Interest groups, the bureaucracy and issue prioritization

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Interest Groups, the Bureaucracy, and Issue Prioritization

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Summary

Interest groups—collective voluntary organizations for which political advocacy is a primary task such as business associations and citizen groups—are key agents engaging with the bureaucracy. While understudied, research on the relations between interest groups and civil servants highlights the importance of the bureaucratic arena. Recent studies present different perspectives on the interactions between these two actors and also highlight the process of issue prioritization, an important aspect of (internal) agenda setting within groups. This is a key process to study as it provides insight into why groups allocate their attention and resources to a specific set of policy issues, and in this way it clarifies how interest groups put representation into practice. Issue prioritization within groups can be conceptualized as being guided by five drivers: internal responsiveness, policy capacities, niche seeking, political opportunity structure, and issue salience. Recent scholarship has highlighted how rather than privileging one driver over another, this process is first and foremost a balancing exercise in which groups take on board various internal and external considerations. Similar processes are at work within bureaucracies. The intersection of prioritization processes of civil servants and interest groups is an important area for future research.

Keywords: interest groups, civil society organizations, lobbying, advocacy, agenda setting, issue prioritization, policy agendas, policy advisory systems, policy formulation, public administration and policy

Subjects: Groups and Identities, Political Institutions

External Agents in Public Policymaking

The contemporary literature on bureaucratic politics, policy advisory systems, network governance, and collaborative public management highlights the important role of external actors in policymaking (Braun, 2013; Craft & Wilder, 2017; Daugbjerg & Fawcett, 2015; Kim & Darnall, 2016; Lang, 2016; O'Leary, Gerard, & Bingham, 2006). Given the variety of issues they need to deal with, and the limited time and resources they have at their disposal, civil servants need to rely on information provided by external actors, such as interest groups, academic experts, nonprofit organizations, think tanks, and companies. While this dependence on external input has only increased with the growing complexity of policy challenges (Baumgartner & Jones, 2018), this view resonates with earlier work that emphasized the importance of interactions between civil servants and interest groups, such as industry federations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman (1981) already noted how various scholars in the United States and Europe highlighted the "role of bureaucratic agencies in mobilizing and mediating sectoral interests" (p. 6); he cited contributions such as that of Rourke,

who argued that "bureaucratic policymaking in the domestic arena commonly represents a reconciliation of conflicting group interests as much as it does the application of expertise toward the solution of particular problems" (Rourke, 1976, p. 184, cited in Aberbach et al., 1981).

These developments are underpinned by a shift from government to governance and more diverse and dynamic policy networks (Peters & Pierre, 1998; Rhodes, 1997). As such, it challenges the traditional mythology that governments "decide" based on the neutral and impartial—and mostly expert-based—advice from internal policy advisors (see Craft & Howlett, 2012). Rather, the role of civil servants in policy processes requires that they take a different and more active approach. As argued by Varone, Ingold, and Fischer (2019, p. 353), "it is by adapting and also abandoning a state-centric vision and hierarchical position, as well as finding a place within a policy network as broker, facilitator, or co-producer, that public administration is able to maintain its ability to significantly influence the content of public policies." This different role is also underlined in work on information processing and policy dynamics in the US context. Workman, Jones, and Jochim (2009), for instance, highlight the key role of the bureaucracy in "the monitoring of the policy environment and collection of information (search) and the processing or prioritizing of this information (prioritization)" (p. 86). In this view, cultivating contacts outside government is a crucial task of civil servants. It may even imply that civil servants engage in what has been referred to as "reverse lobbying." Rather than civil servants being lobbied, they seek out partners and try to broker coalitions of external stakeholders that provide the particular resources they need (Mahoney & Baumgartner, 2015).

