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

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Chapter VI

On the Value of Unpacking Interest
Groups: Lessons Learned and Future
Research Directions

A core question in political science and public administration is whose interests and preferences are represented through interest groups and which ones are more frequently heard and taken on board by policymakers. Interest groups have become key players in western democracies to tackle complex and wicked policy problems, they supplement and complement other forms of political representation such as political parties and function as relevant intermediary actors connecting societal interests to policymaking processes. Yet, this intermediary function of interest groups is not a straightforward endeavor as it requires paying attention and investing in organizational structures to involve their members while efficiently transferring policy input to public officials. While public officials often interact with interest groups to obtain policy information that is representative of the members and constituency of the group, interest groups face difficulties when and reconciling their capacity to involve their members while being active in policymaking processes. In that regard, an accurate examination of which interests and preferences are being represented and heard in policy systems requires unpacking interest groups. In doing so, it is possible to more accurately assess interest groups' internal ability to involve and represent their members and their ability to transfer policy input to public officials.

This dissertation contributes to advance our understanding of the democratic role that interest groups play in governance systems by theoretically conceptualizing and empirically examining interest groups as transmission belts that are expected to collect, aggregate and transfer the preferences of their members to policymakers. To better understand the intermediary role of groups, the study focuses on how groups are internally organized, a crucial element that affects the ability of groups to balance and reconcile two somewhat conflicting organizational dimensions related to the transmission belt function: member involvement and organizational capacity. Whereas the first one is aimed at collecting and aggregating input from members, the latter is centered on the organizational ability to efficient and effectively communicate with public officials. By unpacking interest groups, the dissertation provides a novel approach to assess the democratic role of groups in governance systems.

Empirically, the dissertation examines how groups mobilized at the EU level balance their investment in each organizational dimension related to the transmission belt function. Moreover, it studies when groups are more likely to function as transmission belts and the consequences of these organizational characteristics for their political relevance among public officials. By treating the transmission belt function of interest groups as both independent and dependent variable, the dissertation provides a comprehensive assessment of the intermediary role of interest groups and addresses the two overarching research questions formulated in the introduction:

1. *How and when do interest groups organize themselves as transmission belts?*
2. *How does the transmissive role and interest groups' policy capacities affect their political relevance?*

The first two empirical chapters explore the transmission belt ideal and the potential factors affecting interest groups' likelihood to become organized and operate as intermediary actors that connect their members with policymakers. The last two empirical chapters examine how the transmission belt role and the policy capacities of interest groups affect their political relevance (i.e., access and influence) among public officials. The following sections discuss the main results of the four empirical chapters of the dissertation, the limitations of the study, several avenues for future research, and the implications for practice and society.

6.1 Main findings and contributions

6.1.1 Block I: Seeking and finding transmission belts

This dissertation conceptualizes the transmission belt ideal as the organizational ability that interest groups possess to reconcile and balance the involvement of members and the organizational capacity to interact with public officials. An empirical exploration of the conceptualization put forward shows that one third of the groups mobilized at the EU level are organizationally equipped to function as transmission belts. Thus, most groups mobilized at the EU level only invest in one of the two organizational dimensions, or have poorly developed organizational structures. Consequently, only a minority of the groups mobilized at the EU level are organizationally prepared to contribute with input and output legitimacy, and demonstrate the organizational features necessary for facilitating the involvement of their members and efficiently interacting with policymakers (Chapter II).

Given the variation in the extent to which transmission belts are found, the dissertation examines when interest groups are more likely to function as intermediary actors. An exploration of the factors that affect interest groups' organizational structure shows that having a more diverse membership-base (i.e., including individuals, different types of organizations – profit/nonprofit –, and national/European associations) negatively affects the likelihood of being organized as a transmission belt. Relatedly, the data shows that internal diversity is positively related to exclusively investing in professionalized structures aimed at increasing organizational capacity (Chapter II). That is, when the membership-base is more heterogeneous, there is a higher likelihood that groups will invest less in member involvement and focus more on organizational capacity – a logical organizational decision considering the severe collective action problems that derive from having a diverse membership-base (Olson, 1965).

