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Policy Issues, Organisational Format and the Political Strategies of Interest Organisations

JAN BEYERS

Contemporaneously, the study of EU lobbying appears somewhat disconnected from other sub-areas within the study of EU politics. Research tends to be focused on single issues – either particularistic or directional – and concentrates on communicative interaction modes that emphasise network governance, ignoring the electoral side of politics. This essay's main objective is to make the politics component of interest group politics more intelligible. The core argument is that interest group strategies, as well as potential influence, are not adequately explained by resources only. In response to this, a framework is built that links different interaction modes (arguing, bargaining and voting) with political strategies (inside and outside), organisational formats and the nature of political issues.

This contribution addresses a topic somewhat ignored by scholars studying group politics in the European Union: namely, how the nature of policy issues structures the context within which interest groups operate and how this shapes their political strategies. This essay is inspired by the observation that interest group approaches remain, in two distinct ways, somewhat disconnected from a broader literature. First, despite excellent volumes with chapters on social movements, interest groups and political parties (Marks and Steenbergen 2004), the cross-fertilisation between the literature on ideological political conflict within the EU polity, on the one hand, and the EU interest group literature, on the other, remains rather limited. Often the literature reads as if different types of political representation – such as parties, interest groups or social movements – exist near each other. These different types do not share ideational niches nor are they supposed to interact in the same political context. Second, interest group approaches tend to emphasise the semi-institutionalised strategies of inside lobbying and stress the preponderance of functional resources such as expertise.

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In contrast, social movement scholars, who study similar types of political organisations, take the conflictual nature of politics, non-institutionalised forms of claim-making and the importance of political cleavages as a starting point for their analyses.¹

Although these various strands in the literature stress different aspects, they all tend to depict EU politics as de-politicised and technocratic. One reason for the apolitical nature of EU interest group studies is that group politics is often conceived as driven by resource-based bargaining confined to specific policy issues. Here the claim is that in order to make the *politics* component of group politics more widely intelligible, more attention needs to be paid to the varying nature of the political issues that characterise the political context and that interest groups need to be studied as political *organisations* (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 177–8).

When designing their strategies interest groups have to decide about the arenas where they will present their policy views. Roughly speaking, two arenas can be distinguished, inside arenas (backstage) or outside arenas (front stage) (Kollman 1998; Grant 2001; Beyers 2004; Binderkrantz 2005; Naurin 2007a). The first venue concerns the world of advisory bodies, committees, agencies and, to some extent, parliamentary committees. This world is not or only partially visible to a larger audience. Contemporary political systems, the EU in particular, contain an incredibly diverse number of such settings. Consequently, scholars of EU interest groups pay much attention to what happens in these arenas. In contrast, outside arenas are the venues where the communication among interest groups, policy-makers and citizens becomes visible to a broader audience. It is not only the arena where political campaigns are reported or where organisations try to attract attention from a broader audience, but it also functions as a venue through which constituencies gain information about an organisation's activities.

Here I seek to build a framework to facilitate our understanding of how groups represent their interests – e.g. through various forms of inside and outside lobbying, through arguing or bargaining – and by looking at variation with regard to the policy issues, the way groups interact with other key actors as well as their organisational format (Wilson 1995: xvi). The discussion is organised as follows. The first section focuses on the nature of policy issues and, more concretely, their varying salience and visibility. Many researchers concur that the unique features of an issue has important implications. But few have investigated systematically how within a large population of issues salience impacts upon group strategies. Issues also induce actors to colour their strategies with different interaction modes, i.e. how interest groups interact with other actors. The next two sections conceptualise three different interaction modes; on the one hand, arguing and bargaining as modes based on communication or exchange and, on the other hand, modes characterised by acquiescence whereby, compared to bargaining and arguing, communication is less prevalent. The propositions developed in these two sections are, first, that EU interest group scholars

tend to ignore hierarchical modes of policy-making as well as the electoral side of politics and, second, that interaction modes have specific consequences for understanding interest group power. The first three sections of this article refer to the issues in the external context of organisations and to the interaction among organisations. The final section looks at the internal organisational context and deals with how organisational format shapes interest representation, including how groups argue their case.

The Nature of Political Issues

When looking to the prevailing political strategies at the EU level one may conclude that EU policy-making is characterised by a low intensity of political conflict. There is not much grass-roots mobilisation, non-institutionalised forms of claim-making are rarely used and outside strategies or media campaigns are quite uncommon (Imig and Tarrow 2001). One of the reasons, it is often argued, is the absence of a European public sphere and the technical nature of most regulatory policy issues. Nonetheless, in recent years the European Commission started to pay more attention to its communication with the broader public and the European Parliament's (EP) susceptibility to public debate increased the visibility of European political debates. More and more European interest groups advertise in weekly magazines or newspapers such as *European Voice* or the *Financial Times*.

