

Political Cleavages and Interest Group Politics

A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract. For a long period the study of European interest group politics remained somewhat disconnected from other areas of European Union studies. There exists little cross-fertilization between the burgeoning literature on European party politics and political cleavages, on the one hand, and the literature on European interest groups, on the other hand. Although, recent scholarship has moved towards a more comparative approach, researchers still do not pay much attention to the possibility that a small number of political cleavages shapes the emerging European interest group system. This paper, which is part of a larger ongoing research project, aims to connect the study of interest group politics with the literature on party politics and political cleavages. The empirical corpus of the paper analyses data on political support networks among interest groups and political parties and uses German, Dutch, French, Belgian and EU-level elite survey-data. More in particular, I demonstrate that support networks between interest groups and political parties are structured according to traditional party political cleavages.

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Introduction

For a long time the study of European interest group politics has remained disconnected or ‘ghetto-ized’ from other sub-areas within the study of the European Union (EU), on the one hand, and from the general study of interest groups, on the other hand (Green-Cowles 2003; Woll 2006). Early studies of EU interest groups were inspired by the growing number interest group population in Brussels and most of these studies were primarily concerned with the mapping of an emerging interest groups system. Although empirically rich, most studies were characterized by ‘theoretical poverty’ and linkages to the comparative and general political science literature on interest groups were usually absent. The recent literature on EU interest groups goes beyond questions about the development and evolution of the EU interest group system and, therefore, it is broader in outlook. Several studies are conducted on the conditions under which and processes through which European interest groups mobilize (Wessels 2004; Mahoney 2004), which institutional configurations promote or constrain access, the resources and strategies affecting access (Bouwen 2002; Beyers 2004), which channels and levels are most likely to be used (Bennet 1999; Beyers 2002; Eising 2004), the stages during which lobbying will be most effective (Crombez 2002) and how specific actor properties, such as the distinction between public interests and business interests, shape access (Pollack 1997; Beyers 2002, 2004; Mahoney 2004).

In this paper, I address a topic which, although it is central to many fields of political science, has received little attention from interest groups scholars: the structure of conflict and consensus. I believe that a more explicit and thorough linkage of interest group politics with the overall structure of conflict in a polity is crucial in order to understand the role of advocates in a broader political context. Despite the publication of excellent special issues and edited volumes with chapters on social movements, interest groups and political parties (see for instance Marks and Steenbergen 2004), the cross-fertilization between the literature on EU party political cleavages, on the one hand, and the EU interest group literature, on the other hand, has remained limited. In order to map political parties in a political space students of party politics rely on party manifestos and public opinion data; very few scholars map parties in a political space by taking into account the interactions between political parties, government officials and interest groups (exceptions include Wessels 2004, Beyers and Kerremans 2004). Most studies deal with one type of political organization (often parties) and then make indirect inferences with regard to the other

type (for instance interest groups). Often the literature reads as if these two types of political representation – parties and interest groups – exist near each other; they do not share fundamental ideological niches.

This observation is not only confined to the literature on EU interest groups. While the traditional pluralist scholars such as Bentley, Truman and Key put group conflict at the core of their thinking and often combined the study of political parties and interest groups, few contemporary scholars of politics link the study of party politics and interest group politics (see for instance Heinz et al. 1993, 247-9; Clifton 2004, 475-7). The reason for this limited attention has perhaps to do with the lack of empirical data and/or the difficulties in gathering such data. While political parties and party systems can be analyzed by using data on roll call votes or electoral behavior, the basic problem with interest groups is the absence of readily observed behavior. Interest group behavior is multifarious and there is no single logic which defines the maintenance and activities of interest groups. Moreover, the concept ‘interest group’ covers a very heterogeneous set of organizations which makes it difficult to delineate the field of study.

As a result, interest group scholars face difficulties in analyzing systematically why and how interest groups interact as well as how coalitions among groups are structured. While there is plenty of positive theory which suggests that political influence is based on exchange relations, there is little empirical research that systematically demonstrates and explains the emergence and development of exchange networks. Most explanations have a functionalist flavor whereby exchanges are seen as a transaction of something from x to y whereby x expects that y takes into account something that is valuable and of interest for x . Money, information, expertise is exchanged in return for access, attention or influence. So influence, access and attention are a function of exchanges. However, transactions are plagued by uncertainties about how much the seeker of influence, x , can trust y ; y may free ride, take the resource and ignore x interests. Such uncertainties decrease the likelihood of exchanges as well as the potential surplus or added value that result from exchanges. Yet, a large literature in sociology and political science elaborates how the structural embeddedness of actors in networks of continuing relations increases the likelihood of trustful and effective transactions. Because of long-term experiences with the exchange of resources, political support as well as friendship, stable networks and coalitions can emerge within a system of interest intermediation which includes parties and interest groups.

This paper analyzes the structure of these long-term support networks in which interest groups are involved and I argue that interest intermediation can be modeled along a dimensionality that reflects party political cleavages. In the next section, I sketch the rationale for connecting the study of party politics with interest group politics. This section is part of a larger project in which I hope to build a comprehensive theoretical framework which explains how interest groups seek allies, how they try to persuade opponents and how they seek to influence government policies. Then I present the research design. The empirical corpus of the paper analyses data on political support networks among interest groups and political parties in the field of trade policymaking. I demonstrate that support networks between interest groups and political parties are structured according to a dimensionality that reflects party political cleavages. More in particular, I conclude that the structure of conflict with regard to trade policies is consistent with a left-right structure which encompasses three alliances; a labor or social policy coalition, a pro-growth or business coalition and a pro-sustainability coalition.

Why should we study party political cleavages *and* interest group politics?

Why is a deeper understanding of the interaction between interest groups and political parties needed? One of the reasons is that, as suggested above, knowledge about the stable patterns of ideological contention may lead to a better understanding of daily political practices of interest groups. For instance, interest groups seek exchanges with political parties that have a similar ideological profile. Or, groups may perhaps try to convince and lobby party leaders with opposing political views. Although both examples – lobbying allies versus lobbying opponents – exemplify different behavioral patterns, both cases implicate the existence of a cleavage pattern that structures interactions. Yet, despite the fact that many studies demonstrate the emergence a European political cleavage space which resembles domestically mobilized cleavages, the literature on EU politics remains inconclusive regarding the relationship between interest group politics, party politics and political cleavages.