This finding and the reasons why interest groups are more likely to function as a transmission belt are further explored by focusing on the internal mechanisms that interest groups put in place to ensure that their members are involved and their voices are taken into account when establishing policy positions (Chapter III). Importantly, interview data

from interest group leaders indicates that the diversity of the membership-base – when conceptualized as the presence of unequal resources among the members – affects the extent to which members are effectively involved in the group. Poorly endowed members are less actively engaged in the processes of establishing policy positions that are subsequently communicated to public officials. Consequently, groups can fall into a representational strain where the interests of more resourceful members are better represented than the ones of poorly endowed members (Kröger, 2018; Schnyder, 2016; Strolovitch, 2006). Moreover, the ability of groups to function as a transmission belt is contingent on how the policy issue under discussion is perceived by the leadership and the members of the organization. Even when groups possess the organizational structures that fit the transmissive purpose, the leadership of the groups often by-passes those members that are not expected to have a direct stake on the policy issue under discussion. What is more, when members perceive that the policy issue under discussion does not affect their direct interest, they are less likely to get involved in the process of establishing policy positions. In contrast, when the different members have a high stake on the policy issue under discussion, they become highly involved and engaged, which reinforces the transmission belt function of groups. Hence, the transmission belt function cannot be taken for granted as it is found in different intensities depending on whether policy issues are perceived as particularistic or conflictual among the leaders and members (Smith, 2000).

Intriguingly, the results show that the most frequently used typology to examine interest groups (i.e., citizens vs. business groups), does not help us explain the internal organizational structure of groups and the extent to which they invest in the organizational dimensions related to the transmission belt ideal (see also, Rodekamp, 2014). More specifically, being a citizen or a business organization is not statistically related to being a transmission belt and it does not explain variation in the process of member involvement when establishing policy positions. While aligned with large-n studies examining interest groups member involvement (Binderkrantz, 2009) and professionalization (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013), this finding nuances the idea that business are often representative of their membership-base while citizen groups tend to be professionalized and less connected to their members (De Bruycker et al., 2019; Greenwood, 2007; Warleigh, 2003). In other words, the results of this study indicate that business and citizen groups mobilized at the EU level are similarly capable to organize themselves as transmission belts.

It is worth to underline and further discuss two important contributions resulting from the findings of the first block of the dissertation. First, internal diversity affects how interest groups are organized, hence the more homogeneous the membership-based, the higher the likelihood that the organization will function as a transmission belt. In contrast, groups with more heterogeneous membership-base face higher costs of collective action (Offe & Wiesenenthal, 1980; Olson, 1965), and this affects their ability to set up structures that involve the members. This implies that, to guarantee the representation of the members,

interest groups have to be rather specific and niche-oriented, which is aligned with the pluralist perspective of interest groups and the idea that likeminded individuals (or organizations) will come together in response to disturbances in the policy environment (Dahl, 1961; Truman, 1951). However, highly specific groups, even if they are transmission belts, may become less relevant for public officials who favor interactions with encompassing groups that reduce the transaction costs of meeting with multiple organizations. Previous research has shown that the representativeness of groups – understood as the ability of groups to aggregate the interest of multiple regions and/or countries – positively affects the likelihood of gaining access to EU public officials (Albareda & Braun, 2019). As a consequence, interest groups have to resolve the trade-off between being niche-oriented and easily representing their homogenous members, or expanding their scope to be politically relevant yet facing more difficulties to properly engage and represent their diverse membership-base.

The second contribution is that the functioning of the transmission belt is issue-contingent, that is, it depends on how the policy issue under debate (un)equally affects the members of the group as perceived by the leader of the organization. Even when interest groups have the organizational structures that fit the transmission belt ideal, the type of issue under discussion affects the extent to which members get involved, and consequently, how and to what extent different perspectives of the membership-base are collected and aggregated. Hence, providing context is not only relevant when examining interest groups' strategies and political relevance (Bernhagen et al., 2015; Klüver et al., 2015; Smith, 2000), it is also key to assess the intermediary function of groups, which ultimately affects their representative potential and their ability to contribute to governance systems with input and output legitimacy. Paradoxically, the findings show that groups experience high levels of member involvement (which enables their transmissive function) particularly when policy issues generate conflict among members. When members have different perspectives, challenging consensus-based decision-making processes, we observe higher degrees and intensities of member involvement. The leadership of the groups as well as the organizational mechanisms in place to resolve conflicting perspective within the group, thus, become paramount to advance representative positions and fulfil the transmission belt function.

All in all, the first block of the dissertation demonstrates that interest groups have varying organizational formats and implement different processes to involve their members in policy issues. This variation has important normative implications as it affects the representative potential of groups. Additionally, as discussed in the next sections, it also shapes the ability of groups to become politically relevant actors in EU policymaking processes.

