

# **Laying the Groundwork: Linking Internal Agenda Setting Processes Of Interest Groups to their Role in Policymaking**

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Darren R. Halpin  
Research School of Social Sciences  
Australian National University  
darren.halpin@anu.edu.au

Bert Fraussen  
Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs  
Leiden University  
b.fraussen@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

## **Abstract**

Although scholarship has highlighted the role of stakeholders in policymaking, less is known about the preparations they make that lay the groundwork for their lobbying activities. This article links ideas on collaborative governance with the study of agenda setting within interest groups. We outline an orthodox mode of agenda setting that anticipates groups possess: a proactive policy mode, an institutionalized policy platform and a pyramid-like agenda structure. Subsequently, we use this orthodox mode as a heuristic device for examining agenda structures and processes, combining survey data on the practices of groups in Australia with illustrative qualitative evidence.

**Keywords:** interest groups, agenda setting, public policy, collaborative governance, policy advisory systems, lobbying

## **Introduction**

Much recent research emphasizes the important role of external actors and organizations in policymaking. This spans a range of fields, including scholarship on bureaucratic politics and policy advisory systems (Braun 2013; Craft & Wilder, 2015), network governance and collaborative public management (Daugbjerg & Fawcett 2015; Kim & Darnall, 2016; Lang, 2016; O’Leary et al. 2006). Here, policy outcomes are considered the result of the interplay between state and non-state actors, including a variety of stakeholders such as interest groups, think tanks, corporations, non-profits, academic experts and citizens. The general assumption is that policymaking benefits from the inclusion of a diversity of actors because they may provide policy expertise and legitimacy. While we know what policy makers seek from these non-state actors, we know less about the extent to which, and how, stakeholders prepare themselves for policy action. While some recent research has examined these questions for the case of firms (Kim & Darnall, 2016), in this article we focus on interest groups, and theoretically flesh out the organizational features and practices these actors need to possess in order to have the potential to be valuable allies to policymakers.

The interest group literature has long focused on the value that groups have for policy makers. It tends to focus predominantly on types of ‘policy goods’ that groups possess, and that they exchange for benefits like ‘access’ (Binderkrantz et al., 2014; Bouwen, 2002; Walker, 1991). We contend that additional organizational dimensions are also salient for understanding the contribution of groups to policy making. An important aspect that has received less attention and reflection, are the internal processes and structures that shape how groups select issues for political action, and how this agenda setting mode might have implications for their possible role in public policy. While scholarship has become more attentive to agenda setting processes within groups in recent years (e.g. Halpin, 2015; Knutson, 2016; Scott, 2013; Strolovitch, 2007), to our knowledge, these internal agenda setting dynamics have not yet been

subject to systematic analysis. Moreover, internal agenda setting has not been considered in light of a group's possible contribution to public policy. In this article, we aim to move the literature forward by linking scholarship on the role of external actors in governance with research on the agenda setting practices within organized interests.

Building on the available work in the interest group and public policy field, we develop an 'orthodox' account of agenda setting within groups, which captures the structure of a group's agenda, the degree of institutionalization of processes to develop policy platforms, and the propensity to pursue policy issues proactively. This account is intended to serve as a valuable heuristic against which to measure variations in practice. This mode has clear affinities with the designs typically employed by what influential scholars call 'legacy' or 'traditional' groups (Skocpol, 2003). Yet, rather than consider this mode of agenda setting as an encumbrance to group policy advocacy, we suggest these are often in fact valuable practices. Indeed, viewed from such a perspective, these organizational practices turn out to be "beneficial inefficiencies" (Karpf 2012, pp. 169-171). Particular processes and agenda structures may render some groups more valuable allies to policymakers, which implies that the extent to which groups approximate this mode of agenda setting could have implications for their role in public policy.

In this article, we do not directly adjudicate the claims that this mode of agenda setting leads to (more) effective policymaking or lobbying. Instead, with our orthodox account in hand, we investigate the degree to which groups approximate this set of processes and structures. In so doing, we contribute to the debate on the capacity of groups to be able to take up the policymaking role public policy scholars envisage. In what follows, we elaborate and assess these arguments focusing on the case of Australia and the practices of national interest groups. In the first part, we outline what we refer to as the "orthodox" mode of agenda setting, addressing its three critical components: a proactive policy posture, institutionalized

procedures to establish policy platforms, and a pyramid like agenda structure. We show how this ideal type mode of agenda setting resonates with the existing group and public policy literature. Next, we assess these arguments empirically, combining quantitative data from a survey of national interest groups with qualitative evidence from interviews and document analyses. While we do indeed find many instances of groups who closely approximate the ‘orthodox’ mode of agenda setting, we also observe important variations. We conclude by discussing implications of this variation for policy making and future research in this field.

