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# Explaining breadth of policy engagement: patterns of interest group mobilization in public policy

Darren R. Halpin and Anne S. Binderkrantz

**ABSTRACT** How broad do groups spread their engagement across the spectrum of public policy issues? The orthodoxy for some time has been that groups tend to focus their engagement rather narrowly. Some suggest that groups shy away from competition and pursue niche-seeking behaviour. Others argue that resource limitations constrain both the monitoring behaviour of groups and the extent to which groups can engage in policy influence activity. While there is some consensus that groups tend to specialize, there is not a great deal of work that seeks to explain it. To date this question has tended to be explored using survey data alone, which provides generalized findings about ‘interest’ in policy areas. In this article we go one step further. By linking detailed survey data with the *actual* policy activity data of interest groups, we investigate the factors that shape the breadth of engagement by interest groups.

**KEY WORDS** Interest group; issue specialization; mobilization.

## INTRODUCTION: REVISITING THE ‘SPECIALIZATION’ FINDING

Large-scale studies of ‘lobbying activities’ – predominantly of the Washington scene – have a long history in the United States (US) (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 149). These studies have produced maps of the pattern of activity of particular policy actors across the public policy system. Such scholarship has, for instance, generated the question of policy ‘specialization’ as a distinct theme in the group literature; and the specialization theme is quite an influential thread, not least because it impinges on questions of democracy and governing in the public good. A well-populated and diverse system of organized interests is deemed important to ensure that public policy is made in an inclusive manner (Schlozman 2009). It follows, therefore, that group specialization – sticking to narrow policy areas and avoiding conflict – is likely to undermine the pluralistic competition that scholars see as crucial to the democratic contribution of groups. Moreover, the existence of generalists is viewed as important in linking policy communities (Browne 1990).

This article addresses the breadth of policy engagement by interest groups. The literature suggests that most groups tend to stick to a rather narrow issue focus: they specialize. In fact, this is the core expectation from the public policy literature, where terms like ‘sub-government’ and ‘policy network’ imply groups sticking to familiar policy territory. According to the interest group literature there are a range of reasons why groups may want to specialize. The growth of the group system overall has been associated with groups becoming more specialized (Browne 1990; Gray and Lowery 1996). By specialized these authors mean that groups are involved in a (relatively) narrow issue agenda. Motives for specialization are related to the question of group survival: partitioning off important resources needed to survive *vis-à-vis* competitors is achieved by becoming a specialist in a narrow issue niche.<sup>1</sup> A recent study by Heaney (2004) suggests some modifications to the issue-niche approach to survival. He argues: ‘Instead of a system in which all groups form exclusive issue niches, policy domains are characterized by some groups attempting to form identities in issue niches, while other groups move from issue to issue depending on the interests of those they represent’ (Heaney 2004: 635). By contrast some emphasize that groups need to monitor or be aware of issues that may arise in *numerous* policy domains. There is a dual process at work to ‘simultaneously . . . be a specialist organization *and* to monitor – and potentially act in – a broad range of issues’ (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 157; emphasis added).

While the literature is adept at noting the tendency for specialization, little time has been spent *explaining* variations in specialization. The tendency has been simply to note the variation in the breadth of engagement by groups. Yet, the empirical findings of different patterns of engagement – with some groups focusing on a narrow range of issues, while others adopt a very generalist position – suggest it worth seeking to account for this variation. Indeed, Gray and Lowery (1996: 108) argue that accounting for the relative abundance of groups with a broad versus a narrow policy engagement deserves attention. In taking up this challenge, here we identify the level of specialized policy focus among a population of groups *and* explore factors that contribute to the levels of specialization. We argue that the literature can be organized into three broad approaches. Some authors focus on the imperative for groups to specialize when facing competition; others see the issue as a matter of differing levels of group resources and still others focus on group characteristics arguing that some group types are likely to be more specialized than others.

While these concerns are obviously relevant beyond the US context, there has been little empirical analysis outside of the US literature. Using a Scottish data set combining group survey data with actual observations of the public policy activity of these groups, this article addresses the factors shaping specialization. The analysis includes about 400 interest groups operating in Scottish public policy over an eight-year period. While previous scholars have investigated the issue of specialization by asking groups about their level of ‘interest’ in different policy domains (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 159), our data combine data on actual activity with survey data about group characteristics.

The next section discusses the relevant theoretical perspectives and derives competing explanations from the literature; the following section presents the research design, and the analysis puts the competing explanations to a test.

## EXPLAINING THE BREADTH OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

### The 'niche-seeking' argument

The literature commonly treats specialization as though it were the result of strategic decisions made by groups. Perhaps most influential has been the idea that group specialization patterns flow from their need – for survival purposes – to find a 'viable niche'. In the face of competition for scarce resources (specifically the attention of policy-makers and the support of their constituency) groups react by specializing. It is better for a group – in terms of survival prospects – to ignore most of what is going on in government (even when it may be relevant to the 'interests' they advocate for) and concentrate resources and attention towards an issue niche.

