



# Organizing Transmission Belts: The Effect of Organizational Design on Interest Group Access to EU Policy-making\*

ADRIÀ ALBAREDA  and CAELESTA BRAUN   
Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University, The Hague

## Abstract

The European Commission's outreach to interest groups implies that they function as 'transmission belts' that aggregate and articulate interests as policy-relevant information for policy-makers. Operating as a transmission belt, however, requires an organizational design fit for this purpose. We offer one of the first systematic analyses of how organizational design affects interest group access to public officials. We draw from a novel dataset of 248 EU-level interest groups including data on several dimensions of organizational design. One of our key findings is that qualified majority and consensus-facilitating decision-making procedures help interest groups gain access to administrative and political officials, whereas functional differentiation is important to get access to administrative officials, but not to political officials. Our findings thus demonstrate the relevance of organizational design in gaining access as well as the need to incorporate varying informational demands of public officials to properly explain interest group access to public decision-making.

**Keywords:** Interest group; organizational design; access; EU administrative officials; EU political officials

## Introduction

Interest groups are seen as crucial components of political representation in most western democracies. The European Commission for instance has long reached out to civil society groups, in particular European Associations (EAs), to ensure encompassing interest representation, efficient policy input, and support during implementation (European Commission, 2002; Greenwood, 2002; Greenwood and Webster, 2000; Michalowitz, 2004; Schmitter and Streeck, 1999). Such active outreach is driven by the expectation that interest groups serve as a transmission belt, by providing (supra) national public institutions with useful policy information and simultaneously aggregating and representing diverse constituency interests (Berkhout *et al.*, 2017a; Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2013).

The transmission belt function is a complex issue of organizational design, yet how interest groups organize themselves to successfully fulfill such intermediary positions is a relatively understudied phenomenon (but see Albareda, 2018). As Halpin (2014, p. 1) observes: 'Scholars would no doubt accept them [issues of organizational design] as salient, but they remain understudied. They are -- and remain -- themes for the footnotes

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of studies of “other” things like influence, formation, maintenance and population-level analyses’. This is surprising, as recent studies point out that interest groups significantly vary in their capacity to connect with their members (Binderkrantz, 2009; Halpin, 2014; Leech, 2012), and hence also in their capability of acquiring and maintaining access to public decision-making (Kohler-Koch and Quitkatt, 2013). What is more, the deliberate public outreach to such organizations might alter their organizational capabilities to represent and aggregate societal interests (Fraussen, 2014). How interest groups actually organize themselves, in other words, their organizational design, thus matters for explaining their access to public institutions and the degree to which they can fulfill the intermediary position required from them by many (supra) national public institutions.

In this article we aim to address this gap by examining the effect of organizational design on interest group access to EU public officials. To do so, we first derive expectations from public organization theory to examine organizational design, in particular, information aggregation and information flow, two crucial aspects of interest groups given their dual task of interest collection and interest articulation. In order for this so-called transmission belt to function, it requires certain organizational features to generate policy-relevant information for public officials. Given the varying informational demand of public officials, which we take as the starting point of our analytical approach (Arras and Braun, 2017; Beyers and Braun, 2014; Bouwen, 2002, 2004; Coen and Katsaitis, 2013), we expect different effects of our main explanatory factors – i.e. decision-making procedures, functional differentiation, EU scope and membership type – on access to different EU public officials. We test our assumptions based on a novel dataset of organizational design features of European Associations (EAs) and their access patterns to public officials of the Commission. We find that qualified majority and consensus-making decision procedures positively affect interest group access to EU administrative and political officials, whereas functional differentiation facilitates access to EU administrative officials but not to political officials. The EU scope of interest groups helps to get access to both types of public official, but does not seem to matter for gaining more access to political officials.

Our analysis contributes to the study of interest representation in the EU and beyond in three ways. First, the combination of significant effects of organizational design factors, combined with limited effects of conventional indicators for organizational type, suggest the added value of incorporating insights from organizational theory into the study of interest representation. Second, the varying impact of our factors for either administrative or political officials confirms the importance of bringing in varying informational demands by public officials to properly explain access patterns. Finally, our analyses demonstrate the added value of operationalizing interest group access as a two-step procedure rather than as a compound measure (*cf.*, Rasmussen and Gross, 2015) since it shows different results for getting access compared to enjoying higher levels of access. In sum, our theoretical approach and empirical findings are indicative of the added value of investigating how interest groups organize themselves to gain access to EU officials.

## **I. Why Organizational Design Matters for Interest Group Access to EU Public Officials**

Access to EU policy-makers is essential for interest groups operating in the EU policy-making environment to effectively exercise political influence. Being able to provide

expertise and share insights regarding the political support of their constituency for new legislation is a crucial aspect of political influence in general and in the EU in particular (Bouwen, 2002; Eising, 2007). Most of the outreach of the Commission has been based on the assumption that interest groups are a crucial link to civil society as a whole (European Commission, 2001; Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2013; Schmitter and Streeck, 1999) and as such can provide them with policy-relevant information. Such a transmission-belt function is corroborated in the academic literature (Berkhout *et al.*, 2017a; Kohler-Koch and Quittkat, 2013).