6.1.2 Block II: Political relevance of transmission belts

How does the transmissive role and interest groups' policy capacities affect their political relevance? The findings of this dissertation on this question are rather mixed. While focusing on the number of meetings that interest groups have with EU public officials, the data shows that investing in organizational capacity and professionalized structures leads to a significantly higher level of access to EU public officials (Chapter IV). Contrary to what was expected and despite the rhetoric of the Commission to favor the interaction with representative interest groups, the findings show that investing in member involvement and being organized as a transmission belt does not pay-off in terms of degree access. In other words, the findings signal that public officials prioritize the interaction with professionalized organizations that are able to efficiently respond to public officials' demands and/or provide policy expertise. Yet, it is worth noting that the input legitimacy of these professional organizations might be questioned as they 'may be more willing to listen to the arguments of policymakers than represent the interests of their member' (Berkhout et al., 2017, p. 1110; see also, Leech, Baumgartner, Pira, & Semanko, 2005).

This rather pessimistic view of interest groups' democratic contribution to policymaking processes is nuanced when focusing on perceived influence of prominent groups (Chapter V). The findings indicate that the capacity to provide political support and legitimacy (i.e., political capacities) as well as the ability to gather and offer policy expertise and technical knowledge (i.e., analytical capacities) matter for interest groups' perceived influence among EU public officials.⁴³ Importantly, both types of policy capacities are important when policy issues are categorized as low or high in saliency. Yet, there is a trend that shows how groups with more political capacities are perceived as more influential in highly salient policy issues (for similar findings see, Willems, 2020). This indicates that the ability to provide political capacities (related to the ability to signal political preferences of the constituency and supply input legitimacy), might be dependent on the nature of the policy issue and, particularly in highly salient issues, interest groups supplying input legitimacy become more influential. Yet, as discussed in Chapter V, this finding should be taken with caution as the significance levels of the p-value in the regression models decrease when controlling for group type (i.e., business vs. citizen groups). Nonetheless, this observation also connects with the result of Chapter III, namely that interest groups dealing with internally conflictual issues that generate different preferences among members are more likely to have high degrees of member involvement. Considered together, these findings show how both internal conflict and external salience may contribute to the ability of groups to function as transmission belts and become more influential in policymaking processes. The other side of the coin is that in issues that do not receive much attention either by members or other stakeholders, the transmissive role becomes diluted and less relevant, and this can be normatively problematic considering that salient issues are the exception rather than the norm (Baumgartner & Leech, 2016; Halpin & Thomas, 2012a).

More generally, the findings of Chapters IV and V point toward the idea that different logics and mechanisms take place when gaining (more) access than when achieving a prominent status and influence. Whereas access seems to be mostly granted to professionalized groups, a prominent status is more often attributed by public officials to groups that are organized as transmission belts.⁴⁴ While this observation needs to be validated with additional research, this finding might be explained by the conceptual differences between access and prominence (Fraussen, Graham, & Halpin, 2018; Halpin & Fraussen, 2017a). It can be argued that, while interest groups have some agency regarding whether and how often they meet with public officials, gaining a prominent status is more outside their control and largely dependent on the perception of groups by public officials. Nonetheless, more research is needed to assess such an argument and to examine whether the organizational ability of groups to function as a transmission belt plays any role in public officials' decision to grant them a prominent status in certain policy issues.

Aligned with the results of the first block, the findings of Chapters IV and V suggest that being a business or a citizen group is not an important factor explaining access or influence to public officials, particularly when accounting for the organizational structure and the policy capacities of interest groups. These results add to the rather mixed findings of previous studies examining the effects of group type on access or success (e.g., Binderkrantz et al., 2014; Dür et al., 2015). In other words, the assumption that businesses always win has to be nuanced and, aligned with previous research, the findings of the dissertation point towards the importance of controlling for additional factors such as the nature of the policy issue (see also, Bernhagen et al., 2015). More importantly, beyond group typology, public officials seem to be attentive to the type of policy capacities interest groups can offer. In that regard, paying attention to the internal organization of groups is crucial as it determines the extent to which they can generate and offer analytical or political capacities, and ultimately obtain access or influence (see for instance, Albareda, 2020; Albareda & Braun, 2019; Grömping & Halpin, 2019; Klüver, 2012a). It is worth noting that the organizational ability to generate policy capacities is not related to whether they are businesses or citizen group; as noted in the discussion of the findings in the first block, both business and citizen groups are equally (un)capable of organizing themselves as transmission belts. Consequently, one should be careful to relate specific group types to the possession of different types of policy information and access goods. Instead, it seems necessary to unpack interest groups, and to more explicitly assess whether they have certain policy capacities or not, and how the varying presence of these capacities affect their political relevance among policymakers.

