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The Netherlands

## **Unpacking interest groups: on the intermediary role of interest groups and its effects for their political relevance**

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### **Citation**

Albareda Sanz, A. (2021, September 21). *Unpacking interest groups: on the intermediary role of interest groups and its effects for their political relevance*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3213547>

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Chapter I

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Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

The presence and participation of interest groups in policymaking processes has become a crucial component of Western democracies. Increasingly interdependent and complex policy environments have positioned interest groups linking society and policymakers as one of the key policy actors when formulating, adopting, and implementing public policies (Dahl, 1961; Jordan & Maloney, 1997a; Lowery & Gray, 2004; Truman, 1951). Defined as membership-based, formal organizations, that aim to shape public policy in a specific direction on behalf of the interests of their constituency/membership in the political arena (Jordan, Halpin, & Maloney, 2004), interest groups are often described as transmission belts that collect, aggregate and transfer policy input from their members to policymaking processes (Easton, 1971). As such, they fulfil an intermediary function by ‘feeding members’ preferences into the policy process’ (Kohler-Koch, 2010, p. 107), thus legitimizing and informing public officials’ policymaking choices.

This transmission belt function displayed by interest groups is often taken for granted by scholars and practitioners, but rarely conceptualized and empirically examined. As an illustration of the relevance of the transmission belt ideal in political-administrative reality: several public officials of the European Commission interviewed for this research project noted that interest groups are particularly relevant in order to know what different sectors of society think about policy proposals. More specifically, when justifying the interaction with different interest groups, one senior public official in charge of drafting a major regulation in the EU health domain highlighted that “the members of [interest group A] are the ones that conduct clinical trials in Europe, and we need to know about the impact of this regulation on their members. (...) We also talked with [interest group B] because clinical trials are conducted on patients, so it is important to have them informed and on board”. This quote illustrates how public officials frequently listen to interest groups while assuming that they represent the preferences of their members, and therefore an agreement with the spokesperson of a group is taken as an agreement with the whole membership-base of that group. However, interest groups usually struggle to function as transmission belts. Paraphrasing a representative of “interest group A” mentioned by the senior public official: “Reconciling different members’ perspectives is sometimes a challenge. We try to provide a channel so our members can have a say in policymaking, but not all our members are always happy”. The respondent also notes that internal disagreements are often solved by dropping policy issues from the agenda or by communicating partial positions that do not reflect the preferences of all the members in the group. Even when there is internal consensus among members, efficiently communicating policy positions to public officials is not an easy endeavor. As mentioned by the spokesperson of “interest group B” involved in the same regulation: “We always have a capacity problem, it has to do with resources, when you don’t have a lot of staff, and basically one person has to do everything, then it

is difficult to be politically active”. These examples illustrate that while governments and public officials often interact with interest groups because of their representative function and their ability to connect their members and constituency to policymaking processes, these groups not always possess the instruments to function as a transmission belt, as this requires time, resources, and adequate organizational structures.

Addressing this puzzle is crucial to improve our assessments of the quality of our democratic systems and the role that interest groups play in them. In other words, it is crucial to unveil whether ‘those claiming to act on behalf of members in the pressure system are in fact representing their interests’ (Barakso & Schaffner, 2008, p. 187; Schattschneider, 1935). It is important to move beyond general assumptions about the intermediary role of groups and more specifically evaluate the mechanisms and processes that interest groups have in place to ‘ensure that they accurately reflect the opinions and preferences of their constituency’ (Halpin & Fraussen, 2017b, p. 24). By doing so, it is possible to more accurately assess whether interest group representatives are legitimate spokespersons for their members in public policy processes. In other words, we need to study how interest groups are internally organized to better understand their varying involvement in policymaking process and their democratic contribution to public governance.

Considering the potential effects on the democratic and legitimizing role of interest groups in our governance systems, there is surprisingly scant research into how and why groups organize their intermediary function and the consequences thereof for their political relevance (i.e., access, influence or success in policymaking processes). The literature often relies on overly general classifications of groups (e.g., business groups vs. citizen groups) that are not necessarily related to their intermediary function (for a discussion, see Fraussen, 2020). Other studies have more directly contributed to the assessment of interest groups’ transmissive function through case studies that focus on the internal representation mechanisms of either citizen groups or business associations. However, we lack systematic research that specifically examines the intermediary role of different types of interest groups by linking the ability of groups to involve their members to their capacity to access and influence policymaking processes.

In order to examine this important normative and empirical gap, this dissertation puts forward two premises: we need to better understand the transmissive role of interest groups and, to do so, we need to unpack how they are internally organized. The transmissive function is defined here as the organizational ability of groups to collect, aggregate and transfer the preferences of their membership-base to policymaking processes. As such, the conceptualization of transmission belts is based on two distinct yet complementary dimensions that need to be balanced and reconciled to achieve the intermediary function: one that centers on the ability to involve and engage with the members (i.e., member involvement), and the other focused on the organizational capacities to generate expert-based information and efficiently transfer policy input to policymakers (i.e., organizational capacity).