Browne (1990: 477) argues that 'Organized interests define themselves in terms of carefully constructed issue niches'. Groups compete for policy-makers' attention and in this competition they differentiate from others by specializing in particular sets of issues. A group 'gains a recognizable identity by defining a highly specific issue niche for itself and fixing its political assets (i.e., recognition and other resources) within that niche' (Browne 1990 502). According to Browne (1990: 477): 'Only a few organizations, usually the least influential, focus on encompassing or sectorwide issues or become large scale coalition players.' From this perspective, we would expect a highly balkanized policy map – with a plethora of small issue niches populated by policy issue specialists. The implications with regard to explaining variation in degrees of specialization are less clear. On the one hand, groups are expected to react to competition by specializing. This should be reflected in a positive relation between level of competition and specialization. On the other hand, the result of the cultivation of an issue niche is presumably that a group will encounter less competition. Thus, level of competition could also be argued to be negatively related to specialization. Particularly in the long run, this latter effect may be important. In order to single out the effect of competition on specialization, the empirical analysis will focus on competition from groups with *broadly* similar purposes or goals and investigate the hypothesis that: *interest groups who find themselves in a competitive situation vis-à-vis other groups are more likely to be specialists.*

In the course of linking studies of group mobilization with studies of group political behaviour, Virginia Gray and David Lowery (1996) elaborate the theory of niche behaviour. While Browne focuses on policy niches, Gray and Lowery (1996: 95) draw on population ecology to establish that: 'an organization's niche is defined by a multidimensional space, not simply its place of interface with the policy-making process'. Various 'resource

dimensions' – they list resources such as members, financial resources and selective benefits – are important apart from the choice of which set of policy issues to engage in. According to Gray and Lowery (1996: 96, 108), interest group niches are in fact more strongly determined by these internal resource dimensions than by interaction with government. It is the focus on competition among groups within the 'membership environment' (as opposed to the policy environment) that makes their position rather different from Browne's.

Heaney also suggests that groups specialize along multiple dimensions. Where Gray and Lowery focus on group internal dimensions, Heaney nuances the issue concept further by distinguishing between different aspects of group identity in relation to the political process. He suggests that 'Whereas some interest groups indeed identify themselves closely with issues, others look more to representation, ideology, or advocacy methods to separate their organizations from the crowd' (Heaney 2004: 612–13). Following this reasoning, groups 'should pursue issue niches only in proportion to the degree to which they depend on issues in building their identities' (Heaney 2004: 635); and he finds that many groups *do not* see issue choice as a central component of their identity: they see other facets of their identity, such as whether they are representative, as crucial (Heaney 2004: 639–40).

The implication of these more multifaceted conceptions of niche behaviour is that groups may vary in their survival strategies and thus in the extent to which issue specialization is part of their identity. In other words: *interest groups that build their identity on issue specialization are more likely to be policy specialists.*

### The 'resources count' argument

Other authors challenge the niche-seeking line of argument more fundamentally, suggesting that when confronted with challenges in 'new' policy terrain groups may have no choice but to defend their interests. Walker's (1991) survey of Washington groups asked respondents to nominate their degree of interest across a list of 10 policy domains. Counting those Washington groups who indicated they were 'very interested' in any given domain, Walker was able to demonstrate the sheer diversity in policy engagement. Based on re-analysis of the Walker data, Baumgartner and Leech (1998: 158) conclude that although most groups were 'very interested' in none or one or two domains, the vast majority of groups were 'somewhat interested' in a broader range of domains. They conclude: 'Groups never know from what direction a new policy may come that has dramatic effects on their members, and their typical reaction to uncertainty is to cast their net widely in search of information and warnings' (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 159). Alongside the assertion that groups have a strong incentive to specialize, Baumgartner and Leech (1998: 162) argue that even more powerful incentives exist for groups to spread their gaze widely.

This finding is confirmed by another influential US study. Heinz *et al.* (1993) found that on average their respondents reported 'some interest' in 11 events in

their domain from the possible 20 they were presented with. Most groups engaged well beyond the confines of any single governmental department or agency. Indeed, they conclude: 'the average representative spends time in more than half the subfields within his or her policy domain and, in addition, in some four other major policy fields' (Heinz *et al.* 1993: 161).

