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Organization of Interest Groups

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Keywords

Interest groups · Group type · Organizational form · Organizational features · Organizational development · Transmission belt · Representation · Solidarity · Identity · Digital natives · Membership

Definition

Insight into the internal organization of interest groups is crucial for understanding their representative function and intermediary role in contemporary democracies. The particular organizational features of groups shape their ability to fulfill their potential as "transmission belts" between society and the state. Given these important repercussion of organizational choices, it is not surprising that decisions about the specific mission of the organization, the type of members, and their precise role in decision-making processes are often strongly contested when a new interest group is being established. Once these choices have been made, however, an organization's mission and structure tend to be rather inert and mostly evolve

in a path-dependent, incremental manner (Fraussen, 2014).

This chapter defines interest groups as membership-based formal organizations, who seek to represent the interests of a particular constituency or advocate for a particular cause in the political arena. This chapter first clarifies the importance of the internal organization of interest groups and subsequently addresses the use and value of different group typologies. The last two sections focus on clarifying feature- and identity-based approaches for identifying variation in organizational form and explore how digital technologies might alter the organizational design of interest groups and how they conceive and involve their constituency.

Why Does the Internal Organization of Interest Groups Matter?

Insight into the internal organization of interest groups is crucial for understanding their representative function and intermediary role in contemporary democracies. Interest groups can provide policy expertise, societal legitimacy, and political intelligence, and therefore policymakers often consider them as valuable partners. The particular organizational features of groups shape their capacity to provide these valuable policy goods and thus their ability to fulfill their potential as "transmission belts" between society and the

state, who transmit viewpoints of their members to policymakers.

The persistence of organizational features is another indicator of their importance. Decisions about the initial organizational design, such as the specific mission of the organization, the type of members, and their precise role in decision-making processes, are often strongly contested. Once these choices have been made, however, an organization's mission and structure tend to be rather inert and mostly evolve in path-dependent, incremental manner (Fraussen, 2014). While a group might alter its overall lobbying strategy and, for instance, take a less radical stance to enhance its relations with policymakers, fundamental changes to its organizational design are much less common, as this would fundamentally alter the DNA of the group.

In *Democracy in the Making*, Kathleen M. Blee provides a detailed and insightful analysis of the lasting impact of initial choices by analyzing the formation process of 60 emerging activist groups in Pittsburgh over a 3-year period (2012). She finds that even these groups, which "lack the formal trappings of rules of operation, settled beliefs, and a collective identity that characterize more established activist organization" (2012, p. 6), have a very strong tendency to stick to initial commitments and only consider substantial (yet mission-consistent) changes to their organizational form in times of crisis (see also Halpin & Daugbjerg, 2013). If this structural inertia is so strong in organizations that theoretically can easily alter their structure and processes, older and more formalized groups will probably face even greater difficulties to realize organizational change and find it extremely hard to escape from what Blee aptly labels "paths of diminishing possibility" (2012, p. 39).

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identifying variation in organizational form and explore how digital technologies might alter the organizational design of interest groups and how they conceive and involve their constituency.

The Use and Value of Group Typologies

Which societal voices a group aims to represent is a key decision that will strongly shape its identity. It will affect many subsequent organizational choices related to how they define and involve their constituency, as well as the way in which they engage with policymakers. This section provides an overview of different group typologies and discusses their value as proxies for identifying key organizational features.

Group Typologies

Within the broad category of membership-based organizations, scholars often distinguish two main types: groups that represent economic interests and groups that advocate for citizen interests or public causes. Subcategories of economic interest groups are business associations, professional groups, and trade unions. Business associations can represent a specific industry and thus have individual firms as members, function as umbrella for multiple industries (such as Chambers of Commerce), have other industry federations as members, or combine organizational and associational memberships. Professional groups refer to organizations that bring together individuals based on their professional activity, such as doctors or lawyers, and often regulate these specific occupations by developing and enforcing specific qualifications and standards. Trade unions are also often included in the category of business interests, as the reason why citizens join unions is not so much issue-driven but mostly related to their economic activities. Much research also includes a category of institutional groups that have public institutions as members, such as local governments, schools, or hospitals.