Both dimensions are equally relevant to function as a transmission belt. However, not all groups are equally capable (nor willing) to go through the time-consuming and costly process of aggregating and synthesizing the preferences of their members and broad constituencies to ensure representation (Jordan & Maloney, 1997b; Kröger, 2018). Nor do they have the necessary organizational capacities to professionally and efficiently communicate policy positions to policymakers (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013). Hence, interest groups vary in the extent to which they invest in member involvement for representation and in organizational capacity to efficiently interact with public officials. What is more, groups often face tensions and trade-offs as it is not always easy (nor cheap) to actively involve the members to ensure representation while efficiently interacting with public officials in need of quality and timely policy input (Berkhout, 2013; Berkhout, Hanegraaff, & Braun, 2017; Schmitter & Streeck, 1999). Groups that want to be politically active and relevant in policymaking processes are often asked to provide expert-based policy input on a very short notice. These policymakers' demands contrast with the involvement of the membership-base when setting policy positions, a process that takes time and often requires an effort from the leadership of the organization to reconcile conflicting perspectives and reach common positions.

Despite these hurdles, groups that reconcile the two organizational dynamics and effectively function as transmission belts have great potential to contribute to policymaking processes with a wider range of policy capacities. Defined as 'the set of skills and resources—or competences and capabilities—necessary to perform policy functions' (Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett, 2015), policy capacities such as expert knowledge or the political preferences of key constituencies on a particular policy are crucial to become politically relevant among policymakers. More generally, interest groups that function as transmission belts can contribute with both input and output legitimacy (Kröger, 2018) as they make sure that the policy input provided to public officials has the approval of the membership-base and is grounded on expert-based knowledge. These characteristics of their policy advice facilitate the development of technically sound and implementable legislations.

In summary, functioning as a transmission belt that effectively aggregates and involves the membership-base and interacts with policymakers is not a straightforward endeavor. Still, it is highly relevant to assess the contribution of groups to our democratic systems. As noted, public officials need and require representative information that is efficiently supplied by interest groups. Yet, interest groups struggle to involve their members while efficiently communicating their policy input to public officials, as both functions demand an investment in organizational structures and processes that not all groups can (or want) to possess. In light of this conundrum, and in order to advance our understanding of the intermediary role of interest groups, this dissertation unpacks interest groups and analyzes how and when do interest groups reconcile the two organizational components of the

transmission belt ideal, and the broader implications of these organizational practices for the involvement and role of groups in policymaking processes.

### **1.1 What do we know about transmission belts, and what is missing?**

Interest group scholars have paid limited attention to how and when groups fulfil their intermediary role and function as transmission belts. Relatedly, there is scant research exploring the implications of interest groups' intermediary function for their relations with public officials. The extensive literature examining interest groups' roles and activities in political systems often relies on broad typologies more related to the type of constituency or 'interests' they represent than to their ability to relay their members to policymaking processes.

Previous typologies of interest groups – often focused on the distinction between business and citizen groups<sup>1</sup> – have been empirically and normatively helpful to evaluate interest group systems (Gray & Lowery, 1996; Hanegraaff & Berkhout, 2018), as well as the ability of groups to supply information to policymakers (De Bruycker, 2016; Flöthe, 2019a, 2020), their lobbying activities and strategies (Dür & Mateo, 2013), and their level of access, success, preference attainment, or influence in policymaking processes (Bouwen, 2004; Braun, 2012; Dür, Bernhagen, & Marshall, 2015). However, the majority of the typologies used black box how groups are internally organized, which is crucial to properly assess how they connect their members to policymakers and thus to evaluate interest groups' potential contribution to governance and democratic systems. Importantly, previous research has demonstrated that the assumption that interest group type is related to having certain organizational resources and policy capacities does not always hold true (Baroni, Carroll, Chalmers, Marquez, & Rasmussen, 2014; Binderkrantz, 2009; Klüver, 2012b; Klüver & Saurugger, 2013; Minkoff, Aisenbrey, & Agnone, 2008). Groups within the same category (e.g., citizen groups) may have unequal capacities and adopt different strategies due to their varying organizational formats (Beyers, 2008; Braun, 2015; Halpin, 2014). Therefore, interest groups within the same typology may have unequal organizational abilities to operate as transmission belts.

Despite this observation, much research explaining why some groups are more capable to involve their members and function as transmission belts focuses on either business or citizen groups. For instance, Greenwood (2007, p. 349) underlines that business groups, particularly those representing small or specialized constituencies, are subject to significant membership control, or at least, a particularly powerful segment of members. In contrast, research examining citizen groups mobilized at the national and European Union (EU) level often shows that the organizational structures to ensure member involvement and participation, such as the existence of internal decision-making allowing supporters' input into the organization's strategy, are 'conspicuous by their absence'. As a consequence, citizen groups are characterized for having elitist governance structures that

prioritize efficient interactions with public officials over the involvement and participation of members (Jordan & Maloney, 1997b; Kohler-Koch & Buth, 2013; Sudbery, 2003; Warleigh, 2003, p. 118). This is aligned with the professionalization trend among interest groups, which according to Deth and Maloney (2012, p. 2), entails the specialization and professionalization of voluntary organizations, who ‘change their view on membership and give less priority to organizational democracy’ (see also, Holyoke, 2013; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012; Skocpol, 2003).