On the one hand, the EU-polity potentially depoliticizes issues as bureaucrats and non-majoritarian institutions play a key role in the policy-making process. Much legislative and executive work is done in bureaucratic committees such as the Council working groups, comitology committees and expert committees (Hix 1999, 31). Furthermore, regulatory policies occupy a prominent place in the activities of the EU. Because such policies are often considered

as more suitable to technocratic decision-making, the potential of expertise and information as decisive factors for network formation in the EU cannot be neglected. All this has led to a policy-style among interest groups which is often described as less political, less publicly visible and less aggressive compared to lobbying in the United States (US) (Mahoney 2005). So, compared to their colleagues in Washington, EU interest groups – as specialized and more functional organizations – should be less confrontational, prefer inside-lobbying instead of grass-roots lobbying and avoid ideological statements. On the other hand, recent studies have shown that the ideological views of actors (parties, social movements and bureaucrats) involved in European policy-making matter. Although opinions diverge on the way and the extent to which traditional left/right and new political cleavages are structurally related to issues arising from European integration, the main thrust is that politics at the European level reflects domestically mobilized political cleavages (Hix and Lord 1997; Hooghe 1999; Imig and Tarrow 2001; Gabel and Hix 2002; Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002; Marks and Steenbergen 2002). Clearly, despite the potential for technocracy, a strong political component seems to be present in EU politics.

Why is it plausible to assume the existence of a rather stable and enduring political space characterized by a sizeable number of dimensions? Why does not each separate issue or actor represent an idiosyncratic policy view based on technical expertise (as many policy issues require specialized knowledge and can have different implications for varying constituencies)? And, why should the interaction between interest groups and political parties be of any importance? As it would require an entire book to elaborate these issues, I will limit myself to a brief summary of some key arguments. I start with outlining some social mechanisms which lead to a low-dimensional political space. Then, I consider the role political parties and interest groups play in shaping the structure of a political space. I conclude this section with elaborating some propositions on the nature of political cleavages in the field of EU politics, in general, and trade policymaking, in particular.

Why is politics not just a matter of a fluid structure with random coalitions that take into account the uniqueness of each separate issue? Why do policymakers often pursue policies which resemble already existing policies and why do they not continuously adopt new policies? All these questions suggest that the options available to policymakers are considerably limited. Contemporary political science generally considers political action as being significantly constrained by institutional rules as well as the more informal nature of the cognitive/ideological

environment within which actors operate (Hix 1999, 71). This is one of the crucial tenets characterizing present-day political science, a discipline strongly colored by the neo-institutionalist turn of the early nineties. One of the puzzles for political science is the inherent instability and indecisiveness of systems with more than two voters and more than two separating issues (Riker 1982; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Continuously including new dimensions and decision-makers can indeed lead to instability. Institutionalists will explain political stability by pointing at the fact that the dimensionality of political conflict is institutionally constrained and by formal institutional mechanisms which organize the order in which decisions are made, establish voting procedures and regulate the access of interest parties. Many of such institutional devices are based on formal rules which are often, but not always, laid down in constitutional law.

In addition to formal devices, stability is also enhanced by the fact that usually new (and recurrent) issues are defined so that they include a single dimension of conflict or that new issues are interpreted in light of existing cleavages. Political scientists have used the notion of bounded rationality in order to understand this: as the computational abilities of actors are limited and as access to information is restricted, actors try to understand new issues within existing frames of reference. Another reason for inherent stability concerns the path-dependent character of political choices that originated in the past. For political parties, but also for interest groups, it is hard to abandon the existing party cleavage structure and to start thinking in entirely new terms. Parties and interest groups attract a politically motivated constituency that benefits from the policies they support and, therefore, abandoning existing policies by adopting new policies or drastically changing a prevailing policy view may harm the party's or interest group's reputation among crucial constituencies. In sum, cleavages concern 'the ways in which custody of symbolic content of the domain is distributed among its participants' and they 'impose limits on the range of arguments that are permissible, legitimate, and likely to be accepted as valid frames for the controversy in any given situation' (Laumann and Knoke 1987, 315).

Traditionally, political cleavages were organized by political parties and in studying cleavages most political scientists have concentrated on party politics (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 21). This is a logical research strategy as especially parties, and not interest groups, are crucial in shaping legislative and executive politics. However, this does not mean that cleavages only emerge or develop as a result of partisan politics or that they are limited to the partisan

arena. On the contrary, in order to be meaningful, party cleavages should spill-over in and shape other arenas such as the arena of interest group and bureaucratic politics. In addition, politicians are key ideological labelers as they regularly comment on specific issues. In doing this they establish ideological significance and mobilize sympathizers and antagonists on the basis of ideology. Interest group officials have to take into account such information when they establish networks with politicians. Party political cleavages do not only differentiate political parties into different clusters, but they may also be important devices which shape interest group activity. The more actors outside the partisan arena take into consideration the ideological labels attached to political parties, the more ideological cleavages are indeed enduring features of politics.

Also political parties consider the political activities of interest groups as salient. Quite regularly political ideas and beliefs originate outside the partisan arena and are later on, once they have the potential of conveying electoral advantage, drawn into partisan conflict. It is well-known that the electoral success of parties can be significantly affected by grass-roots support mobilized by interest groups (for instance, the Christian Right and the Republicans in the US) and that the emergence of new parties is quite often related to previous interest group mobilization (for instance, the green parties and new social movements in several European countries). Parties generally rely on interest groups in order to gain information about important parts of their electoral constituency and in some political systems interest groups play a key role mobilizing voters. Finally, political parties may lack sufficient information and knowledge about the distribution of costs and benefits of the policies they are contemplating or the political risks that such a distribution may entail (Majone 1996, 268). Interest groups, with their more specialized and functional profile, are able to provide this sort of information to political parties, information political parties will often find difficult to collect themselves.

If political cleavages – stable structural patterns of conflict and consensus in a political system – are a persistent and recurring feature of politics, then they are not necessarily confined to partisan politics. As mentioned above, political cleavages, if they are salient, may spill over into other arenas, including the supranational or international arena. Since the mid-nineties many scholars started to investigate the political cleavage structure of EU politics. The importance of this research program lies in the fact that it demonstrated the persistent nature of party cleavages for an arena where traditional party politics was assumed to be less relevant. Traditional approaches, such as intergovernmentalism or neo-functionalism, do not expect that party

cleavages play a significant role at the supranational level and suppose, albeit for different reasons, that EU-politics remains divorced from party cleavages. These approaches suppose that the EU political space is primarily structured by a cleavage between support for and opposition to European integration and not by a left-right political divide.