Two broad types of policy-relevant information are distinguished in the literature: expertise (such as technical specifications and state-of-the-art scientific knowledge), and political support (such as citizen support and the backing of policy-powerful economic actors) (Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2014; Bouwen, 2004; Braun, 2012; De Bruycker, 2016; Klüver, 2013). As both types of information can strengthen the capacity of EU public institutions to develop effective and legitimate policy proposals, interest groups capable of offering policy-relevant information have been demonstrated to enjoy high levels of access to EU public officials (Bouwen, 2004; Bunea, 2014; Eising, 2007). Moreover, recent studies show that varying informational demands by public officials explain different levels of access depending on the type of information interest groups were able to provide them with (Arras and Braun, 2017; Beyers and Braun, 2014; Bouwen, 2004; Coen and Katsaitis, 2013). The varying informational demand of policy-makers thus serves as a key assumption underlying our analytical approach of how organizational structure affects (levels of) interest group access.

The capacity to offer different types of information to multiple public officials is strongly linked to the transmission belt function of groups. More specifically, groups need to aggregate interests as well as to articulate and transform those interests into policy relevant information (*cf.* Berkhout *et al.*, 2017a). Aggregating, processing and transferring various types of policy information to distinct types of policy official renders groups akin to ‘service bureaus’ to policy-makers (Hall and Deardorff, 2006, p. 72; Leech, 2012) and speaks to their ‘policy capacity’, that is, their ability to provide different kinds of policy-relevant information (Daugbjerg *et al.*, 2017; Halpin, 2014) to different public officials.

Indeed, key insights from (public) organization theory show that organizational design has a profound effect on preference formation and policy outcomes (Bach, 2014; Christensen *et al.*, 2007; Egeberg and Trondal, 2009). Yet, despite the importance of organizational design in aggregating, channeling and enhancing information flows, very few studies have examined the role of organizational design in getting access to policy-makers (but see Braun, 2013; Halpin, 2014).

## II. How Organizational Design Relates to Interest Group Access

To assess the effect of organizational design on interest group access to EU public officials, the article focuses on two dimensions: the flow of information within an organization (organizational structure) and how they organize the inclusiveness of their constituency (representativeness). Organizational structure and representativeness are important dimensions that enable interest groups to engage in interest aggregation and interest articulation, and more specifically to engage in a diversification of the types of information supply required by public officials – given their varying informational

demands. Therefore, different informational demands across and within EU public institutions require interest groups to offer different types of policy-relevant information and hence result in varying levels of access to EU *administrative* and *political* officials.

### *Organizational Structure and Interest Group Access*

Given the dual organizational task of interest groups of both aggregating and articulating interests, assessing the effect of organizational structures on interest group access should entail an analysis of how information flows throughout the organization. Public organization theory posits that organizational structure affects how ideas and preferences are being channeled through organizations via formal units and consequently, formal decision-making junctures in the organizational hierarchy (*cf.* Meier, 2010). More specifically, organizational structures are argued to affect policy outcomes by how they structure both decision-making processes and the channeling of ideas (Hammond, 1986), or influence the translation of knowledge from source organizations to recipient organizations (Røvik, 2016). These mechanisms are equally relevant for the organizational design of interest groups, which operate as a multi-layered structure with independent yet related entities, including a formal secretariat representing the members. Key insights from public organization theory on the effect of organizational structure on information flows, combined with the organizational format of most (EU) interest groups, suggest two important aspects that affect their access to EU policy-makers: first, decision-making structures, as they reflect to what extent members have a say in the interest aggregation (Binderkrantz, 2009; Christensen *et al.*, 2007) and second, functional differentiation of the organization as it helps to assess their capacity of transforming constituency interests into useful and distinct packages of policy-relevant information (Gulick, 1937; Klüver, 2012).

First, the decision-making system is critical for how constituency interests are represented within the interest group (Binderkrantz, 2009). The organizational structure of many interest groups suggests a delegation or deliberation process whereby member organizations provide input regarding their preferences and collectively agree on the interests that the group will represent when seeking access to EU institutions. Decision-making systems requiring large majorities or consensus – despite increasing transaction costs, stasis or internal tensions (Greenwood and Webster, 2000; Williamson, 1979) – ensure an internal alignment between the members in the association and, therefore, a better representation of membership interests. Hence, decisions taken by qualified majority or consensus are expected to reflect both higher levels of membership involvement and a broader coverage of multiple membership interests than simple majority systems. Even though consensus may imply diluted or watered-down positions, the political significance of these decisions is stronger than the ones obtained through simple majority systems. We expect qualified majority and consensus systems to increase levels of access for both political and administrative officials as they signal both consensus on substantive aspects within the associations and, by implication, political support, which is beneficial for both types of public official. Hence, we hypothesize that:

*H1 Interest groups with consensus-oriented or qualified majority decision-making procedures are more likely to enjoy (higher levels of) access to both EU administrative and political officials than interest groups with simple majority decision-making procedures.*

A second dimension of organizational structure which we expect to affect the levels of access is functional differentiation, which is defined as the ‘division of labour within an organization and the distribution of official duties among a number of positions’ (Klüver, 2012, p. 495). More specifically, functional differentiation implies the creation of separate units, departments, divisions or working groups under the executive bodies that focus on different policy issues and/or concrete legal, technical, economic or planning issues (*cf.* Gulick, 1937). In that regard, and as noted by Klüver (2012, p. 496), ‘employees who focus on one specific policy field become specialists in this area and develop important expert knowledge’.