Citizen interests comprise of a variety of organizations that gather individual citizens as members and/or advocate for a specific cause. Within this category, some work distinguishes between

identity groups and public interest groups, the former referring to groups that represents specific constituencies (such as minorities, elderly, students) and the latter including groups that advocate for a broad cause, such as human rights or government transparency (e.g., Binderkrantz, Christiansen, & Pedersen, 2014, p. 4). An alternative approach emphasizes the extent to which citizen groups prioritize or combine different tasks. Following this view, one can distinguish advocacy (citizen) groups, service groups, and hybrid groups (e.g., Minkoff, 2002). Whereas the first prioritize political lobbying, service groups are more focused on the provision of public services (for instance, related to health or social welfare), whereas hybrid ones put most emphasis on service provision yet also frequently combine this with political advocacy. One reason that several service-oriented groups over time evolve toward hybrid groups is that they start "to see the political advocacy of their 'service users' interests as the logical progression of its services role" (Halpin, 2010, p. 282).

The twofold distinction between economic and citizen interest can be related to another typology that applies the labels of "specific" and "diffuse" interests, or "sectional" and "cause" groups (e.g., Klüver & Saurugger, 2013). Some groups have a clearly defined and exclusive constituency, to whom they provide selective material incentives. Think of a professional association of general practitioners or an industry federation that gathers all companies in the chemical industry. Organizations or citizens that do not meet these specific criteria are unable to become a member of the organization. Environmental and consumer rights groups are typical examples of "diffuse" interests or "cause groups," which have a more open nature. Citizens join these groups as they share their values, and theoretically anyone can affiliate with the organization. As these diffuse interests advocate for public goods, all citizens (and hence also non-members) benefit from their lobbying work. For these reasons, it is often argued that groups representing diffuse interests face a much stronger version of the collective action dilemma (see the chapters on Mancur Olson and Collective Action Problem for a more detailed discussion,

see Jordan & Maloney, 1996 for an alternative perspective). Yet, whereas establishing and maintaining groups representing diffuse interests are more challenging, recent work demonstrates that establishing policy positions might be more difficult for (business) groups that advocate for specific interests, as aligning the preferences of their membership often involves a rather cumbersome and time-consuming process (De Bruycker et al. 2019). At the same time, extensive engagement with members, while challenging, might still pay off in terms of higher levels of access, thus constituting a "beneficial inefficiency" (Groemping & Halpin, 2019).

Group Typologies and Organizational Features

There is considerable debate on whether different group typologies provide accurate proxies for assessing differences in organizational features. Many studies that rely on a distinction between group types, and, for instance, compare economic groups and citizen groups, assume that the nature of a group's constituency will shape its organizational characteristics and political behavior.

Following this view, some key assumptions are that groups who gather citizens generally have greater difficulties to mobilize members compared to economic groups, dispose of fewer financial resources, and more strongly rely on contributions from members and supporters. Yet, they also have a greater ability to mobilize citizens and volunteers and work for causes that often have a broader appeal and therefore higher news value. For these reasons, some central expectations are that citizen groups focus more on agenda setting and activities in public arenas, whereas economic groups primarily aim to shape political decisions and seek to capitalize upon their policy expertise in bureaucratic and administrative arenas. In other words, whereas citizen groups due to their organizational features are expected to put relative more emphasis on outside lobbying strategies, economic groups are assumed to invest relative more effort in inside lobbying strategies (e.g., Binderkrantz et al., 2014; Dur & Mateo, 2013).

This linkage between group type and their internal organization and political activities

requires some qualifications. While it is very challenging and time-intensive to collect detailed information on the specific organizational features of groups, studies who have examined variation in the organizational form of different group types find high levels of variation in key organizational features *within* group types.