However, because the policy issues the EU deals with are not neutral in terms of distribution and redistribution, the cleavage pro or contra European integration is an insufficient or incomplete representation of the European political space. Scharpf, for instance, demonstrates that product and process-related regulations generate different distributional pay-offs (1996; 1997, 133). Likewise, Pollack shows that the member states have delegated powers to supranational institutions like the Commission and the Court of Justice in areas where policies impose concentrated costs and diffuse benefits for different societal groups (2003, 66 and 105-6). Examples are competition and external trade policies. These policies impose costs on concentrated economic interests, but may lead to diffuse benefits in the form of competitive markets and consumer choice. Not only concentrated interests facing direct costs and benefits will become active. Groups representing societal preferences not directly related to material self-interests may also organize mobilization of support and opposition. People may have strong feelings about the interests of 'others' (for instance the poor, the developing countries) or about diffuse issues such as sustainable development (Salisbury 1969; Baumgartner and Leech 1998, 69-70). There is thus, a high potential for interest mobilization on EU policy issues, for attempts by organized interests and political parties to gain access to and politicize EU policymaking. In this paper, I hypothesize that a small number of dimensions dominates the political space, but I have less firm a-priori hypotheses regarding which dimension will dominate this space. Although Gabel and Hix identified the preponderance of a traditional socio-economic left-right dimension (2002), the findings of Hooghe et al. suggest that a coalition mobilizing green/alternative/liberal values may start to take over (2002). The latter is consistent with other recent research on interest groups politics and their interactions with political institutions, research which showed that the structure of networks between interest groups and policymakers reflect a cleavage between a pro-growth and a pro-sustainability coalition (Kriesi and Jegen, 2001; Beyers and Kerremans 2004).

To my knowledge few scholars have studied whether a comparable structure of consensus and conflict exists within the context of other international organizations and their policies. This is not unlikely as the policies of organizations such as the World Trade Organizations (WTO),

the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank Group (WB) or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have considerable (re)-distributive implications. More in particular, the politics of trade has increasingly become vulnerable to contestation and concomitantly, to de-legitimization (Aaronson 2001). In short, trade policy, as a contentious policy area, is a fertile laboratory for studying interest group politics and agenda-setting.¹ As Holland, referring to trade in the context of the EU, phrased it: ‘Trade has become pervasive, touching almost all aspects of EU policy, both internal and external’ (2002, 140). When reading the specialized political economy literature, one can distil two mechanisms which explain the emergence of stable political cleavages with regard to trade policies (Goldstein and Martin 2000; Meunier 2003; Aaronson 2004).

First, according to Goldstein and Martin, the legalization of the international trade regime affects the incentives of groups to mobilize. Increased rule precision causes more and better information about the distributional implications of trade agreements to become available so that it is now easier for groups to estimate the potential benefits of collective action (Goldstein and Martin 2000, 604; see also De Bièvre 2004). Moreover, Goldstein and Martin argue that such legalization particularly empowers protectionists’ interests as especially these interests benefit from the resulting informational asymmetry, given their usually lower information-gathering capacity in comparison with export-oriented groups (Goldstein and Martin 2000, 606). Second, traditionally trade policies were mainly about tariff-barriers, arguments about jobs, export opportunities, and how distributional losses could be compensated. Therefore, primarily export industries, industries that face import competition, and to some extent consumers were mobilized. Yet, because of the gradual lowering of tariff-barriers, behind-the-border regulatory barriers became more prominent in trade negotiations. Accordingly, domestic regulations which potentially distort trade became part of such negotiations. It concerns areas such as food safety, education, health care and cultural diversity, all contentious areas within many domestic polities. This means that a much broader set of political groups may have reasons to mobilize in favor/against trade liberalization or may seek compensation for losses. Therefore, it is likely that an increasing number of interest groups – including public interest groups such as environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), human rights organizations and development NGOs – will search influence. In sum, the politics of trade has become more complicated and

multidimensional. But what is the dimensionality? And, what is the location of interest groups and other key actors, such as political parties, in this political space?

Research design

The dataset used is part of a larger research project on how interest groups interact with public actors in four EU member states – Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands² – as well at the EU-level. The focus of the project is thereby on the efforts these groups make to influence the EU's external trade policies in the WTO, more particularly in the areas of agriculture, steel/metal and services. One part of this larger project tries to find out whether and if so, how national interest groups have Europeanized their political strategies. Data collection has been based on an elite-survey conducted between May 2003 and February 2006. This section briefly outlines some basic features of the research design by indicating how the fieldwork was conducted and how interest groups were sampled.

One of the problems with elite-surveying concerns the identification of a relevant sample of interest groups. As part of the research questions can only be dealt with in a comparative design, cross-sectional samples that are structurally equivalent and comparable across countries are needed. For each country and the EU-level it was aimed to get a final sample of 120 completed interviews; 20 with public officials and 100 with interest groups.³ In addition to this it was tried to get a diverse sample with a large variety of interest groups including NGOs, public interests, business interests and labor interests.

Basically, the sample is constructed on the basis of a positional sampling technique for which a large amount of formal sources were screened.⁴ From all these sources only interest groups were retained; think tanks, institutes, policy centers, media actors and individual firms were not considered. There is of course overlap among the different sources. Each interest group has been coded once as soon as the group was mentioned in one of the sources. All these interest groups were coded on the basis of a number of variables such as type of interests (employers, trade unions, NGOs), policy sector in which the group is active and so on. For this, a coding frame was established beforehand and coding occurred through an interactive process among the researchers that included an extensive consultation of external sources (such as monographs, websites and experts).

The established list, however, does not correspond with a balanced cross-sectional sample that is structurally equivalent across countries. Two major problems had to be solved.

First, the list was too large as it contains several highly specialized business interest groups that had no link at all to the policy-sectors on which the project focused (external trade policies with regard to agriculture, steel/metal and services). Regarding sectoral business and labor interests only those sectoral associations that have a direct (agriculture/food industry, metal/steel, services) or an indirect link (transport and retailing/distribution) with the policy sectors under investigation were retained. NGOs were retained in the sample as well as cross-sectoral specific interest groups such as cross-sectoral employer unions, trade unions and associations representing small and medium enterprises (SME's).

Second, there was a risk that the sources would generate a biased sample with regard to access and mobilization; less visible and less active organizations run the risk to be excluded.⁵ This risk was particularly high for trade unions. Although trade unions play an active part in domestic politics (especially in neo-corporatist countries such as Belgium, Germany, or the Netherlands), they were barely named in the sources mentioned above (Beyers and Kerremans 2007). In order to redress this potential bias, the following procedure was adopted: First, for all international and European umbrella organizations mentioned in one of the above sources, it was checked whether or not their European or domestic members were already included. If not, they were added. Second, for the three policy sectors, the potential cleavages were investigated so that the sample would include varying and/or opposing policy positions. In order to identify the actors connected to these cleavages the relational data-set compiled by Bernhard Wessels (Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin) which links Euro-level associations to their domestic members was used (Wessels 2004). Finally, a number of experts (especially with respect to trade unions) were consulted and the composition of key advisory bodies at the domestic and the EU-level (such as the EU's Economic and Social Committee) was checked in order to fine-tune the sample with regard to trade unions.

