

# INTEREST GROUPS BETWEEN AUTONOMOUS AND NATIONAL INTEREST

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**Abstract:** Whether approached from an empirical or theoretical scientific point of view, the concept of interest groups covers a reality that is extremely difficult to understand and define. Although the formation of interest groups is a phenomenon that is common to all societies and the term is constantly used in the public debate in the form of “interest groups”, “pressure groups” or “lobbies”, it shows various sociological, ideological and economic heterogeneous aspects. Interest groups can take many different forms (unions, professional, religious organizations, associations, collective movements, etc.). An interest group, to be considered as such, must rely on a permanent organization, which distinguishes it, for example, from a one-time protest movement or social movement. Analyzing interest groups means discovering the logic of the construction of these collectives and their causes, their modes of existence and their means of existence, also studying the repertoires and modalities of action that “they implement the constraints and possibilities shaped by the spaces in which they are inserted.

**Keywords:** interest groups, competing interests, lobbying, democracy, economic actors

**Field:** Social Sciences and Humanities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the broadest sense of the meaning of the term, the term interest group is defined as an entity that wants to represent the interests of a certain part of society in the public space. (Offerle, M. 1998, p.88) A similar definition is proposed by Sogurer Sabin. “In its broadest sense, the term “interest groups” refers to entities that want to represent the interests of a certain part of society in the public space. A more precise definition describes them as actors who try to influence the process of public policy development by formulating a position and asserting it before decision-makers, institutions and the general public.” (Saurugger, S.,2019, p.305-312) In a narrower understanding, an interest group is defined as a constituted organization that tries to influence political powers in a direction favorable to its interest. (Offerle, M, 1998, Ibid.p.25) While the first definition allows us to imagine the interest group as an actor who tries to influence not only the political powers, but also other groups or public opinion in general, the second definition puts more emphasis on the relationship that exists between political forces and a group. These two meanings that we find in national as well as in international or European contexts reveal the challenges that face any exercise in defining the term, challenges that essentially revolve around three elements: the term “interest”, the term “composite organization” and, finally, the influence exerted on the political powers. Interest groups, sometimes called pressure groups or lobbies, are understood, in a broad sense, as any organized group that tends to influence political choices and public authorities. Some authors define them more precisely as “groups and regroupings, actual or permanent, whose spokesmen act to promote, primarily or incidentally, the defense of social interests of any nature, in a constant debate about the delimitation and division of the work of political representation.” with the spokesmen of the political parties”. Lefebvre, R. (2017, pp.273-278),. In the broadest sense of the meaning, the term “interest groups” is understood as content that refers to entities that want to represent the interests of a certain part of society in the public space. A more precise definition describes them as actors who try to influence the process of public policy development by formulating a position and asserting it before decision-makers, institutions and the general public. Otherwise, public policy is a broad space that encompasses several domains, both horizontally (economy, finance, ecology, industry, social policy, politics) and vertically (local self-government, regional policy, central government), and thus also the domain of action of the interested parties. groups, i.e. lobby groups.

## 2. INTEREST GROUPS VERSUS COMPETING INTERESTS

They differ from political parties that seek to exercise power, while interest groups only seek to influence political parties. This does not mean that certain interest groups do not have privileged relations in certain political parties and some interest groups can be transformed into a party (eg. the English

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Labor Party from the trade unions...). Groups that represent the core of democracy Interest groups are formalized organizations (which distinguishes them from social movements), different from political parties and public administration, which can act both with political actors and in the public space Baeckelandt, S. (2022, 133, p.). These definitions emphasize the relationship between groups and public authorities, as well as the orientation of the groups' action towards the decision. The term originates from the work of 20th-century American political scientists, primarily Arthur Bentley (1908), David Truman (1954) and Robert Dahl (2005), who are tried to understand the place that organizations occupy in decision-making processes. . The term interest groups unites organizations that defend the interests of their members (unions, professional federations, etc.) and public interest groups (Berry, 1977), defending interests that exceed the interests of their members (around the environmental cause, for example.). From employers' unions to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), from professional federations to local associations, including associations of elected officials and large companies, interest groups cover organizations with resources (number of members, internal expertise, financial capital, networks, etc.) and repertoires of different actions, with varying degrees of access to public authorities or public space. Two types of action repertoire are distinguished in the literature. On the one hand, internal lobbying includes practices inside the political field: meetings, hearings, letters, studies, etc. pressure on public decision-makers: this includes the use of the media, a call to mobilize certain sections of society or even social media campaigns. NGO advocacy officers, public affairs officers or consultants, lobbyists form a population of political economic or other types of professionals with very different trajectories (Michel, 2005). A term attached to the imagination of lobbies has a bad press, accused of being at odds with the general interest and of being an instrument of the dominant in their control of political power (Lawrence, 2015). Thus, they are occasionally singled out as explanatory factors for certain political choices, although it is difficult to know the content of the practices of interest representatives: they act discreetly, in conditions that receive little publicity and are little valued by public institutions. If the press portrays them as (non)lawmakers, interest groups and their practices represent a part of society, which seems difficult to exclude from the decision. The participation of organizations is, in this sense, an essential democratic issue. (Saurugger, S. (2019, p. « Groupe d'intérêt »,) the entire text is from her the citizen on the margins of pluralist and neo-corporatist theories.