In this light, the fact that some groups concentrate on a few issues may reflect a lack of resources. Groups with large staff compliments, and sizeable budgets, are best able to monitor *and* mobilize when an issue arises. But findings are varied. In an analysis of the distribution of activity across different issues, Baumgartner and Leech (2001) find that much lobbying activity is concentrated on a few issues, while other issues only attract the attention of one or a few groups. They relate this to different levels of resources among groups and argue that business groups in particular are able to engage in a broad range of issues because they are 'less likely to make the hard decision to ignore issue niches that are important to them' (Baumgartner and Leech 2001: 1, 204). Elsewhere, utilizing Walker's data, Baumgartner and Leech (1998: 160) suggest there is a 'meager and statistically insignificant relationship between the size of a group's staff and its degree of issue-specialization' and conclude: 'Many large groups specialize, and many small ones are active in many policy areas.' However, Walker's data is measuring an expression by groups of a general interest in policy areas: being active is something different. Therefore, there is reason to revisit the expectation that group resources matter more when explaining the *actual* level of activity. In other words: *interest groups with high levels of resources (e.g., money and staff) are more likely to be policy generalists than other groups.*

Resources are more than money and staff. Governmental structures impact interest groups because groups adjust to the institutional context in which they work (Baumgartner and Mahoney 2008). Groups enjoy differential access to government as some groups are engaged in close networks of policy-making while others have more sporadic interactions with officials. Those groups who have privileged positions in decision-making structures are generally better equipped to be politically active (Binderkrantz 2005). It is interesting to note that Browne also discusses resources in terms of political standing enjoyed in governing circles, although in line with his general argument his expectation is that such standing will lead to specialization (Browne 1990: 478). On the contrary, when privileged position is discussed from a perspective relating resources to the option of a broad political engagement the expectation is that *interest groups with a privileged position are more likely to be generalists.*

Finally, Beyers *et al.* (2008: 1, 121) argue that older groups tend to use insider strategies, although there is at present little data offered in support of this assertion; and we can imagine many instances of groups being 'born' as important policy specialists with a narrow policy focus and remaining so. But, working with the observation of Beyers and his colleagues, one could imagine age being a factor as over time groups may become better networked: the routine and repetitive nature of policy work plays into the hands of the 'usual suspects'. Groups that are older will become more institutionalized into policy routines

and thus more likely to be policy-generalists. On this basis, the expectation is therefore that *older interest groups are more likely to be policy generalists*.

### Group characteristics in focus

The discussion so far has assumed that all groups face similar ‘choices’ with respect to policy mobilization – whether these are shaped by ‘niche-seeking’ or ‘resource constraint’ considerations. There are, however, qualitatively important differences between groups that can be expected to draw some groups towards specialization and others towards a more generalist pattern of engagement in politics.

A central distinction in the literature is between citizen groups – or public interest groups – and special interest groups. While most interest groups pursue the political interest of a specified constituency (from which they draw their members), citizen groups’ work for causes the achievement of which will not selectively benefit the memberships or activists of the organization (Berry: 1977: 7; Dunleavy 1991). Different authors emphasize slightly different factors when distinguishing between these types of groups, but there is broad agreement on the existence of two large classes of groups with different relations towards their constituency. Citizen groups are, in principle, less constrained in their issue selection by the ‘interests’ of their constituency, and we therefore suggest that *citizen groups are more likely to be generalists than other groups*. However, we all know citizen groups that pursue rather narrow causes and special interest groups that engage in broader agendas (say, trade unions in human rights or the environment). Therefore, we are also open to the idea that this could flow both ways.

A final characteristic that may be important in shaping the political engagement of groups relates to membership influence in groups. Although groups are often celebrated as an alternative channel of participation in light of the decline of party membership, there is marked variation in the actual levels of internal democracy in interest groups. Some groups are democratically ‘hollowed out’, while others come closer to the classic portrayal of interest groups as little democracies (Binderkrantz 2009; Halpin 2006; Jordan and Maloney 1997; Rothenberg 1992). Levels of membership influence have been found to affect the level of group activities targeting the bureaucracy, probably reflecting that influential members want their group to actively seek the kind of benefits that may be obtained by close interaction with relevant bureaucrats (Binderkrantz 2005). In terms of effect on specialization competing explanations may be put forward. On the one hand, groups with high levels of internal democracy may focus on a specific policy domain and strive to obtain a good working relationship with official actors there. On the other hand, members may expect the group to be active in a broad array of policy areas and use their influence to this effect. While level of membership influence is interesting to investigate, it is not possible to advance a one-sided hypothesis.



## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Our approach and data

Part of the difficulty in ascertaining the breadth of policy engagement by groups – their levels of specialization – is methodological. One of the limitations of Walker's work – and the general style of survey based data collection – is that it asks groups for de-contextualized responses. We tend to survey known groups and then ask them for a self-assessment of their *typical* patterns of behaviour. It is far better, but more difficult, to *observe* their pattern of policy engagement. This is precisely what we attempt in this article. We do this by mapping the mobilization of interest groups across all (available) public policy issues consulted upon by the Scottish Government. And then, from this data, formulate measures of *actual* policy specialization. It is these measures that become our dependent variables. We then use a group survey (from a random weighted sample of groups captured in our mapping of policy mobilization) to collect data on the independent variables.