The distinct ability of business and citizen groups to function as transmission belts has been further examined through studies that analyze both types of groups together. Kröger (2016, 2018), for instance, shows how economic groups (in her case EU umbrella groups representing the agricultural sector) had more regular contacts with their members than environmental and anti-poverty organizations. Similarly, Barakso and Schaffner (2008, p. 186) examine the extent to which members are connected to the interest groups they belong to and find that groups from which exit is more costly (i.e., business associations) are ‘structured more democratically than those in which members face fewer barriers to exit’ (i.e., citizen groups). However, other large-*n* studies conclude that group type cannot explain the professionalization (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013) nor the extent to which members are internally involved in interest groups (Binderkrantz, 2009). What is more, relying on in-depth qualitative interviews with the representatives of EU associations, Rodekamp (2014) shows that interest group leaders representing either economic or citizen interests are tightly connected to their organizational members (Rodekamp, 2014). In other words, the results thus far are somewhat inconsistent particularly when linking group type to their democratic and professionalized character. Consequently, it is not possible to definitively state that business groups are more representative or more professionalized than citizen groups.

In summary, most of the research focusing on the internal structures of groups and its relation with their ability to function as transmission belts is based on case studies that either focus on citizen or business organization and are, thus, hard to generalize. Large-*n* studies, in contrast, have analyzed how different types of groups involve their members and develop professionalized structures. Yet, we lack studies that go beyond group typology and link interest groups’ organizational structure to the transmission belt function by simultaneously considering the ability of groups to balance and reconcile member involvement and organizational capacity, two crucial components of the transmission belt ideal. In doing so, it is possible to more directly assess the representative potential of groups and hence their democratic contribution to our governance systems.

Research is also scarce when focusing on the link between the intermediary role of interest groups and their political relevance. In that regard, the majority of the research has examined interest groups’ political relevance by considering group type (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, & Pedersen, 2014; Dür et al., 2015; Hopkins, Klüver, & Pickup, 2019;

Yackee & Yackee, 2006), and the sort of information interest groups supply (Bernhagen, Dür, & Marshall, 2015; Flöthe, 2019a; Tallberg, Dellmuth, Agné, & Duit, 2018). These studies often emphasize two types of policy capacities (or access goods) interest groups can supply to policymakers: policy expertise, related to the ability of groups to provide technical information to develop sound and effective public policies; and political information related to the capacity of groups to confer political legitimacy to policy choices by transferring the ‘needs and interests’ of their members and constituency (Bouwen, 2002, 2004; Braun, 2012; Daugbjerg, Fraussen, & Halpin, 2018; De Bruycker, 2016; Flöthe, 2019a; Truman, 1951). Whereas business (and sectional) groups are frequently seen as possessing policy expertise, citizen (and cause) groups are more likely to have political information (Coen & Katsaitis, 2013; Eising, 2007b; Yackee & Yackee, 2006). However, these studies rely on the assumption that groups within the same typology have similar resources and policy capacities. Instead, this dissertation argues that to further assess interest groups’ political relevance among public officials it is necessary to examine their organizational ability to function as a transmission belt which ultimately affects the policy capacities and information they possess and offer to policymakers.

In that regard, it is important to highlight several recent contributions that examine how different organizational attributes and structures of interest groups affect their political relevance among public officials. Klüver (2012a), for instance, demonstrates that the possession of certain organizational features (functional differentiation, professionalization, and decentralization) positively affects the amount of information interest groups supply to European Commission officials. Another investigation shows how the representativeness and the organizational structure of European associations are significantly related to the (degree of) access to administrative and political officials of the European Commission (Albareda & Braun, 2019). Grömping and Halpin (2019) examine how the internal configuration of groups affect their level of access to members of the parliament in Australia and find that groups with traditional structures to involve their members have higher degrees of access to the parliamentary arena. Last, Heylen et al. (2020), also observe how interest groups with organizational structures aimed at involving their members have a higher likelihood of being political insiders in different European countries. All these authors empirically show the importance of paying attention to how groups are organized internally when assessing their political relevance (for a review, see Halpin, 2014). However, these studies do not make the specific link between the internal organization of groups and how they fulfill their intermediary role in a democratic society. In other words, we still lack studies that link access and influence in policymaking processes to the intermediary role that groups are supposed to play. Hence, there has been little conceptual work on the possible relationship between interest groups’ organizational structure, their capacity to function as transmission belts, and the level of access or influence to policymaking processes. To examine this, we need research that specifically examines how involving the

members and investing in efficient and professionalized structures affects the political relevance of groups. In addition to filling a gap in the literature, this research endeavor could contribute to the normative debate about the desirability of interest groups' involvement in policymaking processes. More specifically, it can be argued that those groups that do not invest in involving their members are less likely to provide representative and democratically valuable policy input to policymakers.

In conclusion, previous research has provided many relevant insights on the role and value of interest groups in democratic systems. However, as argued in the next sections, a proper understanding of the transmission belt function is still lacking as previous research rarely acknowledges the organizational dimension and its link to the intermediary function of interest groups. As a consequence, the literature still misses systematic research on how interest groups reconcile and balance the different components of the transmission belt function.

## **1.2 Conceptualizing transmission belts: Member involvement and organizational capacity**

To better understand the democratic contribution of interest groups to governance systems, it is necessary to go beyond previous categorizations and unpack how groups are internally organized in order to fulfil their assumed intermediary function. To assess the transmissive role of groups, this dissertation relies on and builds upon Schmitter and Streeck seminal investigation on the organization of business associations (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999). The authors present a theoretical framework to study business associations by focusing on two logics: the logic of membership and the logic of influence. Business associations have an intermediary role between two independently constituted, resourceful, and strategically active sets of actors: firms (i.e., members) and the government (i.e., public officials and policymakers). Consequently, as succinctly posed by Schmitter and Streeck (1999, 19), interest groups have to, on the one hand, 'structure themselves and act so as to offer sufficient incentives to their members to extract from them adequate resources to ensure their survival, if not growth. On the other hand, they must be organized in such a way as to offer sufficient incentives to enable them to gain access to and to exercise adequate influence over public authorities.'