### 3. INTEREST GROUPS AT THE CENTER OF DEMOCRACY

Group theorists have classically relegated the participation of ordinary citizens to the margins of their work, focusing on the role of organizations as a conduit for the preferences and interests of the population. Pluralists (Dahl, R. A. (2005) thus limit the inclusive dimension of democracy to its capacity to integrate a plurality of interests. For these authors, the common good is the product of bargaining between competing interests, arbitrated by political elites. The functionalist tendency of pluralist theories (their tendency to justify the functioning of institutions) has been criticized by numerous authors, above all (Mankur, O. 1965) & Schattschneider, E. E. 2013), who describe a system of unbalanced interests in favor of the interests of the dominant. The participation of "ordinary" citizens is, for pluralists, sometimes limited to voting and their membership in collective organizations. Neo-corporatist authors (Philip Schmitter, Wolfgang Strick in the US by Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers) have abandoned competition between groups to focus on which groups can contribute to democracy. In the ideal type developed by P. Schmitter, citizens are part of a limited number of organizations recognized by the state. These organizations participate in the development of public policies that affect them. Researchers look at groups as a means of forming and aggregating citizens' preferences. From Rejecting to Including Groups in Deliberative Theories Deliberative theory, for its part, was partly constructed against 'lobby democracy'. Driven by strategic action (Habermas,) and identified as belonging to market space ( ), groups are depicted as obstacles to the search for reason in policy making. The risk is that they will try to monopolize the debate in favor of the interests they defend. If groups are tolerated in discussion arenas, it is only to provide participants with knowledge or to provide their point of view in a pluralistic and contradictory context (Manin, 2011). They usually do not participate in the discussion. More recently, the systemic turn in deliberative theories (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Parkinson, 2006) has tended to bring interest groups back into the fold of normative theories of democracy. Attempting to derive deliberative theory from forums reserved for ordinary citizens but far from power, de-liberalists are more open to the involvement of interest groups. Jane Mansbridge, (1992) was inspired by neo-corporatist work to emphasize the deliberative contribution of groups, both internally - groupthink has democratic virtues - and externally - groups participate in the formation of public opinion and contribute to political decision-making. It particularly emphasizes the capacity of groups to gather and shape citizens' preferences. It also highlights the fact that interest groups provide governments with

valuable information. However, an interest consultation system must limit the rent seeking (Mansbridge 1992) of interest groups, that is, their tendency to seek benefits for their members.

#### 4. THE AUTONOMY OF THE INTERESTS OF THE LOBBY GROUPS IN THE EU

In the works on European integration, studies on interest groups, ie lobby groups, were not the subject of greater scientific interest, and their number in the EU was not very large. they abound, on the contrary. For a long time, economic exchanges treated everything as the basis of European integration, whether from the point of view of the member states, as affirmed by liberal intergovernmentalism, or from that of institutionalization processes, as attempts to present the renewed visions of neofunctionalism. According to the dominant representation, economic integration still constitutes the backbone of the European construction. Therefore, the economic actors and their political representatives, the interest groups, who are the bearers of this integration, necessarily have a very significant place in the review and the power of influence. As a result, it is understandable that the tendency to support the image of strong economic lobbies has strengthened. which control the European Union at the expense of the general interest. In the context of the European construction, it is the political institutions that influence the economic interest groups more than the other way around, even if these relations are far from one-sided or one-way. Economic actors, faced with the uncertainty caused by the emergence of EU governance, tended to trust national political institutions more to defend their interests than those of the EU. Finally, after an uncertain and prolonged period of doubts and a difficult learning process, interest groups, thanks to the institutionalization of EU policies, have gained some autonomy in relation to national political institutions. However, even at this stage, the specificities of the community environment and the political process limit the ability of interest groups to act exclusively in favor of the economic interest of the organizations or companies they represent. Baeckelandt, S. (2022). Reading the main contemporary works on European integration, one notices a consensus regarding the attitudes of economic interest groups towards European integration and their necessarily important role in this process. This consensus includes different schools and approaches that are otherwise very critical of each other. From considerations of the specificity of the banking sector, it is necessary to develop an alternative explanatory framework that affirms the first and primordial character of the political sphere, on which economic interest groups depend to develop political strategies to support their interests. The strange consensus on the role of economic interest groups in European integration. In the context of European construction, we argue, it is political institutions that influence economic interest groups more than the other way around, even if these relationships are far from one-sided or one-way. Economic actors, faced with the uncertainty caused by the emergence of community governance, tend to trust national political institutions to defend their interests. Only at the end of a more or less long and difficult learning process, depending on the characteristics specific to the interest groups and their context, as well as thanks to the institutionalization of community policies, do they acquire autonomy in relation to national political institutions. However, even at this stage, the specificities of the community environment and the political process limit the ability of interest groups to act exclusively in the economic interest of the organizations or companies they represent. "Economic actors most likely to benefit from newly opened opportunities for international trade and payments are likely to support policies that will allow them to realize the greatest possible benefits associated with an expanded economic horizon." Numerous elements affect the relative prices of goods and services, and thus the interest of producers to have access to the world market and therefore to support or oppose trade liberalization policies. However, there will not be an unequivocal response, even within a single sector, because, for example, banks are engaged in different activities that structure their time horizons and their commitments to a sector or economy. If certain types of investment recover in the short term, others may show a degree of "rigidity" in the short term, which may lead to a conflict between decidedly "international" sectors and other more restrained sectors.