When determining which societal actors and organizations should be involved in policymaking, civil servants require insight into the community of relevant external stakeholders, as well as a good understanding of their internal functioning and capacities. For instance, while think tanks position themselves as independent providers of policy expertise, this is not always reflected in their internal organization (e.g., lack of transparency about income sources), which can undermine the validity and independence of their claims. Likewise, while an interest group is expected to channel the preferences of its constituency to policymakers, their lobby agenda does not always (fully) reflect the concerns of the membership, or it may be dominated by issues that are important to advantaged subgroups within its constituency (Strolovitch, 2007). Furthermore, their policy activities may be mainly driven by the evolving government agenda or salient external events, which could limit their role as reliable spokesperson for a certain group in society (Baumgartner, Larsen-Price, Leech, & Rutledge, 2011; Leech, Baumgartner, La Pira, & Semanko, 2005). Civil servants should thus be aware of the specific features of these organizations and have an idea of the quality and nature of the policy input they provide and whether they could be a useful and reliable ally to move a certain policy proposal forward.

As regards external stakeholders, this article will focus on one specific type of organization, namely interest groups. The article follows the definition of Jordan, Halpin, and Maloney (2004), who define interest groups as collective organizations that advocate on behalf of the interests of their constituency/membership on matters of public policy. This includes all formal organizations that engage in policy advocacy on behalf of a specific constituency or to advance a particular cause, such as human rights or the environment. By applying this definition, a wide variety of membership-based organizations are included, such as business associations,

professional associations, trade unions, and civil society groups. This latter sub-type—often labeled as citizen groups in the US-orientated literature—includes groups that either seek to represent identity communities (e.g., women, Indigenous, patients, etc.) or campaign for specific causes (e.g., public interest groups focused on topics such as education, health, or government transparency). This definition also distinguishes interest groups from other political organizations, such as political parties (unlike groups, they participate in elections and seek to be part of government) and think tanks (who usually do not have a membership-based nature and focus primarily on the production and provision of policy advice). It also excludes other organizations that might engage politically from time to time, such as corporations or (public) institutions (such as local authorities). Their public policy engagement is generally a by-product of their core activities (whether market- or governance-focused) and they are not collective voluntary organizations, which implies that their internal organization and functioning is rather different (see Salisbury, 1984; see also Fraussen & Halpin, 2018 for a more detailed discussion on the differences and similarities among different types of political organizations).

Interest Groups and the Bureaucracy

The bureaucratic arena is an important one for interest groups, even though scholarly group research has tended not to privilege it as a focus for study. For instance, while most studies of US lobbying address Congress, one of the classic studies showed that most groups thought the administrative arena was more important (Salisbury, 1984). When Furlong and Kerwin (2005) assessed the importance of the bureaucracy to interest groups, 75% of the respondents to their survey indicated that this arena was at least as important as Congress and the White House. In neo-corporatist European countries, the bureaucratic arena has always been considered important. Here, policy preparation committees involving groups and bureaucrats from client ministries were viewed as the primary locus of group power over public policy (Schmitter & Lehmbruch, 1979). Focusing on the German case, Mayntz and Scharpf (1975), for instance, remark that "it is the ministries and not parliament or political parties to which organized interests turn first, where they argue their demands in detail and to whom they present information in support of their claims" (p. 67). Indeed, even in the pluralist United Kingdom, there is a very long tradition of studying the consultative basis of public policy. Key authors have long argued that the core of public policy is best explained by tracing interactions between the bureaucracy and interest groups, rather than assuming governments impose decisions (see Jordan & Maloney, 2001; but see Richardson, 2018).

The study of public administration rightly places much store in the decisions of government departments and agencies and the behavior of civil servants within them. Civil servants are often central actors in the first and final stages of the policy cycle, namely policy preparation and policy implementation. Departments have responsibility for the formulation of policy proposals at the request of government, in addition to carrying out the implementation of government decisions. Furthermore, in the case of regulatory agencies, they are responsible for monitoring and oversight. In all these different roles, policy expertise is often considered the key currency. As noted by Godwin, Ainsworth, and Godwin (2013),

> the breadth and depth of the policy problems faced by modern societies require bureaucratic expertise. Policymaking requires considerable issue-specific knowledge, research, and time. When writing law, elected officials would like to leverage the technical expertise and implementation capabilities housed within the bureaucratic agencies. Ideally this would take the form of setting the broad normative targets and letting the agencies implement those goals. (pp. 77–78)

