European Journal of Political Research ●●: ●●–●●, 2017
doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12194

Research Note

Conceptualising the policy engagement of interest groups: Involvement, access and prominence

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Abstract. While much progress has been made in empirically mapping and analysing a variety of interest group activities in the last decade, less attention has been devoted to conceptual work that clearly defines and distinguishes different forms of policy engagement. This article contributes to this endeavour by developing a theoretical framework that explicitly links currently available measures of the policy engagement of groups to the distinct concepts of group involvement, access and prominence. It argues that greater conceptual clarity will lead to better accumulation of knowledge in the sub-field and a better understanding of the role of interest groups in political systems.

Keywords: interest groups; policy engagement; prominence; access; involvement

Introduction

Contemporary appraisals of the interest group field have emphasised the need to develop rich sources of systematic data (Baumgartner & Leech 1998; Beyers et al. 2008). Scholars have by and large responded (Hojnacki et al. 2012). The proliferation of data describing national interest groups has fostered a healthy literature documenting the composition of group populations relevant in politics (e.g., Binderkrantz et al. 2014; Halpin & Jordan 2012; Johnson 2014; Schlozman et al. 2012). This work has extended to capturing variations in the policy-related activities of groups. Such data on national groups provide many opportunities to delve deeper into the relative roles of groups in national politics. When confronted with such data, one salient question to pose is how can we distinguish meaningful variations in their policy engagement? As Rasmussen and Carroll (2014: 445) rightly highlight, the 'social science literature contains ample warning that even if a range of methods exists for involving external interests in policy making, external interests still do not necessarily have equal opportunities to voice their concerns'. Hence, it is important to look beyond mobilisation and population patterns, where bias might be relatively limited, and focus more closely on later phases of the influence production process, where more indirect but stronger forms of bias might materialise (Lowery et al. 2015).[1]

To address these types of questions, scholars often seek proxies of the relative importance of particular groups in national politics. While something like 'influence' is perhaps the aspiration, various scholars have argued that measures of this concept are best attempted and most meaningful when assessed at the issue-level (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Beyers

et al. 2014; Binderkrantz et al. 2014; Kluver 2013). We agree with this point of view, as the assessment of policy influence requires a high level of contextual knowledge (e.g., a substantive understanding of a policy issue), as well as the consideration of multiple factors related to the interest constellation (such as the nature of involved actors, their policy positions and lobbying strategies) which typically vary considerably across issues. At the aggregate level, by contrast, several other measures of policy engagement are available which can be meaningfully operationalised (Grossmann 2012: 85–87). A review of recent work illustrates that researchers regularly qualify the relative role of groups by referring to a range of terms including 'access', 'mobilisation', 'engagement', 'contacts', 'appearances' and 'mentions'.

In this research note, we contribute to this general endeavour by developing a conceptual framework that enunciates the distinct concepts of *involvement*, *access* and *prominence*. We clarify the definitions of these concepts, connect them to available measures and explore the distinct mechanisms behind them. As will become evident, our approach does not anticipate new forms or sources of data, instead we highlight how existing data conventions support the continued study of these concepts. Our approach constitutes what Adcock and Collier (2001) refer to as 'friendly amendments' to an existing set of scholarly practices. Specifically, we aim to develop a clear ladder of abstraction (Sartori 1970) by unpacking the more generic term of policy engagement into three distinct concepts situated at a lower level of abstraction: involvement, access and prominence.

We believe that meticulously elaborating the distinction between these three different concepts is critical to understanding the varying kinds of group policy engagement, or different ways in which interest groups can engage with public policy. As argued by Grossmann (2012: 88), for instance: 'Two organizations may each be able to obtain a meeting [i.e., access] with an administrator or member of Congress, for example, but those meetings are unlikely to be equally important if one organization is much more prominent and more regularly involved.' Likewise, Tresch (2009: 75) clarifies that 'while a speech in parliament might be sufficient to make the news once, it hardly is enough to get more regular coverage and attain some level of prominence in the media. Conversely, experience and status might not be necessary for occasional presence in the media, but they certainly seem important to become a frequent speaker in the media.' In sum, across different political arenas such as parliament and the media, conceptual distinctions between forms of policy engagement seem highly relevant.