As a matter of fact, policy issues vary immensely in terms of the amount of political activities that take place in front of broader audiences. Although the public visibility of EU policy issues may vary considerably, few researchers have systematically compared the impact of issue attention across a larger set of policy issues (see Mahoney 2008). This variance is important for understanding the micro-logics that characterise the action repertoire of interest groups. The political context that surrounds crucial issues determines whether and to what extent organisations are capable of deploying their resources effectively (Burstein and Linton 2002: 396–7). Issues can feature high on the political agenda and gain much public attention or they can be of concern to a handful of actors. For different types of issues, policy-makers will seek and need different resources. Some issues require expert knowledge while others need broad-based political support. There are several classifications of conflict types. Here I draw on Mark Smith's (2000) threefold categorisation of issue conflicts in which business organisations may become involved. Smith's distinction is similar to the categorisation proposed by Knill and Lenschow (1998) on how different norms affect the potential for Europeanisation and political change.²


The first issues are particularistic. These concern only one or just a few groups pursuing their interests on matters where existing standards are

highly technical and confined to one specific sector (*first order norms* in Knill and Lenschow's conceptualisation). Each issue mobilises a narrow range of groups and no large coalitions are formed (familiar concepts here are issue or sub-government). The second set of issues, so-called dividing issues, divides business because different competing subsections diverge. A larger number of organisations are involved and debates generally concern the appropriate regulation within a specific field. Often actors share common goals and values, but disagree on how to realise these. Policy outcomes remain confined to specific sectors and do not spill over into a broader political environment (*second order norms* in Knill and Lenschow's terminology).³

Crucial in Smith's research are unifying issues. Here, business, or a substantial part of business, forms a cohesive front. Compared to the number of dividing or particularistic issues, such issue conflicts are relatively uncommon. Usually they concern deeply shared social norms, spanning an overall political system and referring to profoundly held values (they resemble *third order norms* in Knill and Lenschow's terminology). At stake is not only the practical solution of a specific problem, but also the legitimacy of a policy. Unifying issues gain public attention, are salient, partisan and ideological. They concern questions such as should we regulate, expand government intervention or not, deregulate labour markets, etc. Answers to these questions concern the functioning of the whole economy, have broad societal implications, are not confined to one particular sector and will affect multiple domains simultaneously. For that reason, unifying issues respond to public opinion sentiments and potentially play a role in electoral processes.

Basically, this threefold categorisation resembles the extent to which actors seek what Michalowitz (2007) calls directional or instrumental influence (see Table 1). Directional influence concerns a general policy shift that is much broader than an adaptation of policy instruments – it entails a profound shift in prevailing policy views. For instance, a change in the area of migration policies dominated by socio-economic policy instruments aiming to integrate immigrants towards a perspective governed by security tools and a related security discourse would signal an unequivocal directional shift. Such a change has important ramifications, for instance, it may lead to the creation of a new agency (e.g. new staff for border control), or a new set of regulations or substantial budgetary transfer. Instrumental influence, by contrast, concerns the ability to adapt or modify existing policy tools in order to make them more efficient and effective without affecting the paradigm that underpins the policy. One example is the EU Drinking Water Directives which dove-tail neatly with German regulatory practices and demanded only marginal changes in Germany's measurement techniques (Knill and Lenschow 1998). German interest groups focusing on such issues need to know all the technical details. Their influence strategies on this matter will not affect the core content of

TABLE 1
DIFFERENT CONFLICT TYPES AND THE NATURE OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Smith	Knill and Lenschow	Nature of Influence, Michalowitz
– Unifying issues	– Third order norms	Directional influence
– Dividing issues	– Second order norms	
– Particularistic issues	– First order norms	

Germany's water management policies or spill over into other policy areas. In sum, such groups seek instrumental, not directional influence.⁴

One might think that unifying or directional issues are rather scarce at the EU level. Public accountability is often assumed to be of lesser importance than it is within the member states. Moreover, the technocrats in the Commission are trained to depoliticise macro-political issues. Yet some European policy issues, such as the GMO or Service Directives, resemble unifying issues as they blend into broader ideological programmes. The fact that different actors – business, labour, and a diverse set of NGOs – build advocacy coalitions in opposition to each other makes some issues more visible than others. In addition to this, public visibility also affects the institutional venues for political deliberation. Often these issues are not only debated and decided in insulated policy settings such as Council working groups, comitology or advisory committees. Generally, they move to venues, such as the EP, where elected policy-makers are involved.

These distinctions are relevant for when and how groups mobilise and the degree to which the identity core of a body politic is touched upon. Seeking directional influence has a unifying effect as a larger variety of interests becomes involved. In contrast, instrumental influence has no tremendous implications for prevailing policy frames. It does not touch upon fundamental beliefs or the overall direction of policies at the aggregate level. In general, unifying issues have a directional bent, while particular and dividing issues are more instrumental. The public visibility of directional/unifying issues has major implications for the potential impact of interest groups (see also Burstein and Linton 2002: 384–5).

First, the saliency of unifying issues creates incentives for political parties and politicians to respond to, or take into consideration, voter preferences. Information about ideological stances and partisan affiliations become important compared to other less unifying and more particularistic issues. Politicians, who face re-election will, instead of just listening to a small number of specialised organisations, take into account public sensitivities and, accordingly, groups with broad-based public support enjoy certain advantages in gaining access and attention for their positions. On the whole,

directional or unifying issues involve a greater variety of actors. If this occurs, we cannot speak about *direct* interest group influence. Group influence will be moderated or softened through, and dependent upon, broader contextual factors, including parties, politicians, and public opinion.

Second, compared to the number of particularistic or instrumental issues, the policy agenda will carry only a small number of directional/unifying issues. Such issues demand much political energy and generating influence is highly uncertain. Therefore, interest organisations are tempted to avoid seeking influence on too many directional issues simultaneously. For such issues they usually pool their resources by building sizeable coalitions of large cross-sectoral organisations (such as BusinessEurope,⁵ European Roundtable of Industrialists or European Trade Union Confederation in the EU) to take the lead in debates on unifying issues. But also for these larger organisations spending all resources on directional issues is risky. Therefore, in order to realise some success, interest organisations turn to influencing small technical issues on which the general public might be somewhat indifferent, but with the potential to monopolise an area where tangible and direct benefits for the membership can be realised. For instance, although labour unions in neo-corporatist countries such as the Benelux nations or Germany publicly quarrel with the government and political parties on large macro-political choices, privately and routinely they keep informal and formal working relations with various government agencies in order to oversee, contribute or even execute welfare state programmes. Most portfolios of interest organisations consist of a mix with unifying, dividing and particularistic issues. Yet we lack systematic knowledge on how organisations balance different issues within their portfolios.