That is, in order to fully understand societal problems, develop adequate policy proposals, and ensure sound implementation of policy decisions, civil servants require detailed and comprehensive insight into the policy issue at hand. Given that the likelihood of interest group influence is generally considered higher when the issues at stake are highly technical and there is limited attention from the general public (e.g., Klüver, Braun, & Beyers, 2015), the administrative arena provides a context in which groups can be highly effective. As Kerwin (2003) argues,

> interest groups could find few modes of government decision making better suited to their particular strengths than [bureaucratic] rulemaking ... Rulemaking often requires a considerable amount of substantive, often technical, information. Agencies are rarely in possession of all the information or insights they require to write sound, defensible rules. Frequently interest groups and the individuals or firms they represent have ready access to the information that agencies need. This gives such groups a considerable amount of leverage. (p. 35)

Perspectives on the Relations Between Interest Groups and Bureaucrats

Depending on the intensity and privileged nature of the relationship between bureaucrats and interest groups, and the extent to which bureaucrats' decisions are influenced by particular interest groups, these interactions have been characterized on a continuum that ranges from capture to bureaucratic politics and policy networks (see Braun, 2012). In the first case, interest groups dominate the interaction. As this set of organizations becomes fewer in number and is dominated by narrow interests (e.g., business), concerns about undue influence and neglect of the public interest increases. On the other end of the spectrum, bureaucrats are leading the dance. The literature on bureaucratic politics emphasizes how civil servants engage with societal interests (and other political actors and public institutions) in a highly strategic way in order to serve their individual or organizational interests. In this view, they seek to leverage these relationships to serve instrumental, organization-centered purposes, such as bureaucratic autonomy (e.g., Carpenter, 2001) and political and societal support, that will facilitate policy processes and implementation of specific measures.

The literature on policy networks assumes that the nature of these interactions will vary across contextual settings, ranging from closed and exclusive policy communities to more inclusive and dynamic issue networks that involve a broad and diverse range of organizations and are more ad hoc and flexible in nature. This substantial variation and context-specific view resonates with a neo-pluralist perspective on interest representation, which emphasizes that "the relationship

among bureaucrats, political principals, and organized interests can vary depending on the political environment at a given time and whether agencies are designed to be open to external influence ... It suggests that influence is real, but usually limited, modifying policy at the edges" (Lowery & Brasher, 2004, p. 219; see also Lowery & Gray, 2004).

While the examples illustrate the relevance of interactions between civil servants and interest groups in both more pluralist and neo-corporatist countries, there still exists considerable variation across political systems. The legacies of institutionalized forms of policy concertation are still more strongly present in neo-corporatist systems, even if the prevalence of these committees and their centrality in decision-making is in decline (see Christiansen et al., 2010; Christiansen, Mach, & Varone, 2017). Equally importantly, the nature and institutionalization of interactions between external stakeholders and civil servants also vary considerably across policy domains within countries (e.g., Grossman, 2012; Grote, Lang, & Schneider, 2008). Finally, interest group research highlights that even within the same policy domain, issue-specific factors such as the salience and scope of a policy proposal will strongly shape the involvement of external stakeholders (e.g., Hanegraaff & Berkhout, 2018; Smith, 2000; Wonka, De Bruycker, De Bièvre, Braun, & Beyers, 2018). It is important to note that most of the work covered in this article focuses on advanced democracies, often on countries in Western Europe or the United States.

One of the reasons for the relative dominance of work examining the legislative arena is the difficulty of data collection in the administrative arena. The provision of lobbying data from the legislative arena—by way of lobby registration systems, evidence giving to committees, and so on—has arguably redirected scholarly effort (research on corporatism in Scandinavia being a notable exception; see, e.g., Blom-Hansen, 2000; Christiansen et al., 2010; Öberg et al., 2011). Yet where scholars have instead undertaken the laborious task of—for instance—logging submissions to administrative consultations or notice-and-comment type consultations, the results have been illuminating (see, e.g., Yackee, 2012; Yackee & Yackee, 2006, in the United States; and Ackland & Halpin, 2018; Halpin & Thomas, 2012, in the United Kingdom).