### **The Orthodox Mode of Agenda-Setting Within Groups**

Our approach commences with adopting a concept in good standing – namely ‘policy agenda’ – and repurposes it with respect to interest groups. The concept has been well used in the general public policy literature (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1971; Kingdon, 1984) to refer to the mix of topics that governmental institutions are giving attention to at any given time. Agenda setting, then, is the process through which political systems prioritize issues given limits of resources and attention (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Interest groups, as organizations, also need to engage in the same process. They need to decide how to allocate finite resources and attention available for political work, not to mention resolving precisely what the policy positions of the group should be. Such processes are ubiquitous among the organized advocacy community: indeed, they are ubiquitous among all forms of political organization (for instance, parties, public agencies and so on). Yet, they have been largely unstudied (but see Halpin, 2015; Knutson, 2016; Scott, 2013; Strolovitch, 2007).

In this section we highlight the internal processes and practices that are salient in shaping the type of contribution groups make to policymaking: a proactive policy posture, established policy platforms and a pyramid-like agenda structure. In the literature they are not often explicitly identified as being valuable assets in and of themselves. Yet, as will become

evident, they enable groups to perform in ways that the group and policy literature has identified as valuable attributes in the support of policy making. We will refer to the combination of these features as the orthodox mode of agenda setting. This framework serves as an ideal type against which empirical practices are assessed in the subsequent section of this article.

### ***Proactive Policy Posture***

Interest groups are often considered highly strategic actors, who aim to approach public policy in a proactive manner. This implies that groups commence by setting out what they want to see happen, based on internal priorities and processes, and then progressing these as best they can. Such an account is consistent with normative accounts of groups as ‘little’ democracies’ (see Jordan and Maloney, 1997a for discussion) and early-pluralist theories suggesting groups straightforwardly pursue the unfettered interests of members (see Truman, 1951). Robert H. Salisbury captures this pluralist reflex well; ‘...we are accustomed to thinking of groups as aggressive protagonists, urging policies upon lawmakers or bureaucrats, and pushing to get things done’ (1992, p. 87). Yet he also foreshadows that a more reactive dynamic might have its place, ‘To this we must add that much of what group representatives do is react to the initiatives of others’ (*ibid*).

Of course, as Salisbury’s comments foreshadow, the assumption that groups are proactive sits uneasily with more recent literature which suggests that groups will tend to ‘react’ to the prevailing political opportunity structures and agendas of political elites and governing institutions (see Baumgartner et al., 2011; Leech et al., 2005). As argued by Leech et al., “While mobilization is certainly *possible* without government involvement, it will be extremely difficult, and therefore rare. Day-to-day decisions about lobbying are not made without great weight being given to the government’s attention to the issue” (2005, p. 20;

emphasis in original).<sup>1</sup> Relatedly, public policy scholars tend to emphasise the ways in which the political opportunity structures offer windows of opportunity which groups are expected to exploit (Austen-Smith & Wright, 1994; Kingdon, 1984; Tarrow, 1988). Group scholars might be tempted, on the basis of these accounts, to assume that interest groups, while highly strategic actors, will predominantly focus on reacting to events and opportunities that present themselves. Yet, close reading reveals a slightly more balanced account, with an emphasis on policy planning and preparation. Kingdon (1984) for instance argues that ‘without the prospect of an open window, participants slack off. They are unwilling to invest their time, political capital, energy and other resources in an effort that is unlikely to bear fruit’ (Kingdon 1984, pp. 175-176). Yet, this is *not* the same as saying that groups simply *follow* government activity. Windows do not remain open indefinitely, nor does the impact of focusing events linger, which means that advocates need plans, proposals and policies *ready*: in essence, they need to be prepared to seize the moment (Kingdon, 1984, p. 177).

What are the implications from a policymaking perspective? There is a strong thread which argues that the capacity for government to resolve the big policy questions requires a long term strategic view, which is in part enabled by the potential for groups to take proactive policy stances (Craft & Howlett, 2012; Peters, 2015). Those advocating collaborative governance models, for instance, make clear that an important precondition is partners who are ‘proactive’ (Lin & Darnall, 2016). This means that organizations and actors “typically have invested in specific resources and capabilities that allow them to adapt quickly (Lin & Darnall, 2015; Miles & Snow, 1978) to a changing social and political landscape” (Lin & Darnall 2016,

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<sup>1</sup> As we discuss below, one reason for this apparent contradiction is what ‘mobilization’ or ‘lobbying’ means to different authors. It is likely that those suggesting groups are highly reactive operationalize mobilization as active public lobbying and position taking (e.g. giving evidence to legislative committees, submitting responses to administrative consultations, and so on). However, what we are concerned about here is the often unseen internal preparations – such as formulation positions, prioritizing issues for the attention of staff and office bearers, and developing proposals – which are highly important tasks that support public lobbying but which are not immediately observable.

p. 332). In their classic analysis of the prospects for states to engage in ‘anticipatory’ policy making, Atkinson and Coleman note the requirement that groups are able to ‘capable of looking to the longer term’ (1989, p. 63). Put simply, groups that know what they want – and are well prepared and have been on the scene for some time – are best placed to identify and communicate to elites the legislative opportunities available, and to respond to those windows as they open.