Third, the ideological nature of directional/unifying issues as well as the size of the relevant audience affect interaction modes and are also related to the organisational format of the groups involved. To begin with, it is hard to solve a directional conflict by a simple bargain with a large and unorganised audience. And as directional conflicts mostly concern beliefs and values, there is generally not much room for splitting the difference. Bargaining is only possible when those involved can establish the value of their exchanges. This is difficult with large unorganised audiences, but becomes possible when a small number of especially large and encompassing organisations adopt policy positions that enable them to reach a negotiated settlement. Organisations reduce the inhibiting effects of large numbers. However, argumentation becomes complex when large unorganised audiences are involved, which is the case with unifying issues. In these circumstances organisations, often coalitions or some large resourceful cross-sectoral organisations, tend to dominate the policy-making process. This contrasts with particularistic or instrumental issues whereby a small number of niche

organisations argue or bargain and seek an adequate solution. The next sections elaborate further on these interaction modes.

Three Interaction Modes

Issues also stimulate interest organisations to adopt different interaction modes. Interaction modes concern how organisations interact with other actors and can be categorised in three different ways: bargaining, arguing and acquiescence (Elster 1998; Yee 2004; Holzinger 2004) (see Table 2 for an overview). Two interaction modes, bargaining and arguing, are characterised by communicative exchanges, albeit in a different sense.

Bargaining means that actors make statements on resources to be exchanged in order to gain a particular benefit (e.g. a subsidy, a favourable regulation or help with policy execution). It includes the exchange of information on policy positions (e.g. benefits that are needed), technical information (e.g. is a policy instrument feasible?) and knowledge about intentions (e.g. what will happen when benefits are not delivered?). Each interaction concerns promises in the form of potential benefits or costs (of non-realised benefits) if an exchange does not take place. EU politics is often understood as ‘bargaining politics’ with interest groups as key players exchanging critical resources with public officials (Bouwen 2002; Greenwood 2007: 338).

When actors bargain they are primarily interested in (the distribution of) resources and the potential benefits that flow from exchange. In contrast, when actors argue they mainly focus on policy ideas, the nature of these ideas and (supportive or critical) arguments. Basically, arguing means that actors try to induce changes in the factual beliefs or preferences of others. When interest organisations argue they present ‘arguments in support of a legislative proposal’ (Smith 1984). Key is the framing of interpretations and understandings that the public, government officials and political parties find attractive. These may be superior to, or fit, existing policy positions (Baumgartner and Mahoney 2008; Baumgartner *et al.* 2008). Argumentation is at the heart of interest group politics. In addition to seeking particular benefits on specific issues, most interest groups devote time and energy to researching the nature of issues, the main controversies within a policy domain, as well as how other actors understand policy issues. All this monitoring takes place within communication networks spanning public and private spheres (Heinz *et al.* 1993). Hence, collective action depends largely on what ‘relevant others’ argue and on the structure of the communication network rather than on preferences of single actors. Unfortunately, there is not much large scale research on arguing, framing and EU interest groups, but several notable studies demonstrate the significance of this interaction mode (Guiraudon 2000; Princen and Rhinard 2006; Princen 2007a,b; Daviter 2007).

TABLE 2
THREE INTERACTION MODES COMPARED

	Communicative		Non-communicative Acquiescence
	Arguing	Bargaining	
Behavioural logic	framing of arguments and ideas, argumentation	exchange of resources	voting, coercion
Political strategies seek	ideational (factual beliefs and preferences) outcomes through argumentation	behavioural outcomes through the control of resources	to impose a collectively binding solution
Influence is determined by	the prevalence of a policy paradigm that sustains or challenges the status quo	resources, capabilities and their distribution	formal agenda-setting and voting rules
Is primarily, but not exclusively, used by	interest groups challenging the status quo	interest groups seeking to preserve the status quo	formal political actors; legislators and executive officials
Linkage to other interactions modes	actors can argue about <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the value of exchanges (with bargaining) • the appropriateness to voting (with acquiescence) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • justify their bids (with arguing) • exchange votes and discuss the value of votes on different issues (with acquiescence) 	preceded by arguing and bargaining
The interest group potential to shape policy outcomes	for directional issues if the group can shape the initial frame, mostly after a long time	not for directional issues, mostly particularistic or dividing issues	generally low and uncertain

Not all policy-making relies on communicative exchanges. When a legislative majority votes a law, it aggregates preferences. Within certain constitutional restrictions, such a decision can be imposed hierarchically and it is expected that both majority and minority acquiesce. Acquiescence is characterised by strong hierarchies in terms of resources and formal decision-making capabilities. The prevalence of concepts such as *network governance* signifies that EU scholars are not used to conceiving of the EU as a hierarchical system. Yet important EU policy areas such as trade, competition and monetary policy are fairly hierarchical (see also Eising 2008). Acquiescence is an essential ingredient of politics and, accordingly, much political science energy goes into studying hierarchical forms of collective decision-making such as voting in legislative bodies or executive decision-making. Nonetheless, although voting is key to politics, pure voting or voting that is not combined with or preceded by other interaction modes is somewhat rare. Frequently, voting takes place after arguing and bargaining in the shadow of the vote (Héritier and Lehmkuhl 2008). Moreover, the question whether or not to vote can be part of a process involving arguing and bargaining.

