RESEARCH ARTICLE

The representative capacity of interest groups: explaining how issue features shape membership involvement when establishing policy positions

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Abstract

Interest groups are key intermediary actors that communicate societal interests and preferences to public officials. Given public officials' reliance on interest groups' input in public policy processes, it is essential to understand how groups establish policy positions and assess the democratic nature of this process. Focusing on the leadership perspective, this article examines how interest groups involve their membership base in the process of defining their policy positions. The article relies on qualitative data from interviews with the leaders of interest groups active at the EU level and the statutes of these organizations. The findings show that the nature of policy issues under discussion and unequal resources of members lead to biased membership involvement in policy position-taking. While leaders are aware of these dynamics, their efforts to mitigate unequal participation seem limited, which raises questions about the representative potential of interest groups and the legitimacy of their policy claims.

Introduction

Contemporary governance systems are designed to promote an active engagement of external stakeholders. Public officials often consider interest groups as key intermediary actors as they provide relevant political and technical information that increases the legitimacy of decision-making processes. Since public officials frequently rely on the policy input of interest groups, it is essential to better understand how these groups establish policy positions and assess the democratic nature of this process. More specifically, insight into member involvement in policy position-taking of interest groups is imperative for assessing their contribution to effective and legitimate public governance.

Interest groups whose members are organizations (e.g., firms and NGOs) and/or associations (e.g., trade and professional associations, or federations of NGOs) are particularly relevant because they enjoy high degrees of access and influence among public officials at the national (Binderkrantz et al. 2015; Fraussen et al. 2015) and supranational level – particularly in the European Union (EU) (Schnyder 2016; Berkhout et al. 2017; Albareda and Braun 2019). By representing the interest of their organizational members, these interest groups perform a vital intermediary function at the EU level because they are expected to connect societal voices with policymakers (Rodekamp 2014; Schnyder 2016; Kröger 2018). As a result of their representative nature and often sizable constituency, these interest groups can contribute to an efficient and legitimate policy process that also facilitates policy implementation (Junk 2019). Therefore, it is critical to assess how these groups involve their members in the process of internally establishing policy positions.

A key assumption behind the democratic and political importance of interest groups is that they act in the common interests of their members and accurately represent their views and preferences (Chapman and Lowndes 2014; Rajwani et al. 2015). As noted by Dunleavy (1991, p. 20), the representation narrative of interest groups is often based on the idea that "no group leader can publicly represent members' interests without regular and open procedures for gauging their views" (cited in Halpin 2006). This implies that, if groups have an aggregating function and aim to pursue the interests of members, those members should be involved in decision-making processes and able to influence it (Halpin 2006; Bolleyer and Correa 2020). However, the process of involving members when establishing policy positions is rather complex and often suffers from collective action problems (Van Deth and Maloney 2012; De Bruycker et al. 2019). Not all members are equally capable and willing to participate in internal decision-making processes and share their viewpoints, and this challenges interest groups' ability to fulfill their "transmission belt" function (Greenwood and Webster 2000; Rodekamp 2014; Kröger 2018). Moreover, previous work has highlighted trends toward professionalization, which often implies (more) limited involved of membership (e.g., Jordan and Maloney 1997; Albareda 2020b). At the same time, other work demonstrates continued member-focused orientation of groups (Heylen et al. 2020; Fraussen et al. 2021).

In this complex process of member involvement, group leaders are central actors who can stimulate collective action among the members and steer toward policy positions that avoid "politics of the lowest common denominator" (Rodekamp 2014 p. 188). As argued by Bolleyer and Weiler (2018), the relationship between leaders and members is crucial for the maintenance of interest groups as collective actors because they reconcile the (different) interests and views of members with the preferences and demands from policymakers (Salisbury 1969; Walker 1983). Consequently, this study focuses on the perspective of the leaders of interest groups, as they have a crucial organizational and political task in making "choices about who to represent and how to represent them" (Han et al. 2011 p. 54). A key task regarding representation involves establishing policy positions and deciding on how members are engaged in this process, a decision that is partly determined by statutes of the organization and to a large extent guided and shaped by the leadership of the group. Hence, by focusing on the perspective of the leader we gain insights on how

groups involve their members in position-taking processes as well as the different strategies group leaders implement when establishing these policy positions with their members. Importantly, in this study, we complement this leadership perspective with an analysis of formal organizational processes, as these also provide valuable insight into the formal procedures that shape the involvement of members in position-taking processes.

In summary, this article examines the varying ways of interest groups' member involvement in the process of establishing policy positions. We focus specifically on the role of two factors that have been widely acknowledged in the literature, yet not taken into account to specifically assess member involvement in position-taking processes: issue features and membership inequalities. Empirically, the article combines insights from interviews with the leadership of prominent supranational interest groups mobilized at the EU level with information from official group documents, such as their statutes and by-laws. Our findings show that the nature of policy issues under discussion and unequal resources of members lead to biased member involvement in position-taking. While leaders are aware of these dynamics, their efforts to mitigate unequal participation seem limited, which raises questions about the representative potential of interest groups and the legitimacy of their policy claims.