### ***Institutionalized Policy Platforms***

The second element of an orthodox mode of agenda-setting is the existence of a set of policy positions which constitute an established policy platform. Here we are familiar with the value of being insiders within sub-systems, iron-triangles and sub-governments (e.g. Jordan & Maloney, 1997b; see also Braun, 2013), that groups need expertise and knowledge of their policy fields, and that they be able to frame their concerns in a way that fits with the prevailing discourse (or ideally to co-produce that discourse) (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). In accepting the above, recent scholarship providing advice for advocacy groups, based on a summary of the policy literature, suggests that overall “... individuals looking to influence the policy process be persistent and determined for long periods of time” (Weible et al., 2012, p. 15). It is also consistent with the counsel of key policy scholars who frequently note that efforts by policy entrepreneurs to achieve policy change typically requires ‘years of effort’ (Kingdon, 1984, p. 214; see also Sabatier, 1987).

If, as Kingdon (1984, p. 190) notes, the key to taking advantage of political opportunities is ‘persistence’, then fostering the internal structures that ‘lock in’ a policy focus – if not the precise policy detail – are no doubt crucial. The structures that underpin an orthodox process of agenda setting within groups – where they are highly institutionalised – can be read as providing the conditions for anchoring groups in specific fields for long periods of time,

which in turn is likely associated (when well executed) with membership of important networks, a capacity to frame issues successfully and the generation of substantive political and issue-related knowledge. Put another way, when policy makers ‘reach into the policy stream’ for options to fix a defined problem, advocates best be ready with their preferred position (Kingdon, 1984, p. 182-184).<sup>2</sup>

Policy makers engage with groups in a politically sensitive environment. As discussed above, this means that effective relations – indeed anything approaching ‘partnership’ – are going to necessitate a clear sense of what each other wants. The work on governance and public policy has emphasised the importance of groups to be able to deliver the ‘commitment of members’ to the policy table (Peters, 2005, p. 80). This means policy makers can see evidence of – and factor in – a set of policy positions that a constituency has ‘agreed’ on. For groups, being known for possessing a well-established policy platform, which is signalled and predictable, reduces substantially the uncertainty for policy makers in doing their policy work (see discussion in Kollman, 1998). Arguably, this allows policy makers to factor in the likely positions of groups in advance, and for groups means that they can maximise their ability to exercise indirect power.

### ***‘Pyramid-like’ Agenda Structure***

It has been argued that group agendas can be conceptualized as composing of three distinct, yet related, layers: (a) ‘interests’ (b) ‘priorities’ and (c) ‘actions’ (Halpin, 2015). Referring to the framework in Table 1, the argument is that groups start off with a palate of issues they are ‘interested’ in (which might be what is monitored), then work sequentially to a smaller set of issues that are ‘prioritised’ (receive serious attention, and result in the allocating

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, given the competition among groups for the attention of policy makers, groups that are authoritative or prominent are best placed to be those asked for policy ideas.



of staff time and the development of policy positions) and then subsequently move to an even smaller number of issues that are ‘actioned’ (where a group takes a public position on).<sup>3</sup> While on their own each has been subject to some modicum of analysis, these have not (to our knowledge) been taken as a set of related propositions. Yet, we can say that the group literature is heavily invested in the idea that advocacy organizations typically have broad *policy interests* and set broad *issue agendas*, also *monitor* broadly, yet *lobby* narrowly (see Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; Baumgartner et al., 2011).

**Table 1. Components of Interest Group Policy Agendas**

<i>Components</i>	<i>Description</i>
(a) Policy Interests	Broad policy remit of a group
(b) Policy Priorities	Set of issues that group has consciously decided to develop positions on and focus its attention
(c) Policy Actions	Set of issues that a group is actively engaging in lobbying on

Source: Derived from Halpin (2015)

First, groups have a broad sense of what policy space and issues they are ‘interested’ in. Research on Washington lobbying has long pointed out that the observed lobbying activity of groups belies a broad policy remit. For instance, Heinz et al. (1993) explain that on average, group respondents reported “some interest” in 11 events in their policy domain from a possible 20 they were presented with. Likewise, Nownes (2006, p. 85) argues that “the typical public policy lobbyist spends between 20 and 40 percent of his or her time on policy monitoring and

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<sup>3</sup> It is this last aspect that has tended to be studied under the banner of ‘lobbying’ or ‘mobilization’.

compliance monitoring.” These findings suggest a broad monitoring role among groups. In this context Baumgartner and Leech conclude that: “The complications of policy making force the majority of them [groups] to attend simultaneously to several different policy areas at once” (1998, p. 160).

Secondly, while the policy terrain groups have an ‘interest’ in is likely to be relatively broad, at any one time groups then ‘prioritise’ a sub-set of this broad policy space for concerted effort. For instance, a group might monitor multiple issues across a variety policy domains, yet only devote substantial attention and staff time to a much narrower and specialised set of issues, often within a particular policy domain. The claim that groups engage in a conscious process of prioritisation, and that it is a conceptually distinct layer in a groups’ agenda, resonates with uncontroversial rules-of-thumb discussed in the literature. Here, the assumption is that against the very broad foundational layer of a group’s interests— all the things they might be reasonably considered to have an interest in – due to constraints in resources and time they then need to settle on a sub-set of things to start to actively work on, not least develop viable policy positions on.