Empirically, bargaining and arguing are not easy to distinguish. Unlike in economics, politics has no single medium of exchange (e.g. money) which standardises bargains. Bids are based on subjective, value-based interpretations and discussions. During a bargaining process, actors must, in addition to information about resources, give reasons why benefit *a* is preferred to benefit *b*. In other words, they need to justify their case (Manin 1997: 183–92). Arguing usually precedes, or is combined with, bargaining. So, empirically bargaining may look quite similar to arguing, and arguing regularly intermingles with bargaining.

Strategies and interaction modes co-vary with the stage of the policy process in which an issue is situated. Decision-making models regularly differentiate between a voting stage and a pre-vote stage whereby the pre-vote phase can be further divided in a ‘need of action stage’ (during which issues gain in popularity and salience) and an ‘agenda-shaping stage’ (during which bargaining and arguing about different alternatives takes place) (Stokman and Van den Bos 1992; Kollman 1998: 107–11). Interest group researchers generally ignore the voting stage and, despite the overall characterisation of EU policies as being shaped by interest group activity, few scholars of EU legislative politics incorporate interest groups explicitly into their models. This is understandable. After all, interest groups are not a formal part of the Council, the EP or the Commission and they do not compete in elections. Within the College of the Commissioners, Commissioners acquiesce by obeying the norm of collegiality, which means that bargaining and arguing within the Commission take place in the shadow of hierarchy. During the voting stage interest groups are only one factor in addition to internal party dynamics, electoral competition, political careers, legislative customs and norms, and so on (Binderkrantz 2007). The larger

number of actors involved as well as the fine-tuned nature of the legislative proposals make it difficult to reframe issues or bargain successfully during the voting stage. Because of the uncertainty of outcomes during the voting stage, interest groups concentrate on what Kollman calls the 'need of action stage' and the 'agenda-shaping stage'. Consequently, EU group scholars pay less attention to hierarchical non-communicative interaction modes as legislative voting. Most EU scholars focus on communicative interaction modes such as bargaining. This may lead to a biased image of politics as being non-hierarchical and organised in horizontal non-hierarchical networks. After all, network concepts of all sorts – policy networks, network governance, network analysis and so forth – are common among group researchers, but much less fashionable among students of party and legislative politics.

Bargaining, Arguing and Power

Group influence depends on relations with many other actors (e.g. parties, bureaucrats) and will be limited during the voting stage. But this does not make groups completely irrelevant because much in politics concerns *which issue* is voted upon. As the number of issues is potentially very large, one of the most difficult hurdles for EU interest groups is to get MEPs interested, to gain attention from the Commission and some key member states in the Council of Ministers. Yet attention is not sufficient and not everyone seeks public visibility. Too much attention may backfire. The higher the visibility of an issue the greater the likelihood that the number of actors involved will also grow. It can become very difficult for a single actor to control events. Therefore, interest groups that prefer the status quo will avoid public visibility and eschew front stage strategies. There is already some evidence of this – for instance, challengers are more likely to approach the EP or employ outside strategies – although systematic research is somewhat lacking (Beyers 2004; Mahoney 2008). Basically, gaining public visibility and increasing salience through outside strategies is an important component of advocacy. But how does this relate to the interaction modes of arguing and bargaining? Is bargaining useful when the aim is to increase salience?

An appropriate way to characterise arguing vis-à-vis bargaining is to relate both modes to some classic conceptions of power (Lukes 1974; Schattschneider 1960). A traditional Weberian conception of power concerns the ability of *ego* to induce *alter* to pursue a course of action, which is more to *ego*'s liking. *Alter* would not pursue this without *ego*'s inducement and, therefore, *alter* is stimulated to do something that goes against his or her own will or belief. This conception of power is thin persuasion; only behaviour and not preferences or beliefs are affected. In contrast, power through arguing is a matter of shaping preferences and/or factual beliefs. Arguing differs from bargaining as it is not only confined to behavioural change (Risse 2000; Checkel 2005). It is an exchange of

arguments whereby *ego* aims to induce changes in *alter*'s wants/beliefs so that the newly adopted wants/beliefs cease to be alien to *alter*. Through arguing *alter* gradually – successful arguing takes time – and consciously distances herself/himself from old wants/beliefs and internalises new ones. As a result *alter* starts to pursue activities with the aim to realise wants that were originally only *ego*'s, but which became intrinsic to *alter*.

The bargaining perspective sees the capability to control resources as an important indicator of power, while the arguing perspective emphasises the success and persuasiveness in supplying policy arguments, conserving old policy paradigms and controlling or re-directing prevailing policy views. From a bargaining perspective, it is crucial to research which institutions – the Council, the EP, the Commission – are in need of which particular resource (such as expertise and information) supplied by whom (NGOs, business groups, etc.) (Pappi and Henning 1999; Bouwen 2002). It is important to note that bargaining entails asymmetries. One actor needs to supply what another requires and each actor must have capabilities that are compatible with the needs of others. In the EU policy relevant information is a key resource and all EU institutions, especially the Commission and the EP, seek private actors in order to gain expertise and 'test out' proposals among stakeholders.

That interest groups primarily care about beneficial exchanges has important implications for how we understand interest group power, namely the most resourceful gain most. Thus, a resource-based bargaining perspective explains unequal opportunities, power and bias by looking to organisational needs and the capabilities to satisfy these needs. In cases where interest groups are less able to supply or deliver crucial resources, they gain less access and face difficulties in realising their political objectives. In contrast to arguing whereby ideational variables are crucial, bargaining among interest groups and government officials is the result of comparing group resources with the resources supplied and needed by a target actor (Stokman and Zeggelink 1996). The idea that resources matter may sound trivial as so many writings on the EU seem to substantiate their importance. However, almost no large-N EU-related research or no systematic case studies have been conducted on the importance of resources. Moreover, existing research outside the EU is not encouraging with regard to the prospect of resources as an explanatory factor. Several research projects demonstrate that resources have almost no, or only a limited impact, on the selection of political strategies and the ability to shape policy outcomes (Baumgartner and Mahoney 2008; Burstein and Linton 2002; Binderkrantz 2005; Beyers and Kerremans 2007).