Importantly, the authors also highlight that interest organizations face two additional imperatives: the logic of goal formation and the logic of implementation. Even though the authors conceptually distinguish the logics of influence and membership from the logics of implementation and logic of goal formulation, they also acknowledge that they correspond to certain extent (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999, pp. 19–20). More specifically, the logic of goal formation corresponds more closely to the logic of membership as it relates to the establishment of multiple communication mechanisms to facilitate interchange of opinion among members and ensure that decision-making is based on consensus and takes

into account all the opinions expressed through ‘widespread membership involvement’ (Berkhout, 2013; Child, Loveridge, & Warner, 1973; Schmitter & Streeck, 1999). In contrast, the logic of implementation relates to the one of influence as it is concerned with issues of administrative rationality, routinization of operation, specialization of functions, directness of communication and speed in decision-making (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999, p. 19). As noted by Berkhout (2013), this logic relates to the efficient operation of the organizations by relying on professional management and using task specialization.

Drawing on the work of Schmitter and Streeck, this dissertation conceptualizes transmission belts as those interest groups that invest in member involvement for representation (related to the logics of membership and goal formation) and in organizational capacity to efficiently interact with policymakers (related to the logics of influence and implementation). In doing so, the dissertation examines how groups balance both organizational dimensions, under which circumstances are groups more able to do so, and the consequences for the political relevance of groups in policymaking processes.

Member involvement is about the organizational attributes that facilitate the involvement, participation, and engagement with the full range of members, and relates to the idea of representation. Aligned with Kroger (2018, p. 773) representation is understood as a ‘principal – agent relationship (...) *where* there first needs to be a constituency in order for it to be represented: “no object of representation, no representation at all” (Rehfeld, 2011, p. 637).’ Here, the object of representation are ‘members’<sup>2</sup>, which can be individuals, firms, institutions, and membership-groups or other associations that come together to protect and advance certain policy preferences and interests. Interest groups put in place different organizational attributes to facilitate an active involvement of the members and constituencies in the development of policy positions (Kröger, 2014, p. 148). As noted by Dunleavy, ‘no group leader can publicly represent members’ interests without regular and open procedures for gauging their views’ (1991, p. 20). That means that interest groups need formal and informal organizational attributes to make sure that their members can participate and engage in decision-making processes. To ensure this type of representation, members should, at least, have ‘the opportunity to consent to or reject specific propositions and positions’ (Kröger 2014, 149, see also Grant, 2004, 2005). This understanding of representation through member involvement and participation is aligned with democratic theories that conceive democracy as ‘any set of arrangements that instantiates the principle that all affected by collective decisions should have an opportunity to influence the outcome (Dahl, 1998; Habermas, 1996)’ (Urbinati & Warren, 2008, p. 395).

Organizational capacity relates to the ability of groups to efficiently interact with public officials in need of policy input. Gaining access and influence is crucial for interest groups’ maintenance and growth (Schmitter and Streeck 1999). Often, the *raison d’être* of these organizations is to protect the shared interests and concerns of their members vis-à-vis

policymakers. To protect such interests, interest groups' representatives need to interact with public officials, a task that requires certain organizational structures and policy capacities. As noted by Buth (2012, p. 83), 'groups have to be effective to be considered legitimate in the eyes of political decision-makers (...) *and* in order to become more effective, groups adapt their organizational structures and decision-making'. Aligned with Maloney's conceptualization of professionalization, investing in organizational capacity implies that groups are 'structured according to hierarchical business principles aimed at maximizing operational efficiency and pursuing a scientific and technocratic approach to all organizational activities and functions' (Maloney, 2015, p. 102). In that regard, professionalized interest groups represent an organizational shift from membership to management (Skocpol, 2003).

The distinction between the logic of membership and the logic of influence represents a stepping stone to study interest groups as intermediary actors that have the dual function of aggregating and transferring member preferences to policymakers. These two dimensions may be conflicting and result in tensions and trade-offs that interest groups have to reconcile (Berkhout, 2013; Berkhout et al., 2017; van der Pijl & Sminia, 2004). As already noted, involving members is a time-consuming endeavor that may hamper the ability to supply relevant policy input to policymakers pressured by time and resources. However, Schmitter and Streeck also underline that to be viable and "free" interest groups must have organizational properties for dealing to some degree with the different logics presented: 'the selection of a strategy for developing and preserving [interest groups] is likely to involve some compromised mixture of these different logics' (1999, p. 23). That is, despite the tensions and trade-offs, interest groups can benefit from investing in the different organizational dimensions. In that regard, it is important to examine how the two organizational dimensions interact and to what extent are interest groups capable of reconciling and balancing member involvement and organizational capacity, two components that define the Janus-faced nature of the transmission belt ideal.