The data on policy activity come from a data set compiled from records of Scottish Government policy consultations between 1999 and 2007 (the post-devolution period). Public policy consultations in Scotland are routinely conducted on a broad range of issues, which may include calls for comments on draft bills, initial agendas for discussion, proposals for amendments to regulations, the details of implementation of EU directives and so on. Consultations are launched by a team within a relevant government department, with invitations being sent to stakeholder lists and invitations made on the government web site (the access barriers are extremely low). This dataset was compiled largely using paper-based records held in the Scottish Government Library and its document storage facility in Edinburgh, but with the addition of some more recent documentation only available electronically on the Scottish Government web site. No *definitive* list of consultations conducted by the Scottish government exists,<sup>2</sup> but we can *definitively* say that we mapped each and every consultation where data is available in the public domain. The consultation process provides an important window into policy mobilization by groups. We cannot rule out a different picture of mobilization arising if, rather than the bureaucratic/administrative arena, we examined, for instance, group activity in the media or legislative arenas. However, given the nature of the British – and Scottish – political system, the bureaucratic arena is likely to be the most frequently deployed, the most open and accessible, and the most productive for organized interests (Jordan and Maloney 2001).

The consultations data set plots levels of mobilization over time by all types of actors (individuals, institutions, interest groups, government departments/agencies and ministers or legislators); starting at the issue level and working upwards to domain and then system levels. The specific data set used in this article data included 897 consultation issues (launched between 1999 and 2007), which involved over 11,645 discrete actors<sup>3</sup> and 132,771 influence

events. Mobilization is mapped to *specific policy consultations*, and then subsequently additional codes applied to link these to general issue areas or domains by utilizing ‘policy agenda’ codes. While it is true that our data only allows groups to mobilize on issues that the government decides to consult upon, the consultations nevertheless provide a good insight into how broad groups decide to engage.

The secondary dataset is the result of a postal survey of ‘interest groups’ active in post-devolution Scottish public policy. From the actors engaged in these policy consultations, we extracted all interest groups. Here we defined groups as formal organizations, with members (individuals or institutions), that are explicitly engaged in public policy (Jordan *et al.* 2004). The sample of 1,500 was drawn from a list of those groups who had responded to consultations in the period 1999–2007. A weighted sampling method was used, whereby the more active groups were more likely to be included in the sample.<sup>4</sup> Because our sample comes from a broader analysis of *actual* group activity over an eight-year period, we can explore the ways in which group organizational variables (measured in the survey) may explain actual policy activity (measured in the broader consultations dataset). We achieved a 32 per cent response rate, which is good for a postal survey.

## MEASURES

### Dependent variable: group policy specialization

Our dependent variable is group policy specialization measured at a system-wide level. We utilize two measures of the extent to which groups are active across the entire Scottish policy system.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Domain measure*

The first is the number of domains in which a group is active. Here we look not at volume of activity but breadth of activity – do they spread their activity beyond a single ‘home’ domain? We coded each consultation to the UK Policy Agendas coding scheme,<sup>6</sup> which itself is coded according to the US Policy Agendas project codeframe.<sup>7</sup> The code scheme offers a systematic set of major policy topic codes that match the major activities of government. For our purposes, we considered each major topic code (agriculture, health, education, environment, etc.) as constituting a policy domain. The advantages of this coding process are that we use an established method for coding government policy activity (in our case consultations). For our specific purposes, this approach also overcomes a major problem with the only other viable coding alternative, departmental structures; namely that such structures frequently change boundaries over time. The largest number of policy consultations we coded fell into the policy domains (*Policy Agenda* major topic codes) of agriculture (23 per cent), community development, housing and planning (15 per cent), environment (12 per cent), health (12 per cent) and

education (8 per cent): this mix broadly reflects matters that are ‘devolved’ from the UK to the Scottish level of government.

### *HHI*

Secondly, we use a Herfindahl–Hirschman Index (HHI) score that balances breadth (across domains) and level of activity (overall activity). Here we deploy the HHI as an actor-level measure of system-wide policy specialization. The HHI score is widely used in the field of economics and business to describe levels of competition in industry sectors. The HHI has been used in political science; and in the study of group mobilization in a public policy context (Gray and Lowery 1996). We calculate an HHI score for each individual actor based on their pooled activity data over 21 domains (across all eight years). These scores theoretically range from 0.00 to 1.00 depending on the distribution of each actor’s domain-level lobbying activity.<sup>8</sup> For example, a single actor with five ‘influence events’ within one domain, 75 ‘influence events’ in another and 10 in two others (a total of 100) would have a HHI score – calculated as  $(0.05^2) + (0.75^2) + (0.1^2) + (0.1^2)$  – equal to 0.5850. This HHI score corresponds to an actor that is highly concentrated since one domain garnered 75 per cent of the actor’s attention and it was only active in four total domains. When actors only participate in one domain, the HHI score is 1.00 and indicates a ‘hyper-specialist’ actor. Ultimately, the HHI supports an analysis of system-level specialization at the individual actor level that can be compared across actors. Low scores convey an actor that spreads its activity most equally across domains within the system, while a high score suggests heavy concentration in one single domain.

### **Independent variables**

Seven variables are included in the analyses in order to test the different explanations of the level of specialization/generalization.