Arguing also entails asymmetries. It is especially when wants/beliefs vary that actors tend to argue. Furthermore, although arguing is not primarily driven by resources, it is not devoid of resources (Kotzian 2007). Much has been written on arguing in the field of international relations. Yet there are strong linkages with interest group research on framing and the role of

argumentation. The main thrust in these literatures is that strategies are considerably shaped by how actors frame issues and the extent to which dominant frames are malleable. It is frequently in circumstances characterised by unequal resource distributions and asymmetric dependencies (Martin 1992) that one dominant actor leaves the other aggrieved so that the weaker actor's only option is to try to convince the dominant one to cooperate and to change their mind (Risse 2000). In addition, arguing that aims to shape wants and beliefs is critical for expanding the scope of political conflict – i.e. enlarging the involved audience – for transforming technical issues into directional issues and for shaping views and beliefs of audiences on directional issues (Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 178–9; Burstein 1998, 1999). For various reasons arguing has to be seen as a key ingredient of interest group politics. Often groups lack adequate resources for bargaining and usually bargaining is accompanied with argumentation about the value of exchanges. As realising influence during the voting stage is difficult groups concentrate on stages of the policy process – agenda-setting and agenda-shaping – during which argumentation is predominant.

The distinction between groups challenging and those preserving the status quo is relevant when it comes to argumentation (Baumgartner *et al.* 2008). For instance, NGOs lacking the necessary bargaining chips will rely on normative appeals and refer to factual beliefs. In contrast, those who want to preserve the status quo usually realise their goals by exchanging policy-relevant information with key policy-makers. Actors challenging the status quo have a more difficult job. In order to be successful, they do not only need to demonstrate the deficiency of an existing policy. They must also come up with a persuasive alternative and argue convincingly that their proposed alternative is going to work better, something which they cannot demonstrate empirically. In contrast, status quo defenders do not need to come up with far-reaching alternatives. They can restrict themselves to supporting the existing policy and criticising alternatives as being unworkable, unrealistic and too risky.

Argumentation also entails that actors carefully select and try to reframe issues – for instance, by connecting or aggregating them with other issues – in order to generate attention and visibility. Note, however, that the scientific evidence on (re)framing and interest groups remains fragmentary. Although many authors highlight the importance of frames, we do not yet know how stable policy frames are, how regularly reframing occurs and what explains successful reframing. In one of the few studies on this topic, Baumgartner *et al.* (2008) demonstrate that reframing occurs in a very small number of issues, that most groups customarily stick to the prevailing frame and that only a minority of actors use strategic framing depending on the target institution. Most interest groups do not adapt their frame according to the institution they address – i.e. the EP, the Commission or the Council (see also Naurin 2007b).

Perhaps research efforts are still too much focused on reframing only. Probably it is easier to shape the initial frame than reframe a prevalent one. Instead of trying to reframe a particular perspective, interest groups can invest in some particularistic issues and try to transform these into unifying issues. The ability and opportunity to control the initial framing of an issue and convert it in a unifying issue is conceivably more important than reframing it. Once a frame is set, it becomes hard to change it. An example of initial framing is the Service Directive or the so-called Bolkestein directive which aimed to liberalise the EU service market. Although this directive can be seen as a harmonisation and improvement of the internal market, some actors successfully framed it as a directive that would substantially alter the direction of existing social policies and undermine current welfare state regulations. This made the Service Directive a unifying issue, related to other issues, including the European Constitution.

Political Strategies and Organisational Format

A conventional perspective is that interest groups speak on behalf of a clearly defined interest held by a well-defined constituency. Nonetheless, it is frequently uncertain whether positions and strategies at all times correspond with a membership or a group of supporters. For instance, when Greenpeace campaigned against the Brent Spar it was unclear whether this campaign represented the views of all Greenpeace's chequebook members (Jordan and Maloney 2007). Also, organisations representing similar constituencies or causes frequently behave very differently and/or accentuate other aspects of a frame. Some organisations moderate their stances, while others take more radical positions. Some are pragmatic and change their positions quite easily, while others stick to a position once adopted. Empirical research on influence strategies usually hypothesises that diffuse interests or NGOs are, compared to business interests, more likely to practise outside strategies. Although this is often confirmed, most researchers still observe significant numbers of business interests pursuing outside strategies. This suggests that our a priori distinctions are not always useful devices in categorising interest groups.

This final section deals with the internal environment of interest groups. When designing political strategies groups do not only take into account the potential impact on policy outcomes. More importantly, they also seek to survive as organisations. The strategies groups design may serve to affect the maintenance and the functioning of the organisation (Greenwood 2002; Lowery and Brasher 2004; Eising 2007; Beyers and Kerremans 2007). In addition to a *logic of influence* (e.g., designing political strategies, arguing and bargaining with policy-makers), group strategies are shaped by factors related to the immediate environment which affects a group's organisational maintenance. Such factors concern the membership (e.g., a dependence on membership dues or the ability to deliver services to members) or a group's

sponsors (e.g., a dependence on government subsidies). They may entail a *logic of sponsorship* and/or a *logic of membership* (Schmitter and Streeck 1999; Michalowitz 2007). In sum, the organisational format tells us how an organisation deals with its political environment.