### **1.3 Research aims and approach**

This dissertation seeks to improve our understanding of the intermediary role that groups play in our governance systems. To do so, the dissertation argues that an assessment of the transmission belt function of groups and their political relevance requires a focus on their internal organizational structure as this relates to their ability to relay members with policymakers. Importantly, the organizational ability to function as a transmission belt relates to the possession of different policy capacities and this ultimately affects the political relevance of groups in policymaking processes.

This dissertation examines how and when interest groups organize themselves as transmission belts and the implications for their political relevance among public officials involved decision-making processes. More specifically, the first block of the dissertation

conceptualizes interest groups as transmission belts and empirically examines when are groups more likely to have the organizational attributes that fit the transmission belt ideal. The second block focuses on the political consequences of being organized as a transmission belt and of having certain political capacities related to it. Table 1.1 below presents the two-fold research question that guide this dissertation as well as the sub-questions that are addressed in each of the four empirical chapters.

**Table 1.1.** Research questions

|   |
|---|
| <i>How and when do interest groups organize themselves as transmission belts?</i>   |
| Chapter II: How do interest groups organize themselves as transmission belts?   |
| Chapter III: How and under which circumstances do interest groups involve their members in establishing policy positions? |
| <i>How does the transmissive role and interest groups' policy capacities affect their political relevance?</i>            |
| Chapter IV: How does member involvement and organizational capacity affect the degree of access to public officials?      |
| Chapter V: Why and when are interest groups perceived as more influential among public officials?                         |

The first block of the dissertation focuses on the organizational structure of groups and provides insight into why and when groups are more likely to function as transmission belts. Similarly to other collaborative endeavors, interest groups struggle to successfully reconcile diverging perspectives, preferences, and perceptions of members. To ensure that a collaboration enhances member involvement as well as an efficient interaction with policymakers, groups need supportive organizational structures. As succinctly posed by Schmitter and Streeck (1999, p. 45), 'the formal organizational properties of interest associations can be conceived as a behavioral expression of how respective associations perceive and interpret the collective interest of their constituents.' Yet, as noted by the same authors, formal organizational properties do not explain every single aspect of the behavior of interest groups. In fact, many decisions are affected by informal processes that are, nonetheless, confined by the basic framework of formally established structures and exchange relations. In that regard, the dissertation pays attention to both formal as well as informal organizational-level attributes and processes to properly unveil how groups organize themselves and their ability to relay their members to policymakers (Alchian, 1950; Chandler, 1962; Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1997; Williamson, 1991).

More specifically, to explore how and when are interest groups organized as transmission belts, this dissertation examines formal organizational attributes of interest groups as well as the internal dynamics that shape their ability to involve and represent their members. The study puts forward a new typology of groups based on their ability to reconcile the two dimensions related to the transmission belt ideal: member involvement and organizational capacity. Subsequently, informal organizational processes and the role of interest groups leaders are brought into the analysis to explore how internal dynamics and collec-

tive action problems faced by interest groups affect their transmission belt role (Fisker, 2015; Rothenberg, 1988). In that regard, this dissertation explores the intermediary role of groups while paying attention to how leaders deal with a heterogenous membership-base (Berkhout, 2013; Beyers, 2008, p. 1201; De Bruycker, Berkhout, & Hanegraaff, 2019). Moreover, it accounts for the contextualized nature of interest groups' activity, and examines how the nature of policy issues affect member involvement in the process of establishing policy positions, and thus the intermediary function of groups (Klüver, Braun, & Beyers, 2015; Smith, 2000).

The second block of the dissertation examines how functioning as a transmission belt affects the political relevance of interest groups. To do so, it mostly relies on the exchange approach theory and the idea that public officials and interest groups have an interdependent relationship. More specifically, public officials pressured by time and with limited resources, need policy capacities to formulate, pass, and implement feasible and effective policies; interest groups, in turn, seek access to public officials to protect and/or advance their interests in policymaking processes (Beyers, 2002; Bouwen, 2004; Braun, 2012; Daugbjerg et al., 2018; Dür & Mateo, 2013; Eising, 2007b; Flöthe, 2019a; Hall & Deardorff, 2006; Junk, 2019a).

The internal organizational structure of interest groups and their ability to function as transmission belts is directly linked to the policy capacities they possess, which ultimately affects the political relevance of groups in policymaking processes. As noted by Halpin (2014) 'the organizational design of a group is inherently connected to its ability to provide particular policy goods' (see also, Daugbjerg et al., 2018). On a similar note, Levesque and Murray (2012, p. 333), highlight that 'whether capacities are indeed developed is contingent on the extent to which they fit the organizational logic of the group itself'. In that regard, interest groups investing in member involvement are more likely to have certain policy capacities such as social legitimacy, political support, and the ability to mobilize their members and constituency. Investing in organizational capacity, in contrast, is expected to link with analytical capacities, such as the generation of expert knowledge, as well as with the ability to efficiently supply policy input to public officials.

To fully assess this exchange relationship this dissertation goes beyond interest groups' organizational structure and policy capacities and considers public officials' needs and behaviors as they are the ones granting access and influential roles to interest groups. That is, to examine the intermediary role of interest groups, it is also necessary to look at the receiving end of the transmission chain and examine why do public officials value some interest groups more than others. The dissertation makes an important contribution to the literature by complementing exchange theories with behavioral decision theory (Simon, 1997). More specifically, in addition to examine interest groups' political relevance by considering the policy capacities that interest groups can offer thanks to their organizational ability to function as a transmission belt, the dissertation accounts

for public officials' shortcuts and behavioral routines when interacting with certain groups and determining their political relevance (Braun, 2013; Jones, 2003).

