

# EVALUATING THE BREADTH OF POLICY ENGAGEMENT BY ORGANIZED INTERESTS

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DARREN R. HALPIN AND H.F. THOMAS III

This article probes the variation in the breadth of policy engagement among organized interests. The literature, heavily shaped by large-n US studies of Washington and its lobbying system, suggests many reasons for organized interests to focus policy engagement relatively narrowly. This claim of policy specialization has been long repeated in the British public policy literature. The aim of this article is to empirically test the extent to which expectations of narrowed engagement hold in a UK context. This article uses a new Scottish dataset that tracks actual engagement by any organized interest on executive policy consultations over a 25-year period. It tracks over 90,000 'mobilization events' by over 18,000 organizations in 1,690 distinct consultation issues across the entire Scottish policy system. In analysing these data, we concern ourselves with establishing: (1) the extent of generalized engagement; (2) the type of organized interests that are more or less general in their engagement; and (3) the extent to which a specialized style of policy engagement is on the increase over time. In the process, we develop measures that are appropriate for assessing breadth of engagement using issue-based policy data.

## INTRODUCTION

This article addresses one of the more fundamental questions about the policy-related behaviour of organized interests: how broad is their policy engagement? There is a long tradition of large-n studies of organized interests and 'lobbying activities' in the United States (US) (for a review, see Baumgartner and Leech 1998). Often these studies have produced maps of the mix of organized interests present in the Washington policy scene (see, for instance, Schlozman and Tierney 1984; Walker 1991). This scholarly tradition has, among other things, generated a serious debate about policy 'specialization' among organized interests. In this context specialized means that groups pursue a (relatively) narrow issue agenda. This theme is worthy of debate not least because it impinges on questions of democracy and representation. As has been well discussed, the composition of the system of organized interests is deemed important to ensure that public policy reflects diverse 'voices' (see 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 together the often narrow deliberations of specialized policy communities in such a way as to maximize the prospects of policy being informed by a broader public interest (Browne 1990). While US in its nature, this set of propositions has been highly influential in shaping international scholarly expectations of the pattern of organized interest engagement in public policy. In this article we try to push the research agenda forward – both empirically and in relation to measurement issues – by examining issue-level organized interest data that can tell us more about the scope and distribution of organized interest engagement in public policy, as well as that outside the US.

Darren R. Halpin is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Denmark, and Visiting Professor, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, Scotland. H.F. Thomas III is a graduate student in the Department of Government, University of Texas at Austin, USA.

It is worth noting that the style of data used to address this broad theme strongly shapes how detailed and convincing our answers can be. The tradition of counting populations of organized interests has yielded a string of impressive studies that show the contours of the 'system' generally (for example, Schattschneider 1960; Scholzman and Tierney 1984). Subsequent work assumed that the 'system' might look different in different policy areas: for instance, Walker's (1991) impressive study of Washington groups could tell us in which policy domains groups were 'interested': agriculture, health, and so on. Yet, this domain study could not say whether 'interest' led to actual mobilization; nor could it deal with the intensity of group activity (for example, how often were they active?). In this article, we address the question of breadth of policy engagement, and hence about policy specialization, via directly tracking the engagement patterns of organized interests across diverse policy terrain and over time. In line with an emerging new generation of organized interest studies, this article is concerned with using observed engagement levels as a basis for measuring actual breadth of policy engagement. This style of our data enables more detailed answers to these long-standing questions.

While a relatively diffuse literature, we locate three propositions regarding specialization that we test using new longitudinal data for the UK context. The first proposition is that the organized interest system will be disproportionately composed of policy specialists with a small breadth of engagement. This hypothesis reflects the broader discussion about the need for organized interests – mostly for reasons of survival and maintenance – to avoid policy competition (see Browne 1990). The second proposition we test is that institutions will mobilize more broadly than membership-based interest groups. In his seminal US work, Salisbury (1984) argued that institutions with complex interests, but without the constraints of being accountable to members, would thus move nimbly across relevant policy areas. Lastly, we examine a far broader proposition: that increased overall levels of policy activity by government, and a growing size of the overall organized interest system (the so-called group 'explosion'), will be associated with increased levels of policy specialization by individual organized interests. Our UK data span 25 years, and thus we are in a position to examine this proposition directly.

The article proceeds as follows. We initially address the expectations in the literature about breadth of engagement. The subsequent section outlines the methodological challenges that exist in mapping actual engagement and in measuring levels of policy specialization/generalization with such data. After presenting the Scottish data, the subsequent section examines our findings against the different hypotheses about breadth of engagement.

## ASSESSING BREADTH OF POLICY ENGAGEMENT: SCHOLARLY EXPECTATIONS?

While the literature on the breadth of engagement by organized interests is not well organized, it is nevertheless possible to identify some basic expectations in three areas: the prevalence of generalized versus specialized policy engagement patterns, the types of organized interests that are likely to be *relatively* more general in their engagement, and the trend in relation to specialisation levels over time.

### The numerical dominance of specialists?

Expectations with regard to breadth of policy engagement tend to support the idea that organized interests would engage in a relatively narrow sliver of the policy world.

The general public policy literature – both in the US and UK – has long utilized terms like ‘iron triangle’, ‘sub-government’, ‘private interest government’ and ‘closed policy community’, all of which conjure up the impression of groups engaged in narrow agendas. The policy world is made up of organized interests which specialize in a focused issue agenda and as such, form rather well developed routines of engagement with civil servants (for review, see Richardson 1999).