One clear conclusion arising from this work is that not all groups straddle political arenas. For instance, focusing on a case study of the regulation of stem cell research in the state of California across the legislature, administration, judiciary, and popular initiatives, Varone, Ingold, and Jourdain (2016) find that only 4.6% of groups mobilize in two or more venues. Looking at the Scottish public policy system, Halpin, MacLeod, and McLaverty (2012) show that only around 15% of all groups straddle the legislative and bureaucratic arena. Likewise, examining interest group access to the bureaucracy, parliament, and media in Denmark, Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen (2014) concluded that only 15% of the included groups were active in all these arenas, yet these groups accounted for almost 70% of all appearances of groups across these arenas (p. 12).

The majority of groups, however, appear to be predominantly active in one of these political arenas. To explain the varying presence of interest groups across arenas, scholars often rely on exchange theory and highlight the specific and different needs of venue-specific "gatekeepers," such as journalists, civil servants, or elected politicians (Beyers & Braun, 2014; Binderkrantz et al., 2014; Bouwen, 2004; Braun, 2013). Bureaucrats are first and foremost in need of expertise on technical policy issues. These particular needs are often highlighted to explain the stronger

presence of business groups in the bureaucratic arena. Yackee and Yackee (2006), for instance, argue that business interests are better able to provide high-quality input, as they often have more capacity to understand the complexity of the issue at stake, possess their own technical data and expert information that civil servants need, and frequently rely on lawyers or commercial lobbyists who can assist them in formulating specific policy demands. These contacts also often remain informal or have only limited public visibility. This means that citizen groups, who often focus their advocacy more strongly on rallying the public or media campaigns and frequently prioritize agenda setting over shaping policy decisions, are generally less present in the administrative arenas and tend to prioritize the media arena or the parliament (Berry, 1999; Binderkrantz et al., 2014; see also Dur & Mateo, 2013).

Interest Groups and Issue Prioritization

From one perspective, it is assumed that groups develop a policy agenda—a set of issues that matter to them—and then seek to make that a policy reality. This proactive view would assume that groups straightforwardly pursue a set of issues irrespective of whether the political winds are behind or in front of them. Key is that their issue positions reflect the views of the constituency they set out to represent or advocate for. This approach is perhaps most obviously implied by the pluralists of the post-war period in US political science, who saw the group system as a key representative linkage between citizens and policymakers (see Truman, 1951). While they rarely said so, the implication of their position is that groups matter because they signal to policymakers what key sections of society—whether business, social segments, or professions—see as important.

While interest groups are often described as transmission belts (e.g., Easton, 1971; see also Albareda, 2018), this does not imply that they merely channel member preferences to other audiences such as policymakers and journalists. Rather, they function as filters that regularly tap the sentiment and concerns of their constituency and subsequently take up a select number of these matters for political action. Of course, they may also seek to adjust, filter, or manage the demands from their members to the political and societal context. As was already indicated by Robert Salisbury, while “we are accustomed to thinking of groups as aggressive protagonists, urging policies upon lawmakers or bureaucrats, and pushing to get things done … To this we must add that much of what group representatives do is react to the initiatives of others” (1992, p. 87). Since the turn of the century, a stream of US-based research has pursued what is self-described as a demand-side approach. Here, the key determinant of what groups actively lobby about is in fact the issues that government pays attention to (see Baumgartner et al., 2011; Leech et al., 2005). Thus, groups are viewed as primarily reactive: the aggregate pattern is that more groups lobby in an issue domain where government demonstrates high levels of activity. A related approach suggests that groups increase their activity when the political opportunity structure becomes more favorable and windows of opportunity emerge (Austen-Smith & Wright, 1994; Kingdon, 1984; Tarrow, 1988).

