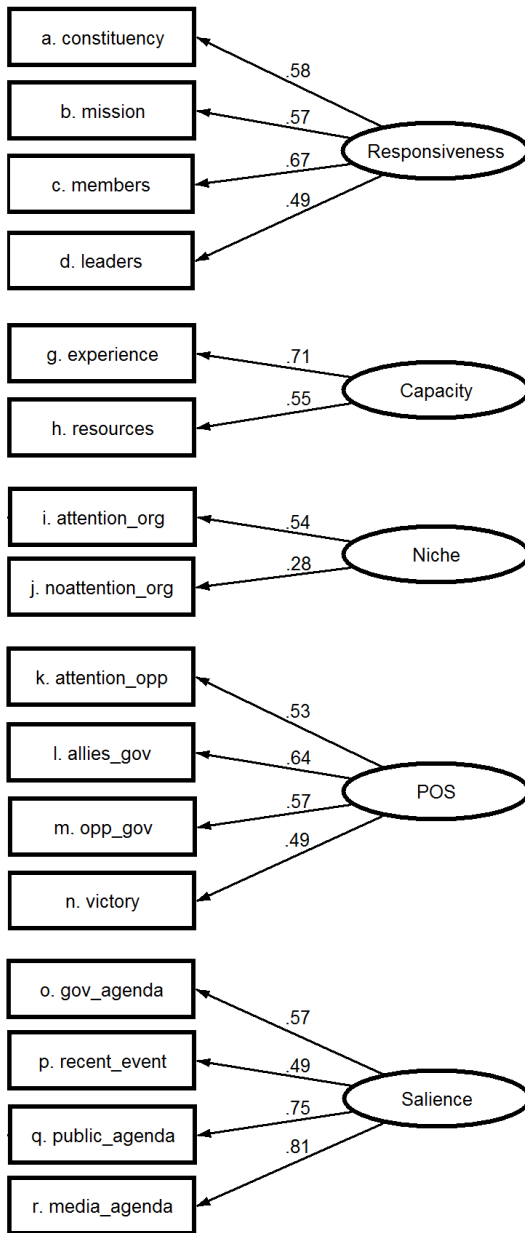


FIGURE 1 Baseline confirmatory factor analysis model of issue prioritization

level for an acceptable model fit. Compared to a one-factor model, our specified model provides a substantially better fit, which supports arguments in the literature that issue prioritization is indeed a multi-dimensional concept.

The model we outlined above is of course not the only one possible.⁶ One might decide to emphasize a more parsimonious approach, perhaps distinguishing between external and internal factors. This type of model might be arrived at by emphasizing work such as that of Schmitter and Streeck (1999), which looks at the role of the political and membership context as drivers of policy behavior. We tested our proposed five-factor model against this two-factor option (which considers the items associated with Responsiveness and Capacity as internal factors, whereas Niche, POS, and Salience are considered external factors), and the five-factor model performed substantially better.⁷

One area for future work is evident in the results above. The coefficient on the no-attention variable (i.e., the issue is not getting attention from other interest groups) suggests this deserves more discussion. This might be due to measurement error related to the wording of the question or



| Model | N | CFI | TLI | RMSEA |
|-------------------|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| One-factor model | 307 | 0.619 | 0.560 | 0.107 |
| Five-factor model | 307 | 0.848 | 0.806 | 0.071 |

FIGURE 2 Results and goodness of fit for confirmatory factor analysis model of issue prioritization
Note. POS = political opportunity structure; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

how respondents understood this item. Alternatively, it might be that the current framing of the item does not adequately capture the concept of “niche seeking” to which it is currently attached. One could mount the argument that it belongs in the POS construct—thus, the (in)action of like

groups are about different opportunities for success as opposed to population dynamics that might trigger interest group activity.⁸

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, the predominant focus of contemporary group research has been on analyzing manifest instances of group lobbying, such as activities in the context of particular policy issues. In this article, we set out to develop a focus on issue prioritization, which is the unseen yet fundamental precursor to lobbying actions. Some of the seminal work in the field has spent considerable time pondering the way in which groups made decisions, were funded and engaged with their memberships. More recent research has once again highlighted the importance of these internal dynamics (Barakso, 2004; Browne, 1977; Goss, 2010; Fraussen, 2014; Halpin, 2014; Heaney, 2004; Strolovitch, 2007; Young, 2010). While we know that groups think strategically about their policy agenda and actively make trade-offs between different demands and objectives, we know of no empirical work that has specifically elaborated and documented the distinct drivers of this process of issue prioritization among groups.