The general interest group literature also tends to support the idea of narrow agendas. From the perspective of ‘group identities’, it has been suggested that groups follow agendas that fit with their projected policy identity (Heaney 2004, 2007). Others suggest that there is a strong motivation for groups to specialize in order to avoid competition for scarce political attention and thus enhance survival prospects (Browne 1990). The ‘specialize to survive’ position has been further developed by the influential ‘population ecology’ literature (see Gray and Lowery 2000[1996]).<sup>1</sup> While these positions provide cogent arguments for us to expect narrow engagement, some empirical work suggests this is not always apparent.

Several US studies have been designed in order to quantify the question of breadth of ‘policy engagement’. And here, the findings point to a broad ‘interest’ (if not engagement) in political issues. The work of Jack L. Walker (1991) was perhaps the first explicit attempt to empirically address breadth of engagement. His survey of Washington groups asked respondents to nominate their degree of interest across a list of ten 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 subsequent re-analysis, Frank R. Baumgartner and Beth L. Leech provide an excellent review of the Walker data (1998, p. 158). The data show that over 10 per cent of groups were not ‘very interested’ in any domain – suggesting ‘public policy is not their main concern’. Moreover, just over half the groups surveyed indicated they were ‘very interested’ in just one or two domains. The balance could be considered to have a somewhat broad interest in policy issues – a generalized level of attention. But only 2 per cent of the total sample indicated they were very interested in eight or more domains. However, when the threshold was loosened to ‘somewhat interested’, the vast majority of groups were active in more than one domain. They conclude that ‘The complications of policy-making force the majority of them to attend simultaneously to several different policy areas at once’ (Baumgartner and Leech 1998, p. 160). At least at the level of being ‘interested’ in public policy matters, the evidence from Walker’s study is that attention is spread quite broadly.

This finding is affirmed by another influential US study. Based upon self-reporting survey data from groups sampled from Washington directories, 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. They found that 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, p. 379). In summing up their research, Heinz *et al.* (1993, p. 380) remark that ‘numerous interest groups monitor any given policy question and consider taking a more active role in the debate’. These studies do not quantify engagement, but the suggestion that organized interests ‘monitor’ broadly at least qualifies the assumption that specialization is a default position (see Baumgartner and Leech 1998, p. 157). As outlined above, while establishing if such empirical patterns are applicable

to the UK context is salient, there has been no attempt to utilize mapping methods to establish if they do indeed exist. We seek to empirically explore these arguments in a UK context.

*H1: The majority of organized interests mobilize narrowly.*

### **Institutions engage more broadly than interest groups?**

The studies of the breadth of policy 'interest' discussed above utilized survey evidence of interest groups. A quarter of a century ago, Salisbury (1984) counselled that 'institutions' rather than 'interest groups' numerically dominated populations of organized interests: the term 'organized interests' covers both interest groups and institutions. When using the term institutions, Salisbury had in mind 'individual corporations, state and local governments, universities, think tanks, and most other *institutions* of the private sector' (1984, p. 64; *in original*). In this respect, Salisbury (1984) contends that each type of organization could be expected to make different types of choices with respect to apportioning policy attention. For Salisbury, institutions are demarcated from 'voluntary associations of members' (a.k.a. interest groups) by the fact that they are 'hierarchical structures which exercise authority over people within their jurisdiction' (1984, p. 67). Institutions have interests that transcend the views or interests of their particular constituent members (Salisbury 1984, pp. 67–8). It is this basic difference that leads Salisbury to reason that institutions are more easily able to enter the political arena (they do not need to persuade membership) and that as complex organizations they will have a broader range of political concerns (or at least governmental activity will encroach more often on their interests) (Salisbury 1984, pp. 68–9).<sup>2</sup> This claim is salient in the UK context, particularly given the role played by local authorities – which would come under Salisbury's label of institution – in the implementation of central government policies. As discussed below, our approach to data collection – we map all policy active organizations – provides a unique opportunity to examine the differential patterns of breadth of engagement by institutions as well as groups. We put the hunch that institutions are more generalized in their engagement than groups to the test.

*H2: Institutions engage more broadly than interest groups.*

### **The growth in specialization?**

As discussed above, there is a growing thread in the interest group literature that discusses the motives for the pattern of engagement as viewed by organized interests themselves. And it suggests that there are good reasons for organized interests to pursue policy specialization to secure their survival. It has been argued that as the group-system grows, organized interests would seek to find narrow policy niches – to specialize as a survival strategy (Browne 1990; Gray and Lowery 1996). The argument, crudely put, is that in the face of competition for scarce resources (specifically the attention of policy-makers) organized interests react by narrowing their policy focus. Even if one does not accept the assumption that cohabitation of the same policy space is a proxy for competition, one could reasonably expect it to be better for an interest organization, in terms of their 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 their own resources and attention towards an issue niche (for further discussion, see Baumgartner and Leech 2001). This finding resonates with the broader political science literature suggesting that the growth of overall group numbers reflects an underlying current towards policy

specialization and the pursuit of narrow issue agendas (for the US, see Skocpol 1999; for the UK, see Grant 2008). If the specialization thesis holds, we would expect to see the breadth of engagement of organized interests to fall as the overall size of the organized interest population increases.

