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Berkhout, J.

DOI

[10.1007/978-3-030-13895-0_137-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13895-0_137-1)

[10.1007/978-3-030-44556-0_137](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44556-0_137)

Publication date

2021

Document Version

Submitted manuscript

Published in

The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Interest Groups, Lobbying and Public Affairs

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Berkhout, J. (2021). Comparative Interest Group Research. In P. Harris, A. Bitonti, C. S. Fleisher, & A. Skorkjær Binderkrantz (Eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Interest Groups, Lobbying and Public Affairs* (Living ed.). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13895-0_137-1, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44556-0_137

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Title

Comparative Interest Group Research

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Pre-processing version: November 2020

Definition

There are challenges to the development of explanatory models of interest group behavior that are valid across a wide range of countries. The position of interest groups in between the policy process and the society and the economy means that a lot of potentially important explanatory factors cannot be theoretically isolated. This creates a fundamental tension between the aspiration to maximize the external, cross-system validity of research findings and the meaningful embedding in country-specific histories, economic structures and societies. This theoretical challenge is conceptually acknowledged in many contemporary studies but still limits the theoretical progress in the field. This contribution discusses the distinct ways in which interest group research has historically dealt with inherent challenges of comparative research designs.

Introduction

Consider these phenomena: In Belgium practically every interest association has a 'sister' organization at the other side of the lingual border, in the United States interest groups are critical financial contributors to electoral campaigns and in France a substantial part of the individual firms lobbyists active in the *Assemblée Nationale* are state-owned. Interest group politics, as these examples indicate, is intimately connected to the broader political system and has historical and nationally distinct roots in different societies. These ties plausibly affect the nature of interest mobilization, the likely strategies pursued and the potential influence on public policy of interest groups. This creates a challenge: how do we know that country-specific supporting evidence for our theories on each of these topics is also valid in other countries? How far can we allow our theories to travel? And how broad should we frame them?

The country comparative study of interest groups is conceptually challenging: in one of his early works, Dahl (1947 8, 11) points to the 'fundamental difficulties of drawing universal conclusions from the institutions of any one country'. The social embeddedness of political phenomena, first, creates serious conceptual challenges to 'scientific' progress in the field because, due to substantial national differences, it would be difficult to formulate universally valid theories. Second, the fundamental roots of politics in 'the national and social setting' necessitates a broadening in the

focus of the study of government beyond institutions and into group-based power struggles surrounding these. Such power struggles provide the link between formal institutions and their social context, and, as implied, is crucial in understanding country-differences. These arguments create a fundamental tension between the laudable aspiration to maximize the external, cross-system validity of research findings and an acknowledgement of a broad set of political practices (institutions and group behaviors) that are socially and historically embedded, and therefore distinct between (clusters of) countries.

This contribution evaluates the different ways in which interest group researchers have dealt with this issue. The response to this tension may be observed in subsequent waves of comparative studies of the political activities of organized interests: a first wave in the Fifties and Sixties of the Twentieth Century with explicit aspirations towards a universally valid 'grand' theory of groups, a second wave in the Seventies and Eighties with implicit or explicit limited interest in cross-country validity and a contemporary wave of studies that relies upon pragmatic research design solutions and relatively narrow 'contextual' middle range theories. In what follows, the lessons learned in each of these waves are discussed, followed by an identification of contemporary challenges in the design of cross-system interest group studies.

The classic scholarly debate on the system-comparative study of interest groups

By the end of the Fifties, several prominent American political scientists started a collaborative, comparative research endeavor into interest group systems. They aspired to broaden the study of politics away from a narrow focus on formal institutions and include the activities of groups of citizens and other politically active organization. The intermediate position of interest groups in between public opinion, parties and government made interest groups crucial for the understanding of the 'systematic conception of the political process as whole' (Almond 1958 271) and the long-term practical viability of political systems in particular countries. Their focus on interest groups as central agents in state-society relations was aimed at the identification of the systemic political characteristics of countries. An optimistic and pessimistic perspective on the extent to which comparative research designs could help in building theories of groups arose from the disciplinary debates that followed.

The optimists are the 'functionalists'. They study the 'function of articulating and transmitting group interests', and, their eventual interest is directed towards a 'functional' theory of politics more broadly: 'the functions of political choice, and the ways in which these functions are performed in different societies' (Almond 1958 272, 281). This function may be performed by different types of actors and through different structures in different countries. Through the comparative study of this function, researchers identify the functional equivalence of certain actors such as pressure groups, 'informal groups' or bureaucratic 'cliques' in different countries. For instance, the comparable

'function' of the mobilization of discontent in Eastern Europe during the Cold War manifested itself through different channels in different countries: with intellectual roots in the Prague Spring in 1968 or via religious leaders in Poland (eg. Dogan and Pelassy, 1990, 41-42). The high level of abstraction allows for the study of a relatively broad range of group-related political behaviors in both Western and non-Western systems, and its relation to public opinion, parties and the legislative process. This is a major benefit and an ambition that contemporary scholarship could still be inspired by. Most of the studies around this time are not comparative, but country studies that are loosely connected through cross-references and workshops (e.g. Ehrmann, 1958).