Groups face a choice. While most interest groups have a broad portfolio of policy issues they could address, they can only focus on a much more limited set of issues in their lobbying activities at any one moment. How groups approach this process of issue prioritization, and which considerations carry most weight in deciding priorities, has important implications for their potential democratic value. Interest groups are considered vital vehicles for political representation, and therefore quintessential interlocutors for policymakers who look for organizations that can provide them with insights regarding the preferences of particular constituencies. However, if the capacity of groups to function as intermediary organizations and bridge between citizens and public authorities declines, their value to policymakers is likely to decrease as well. Leech et al. (2005), for instance, argue that "while mobilization is certainly possible without government involvement, it will be extremely difficult, and therefore rare" (p. 20). However, if groups merely respond to the priorities of government and prioritize talking to policymakers over listening to and involving their membership, their status as representative and legitimate spokesperson for a certain group in society can be questioned. By examining the process of issue prioritization, how groups put representation into practice can be further clarified and compared. A better understanding of this process is crucial to assess the dynamics of interest representation, as by prioritizing certain issues a group "sifts and filters salient voices and perspectives *before* they become manifest in advocacy work" (Halpin, Fraussen, & Nownes, 2018, p. 3). Thus, studying issue prioritization within groups provides valuable insight into which societal voices are more likely to be heard by policymakers, or more generally what Strolovitch (2006) has described as a "new mobilization of bias" (p. 895).

Issue Prioritization

What factors drive the selection of policy priorities by interest groups? A few studies have sought to unpack the drivers of issue prioritization (Halpin et al., 2018; Knutson, 2016; Martin, 1995; Scott, 2013; Strolovitch, 2007). This is an internal process, whereby the group sets out what issues to give priority to. Issues are said to be priorities when considerable organizational resource is allocated to achieving preferred outcomes. Thus, the outcome of this prioritization process may be the visible lobbying that groups engage in, such as making submissions to administrative inquiries. Yet prioritization may not always lead to this kind of public display of effort, as it also relates to policy activities behind the scenes, such as extensive research into a specific issue or the search for potential political allies on a particular legislative initiative. The literature can be helpfully structured to point to five general dimensions that might shape the issue priorities of groups (see Table 1; see also Halpin et al., 2018 for a more detailed discussion). Some of these are internally orientated, such as internal responsiveness and policy capacities—they reflect intra-organizational considerations and constraints. Others reflect characteristics of the political environment, such as the salience of issues or the political opportunity structure, that might encourage or discourage lobbying activities on a particular issue.

Internal responsiveness assumes that groups focus their attention on policy issues that align with the interests of their core constituency or that are in line with their group's core mission (Minkoff & Powell, 2006; Truman, 1951). Given the variety in the internal organization and democratic nature of groups, this internal responsiveness can have different forms and relate to multiple and

distinct internal stakeholders, such as members, supporters, or (individual or institutional) donor contributions. Policy capacity refers to financial resources, yet it also relates to staff experience with this particular issue (Halpin & Binderkrantz, 2011; Moe, 1980). If the group has previously worked on a topic or has internal policy committees dedicated to this policy area, it is likely to pay continued attention to this matter, whereas for topics that are new to the organization, or on which there is limited in-house expertise, the decision to take action will be made less lightly. The niche-seeking dimension highlights how groups respond to other groups in their environment. To stress their unique nature, they may seek out policy niches in which to specialize, especially in a competitive environment (Browne, 1990; Gray & Lowery, 1996; Heaney, 2004). This applies to both specialist and generalist groups. For instance, groups with a broad policy focus (for instance environmental issues) often end up with too much agenda overlap with (possibly) competing groups active in the same policy domain (e.g., Johnson, 2006). On other occasions, they may opt to join the bandwagon and focus their efforts on an issue that is getting a lot of attention from other groups (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; see also Scott, 2013).