*H3: Aggregate specialization levels grow over time.*

In this article we focus on these related propositions. That these propositions are strongly held rules of thumb underlines the importance of our findings for this area of scholarship.<sup>3</sup> The sheer effort required to conduct large-scale empirical work on breadth of policy engagement means that existing findings are limited to a few US studies. For instance, systematic quantification of the actual mobilization of organized interests around public policy issues or domains is an infrequent approach in the UK.<sup>4</sup> This is despite the UK public policy literature containing long-standing claims about the specialized pattern of organized interest government engagement (for a review, see Richardson 1999). It has long been asserted that the 'consultative' system involving close contact between specialized organized interests and sub-sections of the bureaucracy: (1) is important alongside the parliamentary system (McKenzie 1958; Rose 1984); (2) constitutes the British (and Scottish) 'policy style' (Richardson and Jordan 1979; Cairney 2008); and (3) is the 'orthodox' UK public policy approach (Grant 2001). Others have highlighted the importance of the civil service in the legislative process (Page 2003). We acknowledge that the three propositions outlined above have been repeated in the British public policy literature over many decades (see the discussion above); but here we examine whether or not these are empirically borne out in systematic mapping data. We are not so much replicating past studies, but beginning to empirically replace a long-standing assertion. In so doing, this article seeks to extend what is a US research tradition to a new context, the public policy process in Scotland.

In this article we scrutinize these expectations in the literature – shared by US and UK scholars – using a new dataset based on Scottish public policy. Specifically, we utilize data precisely from this 'consultative system' – involving the engagement of organized interests in Scottish public consultations over a 25-year period – to test several general propositions in the literature. In previous studies, the data available to measure breadth of engagement has been based on self-reporting surveys. As such, analysis was naturally restricted to measures of the extent to which groups had an overlap of 'interest' across provided lists of policy domains (see Walker 1991). In this article we utilize a dataset that links engagement to particular issue contexts. An overlap of 'interest' measure was perfectly reasonable when one only had survey-based data, but our data require new approaches: they present unique challenges with respect to measurement. That the style of data collection we analyse is becoming more and more the norm adds further weight to why (re)examining measures of breadth of organized interest engagement is timely.

### **ASSESSING POLICY 'INTEREST' VERSUS 'ENGAGEMENT': DO NEW DATA NEED NEW MEASURES?**

In the discussion above we have established that the extent to which organized interests spread their attention across policy domains or pursue a more focused pattern of engagement is a salient question for political scientists to consider. But the empirical study of breadth of engagement is plagued by the dual difficulties of sampling/data collection and measurement. Past studies gather survey evidence of policy interest from interest groups.

Here, in step with a new generation of studies on organized interest engagement in political life, we collect data from observations of actual policy engagement by organized interests. In this section we outline the type of data we have collected, and the implications this has for how we can go about measuring breadth of engagement.

### Data source

In this article we utilize a large dataset compiled from records of policy consultations launched by the Scottish Office (1982–1999) and Scottish Government (1999–2007).<sup>5</sup> Our decision was based on the nature of the British – and Scottish – political system, which means the bureaucratic avenue is likely to be the most frequently deployed, the most open and accessible, and the most productive for organized interests (see Jordan and Maloney 2001, p. 44).<sup>6</sup> Thus the consultation process provides an important window into policy mobilization by groups. We are concerned with the question of engagement, and not with influence.

In the UK, public policy consultations 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 or similar. Indeed, as mentioned above, such processes have been referred to as both the British and Scottish ‘policy style’. Precisely how decisive these exercises are for the final policy outcome is not clear. Evidence from several interviews with civil servants in Scotland suggests that new insights and information arise from such exercises: there are sometimes surprises (see Halpin 2011). Moreover, a survey of groups mobilizing suggests that 76.7 per cent of groups ( $n = 360$ ) engage in consultations very or fairly often.<sup>7</sup> Of course, there remains some scepticism. Indeed, participants interviewed by the authors openly admit that they are not always clear on how important their participation is, or if it always matters (see also Beales *et al.* forthcoming). Yet, resolving this particular question is not critical for the present article: it is not a study of influence, and our justification for using these data is simply that they provide a convenient window for assessing the breadth of policy engagement.

The process of UK devolution, which in 1999 granted Scotland its own parliament and allocated it direct responsibility for so-called ‘devolved’ policy matters, has not changed the practice of policy consultations. But, given that Scotland does not have responsibility for all policy matters (the so-called reserved matters) our data do not cover policy issues in areas such as defence, national security, international trade, or foreign affairs. It is standard UK-wide practice that consultations are launched by a team within a relevant government department, with invitations being sent to stakeholder lists and (more recently) invitations made on the government web site (in practice, for consultations, the access barriers are extremely low).

The consultations dataset is able to plot 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. In total, the dataset includes 1,690 consultations, which received over 180,000 responses from more than 18,000 discrete policy actors. 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 publications pages of the Scottish government web site. No definitive list of consultations conducted by the Scottish government exists,<sup>8</sup> we can therefore definitively say that we mapped each and every

consultation where data are available in the public domain, and our dataset is as comprehensive as it can ever be.

Most importantly, these data quantify actual policy mobilization: we do not have to decide objectively who is or is not a relevant actor in a policy domain since we simply let the actors decide for themselves.<sup>9</sup> In that respect, our data are substantially different from those used by past studies discussing breadth of 'attention' by interest groups. However, they are almost identical in design to a new generation of datasets being collected in the US and beyond (see those used by Gray and Lowery 1996; Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Rasmussen 2010). As such, the discussion below dwells both on measures of breadth of engagement and on substantive findings about organized interest behaviour.