Baroni et al., for instance, conduct a cluster analysis of 991 interest groups active at the EU level to assess to what extent clusters of key organizational features (such as membership structure and financial resources) relate to different group typologies (2014). They conclude, "although we find that similar group types may share certain background characteristics, we also find important and considerable differences in the organizational attributes of specific interest group types in all the [coding] schemes examined." Importantly, their results "qualify scholarship that assumes a link between interest group type and differences in organizational background characteristics, such as group resources, whether related to finances, staff or information" (2014, p. 143). This finding resonates with research by Kluver and Saurugger on the professionalization of groups (2013; see also the chapter on professionalization of groups). They measured professionalization of 1353 groups active at the EU level by focusing on the nature of the staff of the organization and considering their prior working experience and educational background, as well as the frequency of trainings offered by the group. Distinguishing between sectional and cause groups, they do not find "any systematic association between interest group type and their degree of professionalization" (2013, p. 201).

Likewise, the link between group type and preferred lobbying strategies is not so straightforward. In their study of interest group strategies in five European countries, Dur and Mateo do find important differences between group types in terms of strategic choices, as "citizen groups and professional groups seem inherently more inclined towards an outside strategy." Yet, they also note, "groups still have considerable leeway in their choice of lobbying strategy, as supported by the fact that variation across groups that form

part of the same type is large" (2013, pp. 677–678).

These findings clarify that while these typologies are highly valuable to clarify the different types of members and constituencies that groups seek to represent, researchers should be careful to make a direct link between the type of group and particular organizational features or particular political behavior.

Identifying Organizational Forms: Feature-Based and Identity-Based Approaches

In his book *The Organization of Political Interest Groups*, Halpin distinguishes two approaches for studying organizational form, namely, a "feature-based" and an "identity-based" (2014). A feature-based approach highlights formal or informal features of the groups, such as, for instance, their membership structure and issue focus or blueprints that group leaders use to describe their organizational model. An identity-based approach focuses more strongly on how different audiences perceive the core characteristics of the group. By focusing on identity rather than particular organizational features, the focus shifts to what makes groups distinctive, a question that can be answered by letting group staff and members, or external audiences such as journalist or policymakers, clarify "what they stand for" and "what makes them distinctive." This section clarifies examples of these two approaches to studying variation in organizational form.

Feature-Based Approaches
A seminal feature-based study of organizational from was conducted by Minkoff, Aisenbrey, and Agnone (2008), who examined the organizational diversity of the US advocacy sector. They conclude that, rather than isomorphism in organizational form, there is considerable variety, which in turn shapes the goals, strategies, and claims of these organizations. Their study confirms the presence of different organizational models (see also Fraussen and Halpin 2018a) and demonstrates the broader implications of specific

organizational design choices. Specifically, they highlight three structural features that together determine the organizational form of groups: (1) their organizational structure (the extent to which decision-making processes and internal procedures are formalized, the latter implying a strong reliance on paid staff instead of volunteers or members); (2) their membership strategies (whether and what kind of members does the group have and to what extent can they participate in decision-making processes via federated or centralized structures); and (3) their resources (in terms of budget, years of experience, and amount of members).

Based on a cluster analysis, they proceed to identify five distinct organizational models. The first two are a "national" model and a "federated" one that mainly vary on whether they involve members in a centralized manner or via a federated structure with chapters that operate below the national level. A third type they distinguish is the "mature advocacy model," such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). These groups generally are quite old, highly rely on paid staff, and have rather high levels of financial resources and grassroots support. They also identify two types that are defined by the absence of individual members and vary in their degree of centralization, a "non-membership" and a "network" model. One out of four organizations included in the study fits the non-membership model, confirming the substantial presence of organizations that do not have individuals as members and operate from a single national office (see also Schlozman et al., 2015). The network model defines membership in organizational terms and often links organizations at the national and/or local level. These organizations describe themselves often as coalitions, partnerships, or alliances. While the relation between group type and issue focus is not that clear-cut, it is important to note that Minkoff et al. demonstrate that in particular non-membership and network models focus on poverty and social issues. This finding highlights the difficulties of establishing membership-based organizations that advocate for *and* actively involve disadvantaged societal groups.