Establishing policy positions through member involvement

This article examines member involvement in establishing policy positions by clarifying and assessing the factors that (could) shape this process and by addressing the consequences of the different ways of involvement. We rely here on a broad conceptualization of our outcome variable (i.e., membership involvement in policy position-taking) by focusing on how members participate in internal processes of establishing policy positions (for similar approaches, see Berkhout et al. 2021). More specifically, we examine the involvement of members at their own initiative, as well as the leadership actions and organizational processes that promote (or suppress) member involvement in position-taking processes. Our conceptualization of member involvement is aligned with previous studies that consider "self-inclusion" and "opportunity structure" to comprehensively understand membership involvement (Ansell et al. 2020).

In the following sections, we develop a theoretical argument that highlights how variation in issue-level features and membership inequalities shape the process of member involvement. We specifically focus on the role of group leaders in this process, and the different approaches they may implement to facilitate member involvement in this process.

Issue features

The first dimension that shapes involvement of members in the establishment of policy positions concerns issue features. The severity of the collective action problems that interest groups experience depends strongly on the nature of the policy issue on which they seek to mobilize politically. Issue-level features have been extensively analyzed when studying mobilization, strategies, access, and influence of

interest groups (Dür and de Bièvre 2007; Bernhagen et al. 2015; Klüver et al. 2015; Beyers et al. 2018). Previous research also demonstrates that issues are differently perceived by members and consequently affect the internal dynamics and processes of establishing policy positions (Birkland 1998; Smith 2000; Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Beyers 2008; Rasmussen 2015; De Bruycker et al. 2019; Fraussen et al. 2020). More specifically, Schnyder (2016) studies "which issues figure most prominently in the umbrellas' work, and how well they mirror the priorities of the constituency" and finds that issues of high importance to (some) members are not always sufficiently addressed by umbrella groups. Relatedly, Strolovitch (2006) examines which policy issues are prioritized within interest groups by distinguishing between majority issues, disadvantaged-subgroup issues, and advantaged-subgroup issues. She finds that issues affecting advantaged members are better represented by the group than those affecting disadvantaged members.

Building upon and to complement these approaches, we focus on how group leaders perceive and assess the (different) interests and preferences of their members. The nature of the policy issue may have different implications for members. Hence, the process of reaching common positions within interest groups will be affected by the (expected) effects that policy issues will have on (different segments within) the membership base of the group. To capture the potential role of issue-level features, we build upon the seminal work of Smith (2000), who distinguishes three types of policy issues: particularistic, conflictual, and unifying policy issues. While the research of Smith is focused on the USA Chamber of Commerce, we believe his issue typology can be translated and applied to all types of interest groups that face challenges of involving members and representing their preferences.

More specifically, in particularistic issues "only small subgroups of companies or industries pursue their own specific interest without involving the rest of business" (Smith 2000 p. 13). That is, only a subset of organizational members is directly affected by a policy issue and thus only they become involved in internal group processes. Secondly, conflictual issues (labeled as "controversial issues") generate tensions within the group. Conflicts, according to Smith (2000 p. 14), "arise because of differing profit rates across faction of capital." That is, when policy outputs can generate winners and losers among the members of the group, we can expect political struggles among actively involved members that oppose each other. This is aligned with Lowi's (1972) categorization of policies and particularly with the idea of redistributive (and also regulative) policies that generate winners and losers. Lastly, in unifying issues "diverse firms and industries can stand together" and advance a single position, forming a cohesive front (Smith 2000 p. 16). This type of issue is also referred as consensus issues (Cohen 1999) or majority issues (Strolovitch 2006), as they affect all members relatively equally.

We expect that member involvement in unifying and particularistic issues will be a rather straightforward process for interest groups and their leaders. In particularistic issues, only those that are affected by a policy issue will participate, whereas the rest of the members will remain silent. The role of leaders here is to reach out to those members that are potentially affected by the particularistic issue and facilitate their participation in the position-taking process. In unifying issues,

members are also expected to participate widely and easily reach a policy position with no (or limited) intervention of the leader.

In contrast, we expect an active involvement of members with opposing interests in controversial issues. As highlighted by Gause (2022 p. 260), when members have intense issue preferences on an issue, they are more willing to incur collective action costs related to their involvement. These situations might require a more active role of group leaders as they have to ensure that everyone has an equal voice, facilitate the interaction process, monitor the discussion, and act as an honest broker between these members with conflicting interests, in order to reach agreements and establish a specific policy position (Ansell and Gash 2008). Alternatively, group leaders may promote a process of "selective activation" or engage in an "avoidance strategy." The former implies that the leader "selective includes members in order to increase the probability of a successful mediation" (Ansell et al. 2020). In the latter situation, the leader excludes or avoids those issues that generate conflict among members in order to keep the consensus-oriented approach of interest groups intact (Rodekamp 2014). That is, they actively suppress member involvement by dropping the issue from the organizational agenda.