The division of labour in particular increases the chances of obtaining access to administrative officials because labour division allows interest groups to produce policy positions with detailed information required by policy-makers (Beyers, 2008). That is, functional differentiation allows associations to provide detailed, technical and evidence-based information, demonstrated to be beneficial for getting access to the Commission (Beyers, 2008; Bouwen, 2002; Rasmussen and Gross, 2015). We therefore expect that interest groups with high levels of specialization enjoy more access to administrative officials. Yet, we do not expect to find the same relationship with political officials, who are in need of more political support and less technical expert knowledge (*cf.* Beyers and Braun, 2014).

*H2a Interest groups with higher degrees of functional differentiation are more likely to enjoy (higher levels of) access to EU administrative officials than interest groups with lower levels of functional differentiation.*

*H2b Interest groups with higher degrees of functional differentiation are not more likely to enjoy (higher levels of) access to EU political officials than interest groups with lower levels of functional differentiation.*

### *Representativeness and Interest Group Access*

The dual task of interest groups of both interest aggregation and articulation not only requires them to put in place an organizational structure that facilitates the flow of information and capacity to diversify their information supply, it also requires them to ensure an inclusive representation of their constituency and hence to carefully design their membership structure. More specifically, a key concern of the Commission is that interest groups can voice representative policy positions that take into account broad constituencies (European Commission, 2001, p. 4). Additionally, as specified in the consultation and dialogue communication (European Commission, 2002, p. 20), ‘where appropriate, the Commission encourages contributions from interested parties organized at the European level’. We therefore consider two dimensions of membership to examine organizational representativeness (Pérez-Solórzano Borragán and Smismans, 2012): the EU scope and level of aggregation in organizational membership.

Interest groups that can speak on behalf of large constituencies signaling a broad EU coverage (Hull, 1993) can contribute to securing the democratic legitimacy of EU policies (Eising, 2007). Despite the difficulties associated with collective action and lowest common denominator problems (Beyers, 2008; Eising, 2007), having member organizations from more EU member states is expected to strengthen the political relevance of interest groups. It increases the sectoral weight coverage of the interests relevant to their domain at the EU level (Beyers, 2008; Michalowitz, 2004), and facilitates the aggregation of EU encompassing interests. The underlying logic of EU scope to gain access to EU administrative versus EU political officials might be different, but both suggest a similar observable effect: wider EU representation helps obtain information on EU encompassing interests, which is relevant for administrative officials, but also helps signal broad political support, which is advantageous to getting access to EU Commissioners. Hence, we hypothesize that:

*H3 Interest groups representing more EU member states are more likely to enjoy (higher levels of) access to both EU administrative and political officials than interest groups that represent fewer EU member states.*

Membership type is often considered an important aspect of EU interest groups as it reflects the diversity of the interest group population (Berkhout *et al.*, 2017a; Fraussen and Beyers, 2016). We specifically focus on the level of aggregation of organizational membership, namely, the distinction between national and/or regional associations, and individual organizations, such as firms. While the inclusion of national associations facilitates the aggregation and supply of EU encompassing interests, individual organizational membership facilitates the supply of technical expertise thanks to their direct contact with their sector (Bouwen, 2002, 2004). In this vein, when interest groups include both types of member, their chances to gain access to EU administrative officials should increase as they aggregate both national preferences as well as substantive on-the-ground expertise.

In addition, we expect interest groups with a mixed membership – both national associations and individual organizations – to have a higher likelihood of getting access to EU public officials because they are more attentive to the national stakes and can offer tailor-made or firm-specific expertise that helps inform the technical aspects of legislative trajectories. We expect this effect to be stronger for access to EU administrative officials compared to EU political officials, given that the informational demand of EU administrative officials is likely to require a balance of both political support and technical expertise (*cf.* Rasmussen and Gross, 2015), whereas the balance will be often less outspoken for EU political officials, who are mainly in need of political support (De Bruycker, 2016).

*H4a Interest groups with a mixed membership of both national associations and individual organizations are more likely to enjoy (higher levels of) access to EU administrative officials than interest groups with a single membership.*

*H4b Interest groups with a mixed membership of national associations and individual organizations are not more likely to enjoy (higher levels of) access to EU political officials than interest groups with a single membership.*

### III. Data and Design

To examine how the effects of organizational design of interest groups impact their access to EU officials, we analyze (the level of) access of a random sample of European Associations (EAs) to the Commission. We also distinguish between Commission expert groups and EU Commissioners to examine the variation in access between EU administrative and political officials.