The policy context characterizing a particular issue is also likely to play an important role. As regards the political opportunity structure, both favorable and unfavorable conditions could be important triggers to take political action (Austen-Smith & Wright, 1994; Kingdon, 1984; Kollman, 1998). While the likelihood of a policy win and the presence of government allies is likely to encourage lobbying activities (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009), a group may also need to counteract policy developments that go against their preferences. In that case they may lobby for the status quo by engaging in "negative lobbying" through questioning the feasibility and the effectiveness of the formulated policy proposal (McKay, 2012). Lastly, issue-specific features, salience in particular, are known to strongly shape lobbying behavior (see Hanegraaff & Berkhout, 2018; Rasmussen, Carroll, & Lowery, 2014; Smith, 2000) and are therefore likely to co-determine prioritization processes. Attention from political or media elites (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2011; Binderkrantz et al., 2014), recent events (Cobb & Elder, 1983), or popularity among the general public (e.g., Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018) can convince groups to push an issue up their agenda.

Table 1. Five Drivers of Issue Prioritization

Drivers	Considerations
Internal responsiveness	Are mission and member/donor preferences aligned with this issue?
Policy capacities	Has the group the resources and skills to advance the issue?
Niche-seeking	Are other groups (not) working on this issue?
Political opportunity structure	Are political conditions (un)favorable to advancing the issue?
Issue salience	Are key audiences (government, media, public) attentive to the issue?

Source: Adapted from Halpin et al. (2018).

A survey of over 300 Australian groups demonstrated that groups generally consider all these different drivers as relevant, confirming the multidimensional nature of the process of issue prioritization. This is a relevant finding. Even though the literature on interest organizations has long acknowledged the inherent tensions groups face (e.g., Schmitter & Streeck, 1999; see also Berkhout, 2013), the strong emphasis on professionalization and effective lobbying in recent decades has raised concerns that groups have become too focused on their political environment and less responsive to the demands of their members. However, if the relative differences between the drivers are examined closely, factors related to internal responsiveness are considered somewhat more important. In particular, considerations related to the preferences of members and the mission of the organization are considered very relevant. Elements related to the political opportunity structure, such as the likelihood of victory and the presence of allies, scored considerably lower. This is somewhat surprising, as the presence of (political) allies is considered a key predictor of potential influence (Baumgartner et al., 2009). At the same time, these findings align with the view that political activities do not (only) aim to shape policy decisions but also seek to send signals to a group's constituency. If members expect a group to act, it might do so, even if the chances of having any impact are slim (Maloney, Jordan, & McLaughlin, 1994). Concerns about organizational survival and maintenance sometimes carry more weight than particular policy objectives and the likelihood of shaping public policy (Lowery, 2007). Most importantly, based on these findings, the portrayal of groups as either member- or policy-focused seems to paint an inaccurate picture. If anything, groups actively and consciously try to balance multiple internal and external considerations. For civil servants, there are important lessons here. If a key part of their role in the context of policymaking is managing relations with key stakeholders—even "reverse lobbying"—then their efforts (and the success of those efforts) are likely to be shaped by the complex calculations of the groups themselves.

These findings resonate with classic work on interest groups, which already highlighted that groups often play to two audiences, their constituency (logic of membership) and policymakers (logic of influence) (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999). Hence, in their political engagement, groups are expected to be conscious of membership preferences as well as (changing) political conditions and societal events (which does not imply that all groups perform this balancing exercise in a similar way). Likewise, the policy agenda of a group is likely to reflect both proactive and reactive considerations. This was already highlighted in the seminal work of Kingdon (1984). While he argues that "without the prospect of an open window, participants slack off. They are unwilling to invest their time, political capital, energy and other resources in an effort that is unlikely to bear fruit" (pp. 175–176), he also emphasizes that political actors need to make investments in order to be prepared when policy windows are opening (p. 177). Whereas most interest groups that frequently engage in lobbying activities will surely respond to policy initiatives of concern to them, several of them also devote considerable staff time to developing (multi-) annual working plans, developing policy positions, and monitoring policy developments in a broad range of policy domains (Halpin & Fraussen, 2017). These are critical activities and moments when groups "set" their policy agenda in a more proactive fashion.

The Bureaucracy and Issue Prioritization?