Membership inequalities

Aligned with previous research, we theorize that internal inequalities have important implications for the representative capacity of interest groups (Salisbury 1969; Walker 1983; Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Ansell and Gash 2008; Barnett 2013; Johansson and Lee 2014; Kröger 2018). Based on classic and contemporary work on interest groups and civil society organizations, we formulate two expectations on how inequalities among members – in terms of resources or capacities – may affect their ability to participate and engage in position-taking processes. Firstly, following a power-dynamic approach, we argue that the membership involvement and power within interest groups will be "taken over by those who can constantly commit themselves and the others will fall behind (Alter 1998 p. 269)" (Rodekamp 2014). Accordingly, the perspectives and interests of poorly endowed members are less likely to be taken into account within the group (Schlozman et al. 2010; Fischer 2012). Monitoring EU public policy and being able to provide quality input to the group requires certain capacities that not all organizational members have. For instance, members with little staff, funding, and from remote areas of Europe might face more difficulties to monitor EU policies and provide sensible input. Johansson and Lee (2014) highlight this difficulty when noting that members of EU interest groups face important barriers to full participation, such as "language barriers and lack of resources and expert knowledge in the issues related to EU politics". As a consequence, and as observed by Strolovitch (2006 p. 894), "issues affecting advantaged subgroups receive considerable attention regardless of their breadth of impact, whereas issues affecting disadvantaged subgroups do not." In order to address this equity problem and ensure the involvement of *all* members in the position-taking process, the role of the leadership is to facilitate and encourage the involvement of less resourceful members, for instance by providing them with sufficient information and guidance to develop an informed position on the topic under discussion. In this scenario, leaders could

commit to a positive strategy of empowerment and representation of weaker or disadvantaged members (Ansell and Gash 2008).

In contrast, building on the literature on interest groups coalitions, we can expect that more resourceful organizational members will decide to free-ride and voice their preferences individually because they have fewer incentives to cooperate (e.g., Beyers and De Bruycker 2017; Junk 2020). According to this perspective, the role of interest groups could be a weapon of the weak (in political and financial terms) and members who perceive themselves as weaker than other organizational members will increase cooperation (Hanegraaff and Pritoni 2019). In other words, resourceful members are expected to be less involved than less resourceful members in the process of establishing policy positions. Consequently, the role of the leadership of interest groups is to make sure that more resourceful members remain involved in the organization and collaborate with less resourceful members to come up with a joint position, rather than choosing to bypass the group and lobby alone.

Research design

We examine how interest groups involve their members when establishing policy positions with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with the organizational and political leadership of thirty-two supranational interest groups active at the EU level. An exploratory approach relying on in-depth interviews is highly suitable considering our central research question and the scarcity of previous work on this particular topic. Our study builds upon previous studies that take a rather similar approach to studying dynamics within civil society organizations (e.g., Sanchez Salgado 2014; Garcia 2015). We complement our interview data with information from official documents, such as groups' statutes and by-laws. These documents provide additional information on the internal governance of the group and improve the validity and reliability of the findings (Yin 2018).

Case selection and sampling

The cases included are purposively selected because they represent a theoretically interesting exemplar of a phenomenon of interest, namely how interest groups' members are involved in establishing policy positions (Nowell and Albercht 2018). More specifically, we study supranational interest groups mobilized at the EU level, identified as key actors in EU policymaking system (Bouwen 2004).

First, we applied a purposive sampling strategy designed to select "prominent" interest groups (Halpin and Fraussen 2017; Stavenes and Ivanovska Hadjievska 2021). Hence, the groups examined have been mentioned in an interview with public officials of the Commission as *key* external stakeholders when formulating and developing EU regulations and directives (see Rodekamp 2014 for a similar approach in selecting cases).[1] We selected prominent interest groups to ensure that

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[1]This sampling strategy is embedded within a larger project focused on stakeholder engagement in regulatory governance. We conducted interviews with 32 out of the 58 interest groups invited to participate because they were mentioned by interviewed public officials of the European Commission as "key actors" when developing a set or EU regulations and directives passed between 2015–2016.

groups are closely involved in policymaking and thus often face collective action issue of having to engage members and contributing to the policymaking process. In addition, assessing how these groups involve their members is normatively important to unveil the representative nature of those interest groups that EU officials perceive as the most relevant interlocutors when formulating policy proposals.

Second, the interest groups included in the study have individual organizations (e.g., firms, NGOs, think tanks and foundations) and/or associations (e.g., regional or national trade and professional associations as well as federations of NGOs) as formal members (Albareda 2020a).[2] In that regard, the groups considered are likely to apply a logic of representation and ensure that the preferences of their members are reflected in their communications with public officials (Halpin 2006). That means that individual companies and groups representing individuals are not considered in this study. In fact, more than three-quarters of stakeholders mentioned as *key* by public officials are interest groups composed of organizations and/or associations (see Albareda et al. 2023), thus confirming previous findings that highlight the political relevance of this type of groups (Berkhout et al. 2017; Albareda and Braun 2019). Nonetheless, this research choice means that the results of this study cannot be generalized among individual-based interest groups, particularly if these are cause or solidarity groups where the involvement of members is not that relevant (for a discussion, see Halpin 2006).