Last, by taking the public official perspective, the dissertation also unveils the importance of the behavioral routines and heuristics that public officials rely on in policymaking processes, either consciously or unconsciously (Jones, 2003; Simon, 1997). The empirical findings show that, particularly in highly salient policy issues (i.e., those that attract a

large number of stakeholders), public officials perceive policy insiders (i.e., interest groups with whom they frequently interact) as more influential for policy outcomes (Chapter V). From a normative point of view, this finding can be problematic because issues that attract a large number of actors could be dominated by policy insiders that are considered as familiar or regular partners, thus potentially neglecting other relevant yet less well-known or visible voices. In terms of theory, this finding also highlights the importance of broadening the theoretical scope that is usually considered when examining interest group access and influence on policymaking processes, i.e., resource exchange approach (e.g., Berkhout, 2013; Bouwen, 2002; Braun, 2012; Hall & Deardorff, 2006). Despite the value and relevance of the exchange approach, these findings suggest that behavioral approaches of decision-making should not be omitted from the equation as they can provide us with valuable explanations of why some groups gain more access and which ones are more influential in public policy processes (see also, Braun, 2012, 2013).

6.2 Limitations and future research

This section discusses the implications of specific research choices for the interpretation and generalizability of the results presented in the empirical chapters. First, this dissertation focuses on interest groups mobilized at the EU level. As noted by De Bruycker et al. (2019, p. 296), these type of groups might be different from interest groups focused at national polities for two main 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 (Kohler-Koch, 2013)’. In that regard, the interest groups considered in this dissertation might be characterized for facing more difficulties to involve their members in policy-related issues. In contrast, interest groups mobilized at the national or subnational level, because of their physical proximity and a more homogenous membership-based, do not face the same hurdles to involve their members. Consequently, it might be that the groups included in the analyses of Chapters II and IV – which consider the full population of interest groups mobilized at the EU level – are less likely to invest in member involvement and to function as transmission belts if we would compare to similar samples of interest groups mobilized at the national or local level. In other words, the incidence of transmission belts at the EU level might be lower than at national polities. Future research can assess how interest groups mobilized at different levels of government (local, national, and supranational) differ in the extent to which they function as transmission belts. By doing so, it will be easier to establish benchmarks and compare whether the percentage of transmission belts in other levels of government differs significantly from the findings obtained at the EU level.

Second, and related to the previous point, this dissertation puts forward a conceptualization of transmission belts that is relevant for interest groups that have individuals,

firms, institutions, and membership-groups or other associations as members (Albareda, 2021). However, mostly due to the focus on interest groups mobilized at the EU level, the samples used in this dissertation have a limited number of interest groups that have individuals as members, and thus that directly represent individuals. In that regard, most of the observations in the empirical chapters are interest groups that have organizations (i.e., firms, institutions, and other membership-groups or associations) as members. The internal mechanisms to involve members and develop organizational capacity might vary depending on the type of members that are being represented as the incentive structures and collective action problems vary if members are individuals or organizations (see Jordan et al., 2004). In contrast to individual members, organizational members are shorter in supply and thus group leaders want to avoid the exit strategy. Furthermore, organizational members often have a direct stake in the work of the group, and possess relevant information that can be transferred to the association or umbrella level (Albareda, 2021; Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012). As a consequence, the interest groups taken into account in the analyses might have higher levels of member involvement than other type of groups whose direct members are individuals instead of organizations. Future research needs to empirically assess whether the findings particularly related to Chapter III and the process of member involvement observed among umbrella organizations are transferable to individual-based interest groups, and even beyond that, to other types of political organizations such as political parties. Considered together the first and second limitation point to two potentially relevant, yet contrasting biases: whereas groups mobilized at the EU level face higher hurdles to involve their members, the members of the groups included in the analyses are mostly organizations, instead of individuals, which makes it more likely to observe higher levels of involvement. All in all, this calls for more research considering a wider and more diverse set of membership-based groups active at different levels of government and with all sorts of members.