Table 1 gives an overview of the results of the fieldwork regarding the interviews with interest group officials in the four countries.⁶ In the table a rough distinction is made between a) NGOs or public interest groups, b) economic/business and employers and c) trade unions. The first group consists of environmental NGOs, consumer NGOs, development NGOs and a small number of women's organizations or organizations representing protest movements. The second

group contains cross-sectoral business associations, sectoral business associations (especially in the field of agriculture, services and metal/steel) as well as small ‘businesses’ such as farmers, professions and small and medium enterprises. Under the category of trade unions both cross-sectoral and sectoral employers’ associations are found. Although this categorization in three classes conceals much heterogeneity, it will be demonstrated that much variation in the sample corresponds to this rough distinction.

Table 1. Overview of the sample and fieldwork results (Belgium, Netherlands, Germany, France and EU level)

	Belgium	Netherlands	Germany	France	EU-level	Total
NGOs/public interests						
- sample	53	37	36	38	41	205
- n response (%)	44 (83%)	34 (92%)	28 (78%)	34 (89%)	37 (90%)	177 (86%)
Economic/business/employers						
- sample	87	65	73	78	79	382
- n response (%)	80 (92%)	57 (88%)	52 (71%)	62 (79%)	64 (81%)	315 (82%)
Trade unions						
- sample	29	18	13	36	12	108
- n response (%)	24 (83%)	16 (89%)	10 (77%)	32 (89%)	12 (100%)	94 (87%)
Total						
- sample	169	120	122	152	132	695
- n response (%)	148 (88%)	107 (89%)	90 (74%)	128 (84%)	113 (86%)	586 (84%)

There is another aspect of the table which needs to be clarified, namely the fact that the sample size differs considerably from country to country. Especially the bigger sample of Belgium and France compared to the smaller sample for Germany is noteworthy. The sampling was aimed to be structurally equivalent and comparable across countries; this does not necessarily mean samples of an equal size. As such, specific institutional and political conditions within the four countries resulted in different sample sizes. Two factors explain the size of the Belgian sample. First, there is the specific nature of the Belgian federation which results in a fairly fragmented interest group system. For instance, whereas in most other countries there is only one environmental peak association, Belgium has four environmental peak associations, one for each of the sub-states (Bursens 1997). In addition to this, interest representation by labor unions is quite fragmented with different sectoral and cross-sectoral unions linked to the socialist, liberal and catholic pillars. The fragmentation of the trade union system is even more pronounced for France and explains the larger sample compared to Germany and, to some extent, the Netherlands. In Germany the existence of one big cross-sectoral trade union and its cross-sectoral

satellites led to an identification of 15 trade unions of which 13 were sampled. A similar procedure in France led to the identification of 65 trade unions of which only 36 could be sampled.

Interviews were conducted on the basis of a standardized questionnaire with almost all questions being closed. Key parts of the questionnaire dealt with different characteristics of the political system within which the actors operate, the policy positions of actors with respect to twenty policy issues, their political strategies (including both traditional forms of lobbying as well as outside lobbying) in relation to these issues, the resources actors had at their disposal and invested in political activities, and their embeddedness in domestic and/or European policy networks (by social network analysis).

Interest group politics, party politics and cleavages

In this paper only a subset of the variables are used. It concerns data on political support networks between interest groups and political parties and data on the political arguments interest groups used in their communication with policymakers and the broader public. These data allow me to present a spatial representation of the ideological similarities and the distances between different types of interest groups and political parties in four EU member states and the EU-level. The analysis consists of two steps. First, I explore the support networks between interest groups and parties as identified by interest group officials; this will be done by looking at the overall level of support interest groups receive from different parties as well as the overlap between these support networks. Second, I describe how the different political arguments co-vary with the type of interest group (e.g. trade unions, environment NGO et cetera), on the one hand, and the ideological affiliation of the interest groups, on the other hand. As I analyze several categorical variables which are difficult to cross-tabulate in a comprehensive form, I use correspondence analysis in order to represent the data in a multidimensional space.

Towards the end of the interview interviewers asked the interest group officials from which political party they received most regular support with the following open question: *In general, which of the political parties in the [Belgian, French, German, Dutch, European] Parliament are most supportive of the policy positions your organization pursues?* The respondents could name as many parties as they want; each political party that could have been mentioned was coded as a separate variable. Table 2 shows the results and can be read as follows:

34 or 23 percent of the 148 Belgian interest group officials claimed that their organization received regular support from the Belgian Francophone Christian-democrats (CDH: *Centre Démocrate Humaniste*).

It should be kept in mind that it is somewhat difficult to compare the results as we have not exactly the same political parties across countries. For instance, D66 is a left-liberal party within in the Netherlands, but at the EU-level it joins the other Dutch liberal party, the VVD (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*), in the ALDE (*Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe*).

There are plenty of such examples which may complicate a comparison across cases.

Nonetheless, some relevant observations can be made on the basis of these preliminary results.

First of all, it is hard to find some relationship with the electoral clout of party or whether the party was in government/opposing during the period of the research (2003-2006). One could imagine that especially support from government parties or large/electoral strong parties will be recognized as valuable. Nonetheless, some smaller parties, especially the green parties, are important suppliers of political support and in some cases small parties are perceived as being more important than large parties. On the other hand, some larger parties such as the *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium or the *Front National* in France barely supply support to interest groups. All this can mean different things. In some ways, one might argue that this mapping of interest groups does not reflect the current radical right-wing populist wave in Europe and that few interest group officials have ideological allegiances with extreme right or right-wing populist parties. Indeed, the existing interest group system seems to be quite moderate and maybe even centrist. Second, the importance of a large variety of parties, including some small parties without government experience, stems from the fact that interest group activity is usually not restricted to lobbying during the legislative or executive part of the policy process, but also concerns informal agenda-setting and the maintenance of long-term networks.

Univariate distributions tell us little about the overlap in political support or the fact that interest groups receive support from different parties. Which combinations are more likely to occur? Do such combinations tell us something about ideological affinities? And, are there different combinations in the four countries and at the EU-level? For reasons of space I restrict the analysis to the parties which were by at least ten percent of the interviewees indicated as regular suppliers of support. This is also useful for substantive reasons. One could argue that primarily smaller or peripheral fringe parties generate political conflict and tend to support

radical and ideologically motivated interest groups. In contrast, centrist and moderate parties will be tied to a much more diverse set of interest groups and will make less distinction on the basis of ideology only. By focusing on such parties I explore to what extent even the so-called political centre is characterized by some kind of cleavage structure. The five panels of table 3 present associations for each country and the EU-level. The higher the association, the more likely two parties were jointly identified as supplier of access to interest groups. No association means that occasionally two parties might have been identified together, but a systematic pattern of co-occurrence is absent. A negative association signifies that support from party *x* means that there is generally no support from party *y*.