The cases included vary in terms of group type, 23 of them (i.e., 72%) are business groups, such as the European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations, while 9 (i.e., 28%) are citizen groups, such as the European Patients' Forum. This imbalance reflects the dominance of economic interests at the EU level. To explore whether member involvement varies across groups type (Berkhout et al. 2021), our quotes distinguish between business and citizen groups.

Appendix A and B present an overview of other relevant features related to the interest groups examined (see Supplementary file).

Interview and document data

The thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted between March and December 2019 (see Appendix C in the Supplementary file for a complete description of the interview protocol and interview questions). The interviewees are experienced representatives (organizational and political leaders) of the interest groups included in the study. More specifically, the interviewees occupied the following positions within the organization at the time of the interview: president, (executive) director, secretary-general or similar (n = 12); policy coordinator, director of policy or similar (n = 9); team leader or director of group's unit

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[2]As an example, a group that includes "organizations" could be the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association (ACEA), which represents 14 major Europe-based automobile manufacturers (e.g., BMW, Hyundai, Mercedes, Toyota, Ford, etc.). But it can also be "Seas At Risk", which includes NGOs, think tanks and foundations from Europe working on maritime conservation issues. On the other hand, examples of interest groups that include associations as members are the "European Banking Federation" that aggregates national federations of banks from Europe or the "European Consumer Organization" (BEUC) that gathers national consumer's associations from Europe.

(n = 11). Despite these different positions, we assume that all these leaders are equally capable of reporting how members are generally involved in policy position processes, as in practice, they take up a very similar policy role within their organizations. On average, interviewees have worked in the organization they represent for 10 years.

We combined closed and open-ended questions to obtain an in-depth understanding of the factors explaining member involvement. The interview transcripts were analyzed with Atlas.ti and coded by the authors through an iterative process (Miles and Huberman 1994). A first step in the coding process was to select those passages where interviewees reflected on the involvement of members during the establishment of policy positions. This overarching code served to obtain a general perspective of how group leaders involve members in the process of establishing policy positions, and constitutes the first descriptive part of the findings. To conduct a more detailed analysis of how interest groups involve members, we rely on the two dimensions presented in the theoretical section (i.e., issue features and membership inequalities) which serve as additional sensitizing concepts (Boeije 2009) (see Appendix D in the Supplementary file). All the relevant quotes in the transcripts were coded and subsequently confronted with the sensitizing concepts in order to assess if the processes of involving members when establishing policy positions could be related to any of the two dimensions.

As noted, the evidence from the interviews was complemented with a systematic document analysis (i.e., statutes, by-laws, and other official documents available online) of the 32 interest groups examined. These documents give an overview of the internal organization of the group and the formal participation opportunities of members. Although these official documents clarify basic organization rules and routines related to member involvement, the actual involvement in establishing policy position cannot be retrieved from official documents and might vary on a case-by-case basis, which clarifies the value and complementary nature of the interview data.

Findings
Issue-level features

Even though many interest groups indicate that members are actively involved in establishing policy positions and that common positions are easily reached, almost all interviewees also highlight that the extent to which members are involved in establishing policy positions depends on the issue at stake and its importance to their members. Specifically, 24 interviewees explicitly state that member involvement and the process of establishing policy decisions is contingent on the issue that is being discussed. In that regard, the distinction between particularistic, controversial, and unifying policy issues becomes particularly relevant.

Particularistic issues
Interviewees highlight that many issues are rather narrow and only attract the attention of a minority of members who tend to share similar preferences and positions. In this case, a subset of members that are knowledgeable and affected by

the policy issue at stake is actively involved in the process of establishing policy positions. As noted by one respondent "generally speaking I would say the members that are affected by a particular issue would be very involved" (Business_group#29). But the process of involving members is not always the same across interest groups.

We identify two mechanisms through which this involvement takes place. On the one hand, one institutionalized approach in which those members that are part of a formalized working group will be taking the policy position under the supervision of group leaders. On the other hand, a more ad-hoc approach that is driven by leadership's perception of which members might have an interest in the issue and relevant input to provide, and also by membership's desire to participate in the process.

The first mechanism is a more formalized way to involve a subset of members with a stake on the issue. Interest groups establish a division of work in formal working groups or committees that gather members with a particular interest in certain policy domains or topics. This formalization is reflected in the statutes of interest groups. These working groups are responsible for discussing the policy issue and coming up with a policy position (usually based on consensus). The official documents reviewed also clarify that the leaders of the group (e.g., president, director, or secretary-general) can be present in every meeting of the working group to monitor them and ensure alignment between the organization's objectives and the position of the working group (e.g., Statutes_business_group#01; Statutes_business_group#04; Statutes_citizen_group#06; Statutes_citizen_group#07; Statutes_business_group#21). In that regard, the position of working groups is often the one adopted by the organization, sometimes after the approval of the executive bodies of the group, yet without the specific authorization of all the members.