### **New measures: from 'interest' to 'engagement'**

As discussed above, the state of the art when it comes to measures of breadth of engagement involve measures of 'interest' in policy areas (Walker 1991; Heinz *et al.* 1993). Typically scholars have measured the extent to which groups with a policy 'home' in, say, agriculture self-reported an interest in other domains. Because our data are based on actual policy activity we have some new possibilities with respect to measurement, but also some novel challenges. In this article we adopt three different approaches to measuring breadth of policy engagement.

#### *Domain count*

The first is the number of domains that an organization is active in.<sup>10</sup> To measure this we take a count of the number of domains a group has been active in over the entire 25-year period. In order to identify which domain a consultation belongs to, based on the subject matter of each consultation, we applied a Policy Agendas major topic code.<sup>11</sup> We considered each major topic code – agriculture, health, education, environment, and so on – as constituting a unique policy domain. The advantages of this coding process are threefold. First, we are using an established and respected method for coding government policy. Second, the use of this codeframe makes this and other policy agendas projects data sources easily comparable (for a review, see John 2006). Thirdly, it overcomes a major problem with the only other viable coding alternative, departmental structures; namely that such structures frequently change boundaries over time. While a policy agendas frame has been applied to governmental agendas, we see our approach as a logical extension since organized interests also face finite resources and attention which necessitates prioritization. Table 1 reports the frequency of consultations across the domains. As is evident, consultations were conducted in 15 domain areas, with far more concentrated in the areas of agriculture, health, education, housing and crime.<sup>12</sup> This broadly reflects those policy areas in which the Scottish administration has primary legislative powers.

#### *Issue entropy*

The above domain measure simply reports the total count of domains in which a single organization is active without respect to the distribution of this activity. The problem is that two groups active in the same number of domains may have widely divergent proportions of activity across them. To capture this variation we utilize a measure of 'issue entropy', namely a Shannon's H entropy score. This has its roots in information theory (Shannon and Weaver 1949; Shannon 1950; Chaffee and Wilson 1977; Lasorsa 1991; Culbertson 1992) but is increasingly used in studies of policy agenda diversity (McCombs and Zhu 1995; Baumgartner *et al.* 2000; Talbert and Potoski 2002; Jones *et al.* 2005; Sheingate 2006;

TABLE 1 *Frequency of policy issues and activity by policy domains*

Domain	Issues	Percentage	Activity	Percentage
Macroeconomics	46	2.74	1,255	1.40
Civil rights	24	1.43	2,267	2.53
Health	173	10.30	10,510	11.72
Agriculture	395	23.51	7,495	8.36
Labour	12	0.71	542	0.60
Education	147	8.75	16,830	18.76
Environment	211	12.56	9,336	10.41
Energy	21	1.25	1,038	1.16
Transportation	52	3.10	2,927	3.26
Law, crime, and family issues	175	10.42	7,905	8.81
Social welfare	37	2.20	2,952	3.29
Housing and urban development	254	15.12	15,751	17.56
Commerce and banking	32	1.90	1,958	2.18
Government operations	83	4.94	7,337	8.18
Public lands	18	1.07	1,603	1.79
	1,680	100.00	89,706	100.00

Boydston 2008; Wolfe *et al.* 2009). While capturing the same underlying concept as other similar measures used in the interest group literature – such as the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index<sup>13</sup> (see use by Gray and Lowery 1996) – Shannon's H is utilized in this application as it is believed to be more sensitive to high levels of scope and results in wider variation (Bevan 2008). The issue entropy scores we calculate are normalized to range from 0.00 to 1.00, and describe the distribution of each organizations domain-level activity. When organizations participate in only one domain, the entropy score is near zero and indicates a narrow breadth of engagement. Ultimately, this issue entropy score supports an analysis of system-level breadth of engagement at the individual organizational level, and can be compared across all organizations.

### *Generalization (entropy X activity)*

Though issue entropy is used extensively in the analysis to follow, we develop a third measure of breadth of engagement that incorporates both the distribution of intensity across domains and absolute levels of activity for each organization. Given that our calculation of issue entropy utilizes proportions of activity at the organization level, we multiply this score by each organization's count of consultation responses (total activity) to generate a relative generalization measure. Though mathematically simple in calculation, this score provides a method by which we can compare the distribution of activity across 15 policy domains given an organization's total level of participation. Here, we are implying that despite even distributions of intensity across domains, organizations with substantial numbers of overall consultation responses are fundamentally different than those with limited activity levels.

In summary, we develop three measures that enable us to compare the relative levels of actor participation across 15 policy domains: (1) domains (a simple count of the number of domains in which an actor participates); (2) issue entropy (a normalized Shannon's H score using proportions of actors' activity); and (3) generalization (the product of issue entropy and actors' absolute activity). We are clear that these all provide distinctive measures, but they are of course correlated with one another.<sup>14</sup>

## FINDINGS

### **Generalized versus focused policy engagement: what is the mix?**

Past studies of breadth of engagement have measured the extent to which groups – based on survey data – indicate an ‘interest’ in various policy domains. The usual analysis is to look at the extent to which groups are interested in one or more domains. Here we map actual policy engagement across policy domains. Table 1 also reports the frequency with which organizations engaged across the 15 policy domains over the 25-year period. We counted a single response over this period to a consultation as engagement in a domain. As such, the ‘domain’ measure offers a very low threshold test of engagement, and does not capture the intensity of engagement (we come to that in a moment). As the table shows, the vast majority of our actors, almost three-quarters of the entire population, are active in just a single domain. While we cannot discount that a few may have changed names in ways we could not detect (which would mean we have overcounted the number of unique organizations), this does not diminish the overwhelming finding of very partial political engagement. This analysis does suggest, at face value, that most organizations in our population are domain specialists: they focus in just one policy area. Further, it indicates that beyond these organizations there is a rather smaller minority engaged in a handful of related domains (say, agriculture and environment, or education and social services). It could, of course, be that the most frequent actors are simply those that engage more broadly? That is, broad engagement could be a proxy for a high level of engagement. To rule out this explanation, we looked for any correlations between activity and domain spread. A scatter plot revealed no direct correlation between the number of domains an actor is active in and their level of overall level of activity.