- *Citizen group*: groups were asked ‘What is the primary purpose of your organization?’ Respondents answering ‘pursue goals that primarily benefit non-members/promote a particular cause’ were coded as citizen groups while groups answering ‘pursue goals that primarily benefit the members’ were coded as non-citizen groups. Groups that answered ‘other’ were manually coded based on their names and descriptions of their constituents.
- *Age*: groups were asked what year their organization was founded and this was re-coded to a measure of group age. In order to test whether there might be a non-linear effect of age, we have performed regression analyses including a logarithmical transformation of the age variable. This variable was not significant.
- *Staff*: our measure of general resources is the number of paid staff employed by the group. This measure has been logarithmically transformed to obtain

linearity. The number of staff may have different meanings in different types of groups and we have therefore tested for interaction between staff and group type. The interaction variable was not significant in the regression models.

- *Competition*: is coded on basis of the question: ‘Are there other organizations with broadly similar purposes or goals with whom your organization competes for new members, funds, government contracts or other key resources?’ Groups answering ‘yes’ have been given the value 0, groups answering ‘no’ or ‘don’t know’ the value 1.
- *Policy-issue identity*: is measured with a scale incorporating two questions: ‘We pursue a particular sub-set of issues that others do not’ and ‘We pursue a specific side or angle on a particular sub-set of issues that others do not.’ Respondents were given the mean score on these two questions. Respondents answering at least one of the questions were included.
- *Membership group & membership influence*: a series of questions asked groups about the level of membership influence. Respondents were given the mean score on these questions. Respondents answering at least three of these questions were included. A number of groups answering the questionnaire reported that they were not member based. While most definitions of an interest group state that they should have affiliates (individuals or institutions), we asked if they had ‘members’. Some groups *do* have affiliates – such as donors, volunteers and supporters – but they are not enfranchized in decision-making processes by the group. So, groups in these cases tended to self-report as having had no members. Conceptually they are interest groups, so we coded them as having ‘members’, but members with no influence. Thus, these groups were given the score 0 on the membership influence scale. We accept that these types of ‘affiliates’ may be said to have influence in the sense that they could ‘exit’, but we constrained our conceptualization of ‘member influence’ to internal ‘voice’. To test whether this affects results, a dummy variable registering whether groups were member based is included in the analyses.
- *Privileged position*: a series of questions asked groups how often they were asked to comment on bills and the like, be represented on public committees and seconded to assist government departments in their work. Respondents were given the mean score on these questions. Respondents answering at least two of the questions were included.

## ANALYSIS

### Policy specialists or generalists?

A first step in investigating specialization vs. generalization among interest groups is to look at the overall distribution of their policy engagement. How many groups are specialists in the sense that they concentrate their political activities within a single domain? And how many groups spread their

Table 1 Distribution of groups on domain and HHI measure

Domains	Frequency	Percentage	HHI	Frequency	Percentage
1 domain	164	38.8	1	164	38.8
2 domains	86	20.3	0.501–0.9	70	16.5
3 domains	53	12.5	0.401–0.5	65	15.4
4–5 domains	63	14.9	0.301–0.4	65	15.4
6+ domains	57	13.0	0–0.3	59	13.9
Total	423	100.0	Total	423	100.0

engagement across a broad spectrum of policy domains? These questions can be addressed by looking at the group scores on our two measures of the dependent variable – number of domains engaged in and HHI score – reported in Table 1.

We find that almost 40 per cent of the groups constrain their activity to a single policy domain. Another 20 per cent are active within two domains. However, there are also a sizeable number of groups with a broader engagement: about 14 per cent of groups are active in more than six domains. The distribution of HHI scores is broadly parallel to the domain measure. About 40 per cent are active in a single domain – so they receive a HHI score of 1. Another 17 per cent have a score of above 0.5 and 15 per cent fall in each of the categories 0.3–0.4 and 0–0.3.

One hundred and sixty-four actors have HHI scores of 1 and domain scores of 1: these are the true *policy specialists*. Among the groups that engaged in just one domain, many engaged in very few issues within that domain (numbers not shown). Most groups – in fact three-quarters – are active in less than 10 issues over the eight-year period. And, more than 20 per cent of groups are what Dowse and Hughes (1977) referred to as ‘sporadic interventionists’ – they engaged *just once in a single issue*. In the tables, these groups are pooled with other groups who may be active in a large number of issues but *within a single policy domain*. This latter type of actor could perhaps be called a *domain-level* policy generalist.

It is evident that our sample of groups includes substantial variation in terms of policy engagement. Compared to Walker’s survey, our research design means that we do not find groups completely disengaged from any policy domain. We do, however, find almost 40 per cent active in only one domain – where Walker found about 30 per cent ‘very interested’ and only 8 per cent ‘somewhat interested’ in just one domain where (Baumgartner and Leech 1998: 158–9). That Walker’s data shows comparatively so few groups concentrating on just one domain could be explained by a number of factors; but a likely reason is that our research design admits a broader range of groups, since all those replying to at least one consultation are included.