In response, the pessimists or realists, first, posit that 'except at a level of abstraction that renders it useless and dangerous for empirical research, a general interest group theory does not exist' (LaPalombara 1960 30). In addition, as persuasively and influentially argued by Sartori (1970 1242) the research initiatives of the 'optimists' suffer from 'the travelling problem of comparative politics'. The 'travelling problem' occurs when concepts, in this case of 'groups', are broadened in order to gain extensional coverage ('it applies everywhere') but therewith lose connotative precision ('it applies to everything') (Sartori, 1970, 1234-36, 1243, 1248-49). Sartori (1970 1243, 1248-49) blames the functionalists in general, and the group-students in particular, for climbing the 'ladder of abstraction' without conceptual 'mid-level' steps between the 'indeterminate' group concept and the concrete definitions used in empirical research. In other words, the research results of the functionalists can only be compared at a highly abstract level and are therefore eventually hardly meaningful in relation to the cross-country validity of particular findings. For instance, we may observe the 'function' of the mobilization of discontent in Cold War Eastern Europe in its distinct manifestations, but, we need more specific concepts to explain or predict under which circumstances what type of mobilization (e.g. via the streets or via established (religious) community associations) takes place.

Second, pessimists emphasize the strong cultural, historical and institutional context in which interest organizations operate. Macridis (1961, 45), among others, points out that scholars who compare interest group systems are 'soon forced to the conclusion that 'interest' like any other activity in a system is conditioned by secular forces that have shaped the political culture of the community' and that only a 'a good understanding of the historical dimension' may allow for an explanation of certain cross-national differences in group behavior. For instance, studies in the Sixties in European countries such as France and the Netherlands explain the organizational structure of interest representation on the basis of religious and political ideological fragmentation ('pillarization' in the Netherlands). Such structural phenomena can only be understood when the group system is studied in connection to several parts of the political system (parties, executive, cleavages in society). This implies that group

research can only be non-explanatory, descriptive country studies or must rely on system-specific theory formation (i.e. a theory of the French interest group system, a theory of the American group system and so on).

The initial response to these criticisms focused on system-specific theory construction and the longer-term response conceptually addressed the 'traveling problem'. These responses are discussed in the following section.

Spheres of theoretical validity: pluralism, corporatism and the rest

The magnitude of the challenges mentioned depends, of course, on the size of the differences between the countries under study. The early functionalists were very ambitious in this regard and aspired to include all countries in the world (Almond 1958 281). Also, taking into account that comparison aims to assess the validity of a certain empirical relationship between variables in as many circumstances as possible, Sartori (1970 1035) points to the methodological grounds that such an 'enterprise must – in principle – be a *global* enterprise'. In part, this implies that the differences between countries are 'differences in *kind*' rather than 'differences in *degree*', which produces additional difficulties in designing controlled comparisons (e.g. Sartori 1970 1036). These arguments forms the base for the development of system-specific theory, more specifically, corporatist theories valid for a set of countries in Europe, and clearly distinct from 'pluralist' systems.

In his classic statement, Schmitter (1974, 93-98) defines corporatism institutionally as 'a system of interest representation in which the constituent units are organized into a limited number of singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered, and functionally differentiated categories, recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state, and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.' Pluralism, by contrast, is defined as a mirror image of corporatism: it is 'a system of interest intermediation in which the constituent units are organized into an unspecified number of multiple, voluntary, competitive, nonhierarchically ordered, and self-determined (as to type or scope of interest) categories that are not specifically licensed, recognized, subsidized, created, or otherwise controlled in leadership selection or interest articulation by the state and that do not exercise a monopoly of representational activity within their respective categories'. (See [Chapter Corporatism \(and Neo-corporatism\)](#) and [Pluralism \(the Interest Group Theory of Politics\)](#))

This separate trajectory of theory-formation fostered some progress in our understanding of interest representation in particular sub-sets of (European) countries. The system-specific theory-construction is still also common in relation to the EU, the Scandinavian countries and, more recently, other particular regions in the world. It creates, however, some difficulties in the cross-system build-up of knowledge and the mutual recognition of research output, or even 'professional amnesia' (e.g. Almond,

1983). This may be the reason that there have been only few direct comparisons of (very) different systems.