Thirdly, groups actively engage in policy work to further their agenda on specific issues: the agenda is ‘actioned’. It is this component of group policy agendas that has attracted the overwhelming attention of group scholars: mostly because of a concern with assessing policy influence; this engagement profile has also been referred to as ‘policy identity’ (Heaney, 2004). Some studies, however, focus more on the substance of the policy mix that groups can be observed acting on. Put another way, they are concerned with both the volume of activity *and* the mix of policy topics that groups engage in, that is variation in *policy actions* of groups (Halpin & Thomas, 2012; Scott, 2013).

Why does a pyramid-style agenda structure generate value for policy making? There is value in the active lobbying of groups being underpinned by a broad investment in monitoring

and position formation. Groups that spread their policy attention more broadly are best able to contribute to democratic character of policy making by counteracting the niche-seeking that is likely to undermine the pluralistic competition that scholars see as crucial to the democratic contribution of groups (Schlozman et al., 2012). These groups are also more likely to be important in linking policy communities (Browne, 1990). Additionally, broad monitoring could facilitate interventions from groups that are timely and better aligned with the perspectives and priorities of policymakers, as such groups will possess a more fine-tuned understanding of the political agenda. This is crucial to ensure a valuable contribution of groups to the policy process, but without this pyramid structure they are less likely to be aware of these important contextual factors. Robert H. Salisbury makes the claim; ‘A great deal of what so-called lobbying groups do in Washington is to monitor what is going on; keeping an eye on the policy processes, checking up on the activities and plans of other groups, and generally trying to keep on top of the complex of developments that might affect the groups’ interests. Or...lobbyists spend much of their time trying to discover what their respective interests are as policy impinges or threatens to impinge upon group concerns’ (1992, pp. 99-100).

### ***Summary***

To summarize, an orthodox mode of agenda setting within groups anticipates that:

1. Groups operate in a *proactive policy mode*, which means they seek out ways to advance group interests even if the prevailing opportunity structures are less favorable
2. Groups have an *institutionalized policy platform*, which identifies their core policy terrain and consists of a corpus of firm policy positions.
3. Groups have a pyramid-like *agenda structure*: they monitor broadly and lobby narrowly.

We have established above that where these conditions hold, groups are likely to be better placed to contribute to the collaborate development of public policy. Obviously, it is highly likely that, in the practices of groups, we observe variations on this approach, or even dissenting practices. Notwithstanding this nuance, we believe that the above account provides a valuable heuristic against which systematic empirical investigation can be undertaken.

## **Data and Approach**

To test these expectations regarding agenda setting within groups we draw on results from a national survey of interest groups, completed in 2015. The population we surveyed was drawn from a list of national organizations compiled by the authors. While the data is drawn from the 2012 edition of *Directory of Australian Associations*, we took great care in identifying national organizations, as well as selecting out associations that are not politically active or do not have members. Once this process was completed, our population list consisted of 1,292 interest groups (for more details on the *Directory* and our coding procedure, see Fraussen & Halpin 2016). Subsequently, these groups were contacted to participate in an online survey, which primarily contained questions concerning organizational structure, policy capacity, engagement with policymakers, and organizational agenda. We received a completed survey from 370 organizations (a response rate of 28 percent).

This data is complemented by a set of interviews with 6 national Australian interest groups, including business and citizen groups from a range of sectors, during the period spanning 2014 and 2016<sup>4</sup>. Our interviews focused on understanding, from their perspective, how they decided what the group would work on in a policy advocacy sense. The interviewees

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<sup>4</sup> One of the authors conducted a set of exploratory semi-structured interviews with 6 national Australian groups. They groups cannot be identified as a condition of Human Research Ethics Approval. The sample was a convenience sample – selected for ease of access – but moderated with a concern to have a spread of citizen and business groups. In all we talked to an environment group, animal welfare group, sectoral industry group, general business group, health consumer group and a progressive campaign group.

were with the CEO, Director or Policy Director of the group in question. We also make use of observations from professional conferences attended by group leaders. Such ‘peer’ forums, where leaders across different groups share their experiences and foster ‘best practices’, offer a crucial insight into what ‘norms’ exist in the field. This broad approach – of observational data collection - is an approach that party scholars have used to great effect (see Gauja, 2015). Furthermore, we also examined how a set of 9 prominent business and citizen groups explained their internal agenda setting processes on their website, as well as how they presented their policy agenda, using information that was publicly available on their website.<sup>5</sup> Here we assessed if (and to what extent) they provided details on how they set their organizations policy priorities. Furthermore, we assessed to what extent they made distinctions between general policy interest and more specific policy priorities and campaigns.