We took a random sample of EAs to study the effect of organizational design on access because EAs are a relevant population to study the effect of organizational structure on interest group access. Given that they all operate at the EU level, studying EAs allows us to control for other aspects commonly associated with getting access to EU officials and isolate the effect of organizational design more explicitly. The sample of EAs obtained from this study is based on Wonka *et al.*'s (2010) article about measuring the size of the EU interest groups' population. Wonka *et al.* compile interest groups from three different registers: European Parliament door pass holders (2008), the CONNECCS database (2007), and the commercial Landmarks European Public Affairs Directory (2007). The combination of these three registers provides an inclusive approach and offers a sample of EU-level interest groups that corrects for biases commonly associated with each of the individual databases (Berkhout and Lowery, 2010; Berkhout *et al.*, 2017b). Wonka *et al.*'s (2010) compilation contains 681 EAs, which are required for the purpose of our analysis and we drew a random sample of 248 organizations, representing 36.4 per cent of this database. The compilation dates from 2010, which could be problematic in terms of accurately depicting the current EU interest community. Yet, we know from recent studies that at the aggregate level, the EU interest system is quite stable (Berkhout *et al.*, 2017b), while at the individual level we observe more volatility in terms of persistent versus *ad hoc* presence as indicated by Commission consultation and EU door pass registers (Berkhout and Lowery, 2011). We corrected for this individual-level volatility by using recent observations for the individual organizations. The data sources used to code the organizational characteristics consisted of the websites of the 248 organizations included in the sample and their bylaws, which have been obtained through their websites or *Moniteur Belge* (the Official Journal of the Kingdom of Belgium), in line with recent studies of interest populations within the EU and elsewhere (Berkhout *et al.*, 2015, 2017; Hanegraaff *et al.*, 2011). In cases where these documents were not available in any of the aforementioned sources, one of the authors of this study contacted the EAs' representatives requesting their bylaws. In total, 213 statutes out of the 248 sampled associations were collected. To validate the coding process, the authors reviewed the statutes and the websites of each EA in the sample at least twice.

Our dependent variables concern access to EU officials of the Commission. We define access as the ability to meet or to exchange information directly with policy-makers (Braun, 2012; Halpin and Fraussen, 2017), and we distinguished between access to expert groups and Commissioners to differentiate between administrative and political officials, respectively. We decided to focus on intra-institutional variation (administrative versus political officials within the Commission) to control for inter-institutional variation that might explain different levels of access as well (Bouwen, 2004). Both types of access, to expert groups and to Commissioners, are forms of closed access instruments, in the sense that they are relatively restrictive in terms of membership or participation (*cf.*

Pedersen *et al.*, 2015), allowing us to control for the type of access instrument. This selection has obvious implications in terms of generalization, which we will discuss in the concluding section of this article.

We distinguish between a binary measure of access (either EAs have access or they do not have access) and the level of access of EAs. We thus effectively include four indicators of access. This approach has been previously implemented by Rasmussen and Gross (2015), whose findings indicate that some factors have different explanatory power depending on whether we focus on access or level of access. By making this distinction, this article builds on their contribution and adds to a better understanding of interest group access.

First, we distinguish between access and levels of access to EU administrative officials, measured by interest group participation in the Commission's expert groups. The dataset used was downloaded on 22 January 2015 and includes 824 expert groups originating from 28 Directorate-Generals. To operationalize access, we coded organizations as 0 when EAs do not have access, and 1 when they do have access to expert groups. To measure the level of access to EU administrative officials we counted the number of expert committees of the Commission in which they participate as full members.<sup>1</sup> Second, we examine the access and level of access to EU political officials. To measure this, we counted the number of meetings that the EAs' representatives had with Commissioners during the period between November 2014 and September 2016. These data have been available since December 2014 due to new transparency rules that require all Commissioners, their Cabinets and Director-Generals to publish their meetings with all stakeholders (European Commission, 2014). To correct for the potentially higher barriers that EAs face in order to get access to top EU political officials, as well as to avoid an overly *ad hoc* nature of access, we considered a time range that takes our measurement of access to EU administrative officials as a median in order to obtain equivalent access measurements in terms of access time period and restrictiveness.<sup>2</sup>

Our first independent variable is *decision-making procedures* within the governance board, namely the general assembly or the plenary meeting of the EA, and is measured by decision-making mechanisms laid down in the by-laws of the organizations and operationalized as 0 in case decisions are taken by simple majority to 51 per cent majority, and 1 in cases when qualified majority or consensus is required. Our second independent variable is *functional differentiation*. It is included as a count variable of the number of units, departments or working committees established by EAs to internally structure knowledge and expertise production regarding specialized aspects of the organization. *EU scope* is operationalized as membership of EU member states. This resulted in a count variable of the number of EU member states from which the EA member organizations originate. Our final organizational variable, *type of membership*, refers to the types of organization participating in EAs. We distinguished between EAs

<sup>1</sup>The Commission distinguishes between members and observers within expert groups. Since observers do not have a voice to shape policy proposals discussed in the group, this category has been coded as not having access to the Commission. Importantly, only 9 out of the 248 EAs (3.6 per cent), are observers in expert groups.