By engaging in the construction of integration processes, banks with mobile capital that are already heavily involved in transnational transactions that are likely to favor greater liberalization, as well as a reduction in exchange rate volatility and even a single currency, will be particularly interested. The integration provides these players with superior investment opportunities. On the contrary, holders of immovable capital with little international openness are likely to be more skeptical, and even reluctant, towards greater openness. Thus, there will gradually be a polarization between actors who should logically move between some of the large European federations and which, above all, should put an end to the representation of "national" interests, to the extent that the big internationalized banks should join themselves. to advance the cause of European liberalization, while the coalition of "threatened", on the contrary, should use all its strength to defeat any further liberalization measures.

## 5. PROBLEMS OF INTEREST GROUPS

Apart from the functionalist nature of this analysis, three types of criticism must be formulated against this model. First, it is problematic to consider that actors will always act according to their objective economic interests, which presupposes that they know them and are therefore able – in advance – to assess the chances of the project's success. They can estimate its consequences to the point of being sure that it will generate benefits. (De Graffenried, V. (2023) Then, even if we leave aside this first set of problems, the second shortcut consists of affirming that actors, after recognizing their objective interests, are able and determined to act accordingly. This is only possible because the model runs into a third set of problems, namely that it neglects institutions. Neither the state nor supranational institutions have any autonomy here: they only register power struggles between interest groups. Then, government decisions are only “the result of the effective approach of different interests”. (Grossman, E. 2003, 737-760pp.) From this dynamic, a strange and even surprising consensus can be ascertained regarding the role of economic actors in European integration. The cases, all streams together, assume that large multinational companies and large financial conglomerates supported the progress of liberalization and monetary unification. Furthermore, these actors would be the main drivers of these developments, according to the international political economy approach. As the only approach that actually attempts to answer the question of the role of interest groups, it has been established with some ease. (Berretta, E.2023)

## 6. CONCLUSION: THE ECONOMIC ACTORS OF GRACE AND DISGRACE IN POLICY

Interest groups, as intermediary bodies between political institutions and the companies they represent, make choices in strategy that they must justify to their superiors. In most associations, there are regular evaluations and debates at annual meetings, in order to ensure the “economic efficiency” of political strategies. Associations increasingly find themselves as service providers rather than corporations or “organic” agencies, increasingly resembling public affairs agencies and other professional lobbyists. Therefore, it is not risky to assume that economic actors will do their best to favor the commercial strategies of their parent company, their members or their customers. However, a number of elements can prevent or make difficult the realization of these goals and the very identification of these interests. Indeed, a major exogenous change – such as the emergence at the community level of financial governance – will initially lead to a rethinking of existing institutional arrangements, putting interest groups under pressure. This process will be slow and marked by errors of judgment due to the structural factors that characterize the actors and their immediate environment. Hence, any exogenous novelty is likely, initially, to increase uncertainty about actors' actions and strategies. Of course, everything will be done to investigate and respond to this challenge based on existing and proven procedures and responses, but this is no longer possible, since the change in question affects all the working conditions of the actors. Several sources of uncertainty can be distinguished. First of all, it stems from the ignorance of community institutions and their decision-making processes on the part of national interest groups. Since knowledge of community building is limited and contacts non-existent, it is difficult to form an opinion, to recognize interest and, above all, to follow through at the community level. The second source of uncertainty stems from the very dilemmas in the development of the EU. The period in which the EU is living is experiencing profound changes. Thus, the establishment of the single market for financial services is accompanied or preceded in the member states by movements for the departmentalization of the banking and financial market. There is no consensus on policy and regulatory responses to this new situation. Finally, even when contacts are made with European institutions, the unpredictable nature of EU decision-making processes and the multitude of actors participating in them make them largely unpredictable in the eyes of interest groups, especially since they are largely excluded from certain stages of these processes. Therefore, we question the hypothesis developed by a number of authors within the EPI according to which economic actors with mobile capital that must necessarily be in favor of opening markets and supporting most of the process of European economic integration ( see above). On the contrary, it is unlikely that a clear position will be adopted and initiatives will be taken in the short and medium term, and above all, it is unlikely that economic actors will be at the origin of the main political decisions.

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