## **Results**

In what follows, we empirically assess to what extent groups display features that are associated with an “orthodox” mode of agenda setting. By combining data from a survey of national interest groups with more qualitative evidence from interviews and analyses of organizational websites and documents, we aim to demonstrate widespread practices and beliefs among interest groups, yet also highlight how particular groups have established internal agenda setting processes and practices. In the conclusion and discussion section, we clarify our main findings and relate them to the potential role of groups in policymaking.

### ***Proactive Policy Posture***

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<sup>5</sup> This set included three peak business groups (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Australia Industry Group and the Business Council Australia), two professional associations (National Farmers’ Federation and Australian Medical Association) and four citizen groups (Animals Australia, Australian Conservation Foundation, Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty against Animals and GetUp!).

While a proactive mode of operating might have been assumed in the classic pluralist political science, contemporary research has very much adopted the view that groups are most often follow cues from the policy process and political elites (see Baumgartner et al., 2011; Leech et al., 2005). But to what extent does this empirically constitute a significant or even dominant mode of group policy advocacy?

Our survey results can provide an aggregate answer to these divergent views in the literature. In our survey, we asked groups to indicate what proportion of issues they dealt with in the last 12 months were ‘long-standing issues’ versus those that ‘popped up’ unexpectedly? As Table 2 illustrates, a majority of groups indicated that at least 60 % of issues that they are typically dealing with are long-standing issues – with the balance being something that emerged unexpectedly. Only a very small proportion of groups indicated that their agenda was dominated by issues that “popped up” unexpectedly.

**Table 2. Proportion of the policy-agenda accounted for by long-standing issues**

<i>% long-standing issues</i>	<i>Percentage of groups (n)</i>
0-20	4.6 (17)
21-40	4.4 (16)
41-60	24.4 (90)
61-80	39.0 (144)
81-100	27.6 (102)
TOTAL	100.0 (369)

These findings confirm that groups do indeed *balance* between long-term objectives and short-term demands. In interviews with policy staff at well-resourced and professionalized

Australian groups, informants also independently raised this distinction. For instance, a policy director at an environmental group remarked that:

Planning falls into two camps. Proactive, which is about campaign capacity, building alliances and a constituency for change, with the aim to push government to make decisions. Reactive is about being [in the] right place, talking to the right person, at the right time. Being there at the decision point [Citizen Group A, 2013]

A similar point was made in interviews with the national director of an animal welfare group and a sectoral industry group (Citizen Group B, 2014; Business Group A, 2014). The former noted that there are ‘new’ issues that were ‘not expected’ and that these regularly emerge (the informant mentioned 6 months as a window during which this was sure to occur). The latter, when recounting all issues that they were working on at the time of interview, parsed out some issues which are ‘always on the agenda’ from those that involved reacting to governmental initiatives (the informant referred to a review of Market Competition Policy).

How might we explain the differences between, on the one hand, what groups tell us (and our observations) and, on the other hand, what the current literature suggests? One explanation is that groups want to portray that they are on the front foot and pursuing issues that they originate. This makes sense, as no organization wants to look like they lack agency and are simply ‘ambulance-chasing’. Yet, the self-reported results are hard to dismiss so easily, particularly given that our *observations* of their structures and processes seem to support the proactive approach (as we will clarify below).

An alternative explanation, which we tentatively endorse, is that the recent literature inadvertently starts from an assumption of reactivity, and so unsurprisingly finds reactivity. In that sense, one might view this research strand as suffering from an issue of endogeneity – compromised by the fact that the ‘issues’ studied are those that are (i) already ‘moving’ and

also (ii) have been prioritized by government institutions. If we, instead, start from what groups are doing – beyond such set-piece forms of lobbying – we may see a different story that also include proactive elements. What we offer here is a complementary approach to those studies – including our own – which concentrate on data from observable actions or their ‘actioned agenda’ (see Halpin 2015).

### *Institutionalized Policy Platforms*

As outlined above, the orthodox mode of agenda setting incorporates the idea that groups possess a set of established policy positions. To assess whether this assumption corresponds with the observable practices of groups, we chose 9 prominent national Australian interest groups to explore this question. Utilizing publically available website data, we examined the ways in which they explained processes of policy formulation and their degree of institutionalization.

The business groups, professional associations and trade unions we examined had developed quite elaborate internal apparatus to identify the issue terrain, to set priorities and to take positions. To a large extent, these groups had thematic committees that mirrored the public service to which it sought to engage. If we take the three main business groups in Australia – Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), Australian Industry Group (AIG) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA) – we find that respectively each identify 8, 14 and 8 broad policy areas where they maintain an interest. This ‘interest’ is most often institutionalized through the existence of a policy committee, with a professional staff member as a designated contact.