> *Let's say that in technical policies the relevant working group will work out policy positions, which will then come to me specifically. And I will run it by the executive committee and/or the steering group which validates the position.* (Business_group#04)

> *We have several internal working groups where members together with us [the leadership] can participate on specific issues.* (Citizen_group#02)

> *So, [policy positions] are drafted and agreed at the working group level. Then, depending on the topic, it may or may not need approval at the executive committee and the board. It's not always the case, (...) only for the more political issues.* (Business_group#33)

The second mechanism is more informal and promoted either by the leaders or the members themselves. That is, member involvement is often encouraged by the leadership of the organization, who actively reach out to those members that will be affected by a concrete policy issue or that are knowledgeable about the topic and thus can provide valuable policy expertise.

> *"[Member involvement in establishing policy positions] really depends on who is going to be impacted by the policy. If the policy is about X, we involve members working on X to have the first draft'."* (Business_group#10)

"(...) we're not going to send [a policy position] around to the entire membership if most of them find it irrelevant. You don't want to spam them either. We're working on so many things at the same time. (...) So, we try to only communicate with those that we think might be interested in it." (Business_group#35)

However, members also self-select which battles are worth fighting and strategically decide when to engage in establishing policy positions. Importantly, this remains a rather top-down approach, as it is not the members who actively raise policy issues to the leadership. Instead, the leadership identifies issues and communicates with the whole membership base, yet only a subset responds. One group leader explicitly acknowledged this dynamic:

"We try to involve members all the time (...), but in the end of the day it is about self-selection and what matters is whether the policy is relevant for their work (...). So, we have members who focus on tobacco issues, for instance. On this issue, they are extremely involved, but they are not at all involved in anything related to policy on diets or in food. But when it comes to tobacco, they are extremely involved." (Citizen_group#26)

In these rather informal procedures, the leadership tries to involve the whole membership base when approving the final decision. That is, once the initial policy position is agreed among a subset of members that have a direct stake on the topic, this position is shared with the rest of the group for approval.

Controversial issues

Group leaders note that in some instances different factions of members have high stakes and divisive positions, which leads to more active involvement of members and generates collective action problems. These are the controversial issues, which according to the interviewees are the exception rather than the norm because their members tend to have rather similar preferences. However, in some (exceptional) issues these preferences are not aligned and conflicts between members may arise. While the occurrence of controversial issues is rare, they are difficult to resolve and thus require substantial effort and time from the group leadership. As noted by one interviewee, in "85% of the cases we have a very easy consensus, but 15% of the policy issues we discuss are difficult or very difficult, they take our time and energy" (Business_group#25).

The limited incidence of controversial issues is not coincidental. The leaders and the group secretariat often play a role in managing the position-taking processes to avoid potential conflicts among members.

This (position) was based on consensus and this worked out because the secretariat was not a member, it was a neutral service provider which helped avoid potential conflicts, and come up with solutions amongst members to move forward. (Business_group#11)

What is more, some organizations anticipate the problems derived from controversial issues and categorize policy issues based on the conflict they might generate, for instance by distinguishing "prohibited topics"; "topics that might present a problem"; and "topics that do not present a problem" (Statutes_citizen_group#02). Other groups highlight that staff members (i.e., the secretariat) should identify topics that are highly sensitive among members, as they relate to laws concerning economic competition (Statutes_business_group#04). In that regard, interest groups and their leaders often implement an avoidance strategy by filtering out topics that might generate conflict among the members.

Aside from this selection bias against controversial issues, the extent to which members have different and conflicting perspectives on policy issues leads to a more active involvement of members seeking to protect their interests and, importantly, it sometimes impedes reaching common policy positions. Controversial issues lead to collective action problems because they generate winners and losers within the membership of the organization. They can also affect the activities and even the identity of organizational members. In this case, members with a stake are very involved to make sure that the group does not communicate positions that go against their interests.

> When you have a policy issue that puts members of a particular country or a group of countries into a disadvantaged position [in comparison to members in other countries], then members are more involved and it is more difficult to reach positions. (Business_group#33)

Reaching a common position might be particularly problematic in controversial issues since "[members] are not going to give up their fundamental interests" (Citizen_group#26); or, as noted by another respondent "any discussion that involves basic principles has the potential to become very difficult to come to an agreement" (Business_group#27).

Consequently, group leaders have the challenging task of trying to reconcile opposing interests among highly involved members. This is a very delicate balancing exercise that leaders confront with different strategies. In most of the cases, leaders try to reach agreements or consensual positions that allow the group to position itself vis-à-vis policymakers. However, that is not always possible. In that regard, six interviewees explicitly mention the option of dropping the issue from the agenda if no agreement can be reached. This signals the power of members and their ability to impede position taking if they disagree with the formulated policy preference.

> One of the issues we have not got any consensus is complementary therapies or what is called alternative medicine for some people because there is simply no consensus on that in our membership, so we don't comment on that. (Citizen_group#02)

> When there is no consensus, we don't do anything, so we don't move forward (Business_group#30)

As an alternative to the previous extreme solutions (i.e., consensus or dropping the issue), four additional leaders mention the possibility of producing partial

(majoritarian) positions that represent subgroups within the group. However, as shown in the first quote below, the primary intention of leaders still is to reach agreements among the conflicting parties.

