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ARTICLE

Interest Group Politics: Change and Continuity

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Lobbying the European Union: Institutions, Actors and Issues, David Coen and Jeremy Richardson (eds.), New York: Oxford University Press, 2009

The Political Economy of State-Business Relations in Europe: Interest Mediation, Capitalism and EU Policy-Making, Rainer Eising, London: Routledge, 2009

Organized Business Interests in Changing Environments: The Complexity of Adaptation, Jurgen R. Grote, Achim Lang and Volker Schneider (eds.), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

Political Activities of Interest Organizations: Conflicting Interests, Converging Strategies, Joost Berkhout, Universiteit Leiden, 2010

Lobbying and Policy Change: Who Wins, Who Loses, and Why, Frank R. Baumgartner, Jeffrey M. Berry, Marie Hojnacki, David C. Kimball and Beth Leech, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009

Introduction

In the past 20 years, scholarly attention to the activities of interest groups in Europe has grown considerably (Beyers *et al.* 2008; Coen 2007). This development can be explained by two related political processes. First, European integration has advanced significantly since the 1980s. The increasing Europeanization of various policy sectors resulted in the establishment of numerous European associations, and triggered the mobilization of national interest groups at the supranational level. Second, this

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proliferation of interest groups has coincided with a seemingly declining importance of national parties (Bartolini 2005; Mair 2006). Although the decay of parties has many causes, one vital element concerns the difficulties political parties face as they struggle to adjust their functioning to a multilevel political environment. So far, interest groups have demonstrated a greater capacity to adjust their organizational setup to this changed reality, although adaptive tendencies vary across policy areas and types of organizations (Beyers and Kerremans, 2007; Ladrech 2005).

Considering the academic literature on interest groups, a tendency towards a more systematic and holistic approach can be discerned (Baumgartner and Leech 1998). Looking for explanations of interest group behavior, the focus gradually shifted from external (e.g. Truman 1951) to internal factors (e.g. Olson 1965). Nowadays, research is moving towards a more contextualized theory of lobbying (e.g. Lowery 2007). Various scholars, including the authors and editors of the reviewed books, advocate an approach that takes into account the resource and legitimacy needs of political institutions, as well as the desire of interest groups to gain access and exercise influence (e.g. Braun forthcoming). They study both the demand and the supply side, and use insights from various theoretical perspectives (such as institutionalism and organization theory). In this way, a more comprehensive understanding of interest group politics in Europe and beyond can be developed.

Interest Group Politics in Europe

Four of the five reviewed publications concentrate in particular on interest groups in the EU, whereas Baumgartner *et al.* highlight the linkage between lobbying activities and policy change in the USA. While the first four publications offer rich accounts of the evolving nature of interest groups and associational systems, the fifth contribution demonstrates the important role of policy communities in policy-making.

In *Lobbying the European Union*, Coen and Richardson argue that EU institutions and interest groups demonstrated a great capacity to learn in the latest two decades. The central thrust of this volume is that policies designed by the EU institutions substantially shape lobbying patterns. In particular, the role played by the European Commission (EC) cannot be underestimated. Faced with legitimacy concerns, a growing workload, a higher need of expert knowledge and an increasing amount of advocacy, this institution has sought various ways to manage the information supply by interest groups. For instance, the EC opted to provide financial support to some associations and established numerous consultative committees (chapter 2). Considering interest groups, a kind of task division seems to have materialized. Most EU associations have a specialized functional profile, focusing on monitoring, agenda setting and contacts with the EC. National associations, on the other hand, mostly concentrate on the domestic level. Only at the implementation stage, they become closely involved in EU policy-making (see also Pleines 2011). Furthermore, as the interinstitutional balance of the EU has changed significantly, several organizations have managed to act

upon these shifts in power and adjusted their strategies. However, not all organizations display equally strong capacities to adapt, as is illustrated by the declining influence of COPA in the agricultural sector (chapter 12). All in all, the volume convincingly demonstrates the institutionalist argument, with seven chapters dealing with the varying demands of EU institutions, and six sectoral case studies documenting how interest intermediation differs across policy sectors. Nonetheless, a next edition might benefit from a more thorough discussion of the supply side of lobbying. The two included empirical chapters that deal with this matter are rather narrow in scope, as they focus mainly on large firms with headquarters in Brussels and the most resourceful environmental organizations.