These internal processes have important implications for the content of their policy agenda, as they create path dependence. If a group has a policy committee on ‘sustainability’, for arguments sake, it is fair to assume that it will have (ongoing) policy positions and actions



in this area. One could say that these processes anchor the policy agenda of a group, which is subsequently difficult to switch. Each committee generally then develops issue papers, writes policy submissions, releases media statements, and appears in parliamentary committees, across a number of issues consistent with the broad portfolio. For instance, the BCA, under its Community and Diversity portfolio area, engaged in five priority areas: Indigenous engagement, Mentally healthy workplaces, Disability inclusion, Gender and workplace diversity, and Disadvantaged jobseekers. In each area, the organization initiated actions that included issue press releases, write an op-ed, wrote policy submissions to government, and so on.

There is evidence that CEO's and Chairs/Presidents of these groups actively manage and develop policy platforms, just so they can be prepared for when political windows of opportunity emerge. At an industry conference, the CEO of the Institute of Company Directors advised the audience that groups ought to pro-actively 'firm-up' and 'lock down' policy positions as they emerge. His point was that clear policy positions are often hard to establish in associations (especially those with large memberships), and that institutionalizing these will better prepare the group for the unpredictable nature of policy making. This style of agenda management makes sense when we recall that collective action within groups always risks arriving at lowest-common denominator positions (Olson, 1965). Thus group leaders are highly incentivized to develop platforms that assist in reducing the transaction costs of ongoing and repeated rehearsal of potential (or even unproductive) policy positions.

Looking beyond business groups provides examples of how this might be done differently. Citizen groups by and large set their agenda via 'campaigns' as opposed to 'committees'. Such groups tended to have less institutionalized or routinized processes for agenda management. Equally apparent was the absence of a broad policy portfolio from which these campaign issues were 'selected'. For instance, at the extreme, GetUp! lists 10 campaigns

on its website.<sup>6</sup> Presumably these are selected on the basis that they are issues that fit a ‘progressive’ policy perspective, however they are not framed as corresponding to a pre-established background policy domain (say, environment, animal welfare, industrial relations, etc.). They are just issue campaigns that the group currently prioritizes.

Yet citizen groups are not singularly operating in this manner. For instance, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) publishes a set of “ACF Policies” on its website, each being accompanied by a date at which it was “adopted” (which in some cases is decades ago). This implies some type of formal process that the ACF Council – the decision making organ within the group – uses to formulate and set the policy agenda of the ACF. Similar processes were observed in the case of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA). In that way, these environmental groups resemble many of the economic groups discussed above. Why would this hefty effort at enunciating fixed policy positions be necessary? According to staff we interviewed, across both the economic and citizen groups, the value of this well documented set of policy positions – which are difficult to change – is that it anchors the policy profile of the group. That is, it guards against any temptations to shift broad position as conditions change, or as the views of stakeholders within the organization might change. One of the interviewed citizen groups described these policies as equivalent to “value statements, what we stand for”, and indicated that they could inform “possible campaigns, but are not active campaigns” (Citizen Group A, 2013).

### ***Pyramid-like Agenda Structure***

The group literature repeats the idea that advocacy organizations typically have broad *policy interests*, set broad *issue agendas* and also *monitor* broadly, yet *lobby* narrowly (see Baumgartner & Leech 2001; Baumgartner et al., 2011). However, this orthodoxy has rarely

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<sup>6</sup> This is a net-based organization, operating in a similar manner to MoveOn (US) or 38 Degrees (UK).

been empirically explored, and certainly not via systematic scrutiny of how a set of groups sequentially resolve each of these questions. In fact, there is sufficient evidence to suggest we should also anticipate variations. Those scholars who have focussed on campaign groups – particularly environmental advocacy organizations – have often observed that such organisations tend to first identify issues for action, and then make these the subject of broadcast requests for support or funding (Bosso, 2005; Jordan & Maloney, 1997a). As a result, their policy actions tend not to be built upon a set of pre-established policy positions. To what extent do our empirical findings confirm these different approaches?

We first provide an aggregate picture based on our survey data. To construct a more generalizable picture, we asked respondents to our survey to indicate, during a typical 12 month period, *No. of issues monitored (those issues that you generally pay attention to or see as relevant)*, the *No. of issues that receive serious attention (those issues that you allocate staff time to)*, and the *No. of issues upon which this organisation takes a public position (those issues you send out a press release on, make a statement on or release a policy paper on)*. Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics.

**Table 3. Monitor, Attention, Public Position – descriptive statistics**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
(1)Monitor	16.8	8	28.1	0	200
(2)Attention	8.3	5	13	0	100
(3)Public Position	6.6	3	10.6	0	100

At the aggregate level, we observe a pyramid-like structure. During a typical 12 month period, the median group monitors about 8 issues, devotes serious attention to 5 issues and develops a public position on 3 issues. We see three discernable layers, and more issues

monitored than given attention, and more given attention compared to those on which a public position is taken.