Another feature-based distinction can be made between groups that have a direct-membership model and those that have a more nested membership structure and are often described as umbrella groups. In direct-membership groups, there is a direct link between the constituency and the group. This is the case for consumer groups who have citizens as members or industry federations whose members are companies. Chambers of commerce that have multiple industry federations as members, or peak trade unions that encompass multiple sector-specific unions, are examples of groups with a nested membership structure. Their members are not individual citizens or corporations but other associations that have individuals or organizations as members. These complex nested membership structures are a double-edged sword. While these associations that gather other membership groups are valuable interlocutor for policymakers as they can aggregate multiple interests, and often enjoy high levels of access (e.g. Fraussen, Beyers, & Donas, 2015, see also the chapter Interest Group Access), scholars question their ability to establish policy positions that go beyond lowest common denominator policies (Kröger, 2018).

Other work focuses specifically on the capacity of groups to function as transmission belts. While scholars often use this label to refer to the potential of groups to connect citizens to policymakers, research that has examined whether groups have the organizational features to fulfill this important democratic function is rather scarce. An important exception involves research by Albareda, who conceptualizes organizational transmission belts as comprising of two key dimensions, internal responsiveness (to members) and political capacity (to efficiently provide expertise to policymakers), and empirically assesses the presence of these organizational features among interest groups active at the EU level (2018). Specifically, he argues that responsiveness toward members requires three organizational features: high levels of interaction between members and the organization, decision power of members, and linkages between the central organization and local chapters. Policy capacity, in turn, requires the ability to respond swiftly to demands of

policymakers, the capability to speak with one voice, and internal processes to collect and provide policy expertise (see also Flöthe, 2019 for a resource perspective on information lobbying).

Combining these two dimensions, which requires a delicate balance between democratic representativeness and political efficacy, is a challenging exercise for group leaders. Of the 268 groups included in his study, only 33% meet these high expectations. One out of two groups prioritized only one of these dimensions and thus designed their organization with an almost exclusive focus on either member involvement or providing policy input. Moreover, there were no systematic differences between economic groups and citizen groups. A key insight from this study is that many groups do not meet the high expectations linked to the notion of "transmission belt" and that all group types struggle with the delicate balancing exercise of being democratic and efficient.

Identity-Based Approaches

Several case studies highlight the importance of group identity, as it provides both an enabler and a constraint of organizational development. Halpin and Daugbjerg, for instance, argue that radical change, which often involves shifting the identity of the group, is rare yet possible, provided that "skilled agents can make change seem part of a new reading or interpretation of the mission - something the founders in the same situation would do" (2013, p. 8).

In his work on the multi-dimensional nature of group identity, Heaney identifies four key dimensions through which groups can distinguish themselves: whom they represent the policy issues they focus on (see also Browne, 1990), their ideology and values, and their advocacy methods (2004). He notes that whereas "Some interest groups may be prominent because of their ideological credibility (. . .) or "valued by members of Congress because they can help members think about issues from the "correct" ideological perspective", others "are valued because of the techniques they use to participate in advocacy. Legislators may wish to partner with groups that have legal capacities, the ability to mobilize grassroots

support, or a budget for media advertising." His results, based on interviews with 168 interest groups working on healthcare in the United States, indicate that many of these groups consider the issues they focus on and their representative character as core to their identity (p. 627). Citizen groups tended to more frequently use issues as basis of their identity, whereas other group types were more likely to underline their representative nature (p. 640).