Why is this an important consideration? We spend a great deal of time considering the tip of the issue iceberg, namely, observable lobbying. Yet we know that groups' actions are in practice viewed against a set of issues that groups have an interest in, but choose not to act upon. In other words, these manifest activities are the outcome of an organizational process in which groups make trade-offs between demands from different audiences and balance multiple objectives. By improving our understanding of what drives issue prioritization, we can address some of the taken for granted assumptions that exist about this process, such as the role of members, resources, issue salience, and POS in assessing what groups do. Moreover, such an understanding promises to provide more robust micro-foundations for theories of lobbying behavior than hitherto exist.

Our study relies on survey data from a representative set of national interest groups. While the reliance on self-reports might be considered a limitation of our study, we could find few alternatives to tackle the question of issue prioritization in an equally comprehensive and consistent manner. Just as analysis of group strategies uses survey measures of insider/outsider to sum up the orientation of a given group irrespective of issue context (see Binderkrantz, 2006), our approach similarly generates an aggregate picture of drivers for prioritization at the group level. We think this makes eminent sense, yet we also accept that there will be issue-level calculus too. Future work might look at how a group's general orientation could vary on an issue-by-issue basis. Furthermore, while our work draws on Australian data, the scope of our findings should be generalizable to other political systems, especially Western majoritarian democracies. Not least because the specified drivers are expected to be important elements in all such national contexts.

Our study elected to focus on interest groups, defined as collective associations that engage in public policy advocacy. This means that we do not include what Salisbury (1984) referred to as institutions: firms and public organizations such as government agencies. While the findings of our study are also relevant for understanding the political activities of these institutions, the trade-offs they make are likely to be different than interest groups. For instance, firms might focus strongly on the expected profit of a certain policy success and do not need to take into account the concerns of members (for a discussion, see Godwin et al., 2008, p. 357). At the same time, other drivers of issue prioritization, such as issue salience and the POS, are likely to be equally important for understanding their policy agenda. We think a study that focuses on institutions, compared to interest groups, using the framework presented here is indeed worthwhile.

The overall conclusion we can draw from our study is that issue prioritization is a complex task, where many factors are relevant. Groups indeed take different elements into account when deciding to

prioritize a certain issue for political action. In particular, this article has made three specific contributions to the existing literature.

Our first contribution has been to clarify and elaborate potential drivers of issue prioritization, as well as to surface expectations about them, derived from the literature. The task of this article was to better organize this complexity and to generate a better understanding of what broad *types* of considerations drive issue prioritization. To do so, we undertook a comprehensive review of the interest group literature and identified five broad themes. The outcome of this process alone, we suggest, provides the field with a useful palate of theoretically informed expectations against which to assess empirical findings and construct future research projects on the question of issue prioritization, or the policy agendas of interest groups more generally. Of course, not all nuances within the literature can be captured in a list of items such as ours. In that regard, future work might better seek to capture how prioritization is shaped by potential high costs versus potential high gains (Godwin et al., 2008). Similarly, one could further elaborate the interactive nature of lobbying decisions—specifically how groups engage in counter-lobbying (McKay, 2012). Finally, we are alert to the fact that prioritization might be motivated by maintenance issues that may (or may not) coincide with imperatives of policy influence (Lowery, 2007). We can only capture these issues in an indirect manner in our current setup.

The second contribution is the development of a battery of items that operationalize the five latent factors that the literature connects to issue prioritization. This means that future researchers have a set of items they can deploy to tap the various factors that drive issue prioritization, allowing an empirically rich subliteration to develop. Third, we have put this model of prioritization to the test, using CFA, and established its empirical salience. The CFA results confirm that issue prioritization is indeed a multidimensional concept. Moreover, there is empirical support for the five factors we identified within the literature. The five-factor approach we tested performed better than other possible alternatives. Of course, there is also room for further development and fine-tuning of the framework we have put forward. In particular, scholars might further probe the role of niche-seeking theories in explaining issue prioritization. Furthermore, future work might focus more closely on how groups make trade-offs between, or balance the different objectives associated with these drivers.

In conclusion, this article refocuses scholarly attention on the task of issue prioritization and agenda setting within groups. The ubiquitous nature of such internal processes within groups serves to further underscore the salience of priority setting as a core task, and the importance of introducing it as a research focus. This article offers an important foundation for this work to proceed.

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NOTES

¹ Research on the internal dynamics of groups points to this type of work as being important (Barakso, 2004; Browne, 1977; Goss, 2010; Strolovitch, 2007; Young, 2010).

² We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Erik Johnson and his Comparative National Associations Project (CNAP) in providing the raw *Directory* entries from which we then constituted our Australian National Interest Groups data set.