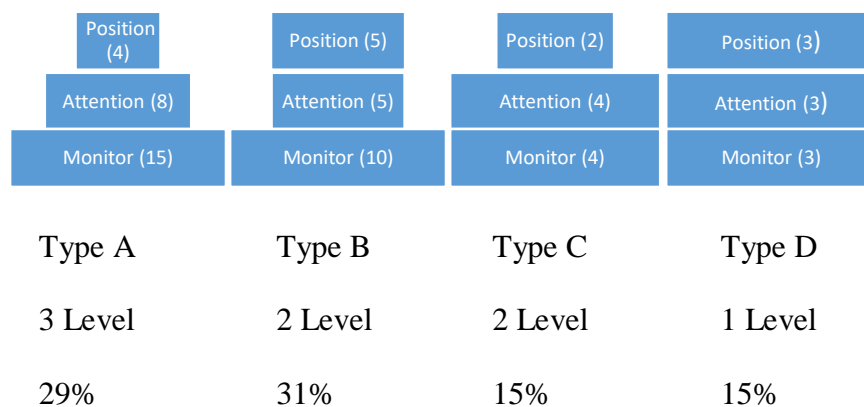
Yet, if we look beyond this aggregate pattern, we see considerable variation. In Figure 1, we set out to capture the main types of variation in agenda structure.<sup>7</sup> It graphically represents the *ratios* between the numbers of issues that groups monitor, that they devote serious attention to and that they take a public position on; the length of each bar represents the number of issues (so a greater length implies a higher amount of issues; the median number of issues at each level is included in brackets). For instance, if the layers of monitor and attention have an equal size, this means that an equal number of issues are being monitored and paid attention to. Type A is a faithful replication of the orthodox ideal-type pyramid structure with distinctive layers, in which groups monitor a large number of issues, pay attention to a smaller subset and take public positions on some of the issues within this subset. This almost perfect ideal-type structure applies to 95 groups (29%). Types B and C, by contrast, do *not* have 3, but 2, distinctive layers. These account in total for 149 groups or 46% of our respondents (C is 31%; D is 15%). In Type B, whatever is subject to internal policy work is also then subject to a public position. This suggests their agenda may consist of two layers: a set of general issue interests that they monitor, and a set of issues on which they take policy action. In Type C, whatever is subject to monitoring is also subject to internal policy work, and thereafter a decision is made to ration which issues are the subject of a public position. In each case, two layers are effectively one and the same component of the agenda structure – they are functionally synonymous with one another. At the same time, both these types have some similarities with type A, as there is a clear hierarchy where there is a broader set of issues at the first level, and more selective set of issues at the second level (that result in serious attention to this issue

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<sup>7</sup> This figure excludes groups that indicated a score of 0 for all three levels (n=16) or that did not respond to this particular question (n=23); we only include those variations that apply to at least 10% of our groups.

and/or a public position). By contrast, Type D groups have a single layer to their agenda structure. That is, whatever is monitored, is also subject to internal policy work and thereafter a public policy position is taken. In our population only a small minority of groups have this one-layered structure (n=51, 15 %).

**Figure 1. Agenda Structure: Overview of Variations**



Note: figures in brackets within the diagram are the median values for monitor, attention and position for each set of groups.

To better understand these aggregate patterns and the observed variation, we examined the practices of specific groups. The orthodox approach is well evidenced in organizations like the National Farmers Federation (NFF). Its member organizations develop policy among their members through often elaborate multi-day Annual Conferences. The outcome of such conferences are a set of approved motions, which are *added* to the pre-existing policy corpus of the group. For instance, in the case of the state-level NSW Farmers’ Association (NSWFA), it has a *Policy Statements* document that runs to 200 pages – listing each and every position adopted.<sup>8</sup> Of course, such a document is not immediately useful to its lobbying staff, and so the organization publishes an annual set of *Policy Priorities*, by policy area.<sup>9</sup> These set out a

<sup>8</sup> See [https://www.nswfarmers.org.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/35630/2014-15-Policy-Statement-Book.pdf](https://www.nswfarmers.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/35630/2014-15-Policy-Statement-Book.pdf) [accessed 21/06/16]

<sup>9</sup> See [https://www.nswfarmers.org.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/40529/2015-16-Policy-Priorities.pdf](https://www.nswfarmers.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/40529/2015-16-Policy-Priorities.pdf) [accessed 21/06/16]

smaller, more manageable, agenda for each policy committee charged with progressing advocacy within the organization. It recognizes that the group cannot do everything that is set out in the established *Policy Statement*, and so it focuses attention and resources on issues perceived as important. In the case of the NSWFA, this prioritization process occurs within policy committees, and is negotiated between elected members and staff. This pattern is repeated within the NFF member groups (at the different state levels), and ultimately by the NFF at the national level.

At first blush, this may seem an incredibly onerous approach to agenda setting. Indeed, one might assume that this is somewhat of an outlier. Yet, we find that this approach is not unique to more traditional economic interest groups; it also characterizes agenda setting practices in campaign groups, such as the ACF. This environmental group also publishes a set of *ACF Policies* on its website, which currently contains 48 issue concerns. While this corpus constitutes a set of agreed positions which the group's staff, leadership cadre and activists seeks to progress, many of these positions are *not* the subject of any public lobbying actions.