My discussion will be structured on the basis of two key factors which affect the groups' significance for policy-makers as well as their ability to bargain or argue publicly or privately (for an overview see Table 3). First, interest groups are depicted as organisations representing either encompassing or specialised constituencies. A second factor concerns the autonomy of the organisational leadership vis-à-vis constituencies.

To begin with, some peak associations such as BusinessEurope or the European Trade Union Confederation are encompassing in the sense that they include a broad membership base and cover multiple policy sectors. Their strategies differ from organisations that concentrate on specific niches and rely on narrow constituencies. Yet encompassiveness is a double-edged sword. The larger the scope of an organisation, the more policy sectors and issues it needs to cover, the larger and more heterogeneous its constituency. On the one hand, this format strengthens the political relevance of an organisation as it speaks for many and not just a few. On the other hand, encompassiveness may diminish the ability for collective action and constrain the forming of common positions (see Schmitter and Streeck 1999; Eising 2007).

In addition, encompassing organisations run the risk that their negotiation flexibility ends once political positions are established. The complexity involved in establishing positions makes it difficult to adjust earlier adopted positions in case policy-makers are in need of more up-to-date positions. The ingrained beliefs and preferences of heterogeneous constituencies are not easy to change. Such constraint makes encompassing organisations less attractive to policy-makers who prefer to argue with organisations that swiftly adapt policy positions if a need arises. The extensive membership involvement that tends to characterise large encompassing organisations may also result in vague positions representing the lowest common denominator.⁶ On average such organisations have a less radical and pronounced public image and, compared to less encompassing organisations, their policy positions tend to lack the detailed information and specialised knowledge that some policy-makers require.

However, to view encompassing organisations with vague and general policy positions as irrelevant can be misleading. Such organisations may be more flexible than they initially appear. The vagueness of publicly revealed positions gives flexibility to the organisational leadership to hammer out the details during backstage bargaining or arguing and to make binding agreements. In addition, although encompassiveness may hinder collective action, the autonomy of large encompassing organisations may be quite substantial as their potentially broad and diverse resource base makes them less easy to capture by one single concentrated constituency. Encompassing

TABLE 3
STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESS OF DIFFERENT ORGANISATIONAL FORMATS

Autonomy of the Organisational Leadership	
Strong	Weak
<p>Encompassiveness of the organisation large, cross-domain player</p>	<p>encompassing organisations, strong leadership autonomy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● strong: providing information on political support ● weak: delivering specialised expertise ● strong: making binding agreements and socialisation of constituencies
<p>small, niche-player</p>	<p>encompassing organisations, weak leadership autonomy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● strong: providing information on political support ● weak: delivering specialised expertise ● weak: making binding agreements and socialisation of constituencies <p>niche organisations, weak leadership autonomy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● strong: providing information on political support ● weak: information remains confined to a particular sector ● weak: delivering specialised expertise ● weak: making binding agreements and socialisation of constituencies

organisations are better able to resist short term interests from a concentrated section of their membership.

Importantly, much depends on the autonomy of the organisational leadership. The greater their autonomy, the lesser the potential impact of a large and heterogeneous membership. Organisational autonomy concerns how strongly an organisation depends on its constituency for its chosen course of action, its policy positions as well as when it needs to make concessions during negotiations. Less autonomous organisations are those whereby the membership can change the organisation's positions constantly and, because of this, permanently limit the manoeuvrability of its representatives. A leadership that enjoys much autonomy vis-à-vis constituencies is less inhibited by cumbersome internal decision-making procedures and can more easily adapt its strategy. All interest organisations show varying levels of autonomy vis-à-vis constituencies. Some experience strong pressures to take tough and radical stances while others are more autonomous in this regard.⁷

There are many different methods to enhance organisational autonomy. Internal decision-making procedures are one important way and may include the strengthening of the secretariat or the adoption of some form of (qualified) majority voting. For instance, the move from consensus decision-making towards majority voting within EU interest groups has considerably enhanced the organisational autonomy of several EU-level peak associations (see Greenwood 2003: 88–9, 170–71). Organisations may also enhance their independence by arguing with and socialising key constituencies. Rather than being the prisoners of a narrow interest, encompassing organisations with a strong leadership potentially function as preference shapers of their constituency (for the neocorporatist perspective, see Schmitter and Streeck 1999). Another way to strengthen autonomy is to set up organisational devices that separate backstage bargaining from membership politics and/or outside strategies. Pushed to the extreme, this strategy implies that supporters play no more than a minimal role within the internal affairs of an interest group and that constituencies remain completely disconnected from what their representatives do at the EU level (Warleigh 2001). Finally, one can enhance autonomy by monopolising a specialised niche, a familiar strategy within a competitive and fragmented system such as the EU. The advantage of partitioning a system into small distinct niches is that it may significantly reduce competition.

Yet does niche specialisation and professionalisation enhance the overall autonomy and flexibility of EU interest groups? And what are the implications for different political strategies? To begin with, specialised niche organisations are smaller in size and have a more homogeneous constituency. This softens the collective action problem and improves the capability to formulate coherent positions. Moreover, specialisation allows the forming of positions which contain specialised technical information and

expertise – resources many EU institutions need. Such positions may be less vague and, therefore, potentially more rigid and informative.

However, niche specialisation may considerably decrease autonomy. Specialisation implies the monopolisation of policy niches and when all organisations control separate niches the amount of competition reduces substantially. Although reduced competition through niche specialisation sounds attractive, at the same time it makes organisations exceedingly vulnerable as they become entirely dependent upon one single source of resources within their niche. While a large encompassing organisation runs the risk of inflexibility because of a diverse constituency, the leadership of a niche organisation may become captured and controlled by very narrow interests. Their close connection to specific sectors make niche organisations, especially when they lack an autonomous leadership, more driven by the *logic of membership* compared to encompassing organisations with a strong autonomous leadership. To sum up, niche organisations are potentially less autonomous vis-à-vis constituencies and less able to socialise their members.