³ We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this as one possible link to explore.

⁴ We ran the CFA using STATA version 14 (applying the SEM-command using the covariance matrix as input; see Acock, 2013).

⁵ The two items “preferences of large donors” (286 observations) and “preferences of institutional donors” (173 observations) were omitted because they received considerably fewer observations than all the other items, which indicates that

these items are not salient to a substantial number of groups in our population. Furthermore, a stable factor solution generally requires a sample size of 300. Note that after excluding these two items associated with “internal responsiveness,” we still have four items that we theoretically expect to capture this particular dimension. Items are labeled “a” through “r” consistent with Table 2.

⁶ We thank one of the reviewers for making this point and encouraging us to look at alternatives.

⁷ Measures of fit for the two-factor model were as follows: CFI is 0.688, TLI is 0.637, and RMSEA is 0.097.

⁸ When we tested the fit of this specific model it performed almost—but not quite—as well as our five-factor specification.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Correlations of survey items

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | |
|------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|----|----|----|----|--|
| 1. Public_agenda | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Gov_agenda | 0.3664* | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Media_agenda | 0.5307* | 0.3707* | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Recent_event | 0.2070* | 0.1658* | 0.2589* | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Leaders | 0.2021* | 0.2984* | 0.1950* | 0.0794 | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Resources | 0.1519* | 0.2864* | 0.1123 | 0.0783 | 0.0716 | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Victory | 0.1741* | 0.1233 | 0.0087 | 0.1178 | 0.1430 | 0.2160* | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Allies_gov | 0.2014* | 0.2702* | 0.1989* | 0.0894 | 0.2395* | 0.2126* | 0.4126* | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9. Opp_gov | 0.2068* | 0.2755* | 0.2295* | 0.2260* | 0.0761 | 0.1909* | 0.2360* | 0.3532* | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 10. Constituency | 0.2001* | 0.3336* | 0.1352 | 0.1689* | 0.3394* | 0.1203 | 0.1016 | 0.1621* | 0.1379 | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | | |
| 11. Mission | 0.1966* | 0.1686* | 0.1652* | 0.1990* | 0.3250* | 0.1216 | 0.1471* | 0.1902* | 0.1369 | 0.2816* | 1.0000 | | | | | | | | |
| 12. Members | 0.0781 | 0.3889* | 0.1377 | 0.1257 | 0.4119* | 0.0939 | 0.0463 | 0.1523* | 0.1069 | 0.4545* | 0.4943* | 1.0000 | | | | | | | |
| 13. Large_donors | 0.0384 | -0.0451 | -0.0666 | 0.0335 | 0.0901 | 0.0397 | 0.1909* | 0.2041* | 0.1261 | -0.0544 | -0.0621 | -0.0889 | 1.0000 | | | | | | |
| 14. Experience | 0.1835* | 0.1812* | 0.0839 | 0.0330 | 0.1606* | 0.3508* | 0.2675* | 0.1783* | 0.1121 | 0.1163 | 0.1574* | 0.0571 | 0.1204 | 1.0000 | | | | | |

(Continues)

TABLE A1 (Continued)

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 |
|----------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| 15. Instit_ donors | 0.1422* | -0.0561 | 0.0706 | -0.0483 | 0.1480* | -0.0189 | 0.0781 | 0.1635* | 0.2190* | -0.0767 | 0.0467 | -0.0140 | 0.5630* | 0.0749 | 1.0000 | | | |
| 16. Attention_ org | 0.3412* | 0.3172* | 0.1799* | 0.1350 | 0.3238* | 0.0883 | 0.1024 | 0.2047* | 0.1658* | 0.2914* | 0.2233* | 0.3021* | 0.0554 | 0.1690* | 0.1199 | 1.000 | | |
| 17. Noattention_ org | 0.1925* | 0.1430 | 0.1289 | 0.1567* | 0.1202 | 0.1437* | 0.0472 | 0.1627* | 0.2229* | 0.2746* | 0.2334* | 0.2078* | 0.0276 | 0.0904 | 0.0433 | 0.1942* | 1.000 | |
| 18. Attention_ opp | 0.2698* | 0.1179 | 0.2323* | 0.2726* | 0.1398 | 0.0964 | 0.1165 | 0.1303 | 0.3292* | 0.2091* | 0.2156* | 0.2078* | 0.1925* | 0.1864* | 0.1850* | 0.2288* | 0.1745* | 1.000 |

Note. Kendall's Tau-b.

* $p < .05$.