It is interesting to compare prior work utilizing a measure of ‘interest’ with our findings deploying a measure of ‘engagement’. Our results suggest the dominance of a narrow policy focus. But recall, in their reworking of Walker’s data, Baumgartner and Leech (1998, p. 158) – based on a similar analysis to table 1 – suggest that two per cent of total were interested in ‘eight or more of the ten areas’. This different finding suggests that while breadth of monitoring may be quite broad, for most organized interests actual engagement is narrowly drawn.

This preliminary conclusion is reinforced when we consider domain overlap (that is, what proportion of all active organizations are engaged in common policy domains). When Walker (1991) asked his respondents to indicate whether they were ‘interested’ in a range of policy areas, he could then examine overlaps of policy interest. In our data, we are fortunate in that we can look at the proportion of the population who actually engage (at least once) in one or more policy domains. The comparison is enlightening. When we tried to replicate his table showing the extent of overlap among actors who worked in similar policy domains, the highest figure in our data is 4.9 per cent. In contrast, Walker’s data showed a high in terms of overlap of 13.9 per cent. Part of the reason for the difference is that we are looking at the overlap among all organizations while Walker looked only at whether those ‘very interested’ in their ‘home’ domain also worked in others. Nevertheless, in and of itself, our finding tells us that beyond the well known political interlocutors (who we ‘know’ are important and invite to respond to surveys), organized interests engage only sporadically in contemporary policy-making. Our data on engagement – versus ‘interest’ – suggest most organized interests stick to their ‘home’ domain.

TABLE 2 *Grouped entropy across all actors*

Entropy	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
0.00–0.09	13,906	75.46	75.46
0.10–0.19	347	1.88	77.34
0.20–0.29	2,233	12.12	89.46
0.30–0.39	625	3.39	92.85
0.40–0.49	651	3.53	96.38
0.50–0.59	330	1.79	98.17
0.60–0.69	197	1.07	99.24
0.70–0.79	88	0.48	99.72
0.80–0.89	52	0.28	100.00
	18,429	100.00	

The finding that most organized interests in our data ‘engage’ rather narrowly is supported when we deploy our other measures of breadth of engagement. Using the issue entropy scores we can compare all our organizations over 15 domains in a fashion that takes available data into consideration (see table 2). As we describe above, the measure captures the evenness of actors’ distributions of activity across domains. It is salient here that the vast majority of actors are active only in one domain; that is, they have an issue entropy score of near zero. It is only when we get to the last 500 or so actors that we see any organizations that could in any meaningful way be described as real system-wide generalists. This reflects the broader pattern of policy activity reported in table 1. Our data show that most organized interests engage very narrowly in public policy.

### **Are institutions more broadly engaged than interest groups?**

As outlined in the data section above, a by-product of our observational – rather than survey based – approach is that we analyse the breadth of engagement of all ‘active’ organizations. We are not constrained by a list of ‘important’ or ‘salient’ organizations in a list of survey respondents. This provides a unique opportunity to evaluate Salisbury’s (1984) hunch that institutions, and not interest groups, would tend to be more broadly engaged in public policy. So what did we find?

In support of Salisbury’s suggestion, table 3 reports the 15 actors with the highest ‘breadth of engagement’ scores (we report all three measures). These actors are the most broad in their engagement. The second column designates organizational type. As is evident, these actors are all local government organizations (with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities [COSLA] being the collective voice of local authorities). In fact, 29 of the 32 current Scottish local authorities (Councils) were in the top 100. If there is a set of actors that constitute a core to Scottish public policy it is local government: that is, central/local government institutions. This resonates with Heinz *et al.* (1993), in their seminal US study, who could not count government, but nevertheless speculated it may be the core. Immediately salient here is that entropy and entropy x activity scores are not directly reflected in either domain spread or overall volume of activity. For example, COSLA is the most frequent actor in the table, and is active across 15 domains (as broad as any actor in the data). Yet it has a lower entropy score than Perth and Kinross Council. Similarly, while Perth and Kinross Council has a higher entropy score than Aberdeen City Council, when we factor in activity levels, we see Aberdeen emerge as a more generalized

TABLE 3 *Top 15 system-wide generalists*

Rank	Name	No. of domains	Activity	Entropy	Entropy X activity
1	COSLA	15	677	0.856	579.63
2	Glasgow City Council	15	629	0.846	532.01
3	Edinburgh (City of) Council	15	618	0.826	510.74
4	Highland Council	15	590	0.850	501.74
5	Aberdeen City Council	15	565	0.840	474.82
6	Fife Council	15	545	0.857	467.03
7	North Lanarkshire Council	15	548	0.831	455.45
8	South Lanarkshire Council	15	533	0.841	448.33
9	Aberdeenshire Council	15	522	0.847	442.11
10	East Ayrshire Council	15	499	0.850	423.98
11	Angus Council	15	500	0.838	418.98
12	Renfrewshire Council	15	497	0.832	413.75
13	Perth and Kinross Council	15	448	0.869	389.14
14	Dundee City Council	15	463	0.824	381.45
15	West Lothian Council	15	437	0.849	370.85

Key: COSLA = Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

actor (Entropy x activity score). The newly devised measures are able to separate out actor generalization levels.