> *When there are conflicting perspectives among certain members, we take the discussion away from a bigger group. We get them on the phone or in a room at the same time, or separately. And if they still cannot agree then we have to make a decision on whether to give up that point and just deleted from the response or, what I've done in the past, to show both sides. So, you basically put in a response "some of the members think 'A' other members think 'B'."* (Business_group#35)

> "For policy issues that are very difficult to manage (in terms of conflicting positions), we have studied the possibility to go for a majority position. A position that reflects the majority of the association, but we have then the possibility to state who is in disagreement with the position. That we use very very rarely, but it happens." (Business_group#27)

Unifying issues

As discussed, unifying issues are conceived as consensus issues on which members easily reach an agreement on the group's policy position. As implied in the previous section on "controversial issues," "unifying issues" are the norm among most of the interest groups examined, rather than the exception. In that regard, the great majority of interviewees stated that their group "easily" or "very easily" establishes joint policy positions with their members. Interviewees note that, despite this easiness, unifying issues still require some work to ensure a common position: *[Members] feel that it is important to reach consensus and they work around it. They work their differences around.* (Business_group#04).

In contrast to controversial issues, where leaders act as brokers and reconcile different positions, here the role of leaders is more limited as members already agree on the position of the group. Hence, group leaders do not experience significant challenges when establishing policy positions. Often, the leaders draft an initial position, which they regularly do in collaboration with their members, to subsequently discuss the position among all the member to reach an agreement based on consensus.

Regarding member involvement, the shared perspective on unifying policy issues leads to a less intense engagement of members, particularly compared with their engagement in the context of controversial policy issues. Nonetheless, interviewees still rely on their members' input and preferences when developing such policy positions, either on their own initiative or because it is established in the statutes.

> *The development of a policy, so the drafting of the wording, the know-how and the preparation of the dossier is based on the input of our members and the communication with our members.* (Business_group#21)

> *We have the formal consultation process when we develop a new position on a new policy topic. So we are obliged to consult with our members.* (Citizen_group#02)

At the same time, despite the intentions of group leaders to involve the full membership base, members are not obliged to participate in position-taking processes, and some are (much) more actively engaged than others.

> *[Members] are officially consulted to a huge extent. But well, they're not obliged [to participate]. So, I think [members] are considerably involved.* (Business_group#18)

> *Many of [our members] just you know, don't participate. They expect you [the leadership] to take care of things.* (Citizen_group#02)

This point concerning the unequal involvement of members, even when working on unifying issues, brings us to our next set of findings, namely the role of resources and internal capacities of members.

Membership inequalities

The majority of respondents highlight that the involvement of members is very much dependent on the resources that members have available. More specifically, respondents noted that unequal resources among members had a big impact on the involvement of members in establishing policy positions. Importantly, our data indicates that 25 out of 32 interest groups report that their members have either "very different" or "different" resources, while the 7 remaining respondents indicated that the members have either "similar" or "very similar" resources. Additionally, 20 interviewees explicitly mentioned the unequal resources and capacities among members as a factor that affects their involvement in the process of establishing policy positions. Aligned with previous research in the field, group leaders clarified how poorly endowed members are less frequently involved in establishing policy positions, compared to more resourceful members (see for instance Barnett 2013; Kröger 2018).

> *Those [members] that can afford to monitor all those issues, then they can get actively involved in all or many of the policy positions. And this might be around 30 to 40% of our members. These are mostly the largest or more resourceful [members].* (Business_group#32)

> *We have very resourceful members who have the resources to be actively involved, and also have very small members who just don't have the capacity to come to a workshop or whatever.* (Citizen_group#12)

Interestingly, this unbalanced representation based on the resources of members is in some cases institutionalized. More specifically, some interest groups decide on the voting weight of each member based on their contributions to the group, a practice we find among both business and citizen groups (e.g., Statutes_Citizen_group#07; Statutes_Business_group#21).

> *Full members contributing more than 5% of all member organizations contribution will have 5 votes, full members contributing less than 5% but more*

than 1% will have 3 votes, full members contributing less than 1% shall have 1 vote. (Statutes_Citizen_group#07)

Beyond these formal elements, the leaders present themselves as neutral (honest) brokers that receive and process members' information and try to ensure that groups' positions are not dominated by large members.

[Our] members try to influence us as well. But we [the leadership] try to act as a neutral receiver in a way, and also ensure that our positions are not dominated by certain [members]. (Business_group#01)

Despite presenting themselves as neutral receivers, the interviewees also state that they cannot do much about the internal participation bias, beyond occasionally reaching out to specific members.