So far, most work on policy engagement has tended to emphasise explaining variations in the *extent* to which groups involve themselves, have access or are prominent in policy processes. Here, we take a different approach as we seek to parse out key conceptual distinctions between different *forms* of policy engagement. Put another way, while much of the literature has primarily highlighted the frequency of engagement and thus emphasises differences in 'degree' (e.g., more or less prominent, or occasional versus frequent access to policy makers), our contribution aims to highlight the fundamentally distinct nature of involvement, access and prominence, hence underlining differences in 'kind'.

The research note proceeds as follows. The next section reviews existing approaches to examining the engagement of groups in policy making. We argue that these existing approaches might be usefully reconsidered as speaking to three distinctive concepts: involvement, access and prominence. Having clarified these three concepts theoretically

and in terms of possible operationalisation, we then outline our expectations regarding the different mechanisms and processes underpinning them. We conclude by formulating specific suggestions on how applications of this framework might move the interest group literature forward.

The policy engagement of interest groups: Involvement, access and prominence

While scholars have used a variety of terms to describe the policy engagement of groups, we believe that the fundamental differences between these forms can be accurately captured by three concepts – namely involvement, access and prominence (Table 1). As the first two concepts are relatively well established in the interest group literature, we will provide a more elaborate discussion of prominence in the ensuing paragraphs.

In our framework, *involvement* refers to, for instance, participation in open (or online) consultations, or the provision of written evidence to legislative committees. In these cases, groups can literally decide how involved they want to be. For example, if a group was so minded, it could simply make written submissions (multiple times if it wished) to legislative committees or administrative consultation processes. As noted by Rasmussen and Carroll (2014: 449) when referring to online consultations in the context of the European Union, 'barriers to entry in this form of external actor involvement are relatively low … typically open to everyone … and do not require prior invitation'. At the national level, studies of written responses to administrative consultations in the United Kingdom, letters to parliament in the Netherlands and Denmark, and 'notice and comment' rulemaking in the United States are additional examples of studies that take as their focus forms of group policy involvement (e.g., Halpin 2011; Pedersen et al. 2015; Yackee & Yackee 2006).

In our view, it is of critical importance to distinguish involvement from the well-established concept of *access*, which Truman (1951: 264) considered 'the facilitating intermediate objective of political interest groups'. Access is generally described as the

Table 1. Conceptual distinctions

Concept	Description	Operationalised as
Involvement	Refers to the extent of contacts made by a group to policy makers and institutions. The group can decide whether (and how intense or frequent) to be involved.	Contact by a group with policy makers or institutions that is at the discretion of the group.
Access	Where a group is granted contact with policy makers or institutions. It is something that not all groups have and it must in some real sense be 'won' or 'granted'.	Contact by a group with policy makers or institutions that is at the discretion of the policy maker or institution.
Prominence	Where a group has pre-eminence for a particular constituency or viewpoint, and is therefore 'taken-for-granted' by a prescribed audience.	Recognition or favourable notice of a group by policy makers.

ability to meet or to exchange information directly with policy makers (Beyers 2002, 2004; Bouwen 2002, 2004). Typical examples of the latter include membership of closed advisory committees (e.g., Balla & Wright 2001; Binderkrantz & Christiansen 2015; Fraussen et al. 2015; Rasmussen & Gros 2015) or (invited) committee hearings (e.g., Leyden 1995; Pedersen et al. 2015). Although much effort has been devoted to analysing the access of interest groups to policy makers, reflection on its conceptual meaning has been relatively scarce. In a recent review of the literature on group access, Binderkrantz et al. (2016: 2) argue that its definition and operationalisation 'often rests on an intuitive understanding of what access implies rather than on explicit definition'. We concur with the definition of access they put forward – namely that 'a group has entered a political arena (parliament, administration or media) passing a threshold controlled by relevant gatekeepers (politicians, civil servants, or journalists)'. Critical here is the granting of access by policy makers: access is something that not all groups have, and it must in some real sense be won or granted.