<sup>2</sup>The results of a *t*-test considering access to both types of public official are significant (Pearson  $\chi^2(1) = 28.602$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), indicating that access to administrative and political officials is similarly restrictive.

with national associations, individual organizations, or both, thus creating a categorical variable.

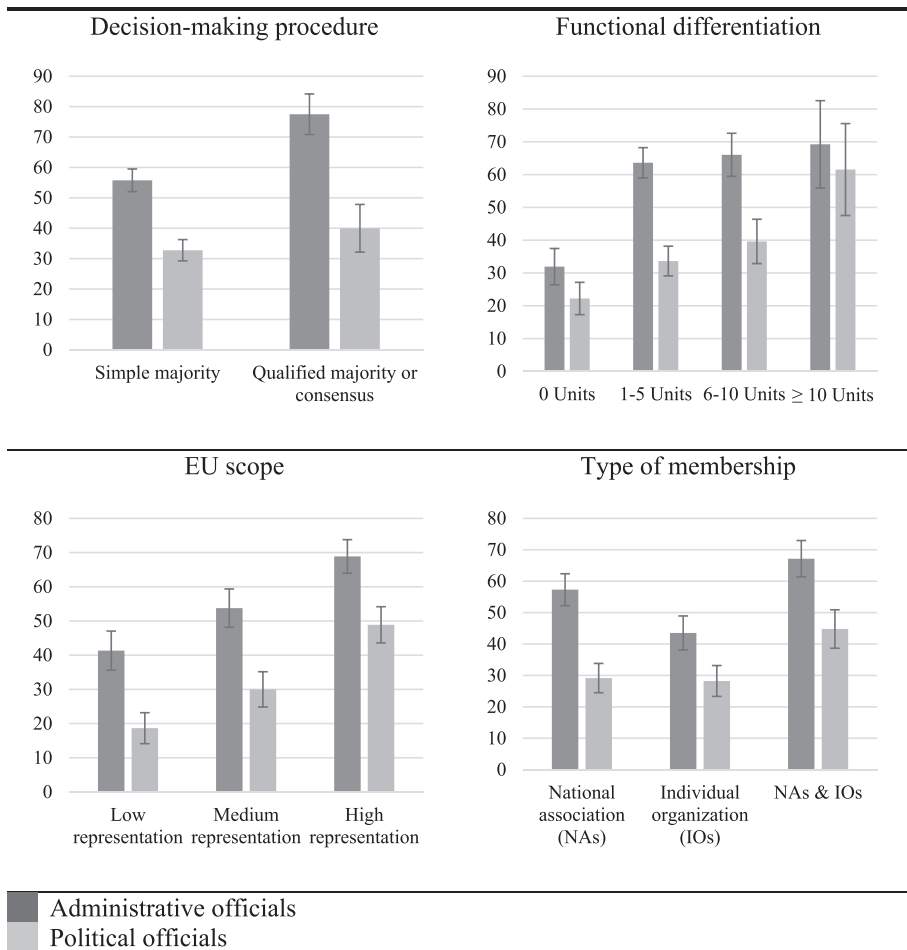
We added three control variables to our analyses which refer to organizational factors commonly included in interest group studies. First, we included *organizational age*, measured as the natural logarithm of the years since the organization's establishment. As argued by Hannan and Freeman (1989, p. 81), older organizations 'tend to develop dense webs of exchange, to affiliate with centres of power, and to acquire an aura of inevitability' (see also Fraussen and Beyers, 2016). Consequently, we expect older EAs to be more likely to enjoy (higher levels of) access to both EU administrative and political officials. Second, we included *resources* of the EAs – measured as the number of staff employed by EAs – as an indicator of an organization's wealth. Aligned with previous research, we assume that resources will have a positive effect on the likelihood of getting (higher levels of) access to both administrative and political officials (Klüver, 2012). Finally, we included a dummy variable that indicates *group type*, in particular whether an EA represents either business or non-business interest groups. In this case, we expect that businesses have (a higher level of) access to both types of public official since representation tends to be dominated by business groups (Rasmussen and Carroll, 2013; Wonka *et al.*, 2010). More information on the variables and their correlations is provided in Tables S1 and S2 in the online Appendix.

#### IV. Does Organizational Design Affect Interest Group Access in the EU?

We start with an overall examination of (the level of) access to EU policy-makers. An initial interesting observation is that 44.76 per cent of the sampled EAs do not have access to Commission expert groups, whereas 67.33 per cent have not held any meetings with EU Commissioners. This seems to indicate that the obstacles that EAs face to get access to EU policy-makers in general are quite substantive, and that the threshold for gaining access to EU political officials is higher than for getting access to EU administrative officials. Additionally, EAs enjoy higher levels of access to expert groups than to Commissioners. On average, EAs participate in 2.78 expert groups and have 1.29 meetings with Commissioners, confirming that getting access to EU administrative and political officials are two substantially different dimensions (see Table S1 in the online Appendix).