"I am not going to babysit anybody. If [members] do not raise any issue [related to policy positions], then I will not do anything about it. Unless that I am aware of something. Then of course I would reach out to the members and check. But if I'm not aware and I'm not made aware, then I cannot do anything." (Business_group#33)

Overall, this unequal involvement has clear implications for the representative capacity of interest groups. The non-participation of less resourceful members might generate internal biases toward the preferences of more resourceful members. That is particularly problematic if we consider that several groups regard decisions as consensual even when some members remain silent: "We provide a platform for everyone to be engaged, if they don't engage, we consider that as approval of this" (Citizen_group#24). In other words, lowest common denominator and consensual positions might be exclusively based on input from resourceful organizations, neglecting the preferences of less resourceful organizations. The following quote illustrates this:

"If there is any member that maybe has more influence [when internally establishing policy positions], I think this will be due to their ability to be more present, and give more information, and provide more examples. By bringing more food to the table. So that's very normal. And that's not a thing that we resist. (...) Members that have more manpower, more examples to give, more technical abilities, and more technical expertise will be contributing more." (Business_group#04)

Discussion

At a general level, interest groups included in the study actively involve their members in establishing policy positions and, aligned with previous research, we observe that leaders of supranational interest groups have an important intermediary role (Beger 2002; Rodekamp 2014). More importantly, the interview

data also show the relevance of the two dimensions presented in the theory section affecting the unequal involvement of members in the process of establishing policy positions: issue features and member inequalities.

Our results indicate that the process of involving members when establishing policy positions is contingent on the type of policy issue under discussion. Particularistic issues, those that only affect a subset of members with high stakes and knowledge on the issue, have been highlighted before as an element affecting member involvement in position-taking processes (see, Smith 2000; Strolovitch 2007). In particularistic issues, the leadership (either via formalized or via ad-hoc processes) interacts with a subset of members with an interest in the policy issue. That is, in these issues, leaders often engage in "selective activation" strategies (Scharpf 1978) to obtain relevant input from those members that they consider relevant for the topic under discussion. Similar to previous investigations, we find that members are less engaged when the issue under discussion does not fall into one of the policy areas in which they have expertise and a direct stake (Rodekamp 2014). This observation is also related to the increasing specialization and professionalization of groups (for a discussion see Maloney 2015), who seek to supply technically sound information to policymakers. By exclusively involving members with high expertise and a direct stake in an issue, interest groups may see their encompassing representative function damaged, yet improve their ability to supply specialized knowledge in an efficient manner while still involving a subset of their members. Thus, aligned with previous research, we observe how providing technical knowledge through professionalized structures is not necessarily at odds with involving members (Heylen et al. 2020). Lastly, through this process the leaders bypass the time-consuming consensus-reaching procedure that frequently generates collective action problems (De Bruycker et al. 2019).

We observe that establishing policy positions is particularly challenging when interest groups deal with internally controversial issues that have different implications for subsets of members (Kröger 2018; De Bruycker et al. 2019). As expected, interest groups have mechanisms to circumvent the inclusion of this type of issues into their agendas – either formalized in their statutes or via the strategic management of the leader (Rodekamp 2014). Nonetheless, controversial issues exist, and their management demands time and effort due to the active involvement of members who see their interests threatened by other organizational members. As a consequence, group leaders have to engage in discussion with all the members that have a stake and try to reconcile different perspectives by embracing a honest broker role (Ansell and Gash 2008). Although reaching an agreement is the desired option, interviewees also acknowledge that in some instances they have to drop the issue from the agenda or produce partial positions that do not represent all the members within the group.

Regarding unifying issues, our findings indicate that groups easily establish their policy positions, implying that, in contrast to Smith (2000) results, these type of issues are the dominant ones among our sample of study. Several reasons may explain this easy consensus. Firstly, leaders are motivated to strategically select policy issues on which the members do not have different or conflicting positions and where consensus can easily be reached (Greenwood and Webster 2000). In fact, as noted above, some groups specify this avoidance strategy in their statutes by

noting that controversial issues cannot be included in the agenda (Rodekamp 2014). Secondly, leadership may strategically frame policy issues in a way that resonates better with their members and thus more easily gain their support. Group leaders have a central role in defining their members' interests at the EU level since, as noted by Barber (1950 p. 496), "constituents may not always be sure about their interests and need help with developing them" (see also, Rodekamp 2014 p. 188). When discussing "majority issues," Strolovitch (2006) also highlights how leaders intend to frame policy issues in a way that will be easily accepted by their membership base. Lastly, leaders not only consider an unanimous support for a position as a sign of consensus but also conclude that members are largely in agreement when there is no objection (i.e., when members abstain or do not participate by remaining silent) (Ahrne and Brunsson 2008 p. 124).

As regards the second feature, member inequalities, interviewees note that more resourceful members tend to dominate decision-making processes because they are more actively involved. Aligned with the power-dynamic approach introduced in the theory section, interest groups are often dominated by those resourceful members that can define their policy preferences and provide relevant information and expertise (Salisbury 1969; Walker 1983; Ahrne and Brunsson 2008; Barnett 2013; Johansson and Lee 2014; Kröger 2018). Ultimately, that means that power within an interest group can be exercised by those who can constantly commit themselves and that other members will fall behind (Alter 1998 p. 269; Barnett 2013). In contrast to the interest group coalition literature, group leaders highlight the importance of engaging and actively involving more resourceful organizations, while acknowledging the limited participation of less resourceful members.