Contemporary state of the field: segmented and contextual

The most important solution to the 'travelling problem' is to segment or narrow down the phenomenon under investigation. This allows for the construction of 'theories of the middle range' that help to link specific studies to a broader field, and allows for the development of common standards of empirical measurement. These things are needed to properly move on the ladder abstraction through the careful handling of (attributes of) concepts.

The development of the field over the past decades indicates that this is more or less the form of progress in the field of interest representation (Lowery & Gray 2004). Most notably, Lowery et al (2008) suggest an ordering of the field of interest group research into somewhat distinct consolidate groups of middle range theories along the four stages along the so-called 'influence production process. I will not restate the precise scheme, it suffices to say that the four subfields of research are 'mobilization and organizational maintenance', 'organizational populations', 'strategies' and 'political outcomes and influence'.

This scheme represents a middle way between the overly ambitious 'grand explanatory schemes' such as structural-functionalism, the 'anything goes' approach of early-stage academic fields that are dominated by descriptive efforts only and the explicit system-specific limitation of external validity of the pluralism versus corporatism debate. It allows for the incorporation of a very broad range of studies and there are several theoretical meaningful connections between the stages. This grouping of theoretical clusters provide more coherence than alternative mid-range segmentations in the field such as the theoretical sub-division per group-type or along institutional lines (legislative politics, executive politics etc). Recent collaborative projects such as INTEREURO in the EU and the lobbying and policy change project in the US, have loosely subdivided the research work along the lines of the 'influence production process' and are productive in the development of 'contextual' theories pertaining to particular research questions on interest representation (Kluver et al 2015). More concretely, for instance, this conceptual specification allows for a study of policy access measured via a survey among leaders of policy-active groups in several countries in Europe (e.g. Hanegraaff et al 2020). This is conceptually sufficiently specific, while broad enough to travel across reasonably similar countries. The inclusion of 'partial' democratic regimes such as Russia or Turkey would be conceptually off-limits, given the distinct meaning and form 'policy access' has in such regimes. The broadening of the concept, for instance adding access to party organizations, to allow it to travel further, makes it more difficult to speak to existing studies of access.

The segmentation of the field along the lines of the 'influence production process' may offer some solution for the challenges of designing comparative research. It also creates a new challenge arising from the fact that relationships between the distinct stages that systematically vary between polities. This requires researchers to 'develop integrated models accounting for the differences between countries in the ways the several components of the influence production process are linked' (Lowery, Poppelaars & Berkhout 2008 1244). However, this is challenging given that one would then need to include 'variables going far beyond organised interests themselves' (Lowery, Poppelaars & Berkhout 2008 1244), possibly including the broad historical or cultural particularities underlying distinct political systems.

In other words, it may not be possible to simultaneously create focused comparative research designs and to specify the effects that relate to the broader process of interest representation. This is a serious issue and echoes the concern of the 'pessimists' about the interrelationship of interest groups with their socio-historical context. It is also largely an empirical question and a matter of how much we want to explain. In part, due to these contextual effects, researchers will have to accept that comparative research designs will, necessarily, not have the same explanatory power as more elaborately specified single country models may have. In other words, comparative variable-oriented research designs probably do not meet the levels of specification that may be reached in other designs. But this is compensated by the greater claim to external validity of comparative designs compared to single country models; or, when carefully and 'qualitatively' designed, the case-oriented specification of particular combinations of variables, trajectories of change or unique particularities of individual cases.

Summary

To summarize, the major, contemporary challenges of comparative research on interest representation that is large-n and sensitive to context, are (1) the simultaneous need to narrow down the research question and maintain links to intermediate theory, (2) the socio-historical particularities of the broader context of interest representation, and (3) the relatively small differences between countries that can be accommodated in current theories. In line with this, recent progress is based on sensible theoretical segmentation, a focus on proximate rather than systemic contextual factors, a relatively similar country selection and, in most cases, largely descriptive, or minimally conceptualized, research findings. To conclude, to further this conceptual progression, researchers are well-advised to continue working in this recent trajectory with (1) a precise conceptual focus, (2) similar country selection and (3) case-oriented qualitative studies with specific theory-building aims.

Comparing countries is important for the formal methodological and research design aims noted above. Comparing also contributes to a self-aware research orientation of the researchers involved and a community orientation aimed at academic progress (e.g. Dogan and Pelassy, 1990, 5-14). In other words, a comparatively oriented research community is likely to endorse a more diverse view in a conceptual and empirical sense and in the course of academic interaction; ultimately contributing to new research questions, nuanced views of one's own outlook and open engagement with the study of politics anywhere in the world.

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