Involvement and access thus differ in the extent to which enjoying this form of policy engagement is at the discretion of a particular group, or depends on a mutual exchange with (often institutional) gatekeepers. Our third concept of policy engagement – prominence – is a term that has been used in general discourse, but rarely has been clearly defined. We use the term here to designate the taken-for-grantedness a group enjoys among a given audience (e.g., members of parliament, government officials or journalists). In this way it shares the approach of Taylor and Fiske (1975) who deploy this term to characterise the degree to which something is 'top of mind'.[2]

Prominence undeniably exists aside a range of similar, yet distinctive concepts. For instance, consider the concept of *visibility*. It is often used to indicate the degree to which an agent attracts the attention of an audience. We accept that a group, which is highly visible (is talked about a lot), may also be prominent. But we can also imagine that some groups will be prominent with policy makers but not highly visible. For that reason we do not consider prominence and visibility to be equivalent; whereas visibility merely involves the frequency with which a group is mentioned, prominence also takes into account *how and why* political elites refer to a particular group. For instance, one reason a group might be prominent is that it has a strong reputation for being influential; this is well captured in the notion of 'influence reputation' (Knoke 1998; Heaney 2014). Additionally, policy scholars talk about the role of perceived expertise and trustworthiness, which has been termed 'epistemic authority' (Kruglanski et al. 2009; see also Doberstein 2016), as a possible driver for prominence. We consider these (and related) concepts to be sub-types of prominence. The key point here is that we deploy prominence deliberately, and imbue it with a specific and distinct meaning *vis-à-vis* concepts that might immediately come to mind as candidates for the same underlying phenomenon.

Prominence is different from involvement and access in the sense that is largely a result of how external actors (and political elites in particular) perceive and acknowledge a group. The notion of prominence captures the idea that groups vary with respect to how preeminent they are as voices for a particular constituency among political elites, and thus refers to the situation whereby some groups are simply assumed to be relevant to the issue at hand. Thus, rather than emphasising a group's role in a particular policy process, for which the concepts of 'involvement' and 'access' seem highly appropriate, high levels of prominence are considered indicative of the taken-for-grantedness of a group as the voice for a particular

constituency or viewpoint. We suggest that a limited number of groups become synonymous with – or placeholders for – a constituency or issue perspective, which means that they stand in for, say, 'business', 'workers, 'farmers' or 'civil liberties'. As Grossmann (2012: 7) accurately observes, only a select few groups become prominent, even though many other organisations 'make the same representative claims, derive their support from similar constituencies, and compete for attention from the same set of policymakers. Yet reporters and policymakers do not regularly seek out their views.' There is a hierarchy, which implies that within each policy sector, or group system, only a few groups get to enjoy high levels of prominence among political elites, even though there are often groups around that provide close organisational equivalents, with similar organisational structures and constituencies.

To summarise, in previous work, several authors have used a variety of terms to describe the policy engagement of groups. Our aim here is to clarify the range of labels *already* in some kind of use (i.e., familiarity), such that their distinctive nature and measurement are well defined (i.e., differentiation) (e.g., Gerring 2012). Therefore, we consider our suggestions to be 'friendly amendments' to the existing literature as they 'do not fundamentally challenge a systematized concept but instead push analysts to capture more adequately the ideas contained in it' (Adcock & Collier 2001: 533). We believe the theoretical framework offered here provides a more parsimonious approach towards assessing the role of groups in political systems as it underlines fundamental differences in *kind* rather than *degree* concerning the policy engagement of groups, which will aid conceptual clarity in our research practices as well as facilitate comparative work and further accumulation of knowledge on these fundamental concepts. Thus far, theories and approaches in our sub-field have mostly tended to focus on access (often as a kind of proxy for influence), but we believe involvement and prominence are equally important to understanding the role of interest groups in policy making.