This discussion also relates to different logics that groups use to legitimate their organization and policy claims. In this regard, Halpin made a distinction between a logic of representation and a logic of solidarity (2006) and in so doing sought to disentangle normative expectations about groups as "little democracies." He argues that ". . .scholars should recalibrate expectations of group democratic practice based on what their promise is – whether for representation or solidarity – with this largely dictated by the type of constituency being advocated for" (2006 937). A key question here involves whether a constituency can speak for itself. If so, the group has the option to apply a logic of representation, as it can consult the people it advocates for, and group officials should be responsive to their demands and preferences. Yet, in many cases, this is not possible. Think of groups who advocate for animals, a clean environment, or future generations and who often rely on financial contributions from "supporters." Here, a logic of solidarity needs to be applied. In this case, the policy claims and arguments of the groups are based on epistemic authority or the quality of their policy expertise, and the group is acting "in solidarity with" the groups that benefit from their advocacy work. A representative of WWF Scotland accurately described this logic of solidarity and the differences with a logic of representation, as he clarified that *"We do not pretend to be representative. We offer individuals a product and they can choose to support it by paying subscriptions. Therefore we have no need to consult with members. In fact when we ask them if they wanted to be consulted they said 'No'. They preferred the resources to go into getting the message out. Our role is informing the policy process. The role of science is high as it provides the basis

for our advocacy. We offer an expert view and not representation" *(*Halpin, 2006, p. *931)*.

This section has highlighted examples of feature- and identity-based approaches to studying organizational form. It is important to underline that these approaches are highly complementary to the use of more traditional typologies, such as business associations and citizen groups. Rather than juxtaposing the use of classic group types and the analysis of particular formal or identity-related group features, theoretical frameworks and research designs that integrate these different approaches are likely to provide deeper insight in the precise nature and rationale of the internal organization of interest groups.

Different Generations of Group Organization and the Digital Age

Advancements in digital technologies have disrupted many industries; think of Amazon, Airbnb, and Uber. A similar disruption of the advocacy sector has not yet materialized. At the same time, a third generation of interest groups has emerged, the so-called digital natives whose organizational model fully embraces the opportunities provided by digital technologies and social media platforms. The last part of this chapter clarifies the distinctive nature of these digital natives compared to membership federations and professional advocacy groups and discusses the possible broader implications of their membership approach.

Three Generations: Membership Federations, Professional Advocacy Groups, and Digital Natives

Group entrepreneurs have different organizational models at their disposal, which imply different ways of identifying and involving their constituency. In his groundbreaking book *The MoveOn Effect*, Karpf distinguishes three generations of groups that emerged at different periods in time: membership-based federations, professional advocacy groups, and digital natives (2012).

The first generation is membership-based federations (1800s–1960s). These groups have a clearly defined and identity-based constituency,

and their members play a key role in the decision-making processes and activities of the organization (or at the very least are provided structural and regular opportunities to do so). Given their high level of internal democracy, these groups are often referred to as "laboratories of democracy" and considered highly valuable in terms of generating and sustaining social capital. To ensure strong linkages and involvement of members, these groups often combine a national office with branches or chapters at the local level. This first generation corresponds with the federated membership model identified by Minkoff et al. (2008), and typical examples are professional groups and trade unions, as well as (some) identity-based citizen groups.

A second generation of groups that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s is professional advocacy groups. Many of these groups are related to large social movements of that time and, for instance, focused on issues like environment, gender, and human rights. Consumer groups are also a typical example of this second generation. In these issue-based groups, the leadership plays a central role and largely sets the group's policy agenda that typically focuses on a single issue. The role of members is often limited to providing financial donations to sustain the organization or support specific advocacy campaigns (e.g., Maloney, 2009). For this reason, these groups often refer to "supporters" rather than members.

The academic literature provides different perspectives on the broader democratic implications of the emergence of this second generation of professional advocacy groups and their relation with first-generation groups. Skocpol, for instance, famously described these developments as indicative of "diminished democracy" (2003). In her view, "A new civic America has thus taken shape since the 1960s, as professionally managed advocacy groups and institutions have moved to the fore, while representatively governed, nation-spanning voluntary membership federations— especially those with popular or cross-class memberships— have lost clout in national public affairs and faded from the everyday lives of most Americans." (2003, p. 174; for similar

observations on contemporary environmental organizations, see Bosso 2005; Jordan & Maloney, 1997.)