Table 2. The amount of support interest groups receive from political parties

	Belgian (n=148)		Dutch (n=107)	German (n=90)	French (n=128)	EU (n=113)
	Francophone	Flemish				
Christian-democrats	CDH 34 (23%)	CD&V 49 (33%)	CDA 50 (56%)	CDU/CSU 36 (40%)	UDF 30 (23%)	EPP-ED 42 (37%)
Social-democrats	PS 32 (22%)	SP.a 45 (31%)	PVDA 49 (46%)	SPD 21 (23%)	PS 53 (41%)	PES 44 (39%)
Liberals	MR 43 (29%)	VLD 48 (33%)	VVD 48 (45%)	FDP 27 (30%)	-	ALDE 24 (21%)
Greens	Ecolo 32 (22%)	Groen! 36 (24%)	Groenlinks 39 (36%)	Grüne 24 (27%)	Verts 28 (22%)	Greens/ALE 28 (25%)
Left liberals	Spirit 18 (12%)	-	D66 27 (25%)	-	-	-
Radical right	Vlaams Belang 8 (5%)	-	LPF 9 (8%)	-	FN 1 (1%)	-
Radical left	-	-	SP 19 (18%)	PDS 6 (7%)	PCF 21 (16%) PRG 6 (5%) LO 2 (2%)	GEU/NL 6 (5%)
Christian Conservatives and nationalists	-	N-VA 10 (7%)	SGP 8 (7%) Christenunie 14 (13%)	-	MPF 1 (1%)	IND/DEM (1%) UEN 1 (1%)
Gaullists	-	-	-	-	UMP 21 (24%)	-

Despite differences in party systems (in terms of types of parties as well as the number of parties) it is noteworthy how similar the results are for the five cases. Nowhere, with the exception of Belgium, do we find a positive association between green parties, on the one hand, and right-wing or center-right parties, on the other hand; most associations are negative. The Belgian case is a bit odd because of the peculiar position of the Francophone Christian-

democrats. This party is positively associated with the Francophone greens (*Ecolo*), but also with other Belgian Francophone parties such as the PS (*Parti Socialiste*) and the liberal MR (*Mouvement Réformateur*). However, also in Belgium there is no or a negative association between the Flemish Christian-democrats (CD&V: *Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams*), the Flemish liberals (VLD: *Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten*), the Francophone MR, on the one hand, and the two green parties, on the other hand.

Generally, the results show that if an interest group gains support from green parties, then support from liberals and Christian-democrats will usually be absent. The divergence generated by green parties is no surprise as green parties are often considered as being less centrists than Christian-democrats or social-democrats. But is this correct? Will we observe less divergence when we move closer to the centre, for instance to the social-democrats? Well, what we see is that the social-democrats generate a divergence that is similar to the green parties, a finding which is at odds with the notion that during the last two decades social-democrats increasingly moved to the centre (Kitschelt 1994, 1999). In most cases regular support from traditional social-democrat parties corresponds with support from green parties and, to a lesser extent, support from radical left parties such as the communists in France or the radical left, the SP (*Socialistische Partij*), in the Netherlands. There is almost nowhere a positive association between support from social-democrats and liberal support; most coefficients are insignificant or negative. Also, regular support from social-democrats is hardly ever correlated with support from Christian-democrats and where there is an association, it tends to be rather low. Just as green and social-democrat support overlaps strongly, it appears that Christian-democrat and liberal support coincides very well. In most cases I find quite high association coefficients (between .27 and .72); coefficients which are generally higher than the occasional associations between social-democrat and Christian-democrat support.

It is important to stress that these patterns bear no relationship whatsoever with the different government coalition patterns that were dominant during the period of the fieldwork. For instance, Belgium had a so-called purple coalition with liberals, social-democrats and (for some time) the green parties. In the Netherlands there was a centre-right coalition with the two liberal parties, the Christian-democrats and (for some time) the LPF (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*). Germany had a green-social democratic coalition. Finally, France was governed by a centre-right coalition that included Gaullists and Christian-democrats. The irrelevance of coalition patterns

suggests that the underlying cleavages are more enduring and persistent than what happens in daily politics.

Table 3. Overlapping supply of support from political parties (Kendall tau)

Panel A. Belgium (n=148)

	CDH	SPA	PS	VLD	MR	Groen	Ecolo	Spirit
CD&V	.30 (=.0003)	ns	ns	.49 (<.0001)	.27 (=.0009)	ns	ns	ns
CDH	-	ns	.41 (<.0001)	ns	.39 (<.0001)	ns	.26 (=.0018)	ns
SPA		-	.39 (=.0004)	ns	-.20 (=.0157)	.62 (<.0001)	.19 (=.0245)	.52 (<.0001)
PS			-	-.19 (=.0206)	ns	ns	.64 (<.0001)	ns
VLD				-	.64 (<.0001)	-.19 (=.0190)	-.19 (=.0206)	ns
MR					-	-.19 (=.0201)	ns	ns
Groen						-	.35 (<.0001)	.61 (<.0001)
Ecolo							-	.25 (=.0020)

Panel B. Netherlands (n=107)

	PVDA	VVD	D66	Groenlinks	SP	Christenunie
CDA	ns	.42 (<.0001)	ns	-.27 (=.0057)	ns	ns
PVDA	-	-.26 (=.0067)	.20 (=.0393)	.43 (<.0001)	.21 (=.0298)	.20 (=.0399)
VVD		-	ns	-.56 (<.0001)	-.32 (=.0010)	ns
D66			-	ns	ns	ns
Groenlinks				-	.46 (<.0001)	.22 (=.0209)
SP					-	.25 (=.0087)

Panel C. Germany (n=90)

	SPD	Grüne	FDP
CDU/CSU	ns	-.24 (=.0260)	.70 (<.0001)
SPD	-	.44 (<.0001)	ns
Grüne		-	-.28 (=.0072)

Panel D. France (n=128)

	PS	Verts	UMP	PCF
UDF	.21 (=.0186)	-.20 (=.0218)	.72 (<.0001)	-.19 (=.0277)
PS	-	.28 (=.0014)	.19 (=.0312)	.27 (=.0023)
Verts		-	-.25 (=.0041)	.22 (=.0113)
UMP			-	ns

Panel E. European Union (n=113)

	PES	ELDR	Greens-AEL
EPP-ED	Ns	.45 (<.0001)	-.40 (<.0001)
PES	-	ns	.47 (<.0001)
ELDR		-	ns

Are different support relations related to different types of interest groups? And which political views and policy images are related to the underlying cleavage structure? Figures 1, 2 and 3 provide us with a first answer. As there are no considerable differences between the five cases, the data are presented in one single overview. First, I cross-tabulate the categorization of interest groups with the supply of political support from four political groups; Christian-democrats, social-democrats, liberals and greens. It is obvious that the type of interest group considerably correlates with the nature of support relations. Employers' unions gain most support from liberal and Christian-democratic parties, while the latter supply more support to trade unions and NGOs compared to the liberals. But the most active supporters of trade unions and NGOs are the social-democrats and the green parties, whereby NGO's receive more support from green parties than social democrats. For trade unions we have a reverse situation, namely social-democratic support is more pronounced than green support.