While there is a preponderance of governmental entities among organizations with the broadest engagement in policy, it is important to note, however, that being a government entity does not itself designate such a pattern. In fact, the local authorities make up a small proportion of the overall governmental entity category which also includes non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), government agencies and central government departments. This is borne out in the analysis below.

Table 4 shows the mean entropy x activity scores for cross-domain generalization by organization type. Calculations of average entropy x activity scores show that institutions are, on average, more generally engaged than interest groups (score of 2.35 versus 1.73). However, it depends on the type of institution. Government, by which we refer to central/local government, is by far the most broad in its engagement. In a Scottish context

TABLE 4 *Mean generalization by actor type*

Type of actor	No. of actors	Entropy	Entropy S.D.	Entropy X activity	Entropy X activity S.D.
<i>Institutions</i>					
Public institutions	5,369	0.05	0.12	0.95	7.85
Government	2,591	0.18	0.22	8.22	45.10
Businesses	3,746	0.04	0.12	0.30	1.59
<i>Interest groups</i>					
Non-profits and citizen groups	3,836	0.10	0.17	1.35	6.86
Trade associations	1,115	0.09	0.16	1.67	11.01
Professional associations	1,025	0.12	0.18	3.20	18.20
Unions	72	0.21	0.22	5.94	19.65
Other	683	0.08	0.16	1.31	12.08
Total/Average	18,437	0.11	0.17	2.87	15.29

this makes sense given they are charged with delivering most public services to citizens.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, prior to devolution (pre-1999), they were the only form of elected *Scottish* government. By contrast, private institutions, such as businesses, and public institutions (such as hospitals, schools and such like) are among the least broad. There is substantial variation. For instance, here unions are the second broadest engaged type of organizations – on average – even though no trade union is in our top 15.

In relation to institutions versus collective organizations, the stand out finding again is that central/local government are very broad, as Salisbury would expect, but other institutions are among the most narrowly engaged. There is little support, at least from our data, that companies and hospital boards, school districts and the like are actually broadly engaged. By and large they stick to a narrow domain focus. In relation to collective organizations, unions and professional associations are the broadest in their engagement, and voluntary associations/citizen groups the most narrow. The fact that unions have consolidated over time, and that professional groups (doctors, lawyers, accountants) must protect members' interests wherever these emerge, seems to make sense with the data we report. The citizen group finding also gels with the argument that such groups are by definition typically narrow and focused in their policy activities. Their generalized engagement mostly happens through umbrella groups – such as the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and the Scottish Environment Link.

### Is focused engagement on the rise?

There is a strong expectation in the group literature that crowded policy space will drive organized interests to specialize and focus attention on increasingly narrow policy niches. One of the advantages of our time-series data is that we can make an initial attempt to examine the development of policy specialization levels *over time*. To facilitate this type of analysis we segmented our dataset by six time periods, each correlating roughly with UK parliamentary terms.

Table 5 reports two measures of 'breadth of engagement' (entropy and entropy x activity) scores, alongside measures of activity by organized interests across time periods. We analysed the breadth of engagement only for organizations that were engaged in more than one domain. Here, we test whether, in aggregate, regular participants become more broadly engaged over time. The initial salient point here is that the 'system' is growing in the first two periods (measures of overall activity by organized interests), and also that the number of unique organizations actually engaged in policy affairs is rising. This suggests ideal conditions for a growth in actor specialization over time.<sup>16</sup> However, our data show that there is no correlation between a rapid growth in both consultation activity and the number of groups active over time, and breadth

TABLE 5 *Breadth of policy engagement over time, 1982–2007*

Period	Average entropy	Average entropy X activity	No. of actors engaged	Volume of activity
1982–1986	.313	2.519	275	1,776
1987–1991	.358	5.635	532	6,150
1992–1996	.337	4.977	1,285	12,598
1997–2000	.350	5.665	1,387	13,825
2001–2004	.339	6.655	1,489	17,513
2005–2007	.354	5.142	911	8,221

of engagement levels.<sup>17</sup> Of course, we cannot directly assess the competition levels that any increase in organizational populations may suggest – but then again the population ecology literature has suggested that indirect competition is the mechanism that regulates populations (see Gray and Lowery 2000 [1996]). While we cannot categorically say what mechanism underlies this process, we can conclude that overall population sizes are not, at an aggregate level, associated with higher or lower levels of specialized engagement. This finding supports analysis elsewhere that shows the importance of individual group resource levels, as opposed to intra-group competition, in explaining the level of generalized engagement in policy (see Baumgartner and Leech 1998).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The breadth of engagement by organized interests is a salient topic for political science. From a pluralist perspective, assessing the extent to which organized interests spread their activities broadly – or not – helps in probing the diversity of ‘voice’ in a given political system and, thus, the prospects for governing in the ‘public good’. While these concerns have US origins, they have been repeated for the UK context and have been central to the international literature on organized interests and public policy. In this article we have explored this issue using a new style of dataset on Scottish policy engagement by organized interests, which affords us three substantive empirical findings. In the process we have fashioned some new measures for breadth of policy engagement that – so far as this style of data collection becomes more common – should prove useful for others (especially in connection with an emerging neo-pluralist group literature, see Lowery and Gray 2004).