We now turn to bivariate analyses of the effects of organizational design on (the level of) access. As hypothesized (H1), EAs with a more inclusive decision-making system that foster the involvement and coverage of members' interests, enjoy a higher level of access to EU administrative and political officials; yet, if we focus on getting access, it appears that qualified majorities and consensus systems are exclusively relevant for getting access to EU administrative officials (see Figures 1 and 2).<sup>3</sup> To test our second hypothesis, we have recoded the variable functional differentiation into four categories: EAs that do not have such specialized units, EAs that have between 1 and 5 units, EAs that have between 6 and 10 units, and EAs with more than 10 specialized units. As expected, having more units seems to be correlated with achieving (higher levels of) access to EU administrative officials, while it is not as relevant for EU political officials.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1: EAs with access to EU administrative and political officials (%).

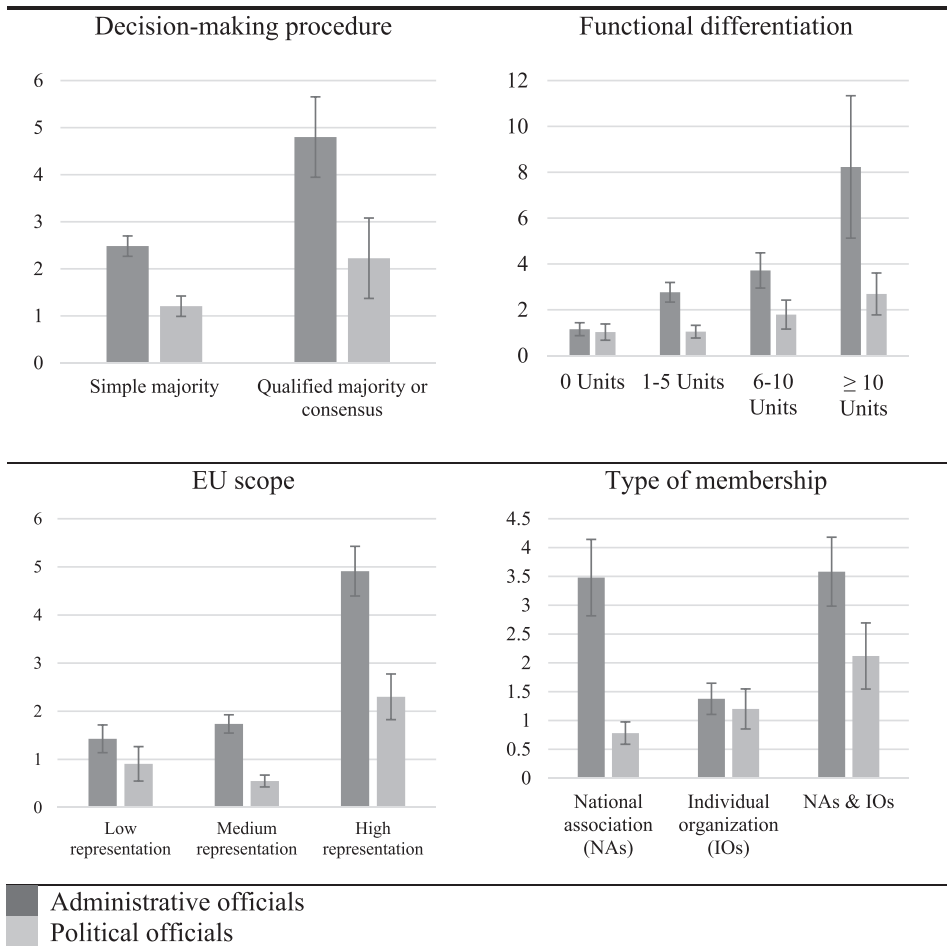


To examine the effect of EU scope on access (H3), we recoded the variable EU scope into three levels: low representation when EAs represent between 3 and 11 EU member states, medium representation when they represent between 12 and 20 states, and high representation when EAs represent 21 or more EU member states. For each level, we calculated the mean level of access to EU administrative and political officials. As presented in Figures 1 and 2, the higher the EU scope of EAs, the higher their probability of getting

<sup>3</sup>Only 18.2 per cent of the EAs take decisions based on qualified majority or consensus. Consequently, we have examined if there is any significant relationship between EAs that have a restrictive decision-making procedure and (1) type of group and (2) type of membership. Importantly, the analyses lead to non-significant results.

<sup>4</sup>We have assessed if there is any significant correlation and relationship between the level of functional differentiation with resources, having a broad issue scope, and with group and membership type. The relationship between resources and issue scope with functional differentiation is significant. However, the coefficients are below 0.4, indicating that these are substantively different factors.

Figure 2: Level of access of EAs to EU administrative and political officials (average number of meetings).



(higher levels of) access to EU administrative officials. However, this variable is not that important for getting (higher levels of) access to EU political officials.

Finally, the bivariate analysis of the relationships between membership type and access indicates, on the one hand, that EAs exclusively consisting of individual organizations have more limited access to administrative officials compared to groups with national associations or with both national associations and individual organizations. On the other hand, EAs comprised of both national associations and individual organizations have more (and higher levels of) access to political officials.