In *The Political Economy of State-Business Relations in Europe*, Eising concentrates on a subset of European interest groups, business associations and large firms. He examines how these organizations and national modes of interest intermediation are affected by the EU multilevel system, assessing interest groups in three member states (France, Germany, and the UK) and concentrating on three sectors (agriculture, industry, and services). In addition, the book also explains varying access of national and European organizations to EU institutions. One of the most important conclusions is that the differences between the traditional systems of interest intermediation (statism, corporatism, and pluralism) and varieties of capitalism (Mediterranean market economy, coordinated market economy, and liberal market economy) are much smaller and more complex than is often presumed. The French and German interest group system are characterized by quite identical structural features, whereas the British system, due to the stronger impact of market dynamics, is less integrated and displays a relatively higher degree of fragmentation. Yet, regarding functional features of interest organizations, German and British groups are rather similar. Compared to French organizations, they more strongly prioritize interest representation over the provision of services and market coordination. Considering access of interest groups, Eising observes that only a minority of national organizations developed into multilevel players. Although institutional factors partly explain the observed variance, other factors, such as resource dependencies and organizational characteristics, also play an important role. More specifically, especially resourceful actors, organizations that dispose of considerable financial resources, expertise, and economic clout, are able to engage in multilevel venue shopping. In this regard, Eising notes that 'it can be ruled out that weak embeddedness in national politics provides the grounds for close relations with EU institutions,' as actors with the largest strategic repertoire are mostly well-established players (168). As a result, whereas European integration overall did not result in a transformation of national systems of interest intermediation, the process might have further consolidated existing (power) relations among national interest groups, a tendency that is most outspoken in neo-corporatist settings. As rightly indicated by the author, future research would benefit from systematic data collection that allows comparison of state-business relations over time.

The edited volume by Grote, Lang, and Schneider, *Organized Business Interests in Changing Environments*, addresses a similar theme and convincingly demonstrates the added value of a longitudinal perspective. Their book starts with a meticulous literature review, followed by two empirical sections analyzing business associations at the national and European level over a period of 20 years, mainly focusing on three countries (the USA, the UK, and Germany) and three sectors (chemical, dairy, and information and communication). Somewhat contrary to the varieties of capitalism hypothesis, which emphasizes the particular character of national polities, they observe that the main variation regarding associational systems is between industries. On the other hand, whereas market dynamics result in rather similar sectoral network structures across countries, corporatist countries still display higher degrees of centralization. Hence, these findings also confirm the generally path-dependent character of adaptation, illustrating that 'every political system contains a specific set of organizing principles, which persist over time and can hardly be modified or even abandoned' (125). The contribution of this volume to the study of interest groups is threefold. First, the applied theoretical framework, complex associative action theory, based on neo-corporatist research and organization theory, represents a valuable complement to the more US-oriented neo-pluralist approach. Second, they provide the most comprehensive explanation of adaptation processes. They conceptualize interest group adaptation as a multilevel phenomenon, implying changes at the system level of associational orders (operationalized through social network analysis) and the organizational level (examining domains, structures, resources, and outputs). Third, in addition to political and institutional developments, the authors include economic and technological changes as explanatory factors for dynamics in interest group communities. They argue that the latter two elements create indirect pressures, as they shape the potential membership of business associations. In their view, market dynamics explain most of the observed changes at the associational and organizational level. However, they also indicate that political systems and interassociational structures (ecological networks) represent critical intervening factors, as they determine the direction and pace of adaptation processes. The cases included here, however, represent longstanding member states and mature polities. Hence, one wonders whether associational systems in countries that only recently joined the EU, characterized by an emerging and more volatile political system, deal with these environmental challenges in a similar way.

The fourth publication reviewed here, *Political Activities of Interest Organisations*, concentrates on explaining variance in political strategies of interest groups. Traditionally, the strategies of interest groups are explained by two fundamental mechanisms: the logic of influence (the desire to shape public policy) and the logic of membership (the representation of societal interests) (Schmitter and Streeck 1999). Yet, Berkhout theoretically distinguishes three exchange relationships. In addition to relations with members and policy-makers, he identifies interaction with the media as a third crucial mechanism. However, public visibility can be