#### **1.4 Research setting: Interest groups active at EU level**

To examine the research questions introduced in the previous sections, the four empirical chapters focus on data from membership-based interest groups mobilized at the European Union (EU) level. Thus, this dissertation builds upon previous studies looking into the internal dynamics, organizational structures, and representative nature of EU interest groups (Greenwood, 2007; Hollman, 2018; Kohler-Koch, 2010; Kröger, 2018; Rodekamp, 2014).

The focus on interest groups mobilized at the EU level makes for an interesting case both empirically and theoretically. The EU has been emphasizing the need to reach out to interest groups to reinforce its (input) legitimacy and address its democratic deficit (European Commission, 2001, 2002, 2017; Kohler-Koch, 2010; Saurugger, 2008). The problem of 'democratic deficit', which is 'diagnosed in most western democracies' (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Halpin, 2010, p. 9; Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019), is, if anything, more severe within the EU due to the distance between the citizens and the decision-making centers (Weiler, 1999). This is particularly worrisome for the Commission, because it has no constituency or mechanisms to link the institution to European citizens (Kohler-Koch 2010). In order to address this deficit, and as the agenda-setter and policy-formulator actor within the EU, the Commission has put in place one of the most advanced consultation arrangements in the world through which interest groups (and stakeholders more broadly) can engage in policymaking processes (Bunea, 2017). Based on the idea that 'with better involvement comes greater responsibility' (European Commission, 2001, p. 15), the Commission emphasized that all parties involved in policymaking processes 'ought to know if the claims put forward by an organization reflect the concerns of the membership or the constituency' (Kohler-Koch 2010). Accordingly, the European Economic and Social Committee noted in its 2006 'Opinion on the representativeness of European civil society organizations in civic dialogue' that a key criterion to be considered a representative organization was to 'provide for accountability of its members' (European Commission, 2003; 2006, p. 5; see also, Fraussen, Albareda, Braun, & Maloney, 2021). What is more, the EU law, through the Treaty of Lisbon, also highlights the need to increase the legitimacy of the EU when interacting with interest groups, which according to the Article 11 should be "representative associations" (see Trenz, 2009 for a more detailed discussion on this matter).

Importantly, much EU debate on interest groups participation has focused on the 'instrumental character of participation' which assumes that engaging with interest groups will favor the effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy of decision- and policymaking processes (Johansson & Lee, 2014; Kohler-Koch & Buth, 2013; Kröger, 2018; Saurugger,

2008). However, as noted by Grande (2000, p. 129), interest groups contribution to EU policymaking might be questionable ‘insofar as the internal structures of these organizations are rarely internally democratically accountable’ (Saurugger, 2008, p. 1279). And, when groups have democratic structures, they may become less relevant for policymakers due to collective action problems and their difficulties to rapidly supply quality policy input to policymakers (Greenwood & Webster, 2000). This connects with the long-standing debate about democracy vs. technocracy within the EU (Wallace & Smith, 1995): Do EU public officials prioritize input from internally democratic groups so as to redress the so-called democratic deficit, or do they mainly interact with professionalized groups that efficiently provide expert-based policy input? By assessing how interest groups are internally organized, this dissertation aims to bring new light into this debate and improve our understanding of interest groups’ contribution to EU governance.

The focus on interest groups mobilized at the EU level also requires some discussion. As noted by De Bruycker et al. (2019), interest groups that are politically active at the EU level face different challenges than other type of groups. Their ability to be organized as transmission belts that collect, aggregate, synthesize and transfer the preferences of their members to public officials might be affected because of the following reasons: (1) mobilizing and being politically active at the EU level is a costly and cumbersome endeavor; and (2) ‘interest groups working at the EU level, compared to national or local groups, must aggregate a larger and more diverse set of interests (e.g., Kohler-Koch, 2013)’ (De Bruycker et al., 2019, p. 296). In contrast, interest groups mobilized at the (sub)national level are expected to face less hurdles, as they aggregate more homogenous members that presumably have less internal disagreements.

To assess the transmissive function of groups, the empirical chapters focus on membership-based interest groups<sup>3</sup>. Following Halpin (2006, p. 921), and aligned with the conceptualization of transmission belts, the term members is used to denote a group affiliation inclusive of some involvement in policy formulation and/or the authorization of leaders (see also Jordan and Maloney 1997). In contrast to firms and institutions (such as hospitals or universities), membership-based groups engage more in routine lobbying (Gray & Lowery, 1995; Lowery & Marchetti, 2012, p. 145). More importantly, membership-based groups have a clear representative function that is less straightforward in the case of institutions. In that regard, the groups considered in the four empirical chapters aggregate at least one of the following types of members: individuals (such as citizens or professionals), firms, institutions, and membership-groups and other associations (e.g., NGOs, professional associations, business associations, and other EU umbrella groups) (Albareda, 2021).

Last, this dissertation explores interest groups’ intermediary function in policymaking processes by focusing on public officials and policymakers as a crucial ending point of the transmission belt metaphor (Ainsworth & Sened, 1993; Schmitter & Streeck, 1999).