*Multivariate Analysis: Hurdle Negative Binomial Model*

We further test our hypotheses with a multivariate model. To model the two dimensions of access, we opted for a hurdle negative binomial model, allowing us to test how our main explanatory variables affect access as well as the *level* of access enjoyed by EAs.

The hurdle negative binomial model is mixed by a binary outcome of the count being below or above the hurdle (that is, having access to EU administrative or political officials) with a truncated model for outcomes above the hurdle (that is, the level of access) (Ehsan Saffari *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, this model accounts for the over-dispersion of our count outcome variables (Ehsan Saffari *et al.*, 2012).<sup>5</sup> Table 1 presents our main models for EU administrative and political officials.

We find that the most significant effect of all hypothesized factors is related to organizational design for decision-making procedures (H1). More concretely, when EAs have qualified majority or consensus based decision-making procedures, they are more likely to enjoy (higher levels of) access to EU administrative officials. Moreover, this decision-making procedure helps facilitate higher levels of access to political officials. As expected, functional differentiation matters for enjoying (higher levels of) access to administrative officials, but not to political officials, which confirms H2a and H2b. We included the continuous data for the variables functional differentiation and EU scope, rather than the recoded categorical data we used for the bivariate analysis.<sup>6</sup>

Representativeness matters as well, in the expected direction (H3). A wider EU scope helps to get (higher levels of) access to EU administrative officials as well as political officials, yet loses relevance when it comes to gaining higher levels of access to EU political officials. Our findings on mixed membership of EAs are complicated to interpret at this stage. The findings indicated opposite effects than hypothesized or did not yield significant effects. Moreover, the actual effects do not seem to follow a straightforward pattern. If anything, these findings could signal that the level of interest aggregation (mixed versus national versus individual organizations) becomes less outspoken than several studies have implied until now (Bouwen, 2002, 2004; Bunea, 2014; Eising, 2007; Fraussen and Beyers, 2016).

The findings concerning the control variables suggest that common factors used to explain varying degrees of interest groups are modestly relevant, and at least not more important than our main expected effects. Only interest group resources offer a consistent positive effect for getting access, and confirm earlier studies in this regard (Klüver, 2012). Group type only affects access to political officials, more specifically, business associations have fewer levels of access to EU political officials than non-business EAs. The non-significant results are in line with previous research that does not find differences between business and non-business groups (Klüver, 2012; Rasmussen and Gross, 2015). A plausible explanation for these findings relates to the efforts of the Commission to avoid business bias (European Commission, 2002), and to the (funding) mechanisms aimed at supporting underrepresented groups (Persson and Edholm, 2017), but could also

<sup>5</sup>An alternative to this model would be a zero-inflated regression model, which attempts to account for excess zeros. However, it is not theoretically clear which substantive factors predict whether a group always (or only sometimes) has the value of zero (Long and Freese, 2001). Nonetheless, various tests have been conducted to ensure the robustness of the results. The results and their significance levels hold when running the analysis with zero-inflated negative binomial and zero-inflated Poisson with age and resources accounting for the inflation part. To further test the robustness of the findings, the model has been replicated for four different sectors: economy, environment, health and utilities. Overall, the effects of organizational design hold, but are also sensitive to contextual factors, which is in line with previous research.

<sup>6</sup>To check the robustness of the results in Table 1, we have conducted the same models with the variables 'EU scope' and 'functional differentiation' transformed in ordinal (as in the bivariate analysis). The directions of the coefficients and their significance levels for both variables in each model remain the same except for the coefficient of 'functional differentiation' related to the level of access to administrative officials, which is weakened ( $p = 0.116$ ). Yet, if we code 'functional differentiation' in six or more categories the results are significant as in Table 1.

Table 1: Hurdle negative binomial regression for access and level of access of EAs to EU administrative and political officials

<i>Explanatory factor</i>	<i>Administrative officials</i>		<i>Political officials</i>	
	<i>Access</i>	<i>Level of access</i>	<i>Access</i>	<i>Level of access</i>
	<i>IRR<sup>1</sup> (SE)<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Coefficient (SE)</i>	<i>IRR (SE)</i>	<i>Coefficient (SE)</i>
Decision-making procedure	3.680*** (1.715)	0.419* (0.245)	1.436 (0.613)	0.734** (0.338)
Functional differentiation	1.111** (0.052)	0.036* (0.019)	1.050 (0.041)	0.013 (0.019)
EU scope	1.041* (0.023)	0.040** (0.016)	1.047** (0.025)	0.017 (0.021)
Type: Ntl. assns. & Indvl. organization	REF	REF	REF	REF
Type: National association	0.697 (0.289)	-0.154 (0.254)	0.535 (0.225)	-0.994*** (0.374)
Type: Individual organization	0.468* (0.190)	-0.894*** (0.291)	0.576 (0.241)	-0.347 (0.351)
Age (log)	0.623 (0.338)	0.000 (0.324)	1.427 (0.815)	0.568 (0.571)
Resources: Staff	1.085*** (0.030)	0.043*** (0.013)	1.094*** (0.026)	0.073*** (0.018)
Business associations vs. Others	1.342 (0.444)	0.205 (0.238)	0.804 (0.276)	-0.823** (0.326)
<i>Constant</i>	0.468 (0.394)	-0.172 (0.560)	0.077*** (0.071)	-0.560 (0.942)
<i>N</i>				206
<i>AIC statistic</i>				2,589
<i>Ln Alpha</i>		-0.040 (0.322)		-0.147 (0.464)
<i>Log likelihood</i>		-393.183		-257.672