seen as something instrumental, a means towards membership maintenance or influencing policy-makers. Moreover, interest group activities mainly involve low politics (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009). Much advocacy is rather technical and happens outside the limelight. Therefore, the assumption that the media context represents a third fundamental mechanism shaping interest group behavior is debatable. Nonetheless, the author rightly underlines the need to bridge the literature on social movements and (economic) interest groups, and introduces a fairly ambitious theoretical framework in the second chapter. Subsequently, he systematically examines respectively the political activities of organizations in the Netherlands and the EU, variation in communication strategies by EU-level interest groups (applying an innovative method of website coding) and differing degrees of media attention to interest group activities in six Western European countries. Combined, these chapters provide a detailed picture of the influence production process (see Lowery and Gray 2004), as they relate characteristics of interest group populations (across countries and sectors) to the actual behavior of these organizations. While the business interest community is more dense at the EU level compared to the Netherlands, a finding that might partly result from different sampling methods (top-down vs. bottom-up), in both cases Berkhout finds business organizations to be more involved in politics than citizen interests. Furthermore, variation across organizations regarding political communication and national media appearances are mainly explained by the specific policy topic of interest and the nature of the associated interest community. That is, while this study was structured to test the explanatory power of hypotheses derived from neo-pluralism (organizational survival), neo-corporatism (government institutions), and social movement literature (media), the expectations regarding the impact of membership, organizational characteristics, and political systems gained little support. Systematic cross-country differences seem less important than frequently assumed, and interest groups representing different constituencies are found to employ largely similar strategies. The title of the last section of his book is the main question occupying interest scholars nowadays: 'issues matter, but why'?

Lobbying and Policy Change by Baumgartner *et al.* is probably one of the most important studies on interest group politics published during the past decades. Its importance lies in the fact that it systematically investigates how the nature of policy issues shapes advocacy. Having randomly sampled almost 100 legislative issues relating to the US federal government, the authors follow the policy-making process on these matters over a period of four years by mapping policy sides, constellations of interest groups and government officials that aim for identical policy outcomes. Their findings on policy change are consistent with a friction model: 'a substantial tendency towards maintaining the status quo, but many large changes as well as marginal adjustments' (242, see also Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In the light of this review, one of their most relevant findings concerns their clarification of how the power of the status quo shapes interest group constellations. That is, the best predictor for policy success

of organized interests is their position as defender of the status quo. They explain this ‘friction’ by the presence of an issue-specific structure-induced equilibrium, created and sustained by ‘large knowledge-based communities of experts’ (47). In other words, similar to Berkhout, Grote *et al.*, Baumgartner *et al.* confirm the important structuring role of ecological networks. Consequently, network analyses of these large communities of specialists and professionals surrounding policy issues seem an interesting path to pursue in upcoming work.

Avenues for future research

By applying different theoretical lenses and employing innovative research methods, these books generate a more fine-grained understanding of how interest groups and associational systems respond to changing environments. Nonetheless, the future research agenda could profit considerably by extending our focus to political parties and including the precise nature of (sectoral) systems of interest intermediation into our reflections.

While interest groups play a fundamental role in policy-making, the vital position of political parties and governmental officials earns greater scholarly attention. One key message permeating these volumes is that interest groups crucially rely on political support (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009; see also Hall and Deardorf 2006). Nevertheless, this function of public actors as policy advocates, working together with like-minded interest groups, regularly goes unnoticed (also among party scholars). Consequently, the current tendency to separate political party studies from the work on interest groups might not be the best way forward, as the behavior of these two actors can only be fully understood by studying them in tandem (Tichenor and Harris 2005).

In the end, none of the contributions provides clear-cut answers on the nature of the EU system of interest intermediation. The reviewed books illustrate that the EU system does not fit traditional typologies, as these do not capture the segmented and sectoral nature of the EU policy process. Yet, the comparative work reviewed here (Eising, Berkhout, Grote *et al.*) also demonstrates that sectoral dynamics differ significantly at the domestic level. Consequently, these findings underline the need to fine-tune our understanding of national modes of interest intermediation. At this moment, however, scholars primarily concentrate on examining patterns at the supranational level. Still, a closer look at national (sectoral) modes of interest intermediation might be essential in order to increase our understanding of multilevel policy-making. In order to paint an accurate picture of the changing interaction between state and nonstate actors, multiple issues within a particular policy sector should be studied, taking into account a long-time frame and examining how the population of engaged interest groups, and their relation with policy-makers, evolves throughout the policy cycle. So far, some of the main trends identified regarding the development of policy communities involve the evolution from iron triangles to issue networks, and the decline of neo-corporatist patterns of policy-making. Yet, currently, most studies in this area remain cross-sec-

tional (Grote *et al.* is an exception). Therefore, as we gradually acquire a more complete image of change and stability in national and sectoral populations of interest groups, a key challenge for the years ahead consists of linking the mobilization and community of societal interests to political decision-making and policy outcomes.

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