But what exactly produces these differences? In the interviews interest group officials got questions on their involvement in twenty different trade issues in the field of agriculture, services and metal/steel. Each issue was presented as a potential controversy regarding single-peaked preferences actors could have regarding existing or future policies and potential policy outcomes. So issues involve a pro-con decision about a policy option. For each of these issues in which actors were involved interviewers asked one question concerning the policy images an interest group relates to this particular issue. The question was phrased as follows:

There are different reasons and arguments as to why someone may favor or oppose policies. In your external communication you may have emphasized different reasons and arguments. Broadly speaking we distinguish between values, technical arguments and political reasons. I will show a set of arguments and ask you to indicate whether these arguments were used in the positive sense, in the negative sense or whether they are not applicable for the position you communicated to the outside world.

A policy image concerns 'how a policy is understood and discussed' (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 24-7). The importance of policy images is that they shape the arguments needed for political persuasion. Much political activity concerns attempts to manipulate the terms of a political debate; by emphasizing and defining issues in particular ways actors try to shift the focus of attention from one set of consequences to another. For instance, with regard to 'immigration' it makes a considerable difference whether policymakers label issues as 'security problems' or 'problems of cultural integration', on the one hand, or as 'social-economic

problems’ or ‘labor market problems’, on the other hand. One implication is that these different images stimulate the involvement of different actors (Kloor 2005). If immigration is connected to ‘security problems’, then often ‘law-and-order’ departments (the ministries of justice, home affairs and justice) gain a bigger stake in the policy process. In contrast, relating immigration to ‘labor market problems’ stimulates the involvement of other agencies such as the ministry of social affairs. Another consequence is that agencies develop different policies in response to different images. For instance, in case immigration is defined as a problem of ‘cultural integration and adaptation’ educational curricula will highlight more the ‘adoption of our values and norms’, while an emphasis on ‘labor market integration’ increases the attention for vocational training.

For each trade issue in which actors were involved the interviewers checked the reasons and arguments as to why the organization favored or opposed the policy outcomes interviewers confronted them with. For instance, respondents could argue that they were in favor or against something because it destroys/creates employment. For the moment, I ignore the political positions – in favor or against some potential outcome – adopted by interest groups. In figure 2 I associate some key images with the interest group type and in figure 3 I relate the same data with the received support from political parties. It is interesting to see how information about only policy images yields interesting observations. Figure 2 shows that the ‘health’ and the ‘environment’ image are predominantly used by NGOs. The ‘consumer’ image is, although more equally distributed, somewhat less used by employers’ unions. Traditional economic arguments about ‘competitiveness’, ‘employment’ and ‘economic growth’ are common among trade unions and business associations. Finally, there are some relevant findings with regard to ‘members’ and ‘public opinion’. Among the three categories, NGOs are least likely to use the argument ‘it is good/bad for our members and constituents’, while trade unions are most likely to use this image. Employers and trade unions differ considerably from NGOs; compared to the latter, the former pay more explicit attention to the consequences of policies for their members and constituencies. Although members and constituencies are of key importance for employers’ unions, it appears that employers’ unions are least likely to rely on information about the public opinion.

Figure 3 displays the same policy images and relates these to political support relations. I consider four categories of support relations: support from Christian-democrats, from social-democrats, from liberals and from greens. The images ‘public health’, ‘environment’ and

'consumers' are significantly more used among interest groups with regular political support from green parties or social-democratic parties, while the image 'competitiveness' is more prevalent among liberals and Christian-democrats. The other two economic images, 'employment' and 'economic growth', do not result in a clear picture. 'Employment' is highly valued by all actors, although it is somewhat less accentuated by the greens. Something similar happens with 'economic growth', an image used by all groups, except those that gain political support from green parties. Finally, organizations with support from Christian-democrats and liberals – mainly employers' unions – make extensive use of the constituency image, while those who gain green and social-democratic support tend to relate their policy position with the fact that 'public opinion is in favor/against it'.