Identifying the mechanisms and processes that drive involvement, access and prominence

In the previous section, we identified three concepts – involvement, access and prominence – that capture distinguishable facets of group engagement with policy makers. The implication is that each concept might well be explained by a distinctive mechanism or process. In developing expectations about what might explain variation across measures of these concepts, we necessarily must outline a theoretical framework to go alongside them. In this section we develop more specific expectations, based on an account of the different mechanisms underpinning each concept. In short, we argue that conscious *effort* by groups appears to largely drive involvement, whereas access is more likely to be the result of a two-party *exchange*. While the involvement and access of groups might vary considerably from issue to issue, we assume prominence to be a more permanent and thus more stable feature of groups as it relates to the *acknowledgement* they receive from important audiences – in particular political elites. Table 2 summarises the key mechanism we argue underpins each concept, and provides a summary of expectations that derive from it.

In our view, involvement is something that is in the agency of groups to decide – how much effort to put into contacting specific political actors or institutions. As such, the level of resources available to a group ought to signify some kind of *absolute* limit on involvement.

Table 2. Mechanisms and processes driving involvement, access and prominence

Concepts	Primary mechanism	Description and expectations	Key explanatory variables/processes
Involvement	Effort	The degree to which a group becomes *involved* in policy is down to the effort a group is willing or able to expend. At the extreme, it is logically bounded by resource levels.	Resource variables ought to be significant.
Access	Exchange	The degree to which a group gains *access* is explained by the outcome of the exchange between policy makers and the group. While groups can generate capabilities that will shape their 'value' to policy makers, it is also the policy makers' needs and preferences that shape the granting of access.	Variables related to political capacity ought to be significant. Resource variables will shape this indirectly (as they may well dictate the extent to which desired capacities or policy goods can be generated).
Prominence	Acknowledgement	The degree to which a group attains *prominence* is the outcome of processes through which policy makers come to associate a given constituency with a particular group (or set of groups). The (repeated) performance of this coupling embeds and positively reinforces the group's prominence.	Most explanatory variables are located in the audience dynamic, and not in the group itself.

At the same time, the level of involvement is likely to be related to strategic choices of groups (e.g., prioritising some political venues or actors over others), as well as its particular policy agenda or issue interests. As regards the latter, we expect groups with a general orientation, such as peak business or labour groups, to demonstrate higher levels of involvement across a range of policy domains, whereas the involvement of specialised industry groups will be much more narrow and targeted (even though both are successful in getting involved) (e.g., Halpin & Thomas 2012).

Given that access is at the behest of government officials, members of parliament or legislative committee clerks, we expect that it will be most related to variables that indicate a manifest desire to invest in political capacities (such as hiring a commercial lobbyist, or making investments in policy research and analysis) and to demonstrate societal support (e.g., through a large number of members). The mechanism of exchange is primary here, which implies that groups possess 'policy goods' which policy makers value (Bouwen 2002, 2004; Braun 2012; Maloney et al. 1994: 36; Halpin 2014; Tallberg et al. 2015). These policy goods can relate to policy expertise, but can equally involve the societal legitimacy of a group, its capacity to implement policy or its ability to shape public opinion.

Unlike involvement and access, we argue that prominence is not something that groups can easily achieve in the short run. Put another way, groups can add more *effort* to generate higher levels of involvement, they can develop certain 'access goods' that might prompt policy makers to engage in an *exchange* with them, but in terms of prominence various factors external to the group come into play. By way of analogy, scholars talk of 'issue salience' as it is commonly accepted that what makes an issue prominent is nothing intrinsic to the issue (health is not more intrinsically salient than, say, education), but is explained by endogenous processes within the audience that drives recognition of an issue relative to others (Wlezien 2005).

We argue that processes of acknowledgment that occur within the 'audience' with which a given a group is seeking to engage, drive variations in prominence. Evidence of this process can be drawn by the way elites utilise specific groups as reference points in making arguments about policy matters. Thus, we see the practice whereby ministers or journalists will interchangeably refer to the 'farm lobby' and the National Farmers Union, or the 'environment movement' and Greenpeace. Drawing analogies with the literature regarding the scarcity of attention and information processing (see Jones and Baumgartner (2005) for a general approach in a public policy context, and Jones (2003) for a discussion of choice in decision making), we argue that since a given audience cannot be intimately familiar with all groups in a given population, they will look for short-cuts or heuristics when seeking to depict a particular set of interests. As regards processes that produce this 'aura of inevitability', explanations often focus on terms as 'major players', 'credibility', 'critical constituency' or 'a taken-for-granted role in the process' (Grossmann 2012: Chapter 6). There is an assumption here that the capacity for a given audience to discern and sift among groups to decide which groups to acknowledge – or give prominence to – will differ. For instance, we might expect the general public will monitor and filter political activities in different ways as compared to legislators or political journalists.