The third limitation relates to the second block of the dissertation. Chapters IV and V, which focus on the political relevance of interest groups, have taken as a dependent variable access and perceived influence among EU Commission officials. In other words, the focus has been placed on the European Commission and more specifically on the meetings that Commission officials have had with interest group representatives. Therefore, the dissertation cannot account for the role that interest groups play in other consultation mechanisms available within the European Commission, such as public consultations, expert groups, workshops and seminars, etc. (Fraussen, Albareda, et al., 2020). More importantly, other relevant policy venues, particularly the Parliament, the Council, and the media, have not been considered in the study. As discussed by Eising (2007a), institutional context matters when examining why some interest groups have more access and become more decisive for policy outcomes. The policy capacities demanded by public officials in other venues and the logics they implement to legitimize their work might vary and, sub-

sequently, the type of groups they interact with can also change. In that regard, Grömping and Halpin (2019), focusing on interest group's access to the Australian parliament, find that structures related to the involvement of members in the process of establishing policy positions leads to higher levels of access, which contrasts with the results obtained in this dissertation. These diverging findings may be related to the policy venue studied and the different policy needs of elected and public officials. Whereas elected officials are more worried about the representative nature of interest groups vis-a-vis their constituencies, public officials (particularly in the Commission) prioritize specialized knowledge and efficient policy input (Majone, 1999a). Importantly, this picture of expertise-based interest groups as the actors dominating access to administrative officials and bureaucratic agencies has also been observed at the national level (Beyers & Braun, 2014). To further unveil the unequal policy needs of administrative and political officials, future research could empirically assess how interest groups' organizational dimensions and policy capacities (unequally) affect their political relevance across policy venues.

Last, the generalizability of the findings related to Chapters III and V might be affected by the sampling procedure and the focus on prominent groups – i.e., groups that are on top of public officials' mind when working on specific policy issues (Fraussen et al., 2018; Grossmann, 2012; Halpin & Fraussen, 2017a; Ibenskas & Bunea, 2020). Although not always the case, these prominent groups are often older and more resourceful groups that have developed complex organizational structures. More importantly, exploratory data shows that there is a higher incidence of transmission belts among prominent groups, particularly if we compare it with the number of groups that are organizationally equipped to function as transmission belts identified in Chapter II (see Note n.44 below). Consequently, the incidence of groups organized as transmission belts in Chapters III and V is likely to be higher compared to the full population of groups mobilized at the EU level. This may also affect the organizational capacities available to prominent groups, as transmission belts are arguably more likely to possess both analytical and political capacities. Future research should systematically assess whether and to what extent did this transmission belt function mattered to obtain the privileged status of prominent groups – which is conceptually and empirically different from having higher levels of access (for a discussion on this, see Fraussen et al., 2018; Halpin & Fraussen, 2017a). Additionally, the results of Chapters III and V need further validation by considering larger and more diverse population of groups that are less relevant for public officials (i.e., non-prominent groups).

6.3 Research agenda

Drawing on the findings and the limitations presented in the previous sections, the following paragraphs highlight four potentially interesting research avenues that could further contribute to the advancement of our understanding of the intermediary role that interest groups play in our democratic systems. The first avenue calls for more comprehensively

examining the transmission belt ideal conceptualized in this dissertation by bringing in the perspective of members and the broader public opinion. Secondly, as noted in different sections of the dissertation, it is still necessary to explicitly connect the organizational structure of interest groups with their ability to produce and supply certain policy capacities. Third, more attention is needed on the receiving end of the transmission belt ideal. By paying attention to the decision-making choices of public officials through a behavioral lens, we can also examine how these actors affect interest groups' internal structures and their ability to function as transmission belts. Last, building on several findings of this dissertation, as well as on the interest group literature, it seems necessary to provide context to the transmission belt function of groups. In that regard, additional research should examine the intermediary role of groups while considering both the policy issue and the environmental context in which it takes place. The next paragraphs discuss each point in more detail.

First, this dissertation examines the transmissive function of interest groups through an organizational-level perspective, that is, focusing on the internal mechanisms put in place that are expected to facilitate the involvement of members and the efficient transmission of policy input to policymakers. This organizational focus draws on a specific understanding of the representative function of groups, which requires certain involvement and authorization of the members to the group and the group leaders. While valuable, this approach can be enriched by paying attention to both the preferences of members and of the public opinion in general. Regarding the link with the members, future research could focus on the relationship between organizational attributes and the actual representation of members and the groups' constituency. That is, we still need to examine in detail whether the presence or absence of those organizational attributes that facilitate the direct and active involvement of members in the group affect the level of satisfaction that members have with the preferences advanced by the group (see Kröger, 2018). In other words, to what extent does the investment in the two organizational dimensions related to the transmission belt ideal facilitate the representation and the satisfaction of the members in group?