Figure 1. Type of interest group and political support

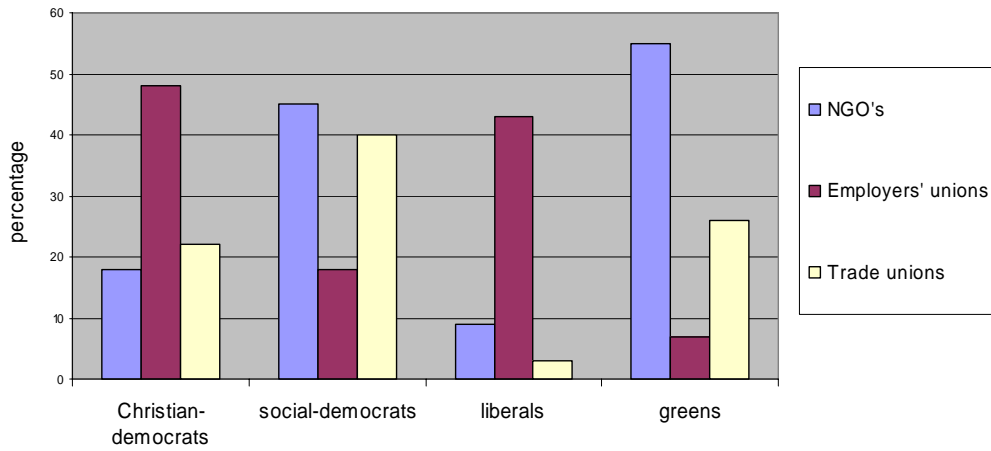


Figure 2. Comparing policy images and three types of interest groups

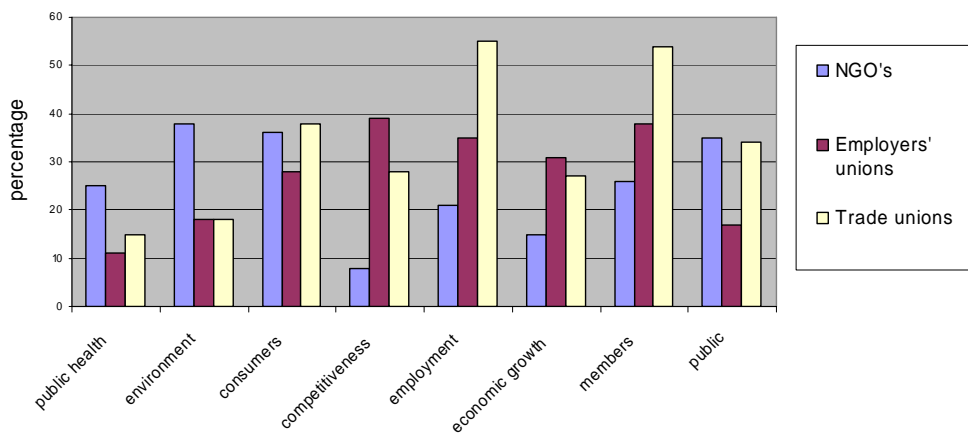
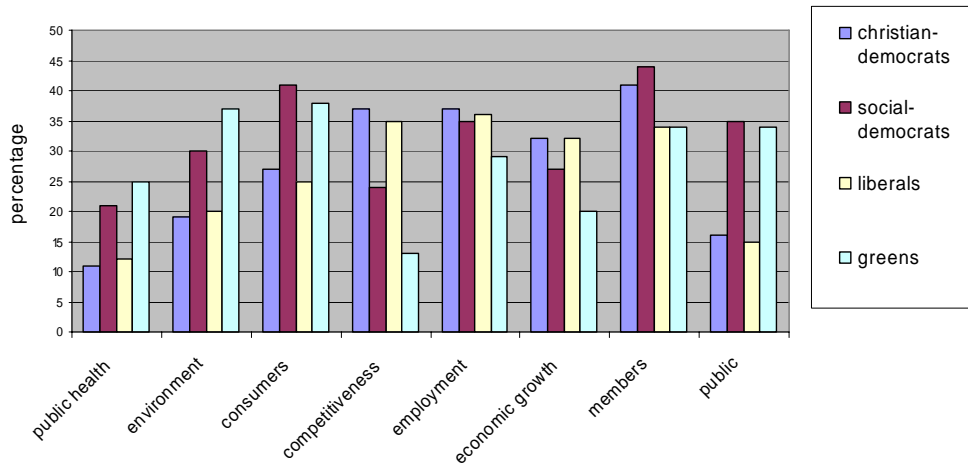


Figure 3. Comparing policy images and support relations



Index figure 2 and 3: Policy images under consideration concern:

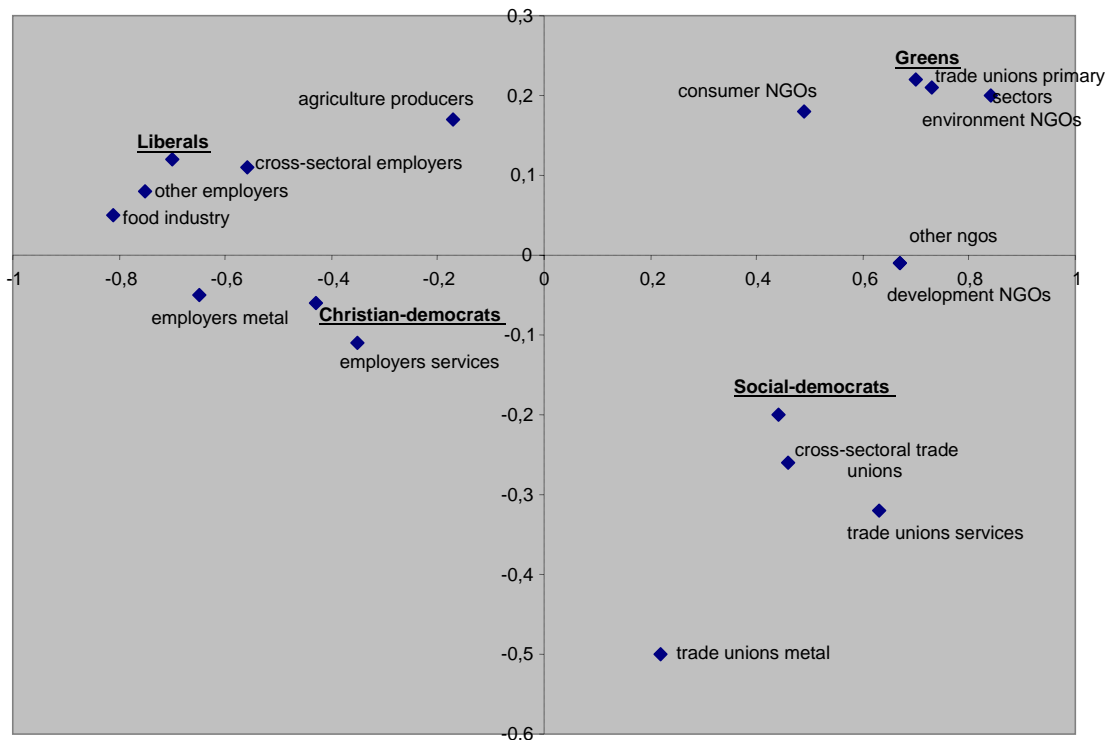
- public health: it is good/bad for public health
- environment: it is good/bad for the environment
- consumers: it promotes/disadvantages the consumer's interest
- competitiveness: it is good/bad for our competitiveness
- employment: it contributes to/destroys employment
- growth: it promotes/impairs economic growth
- members: it is good/bad for our members and constituents
- public: public opinion is in favor/against it

One of the weak points of the analysis so far is that I use quite broad categories which in themselves conceal much heterogeneity. For instance, the category 'NGOs' includes consumer interests as well as development NGOs and environment NGOs. The broad categories 'trade union' and 'employers' do not take into account sectoral differences. Moreover, the univariate and bivariate comparisons may conceal a multidimensional structure of the policy space. It seems that two or three dimensions prevail: a business or pro-growth coalition clustered around Christian-democrats and liberals, a social policy coalition with trade unions and social-democrats and a pro-sustainability coalition of NGOs supported by green parties. Nonetheless, it remains unclear to what extent the last two clusters are really distinct. Although there is considerable overlap in terms of political support (see table 3) and regarding the policy images 'health', 'environment' and 'consumers', it looks as if affiliates of greens and social-democrats differ with respect to the images 'competitiveness', 'employment' and 'economic growth'.

In order to clarify this, I analyze a concatenated frequency table with correspondence analysis, an inductive technique for the analysis of adjacency matrices (for technical details Greenacre and Blasius 1994). Instead of using three types of interest groups, I subdivide the interest group population into fourteen different sectoral categories. For each of these categories I take the number of organizations with regular support from four types of political parties – Christian-democrats, greens, social-democrats and liberals – as column variables. Correspondence analysis results in a geometric and spatial representation of the distances between rows (fourteen different types of interest groups) and columns (four types of political parties sending regular support to the groups in the columns). These distances reflect association between rows and columns. As in factor analysis, correspondence analysis seeks to account for the maximum amount of association along one axis (the so-called first component or dimension); then it aims to account to a maximum amount of association for another axis (the second component or dimension) and so on.

In the analysis presented here, I combine the German, French, Belgian, Dutch and EU-level data, but for future analyses I may conduct separate analyses for each country. Figure 4 plots the first two dimensions which together explain 98% of the variance in the table. Two aspects are crucial when interpreting the results of a correspondence analysis. First, when two rows or two columns are close to each other, they are characterized by a low Chi^2 -distance. In terms my analysis it implies that if interest group types are plotted close to each other, they gain a similar amount of support from the same political parties. Second, rows that are plotted close to columns show a low Chi^2 -distance. So features of rows (in this analysis: fourteen types of interest groups) are interpreted by features of columns (in this analysis: four party families) or vice versa. For instance, if some type of interest groups lies far away from a particular party, it means that this interest group type does not regularly receive support from this party.