From the policy-maker's perspective niche organisations are attractive because they are closely connected to specific economic production processes and are able to provide detailed expertise which enables them to gain access. In addition, the limited autonomy of niche organisations and their weakly socialised constituencies means that policy-makers may consider such organisations as being easier to persuade. Or, as an EC official put it in interview they are those who are 'able to change their mind if you argue with them' (cited in Greenwood 2002: 104; see also Warleigh 2000, 2001). In contrast, such an argumentative process is complicated by encompassing organisations as it might be easier to convince a smaller specialised group instead of a larger organisation with its varied and multifaceted constituency.

Organisational formats also affect the selection of political arenas. Smith argues that organisations in need of building unity among large constituencies, such as cross-sectoral business associations, are less concerned with technical provisions and details (Smith 2000: 47–8, 58–9). Yet, depending on the organisational leadership, such organisations can be quite effective on the inside lobbying game. Nonetheless, they devote (compared to niche organisations) more resources to outside arenas and to mobilising members.⁸ While encompassing groups without a strong leadership are less attractive to policy-makers, they make greater use of outside rather than inside lobbying, not because such groups eschew inside politics, but simply because they find it difficult to identify public officials who are interested in negotiating with organisations that lack the ability to bind their membership.

Smith (2000) presents the American Chamber of Commerce as an example of an encompassing organisation with a strong leadership. Although this group is involved in inside politics, it mostly specialises in

outside lobbying. It was among the first to develop computer technologies to track its members in the various states to stimulate them to contact Congress. The multi-level structure of the EU also stimulates a labour division between the different levels. Most grass-roots lobbying takes place in the member states while EU-level groups concentrate on inside lobbying (Reising 1998; Imig and Tarrow 2001). That the choice of inside or outside arenas is, besides the importance of specific policy issues, also shaped by organisational format is illustrated by contrasting two American business associations, the American Chamber of Commerce and the Roundtable of Industrialists. Over the past two decades both organisations adopted very similar policy positions on the same set of issues. However, their strategies differed considerably. For the Chamber membership allegiance is an important part of its leverage and, consequently, unifying the membership around a common position is crucial (see also Binderkrantz 2005). Once a unified position is established, it becomes costly to change this because it requires utilising a cumbersome internal decision-making process, which, according to Smith, makes the Chamber appear somewhat inflexible.⁹ In contrast, the Roundtable does not have members in the usual sense, but CEOs of 200 large corporations. In this regard, it shares considerable similarities with the European Roundtable of Industrialists (ERT). Typical for both Roundtables is their role as insiders. While ‘grass-roots lobbying’ and outside lobbying may be useful for the Chamber or BusinessEurope,¹⁰ this is less so for their Roundtable counterparts. Accordingly, these differing *modus operandi* meant that the Roundtables are often perceived as being more moderate compared to other business organisations. Or, ‘the Roundtable sometimes will settle for half a loaf, while the Chamber will insist on the whole loaf, but this distinction does not imply that the two organisations’ underlying positions differ’ (Smith 2000: 31).

A similar argument can be made with regard to some EU environmental NGOs (Warleigh 2001). Take for instance Greenpeace and the European Environmental Bureau (EEB). As an organisation, Greenpeace depends on resources extracted through prominent media appearances. Its chequebook membership structure makes it largely autonomous vis-à-vis its constituency. In order to nurture its autonomy and flexibility Greenpeace refuses financial support from government agencies. Publicly, Greenpeace is perceived as radical and outspoken and sometimes its policy positions are presented as being close to non-negotiable. At the same time, its autonomy ensures that Greenpeace can be quite effective in terms of supplying policy-relevant information. Accordingly, Greenpeace is not always an attractive proposition to policy-makers – its chequebook membership is difficult to socialise or to persuade. In contrast, the EEB, a federation of about 140 national environmental NGOs (which are often federations themselves), is not particularly visible to the broader public and gains a substantial amount of its income from EU subsidies. While Greenpeace presents itself primarily as a ‘campaign organisation’, the EEB presents itself as a body that, besides

campaigning, aims to generate knowledge, promote dialogue with the EU institutions or, generally speaking, bargains and exchanges information and knowledge in return for policy changes.

Conclusion

Much interest group research relies on a priori categorisations of organised interests. Often a threefold distinction is put forward. Depending on the subfield these categories are labelled differently: 1) NGOs, public interests or social movement organisations, 2) business, economic or specific interests, and 3) labour or trade unions. Sub-disciplines tend to connect different attributes with each category (see Beyers *et al.* 2008). For instance, NGOs differ from business because of their so-called principled beliefs, peripheral position, limited influence or lack of resources, while business is considered as well-resourced and powerful.

This is an unhealthy state of affairs because these distinctions hide important similarities shared by interest groups. It would be more fruitful to study interest organisations from one generic conceptual framework instead of trying to build specific theories tailored to particular types. This article is an attempt to illustrate the fruitfulness of an approach based on organisation theory which considers interaction modes, the nature of political conflicts and organisational format as key dimensions. This enables us to understand some puzzling observations regarding interest group politics. For instance, often organisations with similar views (e.g. business organisations) adopt different strategies whereby some specialise in outside lobbying and/or arguing while others focus on inside lobbying and/or bargaining. Such variance cannot be explained by their similar views, but can be understood as a function of varying organisational formats. Subsequently, organisations with distinct views (such as economic interests versus environmental NGOs) frequently adopt similar action repertoires. This can be explained by comparable organisational formats, formats that distinguish varying economic interests from each other and make some economic interests more akin to some public interests. More generally, political strategies are not only related to what groups want and what groups want does not explain all their political activities.