As for the link with the public opinion, previous research has assessed the transmissive role of interest groups by focusing on their level of congruence with public opinion at the aggregate level (Gilens & Page, 2014; e.g., Gray, Lowery, Fellowes, & Mcatee, 2004; Lax & Phillips, 2012; Rasmussen et al., 2014), and more recent studies have found that cause groups are more capable to transfer the preferences of the public than sectional groups (Flöthe, 2020; Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018; Klüver & Pickup, 2019). Despite their importance, these studies do not enable us to know whether and why individual groups function as transmission belts between their members and policymakers – regardless of whether the position of groups is congruent with that of the general public. As succinctly posed by Willems and De Bruycker (2019, 2) 'policy position of an interest group's constituency

may collide with public opinion'. Therefore, there is potential for highly relevant research that combines both perspectives. Willems and De Bruycker (2019), for instance have already shown how groups that more actively involve their members are less likely to have congruent positions with the public. The combination of these two perspectives raises relevant questions from both an empirical and normative point of view. For instance, how do investments in both member involvement and organizational capacity affect the likelihood to have congruent positions with the public? And, to what extent should groups represent preferences of the public, or should they only focus on the preferences of their specific set of members? Relatedly, this approach would enable us to assess what public officials prioritize when working on policy issues: interest groups whose positions are aligned with the general public, or groups that function as a transmission belt and are focused on transmitting preferences of their specific constituency.

Second, this dissertation assumes that the organizational structure of interest groups affects the possession of policy capacities, and subsequently, their level of access and influence in policy making processes. Policy capacities are not natural to interest groups; thus, they must be consciously worked out and developed. As highlighted by Levesque and Murray (2012, p. 333), 'whether capacities are indeed developed is contingent on the extent to which they fit the organizational logic of the group itself'. Hence, interest groups have to establish organizational forms and develop policy capacities that fit the strategies and goals of the group. Similarly, Halpin (2014, p. 59), argues that 'identifying the forms in which groups survive will tell us something about the specific capacities of given groups', and adds that policy capacities are not naturally endowed, but have to be generated purposefully by groups. Therefore, the ability of groups to generate policy capacities is related to how they are organized (Albareda & Braun, 2019; Halpin, 2014). This dissertation represents a stepping-stone towards additional work that links organizational features (and the ability to function as a transmission belt) with the policy capacities that groups possess. However, the premise that there is a relationship between member involvement and political capacities as well as between organizational capacity and analytical capacity, needs to be further explored and empirically tested.

Third, a question that deserves further attention in the field of interest groups relates to the receiving end of the transmission belt metaphor, in this case, policymakers. As shown in Chapter V, some groups have higher levels of perceived influence on public officials for reasons other than the resources and policy capacities they can bring to the table. Based on this finding it is important to further explore how policymakers perceive interest groups, why particular groups are granted more access or achieve a prominent status and what are the implications for their level of success and influence in policymaking processes (Jones, 2003; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Simon, 1997). In other words, public officials are crucial actors that take (boundedly) rational decisions when working on public policies, and this ultimately affects which voices are being heard and taken into account. By

paying attention to the behavioral dimension of public officials, future research can also examine the implications of policymakers' choices on interest groups' internal structures. We know that government – interest groups relations affect the organizational development of groups (Fraussen, 2014), yet we miss systematic research addressing how public officials' decision-making choices shape the internal structures of groups and their ability to relay the demands and preferences of their members to policymakers. In other words, to what extent do public officials (deliberatively or not) promote the development of organizational features related to the transmission belt ideal?

Last, Chapters III and V show that context matters for both the ability to function as transmission belt and the likelihood to become politically relevant. Interest groups do not operate in vacuum and the dynamics they encounter in their environment shape how they organize themselves and their chances of success. More specifically, these two chapters respectively show how the level of internal conflict and salience of policy issues affect the intensity with which members are involved in establishing policy positions and the degree of importance of political capacities to be perceived as more influential among public officials. Based on this important observation, future research should pay attention to meso- and macro-level factors related to the context in which interest group operate. At the meso-level, policy issue characteristics have been taken into account to study interest group's strategies, tactics and access or influence (Bernhagen et al., 2015; Klüver et al., 2015). However, aligned with the findings presented here, policy issue characteristics such as conflict, salience and complexity may shape how interest groups internally establish policy positions, and thus their representative potential. Additionally, public officials demand different policy capacities from interest groups depending on the nature of the policy issue. Consequently, the organizational ability to function as a transmission belt and the capacity to supply key information demanded in the specific context may make a difference to gain access and influence to policymakers.