In this article, the relations between bureaucrats and interest groups have been addressed and related to how groups prioritize issues for political action. Moving the focus to the receiving end of this interaction, the civil servants, one might reasonably wonder how they determine policy priorities. While the literature on political agenda setting has expanded considerably in since the turn of the century, the possible role of bureaucrats in these processes, and how they allocate their attention and process input from external stakeholders, has not received much scholarly attention. Moreover, as argued by Baekgaard, Mortensen, and Bech Seeberg (2018, p. 239), while

> the public administration literature has been dominated by questions about how politicians can control the bureaucracy's application and implementation of laws … much less scholarly attention is devoted to the influence of the bureaucracy on the content and composition of the policy agenda at the front end of the process.

As a result of this strong focus on the back end, policy implementation, there is limited knowledge on how civil servants "filter information and generate alternatives to political decision-makers at the front end of the policy process (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Workman, 2015)" (Baekgaard et al., 2018, p. 240; see also Workman et al., 2009). This filtering role can relate to several activities, such as deciding which external stakeholders are granted access (e.g., Braun, 2012), assessing the credibility of the information they provide (e.g., Doberstein, 2017), prioritizing certain administrative tasks (e.g., Gilad, 2015), or selecting and excluding policy alternatives (Öberg, Lundin, & Thelander, 2015).

In recent years, scholars have started to tackle these important questions (e.g., Baekgaard et al., 2018; Bark & Bell, 2019; Gilad, 2015; Öberg et al., 2015). For instance, Baekgaard et al. (2018) analyzed the relation between characteristics of the bureaucracy and the government agenda at the local level in Denmark. They conclude that as the share of administrative professionals within the bureaucracy increases, the policy agenda becomes larger and more diverse. However, they also find that this effect is mitigated by the professionalization and level of involvement of elected politicians in the policymaking process via standing committees. Therefore, they expect that "a professionalized bureaucracy might be an important substitute to a well-developed and highly specialized committee system, assuring that otherwise neglected issues actually enter the decision agenda of the political assembly (p. 242)." Work on the prioritization processes of bureaucratic leaders in higher education also demonstrates how institutional factors, such as administrative capacity and the specific task environment (e.g., the selectivity in determining the served population and ownership of the institution), shifted the ranking of competing priorities (Bark & Bell, 2019). Furthermore, in addition to these contextual factors, civil servants may also exclude certain policy options or alternatives based on their "political feasibility," which in some cases carries more weight than considerations about their economic or technical constraints (Öberg et al., 2015).

The work of Gilad (2015) also provides useful insights into why civil servants may prioritize some tasks and goals above others (for a discussion of how elected officials prioritize goals, see Christensen, Dahlmann, Mathiasen, Moynihan, & Petersen, 2018). Focusing on the attention allocation of public agencies, she argues that these organizations become more sensitive to their external environment when they have multiple identities or a high degree of goal ambiguity (see Chun & Rainey, 2005, p. 535), whereas agencies with a clear identity and prioritization of tasks are much less sensitive to pressures from the public and the broader political environment. Here, strong parallels with interest groups emerge, as a stronger institutionalization of processes for the development of policy positions also enables them to engage with policymakers in a more proactive and consistent way and ensures higher sensitivity to the preferences of their members and the organization's mission (Halpin & Fraussen, 2017).

In sum, these studies indicate that organizational characteristics matter for understanding processes of issue prioritization within both interest groups and public agencies. They shape the nature of the agenda of these organizations and institutions, and they co-determine the extent to which both interest group leaders and civil servants are sensitive to demands in their external environment, and how they balance these pressures with the preferences of their constituency or political principals. While this balancing exercise will always be challenging to intermediary organizations, uneven attention to key public tasks or constituency concerns could have important democratic implications, such as "overlooking significant problems and consequent policy failure" (Gilad, 2015, p. 594; see also Gilad, Alon-Barkat, & Weiss, 2018). We concur with Öberg et al. (2015) that "a focus on the stage in which policy alternatives are analyzed, produced and presented to politicians is likely to improve policy design and, consequently, strengthen democracy and produce better policies" (p. 111). To better understand these processes, future research on issue prioritization and public decision-making would benefit from a more integrated approach that considers prioritization practices of both interest groups and civil servants.

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