Another explanatory factor emphasised above concerns the issue-specific nature of political strategies and actors' positions. Although NGOs or public interests more often challenge the status quo, this is not the case for all issues and also business interests may sometimes prefer a profound change. It is the nature of policy issues in combination with policy position and organisational format that affect an organisation's political strategy, and not necessarily the a priori categorisation of organisations. This claim has important implications for large scale empirical research. Elite survey research should avoid general questions about political strategies as these provide only limited information. It is much better to ask informants to

connect their response with specific issues on which their organisation lobbied. Some recent research projects demonstrate the feasibility of this research strategy (see Mahoney 2008). It would also bring interest group research in line with the study of legislative politics where the investigation of large samples of legislative issues is nowadays a common research strategy. The major advantage of such design is its ability to develop more systematic knowledge about how group politics is part of an overall political process that includes public opinion, electoral politics, political parties, elected officials, and interest groups.

Finally, recent political developments on transparency and the political pressure in favour of a compulsory registration system for EU lobby groups show that a systematic insight into the impact of interest groups goes beyond the narrow interest of academia. It bears directly on important political and normative debates, debates that would profit enormously from more systematic empirical knowledge. For instance, politicians, in particular those who favour an elaborate registration system for EU interest groups, would like to see more systematic information on this topic, more concretely on who lobbies on which issues and with what resources. Behind this debate lurks the fundamental question of whether an interest group system, such as the one at the EU level, is capable of representing civil society, the general interest or the broader public (see Saurugger 2008). An issue-based research design can establish to what extent specific interest groups can affect important unifying issues and generate directional influence or not. For instance, if groups generally do not invest in directional issues and concentrate primarily on particularistic instrumental issues, we might conclude that the core business of these groups is not the representation through the mobilisation of a broader audience. Consequently, the potential for direct citizen participation and democratic representation through EU interest groups has to be viewed sceptically.

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Notes

1. The weak cross-fertilisation between scholarship on parties and interest groups is not confined to the EU interest group literature. While the traditional pluralist scholars such as Bentley, Truman and Key put group conflict at the core of their thinking and often

combined the study of parties and interest groups, few contemporary scholars link the study of ideological conflict with interest group politics (Heinz *et al.* 1993: 247–61; Clifton 2004). This leads to the odd situation that what are assumed to be different organisations are studied by different specialists or disciplines (Burstein 1998). For instance, scholars of party politics seldom consider the interactions between interest groups and political parties and group scholars seldom control for the potential impact of elections and public opinion. In EU studies, there are only few examples where parties are mapped in a political space by taking into account networks among political parties, government officials and interest groups (Beyers and Kerremans 2004; Wessels 2004).

2. Mark Smith's threefold categorisation also resembles Sabatier's differentiation of deep core beliefs, policy core beliefs and operational beliefs (Sabatier 1988, 1998; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Deep core beliefs are constitutive for an actor's identity, and consequently these are un-tradable, rather stable and difficult to change. Actors will resist incoming information that challenges such deep core beliefs. Core beliefs are widely shared, they are characterised by a large measure of consensus and usually they change through factors exogenous to a policy subsystem, such as a crisis or a significant change in government coalitions. More endogenous change is possible with regard to policy core beliefs (policy positions and strategies of realising core values) and secondary aspects of policy decisions (so-called instrumental choices). Changes occur through learning, experience and strategic reframing of a policy. Unifying issues seems to concern deep core and policy core beliefs, while particularistic issues usually affect rather secondary aspect of policy decisions.
3. There might be an intermediate category between unifying and dividing issues whereby one sectoral coalition (business plus labour in an import-competing sector) is pitted against a counter-coalition within another sector (business plus labour in an export-oriented sector). These sorts of dividing issues can be very salient and tense, but are not of the same salient nature as unifying issues.
4. Conflicts of this type relate to what Hirschman qualifies as divisible conflicts (1994) or Sabatier's instrumental policy beliefs (1988).
5. Formerly called UNICE.
6. This mechanism does not only apply to traditional interest organisations, but it may also be applicable to social movements. The more heterogeneous a mass movement the more moderate and less radical it will be because in a broad-based mass movement extreme, outspoken as well as more centrist wings need to be kept on board (Wilson 1995). A more homogeneous movement can issue stronger and more radical statements as this will not hamper the movement's cohesiveness.
7. For example, an official of a major association within the food industry told the author that they were now and then pressed by some small member companies to drop foodstuffs before official buildings in Brussels. At the same time, they faced counter-pressures from large member companies (major multinationals) not to do so because this would harm the public reputation of their well-known brands.
8. Smith (2000) argues that as large cross-sectoral organisations have to ensure a consensus among a broad constituency, they are less able to respond rapidly to precise and detailed amendments that often need to be made during a legislative bargaining process. In sum, some organisational formats are less suited for 'bargaining'. Here I disagree with Smith that large cross-sectoral associations will be less effective in engaging in the give-and-take of legislative politics. The general nature of their policy positions may make them quite flexible for the bargaining process. In addition big organisations can adapt their organisational format by separating the management of inside politics from the management of outside politics.
9. This need not necessarily be the case. As I suggested earlier, encompassing organisations may try to adopt vague and general positions, which leaves them enough discretion for arguing and bargaining.

10. BusinessEurope may organise 'grass-roots lobbying' by collaborating with its domestic member organisations who lobby national governments.

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