There are other potentially relevant audiences for politically active interest groups, such as politicians, members of parliament, or the media. However, public officials, as the specialists in the bureaucracy formulating and developing public policies, are in constant interaction with professional communities and interest groups to decide the specificities of particular legislations and the alternatives available (for a review on the relationship between interest groups and the bureaucracy, see Fraussen & Halpin, 2020). Public officials (i.e., policymakers, civil servants and administrative or bureaucratic staff within executive branches) are involved in the different stages of engagement with interest groups, they have a crucial role in deciding who is invited and whose voices are finally taken into account, as they are in charge of drafting legislative proposals that are subsequently sent to members of parliament. In that regard, public officials play a crucial role in policymaking processes (Kingdon, 1984). As a consequence, the dissertation also addresses the question of whose voice is heard and taken into account in policymaking processes (Grossmann, 2012).

## 1.5 Design and data

The dissertation uses quantitative and qualitative designs to empirically examine the four research questions presented in Table 1.1. In doing so, the dissertation aims to improve the rigor and the validity of the study and its empirical results. More specifically, the empirical chapters make use of three databases to explore the different inter-related questions. These databases come from two large projects: ‘2-Capture: The Driving Forces of Regulatory Capture’<sup>4</sup>, and ‘INTEREURO: Networks, Strategies and Influence in the EU’.<sup>5</sup> Both projects provide valuable quantitative and qualitative data to explore questions of interest groups’ organizational structure, their ability to function as transmission belts, and the effects of different organizational formats on the political relevance of groups among public officials. The databases are:

- 2-Capture – stakeholders’ database: Interview and survey data from leaders of interest groups involved in 64 EU regulations passed between 2015-2016.
- 2-Capture – public officials’ database: Interview and survey data from senior public officials of the European Commission leading 64 EU regulations passed between 2015-2016.
- INTEREURO Interest Group Survey: Survey data from interest groups mobilized at the EU level.

More specifically, Chapters II and IV make use of the survey data collected in the INTEREURO Interest Group Survey, a component of the INTEREURO project to examine organizational characteristics and policy activities of interest groups active at the EU level.<sup>6</sup> In total, 2,038 interest organizations were selected from the Transparency Register of the EU, the OECKL Directory. To be included in the sample, the organizations had to fulfil three requirements: (1) EU-level interest organizations which could be EU peak

associations or national organizations with (2) a presence in Brussels and (3) that show some interest in EU policymaking processes. The organizations included in the sample perfectly fit the purpose of this study because, due to their layered structure, they require to put in place a certain organizational structure that defines the interaction between members. The survey was conducted from 9 March to 2 July 2015 and targeted senior leaders of the interest groups (Bernhagen et al., 2016). To assess the determinants of the degree of access to Commission officials (Chapter IV), INTEREURO Interest Group Survey data is combined with the Transparency International – Integrity Watch dataset on Commission meetings.<sup>7</sup>

Chapters III and V rely on two different datasets collected as a part of a research project ‘2-Capture: The Driving Forces of Regulatory Capture’. This project investigates regulatory governance by paying particular attention to the role and engagement of civil society organizations in regulatory processes. To do so, 64 regulations and directives passed at the EU level between 2015-2016 and covering 6 policy domains<sup>8</sup> have been investigated in depth through document analysis and interviews with public officials responsible of the regulatory dossiers and interest groups involved in them (for more details on the sampling strategy, see Braun, Albareda, Fraussen, & Müller, 2020; Fraussen, Albareda, & Braun, 2020). More specifically, Chapter III makes use of qualitative data obtained through interviews with thirty-two leaders of supranational umbrella groups that were considered as *key actors* by Commission officials when developing a set of regulations (2-Capture: stakeholders’ database). The interviews were conducted between April and December 2019. Chapter V, in contrast, relies on quantitative data from 109 interest groups. The data was collected through interviews conducted between November 2018 and February 2019 with senior public officials of the European Commission leading 29 regulatory dossiers included in the sample (2-Capture: public officials’ database). Thus, in contrast to the previous chapters, this chapter takes the perspective of the public official and examines how these key actors assess and perceive the importance/relevance of the interest groups with whom they interact.

The sampling and selection process of the interest groups considered in Chapters III and V follow a top-down approach, which entail several implications for the generalizability of the results (Berkhout, Beyers, Braun, Hanegraaff, & Lowery, 2018). However, the focus on interest groups that either had access to public officials or that were considered as key actors in policymaking processes is a deliberate choice as they accomplish one of the critical preconditions to be considered a transmission belt: interacting with public officials. The last chapter of the dissertation discusses the implications of this potential source of bias, as well as other methodological choices, for the validity and generalizability of the findings.

## 1.6 Outline of the dissertation

The main theoretical argument of the dissertation, in a nutshell, is that to improve our understanding of the transmission belt function of interest groups, it is necessary to focus on how are they internally organized. Subsequently, the dissertation examines when groups are more likely to organize as transmission belts and the consequences of their internal structures and policy capacities for the political relevance of groups. The four empirical chapters summarized below highlight the benefits of considering interest groups' organizational structure and policy capacities as it can help us assess their potential contribution to governance systems.

In order to address the two-fold overarching research question, this dissertation is structured in two blocks. The first one examines "How and when interest group organize themselves as transmission belts". More specifically, **Chapter II** conceptualizes and empirically examines the occurrence of transmission belts among the EU interest groups system.<sup>9</sup> The results of a cluster analysis show that approximately 33% of the EU groups are organizationally equipped to function as transmission belts. In that regard, the majority of the groups only invest in one of the organizational dimensions related to the transmission belt ideal (i.e., member involvement or organizational capacity). Additionally, the chapter finds a positive relationship between groups having a homogenous membership base and being organized as a transmission belt.