### Explaining policy engagement

So, what drives groups to pursue the life of a policy specialist? Is it, as Browne suggests, that groups seek to create a balkanized policy map ensuring they do not encounter competing policy interests? Or is specialization, as Heaney argues, about forming unique multi-dimensional identities, meaning that policy specialization is likely to be found among those groups that see policy focus as a crucial differentiator for their identity? In this section we first look at the extent to which groups report experiencing competition as well as their pursuance of a policy-issue identity, and then we contrast these factors with other explanations in a multivariate analysis of our two dependent measures.

Following Gray and Lowery (1996: 181–94), we replicated questions from their study of organized interests in the US regarding whether groups faced any policy competition. Recall that Browne's (1990) argument was that niche-seeking behaviour was designed to overcome – or largely eliminate – competition *over policy*. We asked: 'Are there other organizations with broadly similar purposes or goals with whom your organization competes for new members, funds, government contracts or other key resources?' Gray and Lowery (1996: 187) show that there is far less competition over this dimension, suggesting to them that niche-seeking behaviour is driven by a desire to secure and partition resources rather than to secure shelter from policy competition. Here, we find that around 55 per cent of groups *do* face resource based competition from groups with similar goals.

Gray and Lowery (1996: 197) note that their analysis of these niche dimensions has 'an ad-hoc flavor' and suggest that future studies develop more bespoke measures. In our data, we attempt just that. We ask, specifically, for each group to identify the characteristics that make them unique from other similar organizations. According to the more sophisticated discussions of niche behaviour, groups may separate themselves from other groups along several dimensions. Thus, following Heaney (2004), our set of questions asked about issue-related niche-seeking *and* a number of other dimensions along which groups may distinguish themselves from competitors. Figure 1 displays the percentage of groups answering that the dimension in question was 'very important'.

It is apparent from Figure 1 that different dimensions are important when groups seek to distinguish themselves from others. About 50 per cent report that type of constituency, type of services and sub-set of issues they engage in are very important dimensions making their organization unique, and between 30 and 40 per cent of groups use the other three aspects to distinguish themselves from others. Taken as a simple set of frequencies, this data supports a high degree of specialization: it is just that creating a distinctive group identity is not necessarily a matter of choosing one of these dimensions but rather a strategy involving several dimensions. So what does that mean for explaining breadth of policy engagement? We would expect *only* those indicators related to the pursuance of a *policy-issue* identity as relevant. Thus, a scale including these

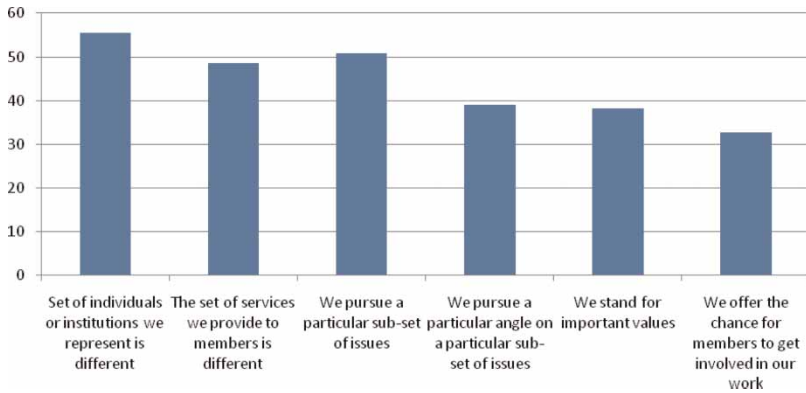


Figure 1 Dimensions separating groups from similar organizations

Note: Groups were asked: 'To what extent are any of the following important characteristics that help to make your organization unique compared to other similar organizations?' The figure reports the percentage of groups answering 'very important'. The four questions to the right ended with 'that others do not' or 'and others do not'.

two indicators – those asking about 'sub-set of issues' and 'specific side or angle' – are included along with the other independent variables in the regression analyses reported in Tables 2 and 3.<sup>9</sup>

The multivariate analyses are conducted in two steps. First, basic group characteristics such as the type of group, group age and number of staff are included in Model I and thereafter Model II also includes those variables related to niche behaviour, membership influence and privileged position. Finally Model III includes only those variables found to have a significant effect at least at the 0.1 level. Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression is used in the analysis with Herfindahl scores as dependent variable, while Poisson regression is used in the analysis of domain counts because this method is better suited for analyses of count variables.

There is not much support for either the crude version of niche theory or the version involving different dimensions of niche behaviour. Neither the competition variable nor the policy-issue identity measure has any significant effect on specialization. While this demonstrates that these perspectives do not add explanatory power in relation to this aspect of groups' political engagement, it is important to note that the population ecology perspective advanced by Gray and Lowery emphasize that this aspect of issue behaviour is not as dominant as argued by Browne (Gray and Lowery 1996). The findings here are therefore not inconsistent with their general theory.