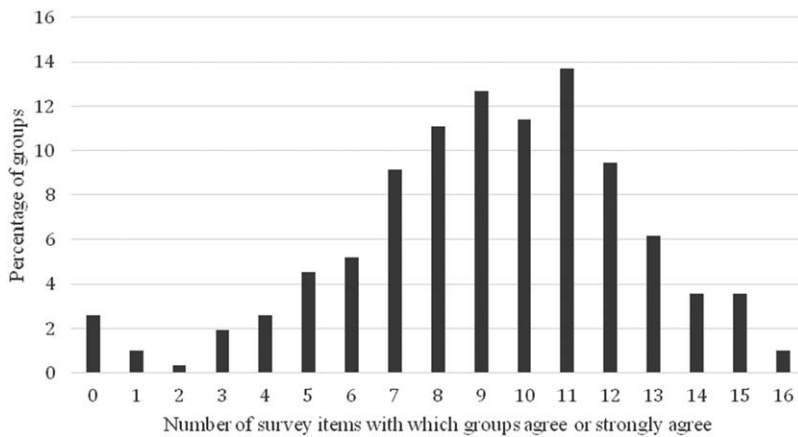
TABLE A2 Overview responses survey items

| Survey item | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Total |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Public_agenda | 15 | 48 | 99 | 139 | 53 | 354 |
| | 4.24 | 13.56 | 27.97 | 39.27 | 14.97 | 100.00 |
| Gov_agenda | 13 | 25 | 84 | 147 | 87 | 356 |
| | 3.65 | 7.02 | 23.60 | 41.29 | 24.44 | 100.00 |
| Media_agenda | 15 | 41 | 113 | 139 | 45 | 353 |
| | 4.25 | 11.61 | 32.01 | 39.38 | 12.75 | 100.00 |
| Recent_event | 22 | 28 | 104 | 133 | 67 | 354 |
| | 6.21 | 7.91 | 29.38 | 37.57 | 18.93 | 100.00 |
| Leaders | 3 | 8 | 73 | 159 | 112 | 355 |
| | 0.85 | 2.25 | 20.56 | 44.79 | 31.55 | 100.00 |
| Resources | 41 | 80 | 89 | 121 | 24 | 355 |
| | 11.55 | 22.54 | 25.07 | 34.08 | 6.76 | 100.00 |
| Victory | 18 | 60 | 187 | 77 | 14 | 356 |
| | 5.06 | 16.85 | 52.53 | 21.63 | 3.93 | 100.00 |
| Allies_gov | 34 | 58 | 139 | 102 | 20 | 353 |
| | 9.63 | 16.43 | 39.38 | 28.90 | 5.67 | 100.00 |
| Opp_gov | 45 | 77 | 138 | 73 | 20 | 353 |
| | 12.75 | 21.81 | 39.09 | 20.68 | 5.67 | 100.00 |
| Constituency | 5 | 4 | 29 | 133 | 184 | 355 |
| | 1.41 | 1.13 | 8.17 | 37.46 | 51.83 | 100.00 |
| Mission | 4 | 10 | 45 | 127 | 168 | 354 |
| | 1.13 | 2.82 | 12.71 | 35.88 | 47.46 | 100.00 |
| Members | 2 | 5 | 49 | 141 | 138 | 335 |
| | 0.60 | 1.49 | 14.63 | 42.09 | 41.19 | 100.00 |
| Large_donors | 50 | 57 | 114 | 51 | 14 | 286 |
| | 17.48 | 19.93 | 39.86 | 17.83 | 4.90 | 100.00 |
| Experience | 10 | 41 | 97 | 154 | 49 | 351 |
| | 2.85 | 11.68 | 27.64 | 43.87 | 13.96 | 100.00 |
| Instit_donors | 24 | 32 | 82 | 30 | 5 | 173 |
| | 13.87 | 18.50 | 47.40 | 17.34 | 2.89 | 100.00 |

(Continues)

TABLE A2 (Continued)

| Survey item | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Total |
|-----------------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Attention_org | 11 | 18 | 89 | 181 | 56 | 355 |
| | 3.10 | 5.07 | 25.07 | 50.99 | 15.77 | 100.00 |
| Noattention_org | 8 | 35 | 120 | 142 | 45 | 350 |
| | 2.29 | 10.00 | 34.29 | 40.57 | 12.86 | 100.00 |
| Attention_opp | 27 | 51 | 112 | 118 | 48 | 356 |
| | 7.58 | 14.33 | 31.46 | 33.15 | 13.48 | 100.00 |

**FIGURE A1** Overview survey items, groups responded agree/strongly agree (%)