At the macro-level, it is important to pay attention at population dynamics and particularly at how issues of competition, adaptation, as well as isomorphic forces coming from the environment shape interest groups' organizational structure and their political relevance (Gray & Lowery, 1996; Lowery, 2007). Beyond survival and disbandment (Gray & Lowery, 1996; Halpin & Thomas, 2012b; Jordan & Greenan, 2012), a population approach to the study of interest groups is relevant to micro-level dynamics of how interest groups develop, which organizational forms they establish, and to what extent are they influential in policymaking processes. More specifically, a key assumption of population ecology and niche theories is that interest groups compete for scarce resources in order to survive (Fisker, 2015; Nownes, 2004). In that regard, the level of competition for members and for attention among public officials is expected to shape the internal functioning of interest groups, who are expected to invest in those attributes that more effectively grant their survival. Competition logics are likely to determine what interest groups do

and prioritize, from their mobilization efforts to their lobbying activities (Lowery, Gray, Kirkland, & Harden, 2012), and, in turn, they are likely to affect their organizational structure and their ability to function as a transmission belt. Building upon the work of this dissertation and to further understand why interest groups organize themselves as they do, future research should examine how the environmental pressures and in particular the competition for members and political attention affects the intermediary function of interest groups in democratic systems.

6.4 Implications for interest groups, public officials, and for society at large

The findings and conclusions of this dissertation have a number of relevant implications for practitioners working in interest groups as well as for (EU) public officials. More broadly, the results also highlight relevant issues that have implications for society at large.

For practitioners working in interest groups, the dissertation shows the different forms and shapes that organizations can take by focusing on the two dimensions related to the transmission belt ideal. Equally importantly, the qualitative data points towards the long-standing assumption that functioning as a transmission belt is a complex balancing exercise that is neither easy nor cheap (see, Fraussen, Halpin, & Nownes, 2020). In that regard, the work and involvement of the leadership of the group is crucial to reconcile both dynamics and relay members' preferences to policymakers. Moreover, members and interest group leaders should be aware of the importance that formal and informal organizational attributes and processes have for member involvement in establishing policy positions, and thus for the representative potential of groups and their intermediary role.

Importantly, the results of the study signal that, in order to ensure high levels of membership representation, interest group leaders should go beyond equality principles – according to which all members have the same opportunities to participate – and be more attentive to the characteristics of the different members and their actual ability to get involved in the organization. In other words, granting an equal level playing field is not always enough, some members may face difficulties to get involved in policy discussion within the group due to their limited resources, skills and knowledge. In that regard, interest groups leaders could seek additional mechanisms to overcome the limitations that particularly less endowed members experience when participating and getting involved in the group (see, Strolovitch, 2006, 2007). For instance, leaders could reach out to those members that struggle the most, investing time in explaining and informing them about the policy issue under discussion and the different alternatives, so the disadvantaged members can make informed policy decisions. Despite requiring extra time and effort, this measure could strengthen the representative role of groups and thus its intermediary function.

According to the results, a pragmatic interest group leader that exclusively seeks to gain more access to EU public officials, should primarily invest in having more organizational

capacity related to professional attributes. However, when it comes to reaching prominent status among public officials and being perceived as more influential, practitioners should be aware that the investment in policy capacities related to member involvement and democratic qualities of the group become equally important. In that regard, the time-consuming and cumbersome process of ensuring the involvement can also be rewarding in terms of political relevance and success.

If we translate these findings for the receiving end of the transmission belts metaphor, i.e., public officials of the Commission, the results show that public officials meet more frequently with groups with professionalized structures. Therefore, Commission officials could be more attentive to how interest groups are internally organized and particularly the extent to which they invest in organizational attributes to involve their members. For instance, when meeting for the first time, public officials could specifically ask the groups' representative how do they ensure that the message they convey is representing their membership-base. This not only ensures that the policy input provided is legitimate, it also enhances future compliance of legislations by all the members of the group. Public officials' limited attention to the internal organization and representation of groups is surprising given the rhetoric of the Commission and the EU more generally, and its stated preferences to engage with "representative associations". Nonetheless, this pessimistic picture is more nuanced when focusing on prominent groups who, according to the data, have the organizational attributes and the policy capacities related to the transmission belt metaphor. These contrasting findings seem to indicate that public officials follow different logics when granting access than when attributing prominent status to interest groups. Public officials and the EU more generally, could consider the creation of more consistent and strict guidelines that regulate the interaction with interest groups and that, in one way or another, take into account the ability of groups to effectively represent their members and constituency.