Firstly, we find that most organized interests are rather narrow in their breadth of engagement. They tend to stick to a single domain, or perhaps stretch to related domains. By contrast, few organizations could be said to spread engagement across anything close to the entire policy system. This finding is consistent with what the ‘specialize to survive’ position would expect to see by way of patterns of engagement. As such, the finding is somewhat at odds with the large-scale empirical studies reporting generalized attention among organized interests. This dissonance underlines a key implication of our study, that attention is empirically different to engagement. We have no reason to doubt that the organizations we observe were attentive in a different pattern to which they engaged. It is important to keep in mind here that the population of organized interests we observe are taken from the context of policy consultations, which have relatively open access to all interested parties. Other studies tend to deliberately sample well-known and regular participants in politics: our data are different. Our method of quantification means we include many, many organizations that are unlikely to conceive of themselves as dedicated policy organizations. This may also partly explain the extent to which we find few organizations with a relatively broad engagement. Yet, if we are seriously interested in quantifying public policy ‘as it happens’ then there is surely value in also from time to time casting a net in a way that reflects the pattern of policy activity in the real policy world. Thus, a firm implication from our work is that the study of organized interests ought not to always focus exclusively on the known quantities of the organized interest universe, but to look also to the fringes where a very large cast of intermittent pressure participants reside. It follows, that explaining the organized interest populations that emerge on given issues requires scholars to resort to theories of conflict expansion which pay attention to the ways in which the initially disinterested or disengaged (policy amateurs) come to take an interest in policy matters (see Schattschneider 1960; Baumgartner and Leech 2001).

Secondly, following Salisbury, we find that institutions are indeed more generally engaged, on average. However, it depends on the type of institution. We find central and local government are the most broadly engaged institutions, but businesses are the most narrowly engaged. This is an important caveat on the Salisbury account; and also a healthy reminder that much political 'lobbying' is government lobbying government. In relation to groups, variation also occurs. Citizen groups seem, on aggregate, to be most narrow in their engagement compared to unions or professional groups. The broader implication here is to how interest group scholarship attends to the question of survival. How two different types of interests groups can survive with vastly different breadth in policy agendas points to useful further work, particularly probing the particular comparative 'ecologies' of citizen versus business interests.

These two empirical findings are not likely to shock the long-standing observer of British public administration. After all, dating back to Sammy Finer, there has been the assertion that groups pursue rather narrow agendas confined to areas of policy expertise (for a summary, see Richardson 1999). Yet, these findings warranted testing and empirical scrutiny. While the US literature has tried to 'test' this type of proposition with population data, they sit in the British literature as largely unsubstantiated claims. This article has not so much attempted to replicate these past studies, but sought to replace assertion with systematic empirical data. That in broad brush we uphold these fine assertions does not devalue the findings, but rather gives them added importance. That we can provide empirical nuance offers a baseline for others to take up and probe the specifics.

Lastly, we examine a far more general question in the literature about change over time. Conversely to expectations about a rise in issue specialists, we show that an expanding population of policy active organizations does not lead to higher levels of specialization among organized interests that are regular participants (those that are engaged frequently in policy activity). There has been a repeated finding that organized interest populations are growing over time – and our data support this for the Scottish 'system'. But, in contrast to expectations (see, for instance, Browne 1990) this does not drive organizations to pursue ever narrower policy niches. This does not rule out, as Heaney (2007) has suggested, that organized interests might utilize other dimensions of their identity to differentiate themselves from each other (say, representativeness, expertise, and so on). But, we can at least make the argument that, in aggregate, policy specialization does not seem to be associated with population expansion. This is highly salient for the long-standing debate that aggregate growth in the organized interest 'system' was synonymous with the growing compartmentalization of policy-making. In fact, we find that the system in Scotland is growing over time, but that it does so by adding new organizations (mostly intermittently) and that the existing general groups remain general in their engagement. This fosters an image of a growing penumbra of policy amateurs surrounding a core of broadly orientated policy generalists. On our evidence, if the system is dominated by policy niche operators now, it is because it probably has been for several decades.

Of course, the argument we have put forward is positioned against expectations in the UK and US contexts. We suggest that breadth of engagement is a theme that has salience outside of these cases, although we also admit that the expectations arising from US and UK evidence might need recalibrating for other cases. Comparative data – of which there is a paucity – on different systems will help explore the claims made in this article further. It is noteworthy that these substantive findings are made against scholarly expectations established largely using data on 'reported' levels of interest in policy domains. Previous studies asked groups for generalized responses as well as about