<sup>1</sup> Incidence Rate Ratios. <sup>2</sup> Standard errors. \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

speak to a more general informational demand by political officials, which is adequately captured by an aggregate measure of organizational type.

Overall, the findings support our hypotheses, and most notably, confirm our expectation that organizational design matters for gaining access to EU public officials, but is influenced by the varying informational demands of public officials.

## Conclusion

Our main aim in this article was to better understand the effect of organizational design on interest group access to EU public officials. Interest groups, in particular EAs, are supposed to operate as a transmission belt and thereby simultaneously aggregate and articulate interests to policy-makers. To properly perform such a transmission belt function, an organizational design fit for this purpose is a crucial aspect to consider when studying interest group access. In this article, we tested the effect of two aspects of organizational design (organizational structure and representativeness) on interest group access to EU public officials. We find that, first, qualified majority and consensus decision-making procedures positively affect interest group access to EU administrative officials and political officials. Second, functional differentiation facilitates access to EU administrative officials but not to political officials, as we expected. The EU scope of interest groups helps to get access to administrative and political officials, but does not seem to matter for enjoying more access to political officials.

Overall, our findings suggest two important observations. First, the significant effects of the variables related to organizational design, in particular decision-making procedures and functional differentiation, combined with the limited effects of commonly used indicators of interest group type, are indicative of the added value of including organizational design in the study of interest group access and how they internally operate to fulfill their dual task of interest aggregation and interest articulation. Second, the variation in the effects of organizational design factors between administrative and political officials suggests that access to different public officials is indeed driven by different mechanisms and should be examined accordingly, both theoretically and empirically.

Two important considerations regarding our research design are our focus on European Associations and the specific venues we selected to study interest group access. Our selection of EAs facilitated the study of organizational structure as they are all characterized by a multi-level organizational structure. This is clearly different for national interest groups, which may not have such a multi-level structure and for which information flow, and hence decision-making procedures and functional differentiation, might operate differently in order to structure the two-way information flow intrinsic to the transmission belt function. Second, we opted for intra-institutional variation between administrative and political officials and for different actual access points. Other options to get access to administrative officials, such as open consultations, or hearings when it comes to access to political officials, might have a different effect, as has been earlier indicated by the distinction between open and closed access instruments (Arras and Braun, 2017; Pedersen *et al.*, 2015).

These limitations bring us to important implications and suggestions for future research. First, as has been demonstrated, organizational design of interest groups matters. Future research should focus on how precisely it affects successful mobilization and

political advocacy (Albareda, 2018). Therefore, future research could for instance delve into governance structures of interest groups and examine other relevant factors such as the professionalization of the staff (Klüver, 2012); the identity of the organization (Halpin and Daugbjerg, 2015); the autonomy of and the relationship between governance and executive boards (Martínez-Díaz, 2009); and the behavioural dimension of organizations (Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011).

Second, although we ran separate regression models for access to administrative and political officials, our findings confirm the necessity to diversify between access to different public officials given their varying informational demands demonstrated elsewhere (Arras and Braun, 2017; Beyers and Braun, 2014; Bouwen, 2004; Coen and Katsaitis, 2013). Our results also suggest the importance of incorporating other contextual factors, such as the network position of interest groups (Beyers and Braun, 2014), previous relations with public officials and the reputation of the interest groups (Berkhout *et al.*, 2015; Braun, 2012; Fraussen, 2014), or other more general demand-side factors such as policy issues under debate (Coen and Katsaitis, 2013). As our robustness checks have indicated, for instance, the effect of sector variation is important to include when examining factors of organizational design. Consequently, further research should adopt an explicitly contextualized model of interest group access, thereby not only varying between types of official but also taking into account a time dimension as getting access to different types of public official seems to be a different matter than enjoying prolonged access (Braun, 2013; Fraussen *et al.*, 2014; Klüver *et al.*, 2015). Getting initial access and subsequently enjoying higher and more diverse levels of access presumably requires a complex organizational design. Our analyses thus indicate that organizing for influence is a valuable, yet hitherto underrated, subject of study within the field of interest representation in the EU and elsewhere.

#### *Correspondence:*

Adrià Albareda, Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University, Turfmarkt 99, 2511-DP The Hague, The Netherlands.  
email: a.albareda@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**TABLE S1:** Overview descriptive statistics of dependent, explanatory and control variables

**TABLE S2:** Correlation matrix of dependent, explanatory and control variables