What does all this mean for society at large? The EU is frequently criticized for being disconnected, or at least distant from the citizens for whom it regulates and governs. Different initiatives put in place by the Commission since the beginning of the 2000s have been aimed at addressing this democratic deficit and at partially filling the gap between the EU and its citizens by engaging with civil society organization, "representative associations", and interest groups. In that regard, the involvement and participation of interest groups, particularly those that have a multi-layered and nested structure, is crucial to facilitate the engagement and participation of different societal interests in EU policymaking processes. However, as shown in this dissertation, not all groups are organizationally equipped to function as transmission belts, and those that reconcile the tensions related to investing in member involvement and organizational capacity, not always have more success among EU officials. In that regard, the dissertation shows how the EU still has ample room for improvement when it comes to promoting representative groups by, as indicated

above, paying more attention to the internal organizational features that facilitate the intermediary role of groups. Importantly, this would not only reinforce the legitimacy and democratic credentials of the Commission and the EU, it would also reinforce the 'European spirit' among different societal interest and interest group members, who would be actively involved and interact through EU level groups. More specifically, by creating incentives for groups to involve their members, interest groups can become active organizations that foster social capital among members, who, through the exchange of information, experiences and opinions, develop a feeling of ownership in the associations, and a sense of belonging to a European community which in turns reinforces an active involvement in EU policymaking issues.

To a certain extent, the transmission belt ideal can be seen as a response to the long-standing debate on democracy vs. technocracy at the EU level (Wallace & Smith, 1995). On the one hand, the EU needs to reinforce its connection with the citizens, yet it also needs expertise and efficient responses to develop sound and effective legislations. As succinctly noted by Braun and Busuioc (2020, p. 1601) 'addressing contemporary societal challenges and many of the regulatory [and legislative] conundrums associated with them calls simultaneously for independent expertise necessarily grounded in the much-needed audience support that underpins regulatory authority'. This double requirement of possessing expert-based knowledge while enjoying the support of the set of actors targeted or affected by a particular legislation is perfectly reflected in the transmission belt ideal: groups organized as intermediary actors are prepared to enhance the connection with their constituency and (lay) members, who have a say and can shape the avenues of the group; yet, at the same time groups are capable of producing and processing expert based knowledge that is thoroughly discussed with the members and efficiently transferred to public officials involved in policymaking processes. In doing so, groups that are effectively organized as transmission belts might be better positioned to supply relevant policy input to policymakers dealing with complex societal challenges that require both: expertise and legitimacy. In summary, a stronger emphasis on interest groups' balancing exercise of involving members and having professionalized structures can benefit the governance system of the EU.

6.5 Conclusions

This dissertation demonstrates the relevance of unpacking interest groups by analyzing their internal ability to function as transmission belts that relay their members with public officials. The crucial role of interest groups in contemporary governance systems calls for systematic and thorough evaluations that enable us to assess interest groups' intermediary role between societal interests and policymakers. As illustrated in the introduction of this dissertation, public officials often reach out to groups due to their ability to represent specific constituencies, yet interest groups struggle to balance and reconcile their ability to

connect with their members while being politically active. To improve our understanding of the intermediary role of interest groups in democratic systems, this dissertation opens the black box and assess how interest groups involve their members, the organizational attributes they put in place to efficiently interact with public officials, the type of policy capacities they possess, and the implications of all these elements for their political relevance among public officials. In that regard, this study provides important and contemporary insights to the long-lasting questions put forward by Schattschneider in 1935, namely: how do we know that those claiming to act on behalf of members in the pressure system are in fact representing their interests?

Notes

- 43 As argued in the introduction, the organizational structure of interest is linked to the type of policy capacities they possess and can offer to public officials. Using 2-Capture project data from 39 interest groups for which there was information available from interest group representatives and public officials, an analysis has been conducted to explore the relationships between (1) member involvement and political capacities and (2) organizational capacity and analytical capacities. Importantly, the tests rely on a different operationalization of the dimensions “member involvement” and “organizational capacity”, which are focused on the extent to which the members and the in-house staff respectively were actively involved in establishing policy positions. The results of a regression analyses, also controlling for whether the observations are business or citizen groups, indicate that there is a positive and significant relationship between involving members and having political capacities as well as between having organizational capacities and analytical capacities. These preliminary results call for future research that further explores the relationship between internal organization and policy capacities in a more systematic manner. Yet, it also confirms the expected relations between different organizational dimensions and policy capacities advanced in the introduction.
- 44 Based on available data from “2-Capture: stakeholder interviews”, 21 out of 27 organizations included in Chapter III (i.e., 78%) are categorized as transmission belts that highly invest in ‘member involvement for representation’ and in ‘organizational capacity to interact with policymakers’. Similarly, 23 out of 32 (i.e., 72%) membership-based groups mentioned by public officials and included in Chapter V are also categorized as transmission belts because they highly invest in ‘member involvement for representation’ and in ‘organizational capacity to interact with policymakers’.