More explanatory power is derived when looking at some of the other group characteristics. Notably, resources seem to explain a fair degree of the variation among groups. General resources measured as number of staff employed and organizational age are important, while having a privileged position does not affect the HHI score and has a rather limited effect on the number of

Table 2 Explaining system-level policy generalization (domain counts), poisson regression, unstandardized coefficients, standard error in parentheses

	<i>Model I</i>	<i>Model II</i>	<i>Model III</i>
Citizen group	0.054 (0.062)	0.180** (0.067)	0.168** (0.066)
Age of group	0.003*** (0.000)	0.003*** (0.000)	0.003*** (0.000)
Number of staff (transf.)	0.443*** (0.057)	0.350*** (0.065)	0.383*** (0.062)
Non-membership group	-0.211 (0.118)	0.373* (0.167)	0.401* (0.158)
Competition with like groups		0.086 (0.065)	
Policy-Issue identity		0.003 (0.038)	
Membership influence		0.010*** (0.002)	0.010*** (0.002)
Privileged position		0.004 (0.002)	0.004* (0.002)
Constant	0.506 (0.107)	-0.467 (0.198)	-0.415 (0.168)
N	400	348	372
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.063	0.101	0.100

Note: Levels of significance: \* = 0.05; \*\* = 0.01; \*\*\* = 0.001.

domains engaged in. This is interesting in light of previous research showing that this factor is important with regard to other aspects of group engagement.

Other group characteristics also come out as important. Citizen groups are somewhat more likely to be generalists than other groups regardless of whether looking at domain or HHI scores. This is in accordance with the theoretical reasoning that these groups are less constrained in their issue selection. Also, non-membership groups are more broadly active than others, but this finding should be interpreted with care because these groups have all been given the score of 0 on the scale for membership influence (the bivariate correlations between this variable and the two dependent variables are not significant, indicating that the result may be caused by the score on the membership influence scale). Finally, a high level of membership influence is found to lead to a more generalized pattern of engagement, which suggests that members may use their influence in ways that endorse groups to engage in a broad array of policy areas.

Overall, the analysis lends much support to the 'resources matter' argument. Rather than using their resources to pursue a specialist strategy, resourceful groups engage more broadly. Consistent with the argument by Baumgartner



Table 3 Explaining system-level policy specialization (Herfindahl scores), OLS regression, unstandardized coefficients

	Model I	Model II	Model III
Citizen group	-0.080** (0.031)	-0.119*** (0.033)	-0.122*** (0.031)
Age of group	-0.001* (0.000)	-0.001* (0.000)	-0.001* (0.000)
Number of staff (transf.)	-0.156*** (0.284)	-0.145*** (0.032)	-0.156*** (0.029)
Non-membership group	0.060 (0.054)	-0.128 (0.073)	
Competition with like groups		-0.019 (0.032)	
Policy-Issue identity		-0.008 (0.018)	
Membership influence		-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.002*** (0.001)
Privileged position		0.001 (0.001)	
Constant	0.915 (0.052)	1.183 (0.093)	1.114 (0.069)
N	400	348	375
R <sup>2</sup>	0.102	0.147	0.148

Note: Levels of significance: \* = 0.05; \*\* = 0.01; \*\*\* = 0.001.

and Leech (1998), the incentive to react to issues across a broader range of policy domains seems more important than incentives to specialize. However, resources are not the only key to explaining specialization vs. generalization; group characteristics such as group type and degree of membership influence also matter.

Clearly our models leave much variation unexplained, indicating that this can be seen as only a first step towards explaining the phenomena in question. One of the interesting but empirically difficult questions is whether some groups are from the outset more generalists than specialists (see also Gray and Lowery 1996: 108). While specialization is often discussed as though it were a 'choice' made by groups *in situ* (contingent on prevailing government activity, group competition or resource availability), scholars also discuss groups *as though* some groups were by definition generalists or specialists. The implicit claim is that there is a more or less settled division of labour among related groups. In a British context, umbrella groups – particularly trade and business organizations – are general actors that would be expected to pick up issues that span more than one of the industries of its constituent members; and, when the umbrella group does act, then its constituent members will not do so in deference to the broader industry view. Of course, discipline of this nature is not

always evident; however this division of labour *could be expected* to shape observable generalist practices. There are, however, very clear problems in defining groups in such an *a priori* manner, and we decided it is just too close to the dependent variable, for instance, to include such a variable in our models.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article set out to address a longstanding discussion within political science: to what extent do groups act as policy specialists? We have also tried to extend this research thread by *explaining* ‘levels’ of specialization. Unlike purely survey-based work, we do not look at monitoring, but *actual* policy engagement. This means that our findings are not directly comparable with those that have gone before; it may necessitate new, or at least revised, rules of thumb with respect to interest group policy behaviour. So what can we conclude?