Opposing our expectations, the role of leaders in that regard is rather passive (i.e., neutral receivers of information). They do not reach out to less resourceful members, they treat all of them as equal and, if someone does not participate, they take this silence as a green light. This limited involvement or even absence of less resourceful members does not seem to generate concerns among group leaders. Yet, as highlighted by Vieira (2020), silence is not necessarily indifference or assent with the preference advanced by the group. More specifically, the author argues that "empirical studies show that 'vocal' citizens are unlike most 'silent' counterparts in their socioeconomic status, and this difference is very likely to ground a difference in the interests seeking representation" (Schlozman et al. 2010; Vieira 2020). Considering this, the limited attention devoted by leaders to less resourceful and silent members is remarkable and requires more attention in future research.

Conclusion

This article examines the process of involving members in interest groups when establishing policy positions. Relying on documents and qualitative interviews with organizational and political leaders of supranational and prominent interest groups active at the EU level, we demonstrate that while members are generally involved establishing policy positions, variation in issue-level features and membership inequalities leads to biased participation of members. By paying particular attention to issue-level features and membership inequalities, this article provides a relevant

framework for future research studying member involvement in position-taking processes of interest groups.

Since we focus on interest groups active at the EU level whose members are organizations and/or associations, further research is needed to assess whether these findings also apply to other types of interest groups, such as groups that are not mobilized at the EU level, that have individuals as members, or that are not considered as prominent organizations by public officials. First, unlike national interest groups or those mobilized in federal systems, such as the USA, EU interest groups not only have to agree on their preferences but they also have to overcome national-based differences. Second, as succinctly noted by Jordan et al. (2004 p. 204), "[o]ne cannot assume that discussions of the membership of companies in trade bodies (. . .) are analogous to the decisions made by individuals about membership of cause or sectional groups." Consequently, future studies should assess whether our findings apply to individual-based interest groups. Additionally, we need to unpack whether there are different dynamics between interest groups that only have organizations as members versus umbrella groups that have associations as members – which have been treated interchangeably in this article yet might be subject to different dynamics (see Fraussen 2020). Third, our focus on prominent groups might have important implications. The interest groups included in this study might be "on top of public officials' minds" precisely because they are the ones that more easily produce policy positions. To become a prominent group among public officials, leaders should be able to produce and communicate policy positions. In that regard, our sample might be biased in favor of groups that easily reach consensus, which is precisely what makes them (among other things) prominent actors in policy processes. At the same time, given their relevance among public officials, these groups often have to formulate policy positions, also on issues that they consider less relevant or on which their members might have different interests and viewpoints. Future work should assess these assumptions and compare the process of establishing policy positions among prominent groups and policy outsiders. Lastly, our reliance on interview data with leaders is a key contribution of the article as it provides us with insights about the processes and rationales used when establishing policy positions. Nonetheless, leaders' responses might be biased as they try to present their organizations as well-functioning entities where most of the time members have similar preferences. As agenda-setters, the leaders may have an interest to downplay the level of internal disagreement. In that regard, future work should also take into account the perspectives and experiences of members in position-taking processes, ideally including members who vary on level of resources, preferences, and intensity of involvement.

As discussed in the introduction, policymakers value interest groups because of their intermediary role and their representative potential. This article demonstrates that the process of involving members to generate policy positions is not always a straightforward one (see also, Kröger 2018). Although controversial issues are the most difficult to resolve by the leaders, these issues are the ones receiving more attention in terms of member involvement. In particularistic issues, leaders often bypass or omit part of the membership base. Last, most of the groups examined here reach easy consensus among their members, yet this might be explained by strategic selection of issues and by the fact that non-participation is often accounted as

support. This brings us to our second factor, membership inequalities. Here we observe that less resourceful members might be underrepresented in these organizations as their voices and preferences are less likely to reach the ears of interest groups' leaders. That is, in the majority of the policy issues that interest groups address, there is a limited involvement of poorly endowed members. The leaders acknowledge this as a problem that affects member involvement in establishing policy positions, but their rather passive attitude in making sure that all members are equally involved and heard suggests that this is not a major organizational focus. In that regard, none of the leaders interviewed referred to the possibility of selectively engaging certain members by "providing structural incentives that make participation more attractive to those who are ordinarily less likely to participate in politics" (Fung 2006 p. 67).

From a leadership perspective, the varying roles implemented and identified here might be the most logical and pragmatic way to manage member involvement. As stated by Strolovitch (2007 p. 208), "not every organization can represent every constituent or potential constituent at all times, nor can organization flout the exigencies of organizational maintenance or focus exclusively on disadvantaged subgroups to the exclusion of majorities and advantaged groups." However, the inability to represent different members may lead to what is described as the "representational strain," where "some interests are better represented than others" (Schnyder 2016 p. 748 see also Rodekamp 2014; Kröger 2018). In other words, policy positions – even those that are characterized as "unifying issues" – might not always be representing all the members, particularly when interest groups have members that vary considerably in terms of resources.

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