**Chapter III** takes a step back and focuses on one specific organizational dimensions of the transmission belt which critically determines the representative function and the legitimacy claims of interest groups: member involvement. More specifically, the chapter aims at improving our understanding of why and under which circumstances interest groups involve and engage their members when establishing policy positions. The results indicate that unequal resources among the membership-base of umbrella groups as well as issue features shape member involvement in different ways, hence affecting the representative potential of groups. Building upon the results of Chapter II, the qualitative data also shows that membership diversity, in terms of resources, critically affects *which* members are actually involved in the process of establishing policy positions. In addition, policy issues that generate internal conflict are characterized for having more involvement of members, whereas particularistic policy issues (i.e., those that only affect a subset of the members and thus are characterized by less internal conflict), only attract the attention of those members with a stake on the issue.

The second block of the dissertation examines "How the transmissive role and policy capacities of interest groups affect their political relevance". In other words, Chapters IV and V address the implications of interest groups' organizational structure and policy capacities for their degree of access among public officials and their perceived influence on policymaking processes. Firstly, following an exchange-based approach, **Chapter IV** examines the effects that the two organizational dimensions that serve to conceptualize the

transmission belt ideal (i.e., member involvement for representation and organizational capacity to efficiently provide policy input) have on the level of access that interest groups gain to EU public officials. The results of the regression models indicate that groups that invest in organizational capacity have more access to public officials, whereas groups that invest in member involvement and those that are organizationally prepared to function as transmission belts do not have a higher likelihood of gaining more access to EU public officials.

**Chapter V** argues that political and analytical capacities are demanded by policymakers when developing policy issues and thus affects the level of influence interest groups have on policy issues. The exchange approach perspective is complemented with a behavioral approach and it is argued that public officials' heuristics and routines affect the perceived influence of interest groups. The chapter shows that political and analytical capacities matter for becoming influential on policy issues' outputs. Yet, it also demonstrates that behavioral routines play an important role as they make those groups that are considered policy insiders (i.e., familiar and regular partners) more influential when the degree of advocacy salience is high (i.e., when many stakeholders mobilize in the issue under discussion).

Lastly, **Chapter VI** takes stock of the findings from the previous empirical chapters and provides a through discussion to the main questions of the dissertation and the implications for practice and society. In doing so, it also addresses the main limitations of the dissertation and puts forward potentially interesting avenues for future research to advance our understanding of the intermediary role of interest groups in governance systems.

## Notes

- 1 Most of the literature on interest groups rely on broad categorizations distinguishing business from citizen groups (e.g., Dür et al., 2015; Dür & Mateo, 2013). A similar approach has been to distinguish between specific (or sectional) groups representing narrow interest from diffuse (or cause) groups representing interests of broad segments of society. Halpin (2006) distinguishes between solidarity and representative groups, the formers representing constituencies that cannot be present or have their own voice, such as animal protection groups; and the latter representing a closed constituency that can be present and has its own voice and thus is able to authorize and hold the group leaders to account, for instance, an association of medical doctors (see also, Binderkrantz, 2009; Fraussen & Halpin, 2018; Willems, 2020). Lastly, by focusing on the nature of members, Bouwen (2002, 2004) makes an important distinction between national associations (that have individual organizations or citizens as members) and supranational (or European) associations (that have associations as well other organizations as members) (see also Bunea 2014; Eising 2007).
- 2 The conceptualization of transmission belts developed here applies to membership-based interest groups as they are expected to have a representative role that one would not assume – or that is at least more complicated – for non-membership organizations (Schlozman et al., 2015). More specifically, membership-based interest groups are expected to promote a legitimate representation through processes of authorization and accountability between members and representatives. Thus, groups with members require a link to a social constituency that needs to be involved in the development of policy positions (Kröger, 2016, pp. 9–10).
- 3 Chapter V also includes non-membership interest groups (i.e., firms). But the analyses control for these different sorts of groups and the results obtained apply also when exclusively accounting from membership-based groups.
- 4 This research project is led by Caelesta Braun and funded by the Dutch Research Council through a Vidi scheme (grant 452–14–012).
- 5 See: <https://www.intereuro.eu/>
- 6 See: [https://acim.uantwerpen.be/files/documentmanager/project/survey\\_samplingmemo\\_intereuro.pdf](https://acim.uantwerpen.be/files/documentmanager/project/survey_samplingmemo_intereuro.pdf)
- 7 The data is offered in an aggregate manner by Transparency International – Integrity Watch. See: <http://www.integrity-watch.eu/about.html>.
- 8 The six different policy areas are: (1) Finance, banking, pensions, securities, insurances; (2) State aids, commercial policies; (3) Health; (4) Sustainability, energy, environment; (5) Transport, telecommunications; (6) Agriculture and fisheries. Importantly, the EU has exclusive or shared competences with the member states in these domains.
- 9 For the sake of clarity, Chapter II uses the label “Civil Society Organizations” instead of “interest groups”. However, both terms are equally understood and defined in this dissertation (Jordan et al. 2004; Beyers et al. 2008).