By contrast, a group like *Animals Australia* has no such set of agreed positions. There is no document that approximates a policy program. What we find instead is a set campaign issues on its website – at last look it added up to 26 – on which it is currently active (or soliciting citizen support or actions). In short, *Animals Australia* has a policy agenda which is the sum of its active campaigns at any given time. This conclusion is in fact made explicitly on its website. In its FAQ section, in response to the question, “I have an idea for a campaign, can you help?” it explains;

*Animals Australia* focuses its campaign efforts on the areas of greatest need -- this is why factory farming and live export are among our highest priorities, with more than half a billion animals suffering in these cruel industries every year. Our team of campaigners work hard to keep on top of all the issues affecting animals in Australia but, as a small

charity *with limited time and resources, we simply cannot act on everything*. For this reason we rely on the growing community of animal advocates to speak out for animals and take a stand against cruelty.<sup>10</sup> (italics added).

There is no pretense by this group to develop policies from among members, nor to be directly responsive to them. Moreover, there is a clear desire to foster a narrow policy agenda whereby what it is *working* on is the sum total of what it is *interested* in. This type of response hints at a two-level structure in which monitoring and attention layers are effectively merged and indistinguishable, with position taking retained as a distinctive second agenda layer.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

This article has addressed a ubiquitous, but surprisingly under-studied, dimension of interest group life, namely internal policy agenda setting and linked this to discussions about the role of external actors in public policy and governance. While previous scholarship has highlighted the important role of stakeholders in policymaking, little research has analysed to what extent these external actors possess the organizational features that enable them to be prepared for policy action. While a great deal of work has focussed on the ‘policy goods’ that groups possess – for instance, political knowledge or technical expertise – the way in which they are set up to develop and process an issue agenda has been neglected. By linking ideas on collaborative governance and policy advisory systems with the agenda setting processes and structures within groups, we have aimed to bridge these two rather disconnected streams of literature.

Our approach was straightforward: we developed an orthodox mode of agenda setting, which served as a valuable device to test against empirical practices among groups. The

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.animalsaustralia.org/about/faqs.php> [accessed 21/06/17=6]

orthodox mode of agenda setting anticipates three attributes: (i) groups operate in a *proactive policy mode*, (ii) groups have institutionalized *policy platforms*, and (iii) groups have a pyramid-like *agenda structure*. While we show that, in aggregate, groups often possess these three features, our research also found important variations. While a substantial number of groups displayed a pyramid-like agenda structure with three distinct layers, almost half of the groups who completed our survey indicated they have a two-level agenda structure. This finding suggests that several groups either do not focus on policy monitoring, or spend little time on developing policy positions without also engaging in public lobbying activities on these issues. At the same time, a hierarchical agenda structure, where broad monitoring activities are combined with a more limited set of issues that gain attention from staff and/or result in public activities, is quite common among the interest groups that we examined. This confirms the common wisdom that a large part of what interest groups do involves monitoring a wide range of issues, while their actual, visible lobbying activities are confined to a much smaller set of issues. Yet, if we only focus on this top of the pyramid, we overlook the groundwork, in particular all the efforts undertaken by groups to remain informed of ongoing and future policy developments. This paper has aimed to shed some more light on this more proactive policy work, which increases the chances that groups will make timely and relevant contributions to public policy when windows of opportunity suddenly (and often unexpectedly) open.

Another aspect of this groundwork relates to the development of policy platforms. Here, we found extensive internal apparatus among business associations and citizen groups, which enable them to crystallize and anchor their policy positions. Among campaign style groups, such internal structures that create path dependence were often absent; rather than monitoring broadly and developing consensus among policy position, they more fully focus their organizational resources on the list of issues on which they are currently campaigning. This difference in the institutionalization of policy platforms resonates with the idea that campaign-



style groups are generally most effective in shaping public opinion and generating attention for (new) policy issues, whereas traditional economic interests are assumed to be more focused on insider politics, and the provision of more specific policy expertise to politicians and public servants through institutionalized channels (such as advisory committees) and informal meetings in the context of legislative policy processes. What also became evident is that these agenda setting processes and structures were not the last word. Even groups strictly adhering to formal processes of policy formulation still step out of this mode from time to time – even the most disciplined group cannot ignore highly salient issues that may surprise them. However, even in such circumstances, their process was generally deemed an asset, rather than a hindrance.

In relation to progressing the study of agenda-setting within groups, this article offers two contributions. Firstly, we go to substantial effort to formalize and make explicit an orthodox mode of agenda setting within groups. This summarizes, as best we can, the conventional wisdom of the sub-field, and serves as a heuristic device for future empirical study. Without this, generating expectations is substantially hampered. Secondly, we have developed and operationalized quantitative measures of agenda structure and proactive policy orientation. These are available to scholars seeking to develop this research further. Future research could provide a more systematic examination of the relationship between (components of) this orthodox agenda mode and the specific policy engagement of groups, or how the quality and/or legitimacy of their input is evaluated by policymakers. We believe that these questions provide excellent opportunities to establish connections between the sometimes rather disconnected literatures on interest groups, public policy and public administration.

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