The initial point to make from our analysis is that the distribution of group engagement is heavily skewed towards policy-domain specialization. Most groups engage in just one domain, and many groups engage in one issue in this single domain. As Schlozman (2009) has recently suggested, many groups may only very intermittently come out of policy ‘hibernation’ to engage in policy activity. This is a basic point, but it is nevertheless an important finding. The discussion of specialization serves as lightning rod for group scholars because it suggests the extent to which policy-making can be satisfactorily characterized as a pluralized or elite enterprise. The evidence here, at this descriptive level, suggests that public policy is dominated by a small core of frequently active policy groups surrounded by a less than active and larger penumbra.

The article also set out to *explain* this pattern. At the outset, we identified three broad propositions in the literature with respect to why it is that groups would be expected to specialize in terms of policy activity: the niche seeking argument; resource dependency argument; and the group type position. Our evidence throws considerable doubt on the niche-seeking arguments, of all varieties. Neither our measure of like-group competition or policy-issue identity were important in explaining specialization levels. We do not wish to over-claim for our research. Our findings that niche-based arguments are less persuasive *may* simply reflect that we take a system-level view and the finest measure is at the single domain count. It may be that the groups we surveyed *do* think they are specializing in a policy sense – carefully choosing issues that keep away from combative scenarios – or in relation to constituency resources – keeping away from like groups that they compete with, for instance, over members. Future work could examine the extent to which it makes sense to talk of *domain-level* policy generalists: groups that are frequent actors across *most issues in a single domain*, but where activity is constrained to ostensibly a single domain.

The most persuasive factors explaining why groups adopt a more generalized engagement with public policy were those related to resource and group type variables. The importance of staff numbers suggests, as did Baumgartner and Leech (1998, 2001), that resources will limit monitoring behaviour, and thus

engagement levels. While the policy status measure was less important, age was important. In relation to group type, citizen groups and those where members have more influence over the agenda, are more general in their breadth of policy engagement.

Beyond the substantive findings, this article has offered a unique methodological approach to the analysis of specialization among interest groups. We have measured *actual activity* by groups, rather than an indication of a general interest in broad policy areas. In addition, we have connected up these data with more traditional group survey data.

In the introduction to this article, we made the point that the literature on policy specialization is rather disorganized; but that this perhaps reflects the complex nature of specialization questions when viewed from the perspective of group leaders. That our model explains a modest proportion of variance in specialization underlines, at least in our minds, this complexity. Heaney is almost certainly correct when he remarked that mobilization decisions integrate, for instance, policy influence and constituency dimensions of group behaviour. While researchers can separate out and measure explanatory variables, and in so doing ascertain their aggregate importance, for group leaders these are wrapped up within an integrated set of organizational conundrums. Unpacking this complexity with any more exactitude surely requires more than the type of data we present here.

**Biographical notes:** Darren R. Halpin is Associate Professor in Public Policy at Aarhus University and Visiting Professor at the Institute for Management, Governance and Society, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen. Anne S. Binderkrantz is Associate Professor in Political Science at Aarhus University.

**Address for correspondence:** Darren R. Halpin, Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus, Barthollins Alle, DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark, email: darren@ps.au.uk/Anne S. Binderkrantz, Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus, Barthollins Alle, DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark. email: asb@ps.au.uk

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## NOTES

- 1 This work emphasizes how groups, first and foremost, seek to survive as organizations (see Halpin and Jordan 2009; Wilson 1995).

- 2 The Scottish Government's (2008) internal *Consultation Good Practice Guidance* recommends that departments, on completing a consultation exercise, should deposit copies of responses with the Scottish Government Library and also post them on the Scottish Government website. However, this guidance has not always been followed, and therefore not all consultation documentation has made its way into the public domain.
- 3 Individual citizens were counted, but because of coding difficulties could only be counted as a single actor.
- 4 This sampling procedure has had the effect of increasing the *variation* in the domain and HHI levels we have in our sample. We compared the frequency distribution on our dependent variables between our sample (see Tables 1 and 2) and the broader population. And we found that 73 per cent of the population has engaged in just one domain, while in the sample this is 38 per cent. Not only does it provide us with sufficient variation to explain, but the sampling strategy – by under-representing infrequent participants – has brought our final sample closer to the organizations typically included in US data (mostly from lobby registers).
- 5 Our approach here is to investigate the breadth of policy engagement of groups *relative to one another*. One reviewer suggested we examine the extent to which individual organizations can be viewed as specialists or generalists measured *relative to their own levels of activity*; that is, does an individual group's actual breadth of engagement (as we measure here) match that predicted on the basis of that same group's level of activity. This approach implies a different question than we deal with here; but we believe it is well worth future attention.
- 6 <http://www.policyagendas.org.uk> (accessed December 2009).
- 7 <http://www.policyagendas.org> (accessed December 2009).
- 8 As a reviewer pointed out, the way we have sampled means that all cases have at least some policy activity, which means that in *reality* no case will return a HHI value of 0.0.
- 9 The direction of the measures *changes* between the models in Tables 2 and 3. In Table 2 the dependent variable is number of domains; therefore, it explains generalization (more domains equates for more generalized engagement). By contrast, the dependent variable in the model in Table 3 is HHI score; therefore it explains specialization (the higher the HHI score the more specialized the group is).

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