'intentions' rather than 'actions'. In recent years, there has been a concerted effort amongst interest group researchers to develop public policy based datasets that reflect observations of actual group engagement and do so at the issue level over time (for a discussion, see Baumgartner and Leech 1998, pp. 119, 124 and Halpin and Jordan *forthcoming*). This article utilizes data that in many respects heed this call. As such, the true test of our findings will be against data from this new generation of studies that take a similar focus on actual policy engagement of organized interests in political affairs. In taking this agenda forward, our study offers some important lessons. For instance, the need to collect data based on policy mobilization then raises the subsequent question over which window on policy engagement to utilize. The initial choice to map policy consultation processes was based on three principles: pragmatism (the data were available and accessible); relevance (the consultation process is very open and would likely capture most politically active groups); and scholarly salience (at least some suggest the bureaucratic arena is a likely focal point for the engagement of organized interests in British politics). Similar justifications of approach are welcome, indeed necessary, both to justify stepping away from established orthodoxies, and (especially) in taking a first tentative step when no orthodoxies exist to follow. In sum, beyond our substantive findings, we offer up one novel way to investigate and measure engagement patterns: methods that are necessary when new datasets that are built using issue-level information on mobilization become available. In so far as this type of data becomes more commonly collected, the measures we devise and apply should prove useful for others.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It is important to note that, despite the theoretical formulation (that is, ESA), the empirical findings from population ecology studies of organized interests support the idea that survival-related specialization is achieved through the partitioning of resources (like constituency support and funding) and not in relation to avoiding crowding in a given policy space.
- <sup>2</sup> In agreeing with Salisbury's finding of (numerical) institutional dominance, Lowery and Gray (1998) have argued that this is because of 'choices' to lobby separate from collective associations. This may make sense in analysing lobby data in the US where 'institutions' is *assumed* to be a synonym for businesses, but our data includes institutions of a governmental nature where collective action is not an alternative.
- <sup>3</sup> It is also important to acknowledge that these theoretical expectations – which are stated for the UK and US cases – may not hold for *other* (sub) national cases. For instance, as one reviewer suggested, one could imagine reasons why corporatist countries in Western Europe *might* be approached with different expectations. The limited scope for accreditation as a negotiating partner with the state might be argued to punish a lack of generalized constituency coverage and constrain variations in policy breadth by key groups. Thus, while the specific expectations might differ for some other systems, the theme of breadth of engagement remains salient. Arguably, the reported decline of corporatism in many countries gives this

theme more weight – see literature on Scandinavian corporatism and rise of ‘lobbyism’ in particular (see Christiansen and Rommetvedt 1999).

- <sup>4</sup> Scholars who have attempted such quantification exercises – even in small domains – have typically noted the difficulty of their task and its necessary partiality (see, for instance, the May *et al.* (1998) study of trade associations). Work is underway to count associative activity in the UK through coding of time-series data from the UK Database of Associations (see Jordan and Greenan forthcoming). Nevertheless, the authors are aware of no current UK-wide or Scottish dataset (institutional or otherwise) which aims to systematically map mobilization in specific issue contexts.
- <sup>5</sup> It is important to recognize that as part of a broader process of UK devolution, Scotland was granted its own Scottish Parliament and Scottish Executive in 1999 and, with that, responsibility for some issue areas (so-called ‘devolved matters’). The UK parliament and government retain responsibility for so-called ‘reserved matters’. Devolved matters include, health and social work; education and training; local government and housing; justice and police; agriculture, forestry and fisheries; environment; tourism, sport and heritage; economic development and internal transport.
- <sup>6</sup> As one reviewer suggests, our choice of arena might be expected to influence the type of organizations mobilizing, and thus perhaps underplay the role of citizen groups. In principle this might make sense. However, consultations in the UK are almost always openly accessible to any individual or organization, making it easy for even the most vociferous outsider to mobilize in this arena. That being said, we in no way suggest that counting populations using data on media coverage or access to parliamentary committees would surface *precisely* the same population. In other countries where access to administrative arenas are more tightly controlled this might be a valid concern. More broadly, we accept that different arenas (legislative, media and administrative) in the same national system will provide different pictures: as Salisbury (1984) demonstrated 25 years ago for the Washington scene.
- <sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked if they thought that consultation results are largely disregarded by policy-makers. Opinions were almost evenly divided, with broadly similar proportions of the sample agreeing with these statements, disagreeing, or remaining non-committal.
- <sup>8</sup> The Scottish government’s internal *Consultation Good Practice Guidance* (2008) 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 web site. However, this guidance has not always been followed, and therefore not all consultation documentation has made its way into the public domain.
- <sup>9</sup> Criticism has been made in the past over using consultation *invitation lists* as data – mostly on the basis that access to lists is very open (see Cavanagh *et al.* 1995). In this data we only map actors who *actually responded* to policy consultations.
- <sup>10</sup> Given that we engage with what is a largely US literature, we deploy the US term ‘policy domain’. The equivalent European or UK term is policy sector or policy area.
- <sup>11</sup> A topic codebook is available (<http://www.policyagendas.co.uk>).
- <sup>12</sup> It should be noted that we dropped policy domains where less than 10 consultations occurred over the 25-year period. Therefore the number of issues covered drops to 1680 and discrete actors to 89706.
- <sup>13</sup> Note that we did calculate both HHI scores and Shannon’s H entropy scores for all groups (–.977 correlation), and our broad analysis/findings remain unchanged regardless of the measure used. Of course, some values for individual groups *do* differ. For the reasons discussed in the text, we chose to use Shannon’s H for our analysis.
- <sup>14</sup> The correlation between ‘domains’ and ‘issue entropy’ measures is highest (.88), which makes sense given that a higher entropy scores *in part* means an organized interest is engaged in more domains.
- <sup>15</sup> This finding also underlines and reinforces the need to resist the tendency among scholars to conceive of organized interests as though they did not include governmental actors.
- <sup>16</sup> As one reviewer noted, the potential for mobilization ought to be increased by the supply of more possible issues to engage on. There is an increase in the overall number of consultations over time for which we have data (generally increasing on average since 1985, but with no obvious break point for devolution). This does not have any impact on entropy itself, but of course can increase the entropy X activity measure.
- <sup>17</sup> In our calculations an organization is counted only once per time period, regardless of how many times it is active in that time period.

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