The work of Skocpol, and other research on the professionalization of interest groups, either implicitly or explicitly assumes a proliferation of "professionalized" groups where members are absent or play a very limited role. Furthermore, the dynamic between membership and non-membership-based organizations is expected to be of a competitive, zero-sum nature. However, a study of Walker, Baumgartner, and McCarthy challenges the idea that there has been a systematic transformation of association life (2011). They examine the emergence of membership and non-membership advocacy organizations in the domains of peace, women's issues, and human rights, focusing as well on the United States. They describe the relations between membership and non-membership-based associations as mutually supportive, as they appear to strengthen each other and demonstrate rather similar growth patterns (see Minkoff, 2002 for a similar discussion of the relation between advocacy, service-oriented, and hybrid citizen groups).

A third generation of groups emerged around the 2000s, following the internet revolution. While MoveOn in the United States was a pioneer, in the following years groups applying a similar model emerged in multiple countries, such as GetUp! in Australia and 38 Degrees in the United Kingdom. These groups have three organizational characteristics that make them truly distinct from the first and second generation of groups. First and most importantly, they have a radically different notion of membership. As they seek to connect with as large a constituency as possible, their membership is open to all citizens and does not involve any subscription costs. Second, they rely on continuous issue-related crowdfunding to finance their advocacy campaigns. Third, they also crowdsource their policy agenda, as they constantly assess and test which issues members consider most important. These digital natives operate on broad (and typically progressive) policy platforms that enable them to engage with a wide variety of issues across different policy domains. While some of these groups have a strong policy identity and initiate campaigns themselves, others provide a platform for other citizens and groups to launch and coordinate campaigns.

Reconceptualizing Membership?

The emergence of these digital natives, and their policy success in some countries, has urged traditional groups to reconsider how they conceive and involve their constituency (Fraussen and Halpin 2018b). Many first- and second-generation groups nowadays desire to expand their membership (or supportership) beyond their core constituency, as they aim to increase their societal and political legitimacy. For this reason, groups increasingly offer novel and multiple opportunities for citizens and organizations to affiliate. They might, for instance, provide the opportunity to become a (traditional) full member, make a donation, or become a friend of the organization, the latter often involving no costs and only requires signing up on the website of the organization. In this way, they establish distinct participation routes, resulting in different types of members.

One the one hand, this multi-dimensional and flexible notion of membership is well aligned with current participatory demands of citizens, who prefer to engage politically in a more ad hoc, flexible, and issue-centered way. On the other hand, it severely increases the difficulties of organizational maintenance and raises key questions about the legitimacy of the claims of the group, or more generally its representative character. In terms of organizational maintenance, a larger and more flexible base of affiliated citizens can be a valuable resource, both in terms of generating income, as well as regards mobilization and agenda setting power. This model also carries important risks, however, as attention and interest from citizens in the organization may wax and wane over time or be highly issue-dependent. Consequently, issue-based crowdfunding provides a less secure and much more volatile source of funding.

As regards internal decision-making, a key question is to what extent these different segments of a group's (expanded) constituency are all equally involved in the internal decision-making

of the group and whether the policy claims of the group (should) accurately represent the preferences of these different sets of affiliated people. Groups of the second generation, who often have a more diffuse membership and already work with "supporters," might find the approach of digital natives largely compatible with their existing mode of operating. In contrast, groups of the first generation that often emphasize their "representative" nature as a key component of their identity might struggle to reconcile their representative logic with this more open and flexible constituency approach that characterizes the internal organization of digital natives.

Cross-References

▶ Collective Action Problem
▶ Interest Group Access
▶ Mancur Olson
▶ Professionalization of Groups

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