Conclusion

This article has put forward the proposition that the various measures currently used to analyse the policy engagement of groups can be meaningfully captured through our proposed theoretical framework. Reviewing the literature, there seems to be a solid foundation for more clearly and consciously distinguishing among the three concepts of 'involvement', 'access' and 'prominence', each driven by different mechanisms and processes. This research note has sought to demonstrate the inherent value in untangling these usages and retrieving what are valuable concepts. It is our contention that the welcome rapid shift to counting and mapping interest group policy engagement has heightened the need to reflect on conceptual precision and, in some cases, to parse out measures and concepts that currently appear to be used interchangeably, or are not explicitly articulated. While measures related to these concepts are increasingly utilised, it is less common to explicitly specify in which respects they vary in substantive meaning, or are driven by different processes.

This intervention is motivated by the view that we can capitalise best on the welcome rapid response to calls for more data if we take some moments to pause and consider how the measures being reported relate to existing concepts in the field (as well as considering if existing concepts adequately cover new sources of data). As is argued more broadly for the

social sciences, more data may not mean more knowledge accumulation unless due attention is paid to conceptual matters (Adcock & Collier 2001; Gerring 2012). Interest group studies are, of course, no different. This conceptual disambiguation will have two benefits. First, by fostering agreed syntax for commonly collected measures, existing findings will be more readily ingested by the scholarly community. And second, conceptual consistency – and its link to commonly agreed measures – will encourage better causal theories.

Our discussion also offers clear directions with respect to the design of empirical work. One fruitful research design approach is to look at how single concepts – say, prominence – map across arenas (see Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Boehmke et al. 2013). Based on existing work, we might expect groups to have varying prominence levels across different arenas (see work on the media and judicial arena, e.g. Bouwen and McCown (2007)). For instance, as the carrying capacity of these arenas differs, the number of groups achieving prominence (or access/involvement) could vary considerably (Hilgartner & Bosk 1988). Relatedly, the variations in the informational needs and preferences of different audiences (policy makers, journalists and judges, for instance) might also help to clarify different patterns of policy engagement in different arenas.

Accepting that these concepts measure different things, another important question involves the relationship between the concepts we identified. While there might be a positive association between involvement, access and prominence, this is an empirical question that requires more research. It seems likely that as group seeks more involvement in policy making, its chances of gaining access increase. Yet, we can also imagine cases where the opposite dynamic may occur. That is, some groups might be prominent among policy makers, even though they rarely involve themselves in policy making; likewise being granted access does not necessarily imply that a group is 'taken-for-granted' by political elites. Future work in this area surely will assist us in unravelling these links in greater detail.

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge the financial support from an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (DP140104097: The Organised Interest System in Australian Public Policy). Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2015 meetings of the European Political Science Association and the Australian Political Science Association, and at an invited Interest Group workshop held at the University of Hamburg. We thank participants for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. We also thank the anonymous reviewers and journal editors for their useful comments, which substantially improved our argument.

Notes

1. While discussions of 'bias' are ubiquitous in the interest group literature, and mostly imply a certain imbalance in the representation of different societal interests, the absence of a standard against which to assess bias in normative or empirical terms makes it rather difficult to produce clear-cut conclusions. For a more detailed discussion, see Baumgartner and Leech (1998: Chapter 5), Lowery and Gray (2004), Lowery et al. (2015) and Schlozman et al. (2012).
2. Our usage finds agreement with the way Grossmann (2012) defines the concept – as taken-for-grantedness – but departs in its operationalisation (his measure of raw group mentions is what we would define as 'visibility', see below).

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