Figure 4. Mapping distances between interest groups and political parties (correspondance analysis)



The figure shows that the structure of conflict with regard to EU trade policies does not completely overlap with a traditional bipolar left-right structure. Instead, we may consider a triangular structure in which three clusters or alliances can be distinguished; labor, business and environment. The data illustrate two insights. To begin with, it appears that the first dimension (plotted on the X-axis) runs between economic liberalism and a large cluster which we might label as 'leftist'. On the left side of the picture, there are only employers associations, the liberals and the Christian-democrats, a cluster which might be labeled 'rightist'. On the right side of the plot, there is 'everything else' which includes actors in favor of national socio-economic protectionism (or welfare state protectionism) as well as pro-ecology and consumer interests. The Y-axis, however, shows not that much divergence among the 'economic right'; the distances among liberals, Christian-democrats and their affiliates are very small. Within the left camp, there is some divergence with, on the one hand, trade unions and social-democrats somewhat at the bottom and greens and NGOs at the top. Yet, the plot is somewhat misleading as it uses a different scale for the X- and the Y-axis. The distance between consumer NGOs and trade unions in the metal sector is approximately .07 on the Y-axis (which is close to the distance between the agriculture producers and the food industry on the X-axis), while the distance between development NGOs and the food industry on the X-axis is almost .15. In sum, there is much more differentiation between 'left' and 'right' than between top and bottom, which leads me to conclude that one single dimension tends to dominate the political space. The two separate clusters on the left (right side of the plot) – the sustainability and pro-social coalitions – are different in terms of political images as well as political support networks, but these differences are smaller than the distinction between 'left' and 'right' and so they can be subsumed within one dimension. True, both employers and trade unions share policy images such as 'economic growth' and 'employment', but their connections to different political parties as well as the affinity of trade unions with social-democratic parties moves the trade unions away from employers' unions.

Conclusion

This paper reveals that party cleavages considerably affect support relations between interest groups and political parties. The data show that an overarching left-right conflict dimension structures the overall interaction among interest groups and political parties. This

finding is relevant as it rejects the notion that the interactions between parties and interest groups primarily concern issue-based lobbying in which the idiosyncratic feature of each separate issue is central. The data suggest that the influence production process is structured and constrained by some straightforward ideological and cognitive cues which interest group officials can use as shortcuts. The policy space consists primarily of three coalitions: a business or pro-growth coalition clustered around Christian-democrats and liberals, a social policy coalition with trade unions and social-democrats and a pro-sustainability coalition of NGOs supported by green parties. Despite this three-fold distinction, the analysis leads to the conclusion that one left-right dimension tends to dominate the political space. The sustainability and pro-social coalitions differ in terms of political images as well as political support networks, but these differences remain rather smaller and can be subsumed within one dimension.

It could be argued that the one-dimensional structure of the policy space is an artifact of the sample and/or policy domain, namely trade policies, on which the analysis is based. Of course, this analysis does not completely exclude the possibility that other policy domains or political systems are featured by a two or three-dimensional conflict space (for instance see Pellikaan et al. 2003; Haarhuis and Torenvlied 2006). On the contrary, as different domains as well as polities are characterized by varying formal and informal institutional rules, it is likely that the conflict structure may vary accordingly. The results in this paper are relevant as they demonstrate the low dimensionality and the importance of party cleavages for a policy space in a domain (external trade policies) and at a level (the EU-level) where party cleavages do not get much academic attention. Also the fact that the structure of the policy space is very similar across countries and levels, shows that we can confidently speak of a European system of interest group politics. What is observed in one country is usually reproduced elsewhere and it is translated quite well to the EU-level.

As the results suggest the potential importance of a low dimensional cleavage structure for interest group politics, the subsequent analysis has to focus on how these findings relate to the political strategies interest groups adopt. It would be interesting to have a more in-depth insight in the relation of support relation with access networks, inside lobbying and outside lobbying. For instance, do NGOs indeed have extensive exchange networks with green parties or social democratic parties? Which resources (money, members, expertise) are important in such exchanges? Do these resources differ from the resources mobilized by business interest when

they approach liberal parties? And to which coalition belong those who experience more (or less) conflict? Some more detailed theory-driven case-studies and statistical analyses are needed for answering these questions. As the analyses in this paper demonstrate, the systematic interviewing of political elites is a promising tool in order to generate systematic answers to such questions.

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Endnotes

¹ It is especially since the strong opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1992-93, the demise of the negotiations on a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1997-98, and the resistance to the (abortive) effort to launch a new round of multilateral trade negotiations at the Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in September 1999 – the so-called “Battle of Seattle” – that trade has caught the attention of more than just a small group of activists and business associations. Indeed, as part of the political mobilization against globalization and/or its effects, trade liberalization has become a discredited and regularly contested policy, as is its multilateral venue, the WTO.

² The focus is thereby on the efforts these groups make to influence the EU’s external trade policies in the World Trade Organization (WTO), more particularly in the areas of agriculture, steel/metal and services. These countries represent advanced export-oriented economies with a long and – as founding members of the EU – a shared and similar tradition of multi-lateral co-operation. They differ, however, on some key variables. There is of course the difference between small and large or medium-sized countries. A more important variation though, concerns the varying policy positions of these countries on trade liberalization, ranging on a continuum from a great reserve (France) to a small reserve (the Netherlands). France, for instance, traditionally shows some reluctance and skepticism with regard to further trade liberalization while the Netherlands has traditionally been more in favor. Germany and Belgium are located somewhere in between these two countries, with Belgium being more reluctant towards trade liberalization than the Netherlands, and Germany being more positive on trade liberalization than France. This variation is not only reflected in official government policies of these countries, it is also visible in their respective public opinions on trade (Beyers and Kerremans 2007). A comparison between the interest groups system and how this interacts with party and government officials may thus yield interesting results.

³ This research project also includes public officials and how they interact with interest groups, but because public officials are not directly relevant for the problem dealt with in this paper, I do not pay extensive attention to the interviews conducted with them.

⁴ Because the larger project deals with trade policymaking, the research team focused primarily on sources which list interest groups that are potentially active in this sector. The WTO-website (www.wto.org) contains a number of useful sources ranging from listings of interest groups and civil society organizations attending ministerial conferences, expert meetings, position papers delivered to the WTO and so on. These sources included:

- Joint UNCTAD WTO Symposium (September 1997), to prepare for the High Level Meeting on Least-Developed Countries,
- Symposium on Trade, Environment and Sustainable Development (1998),
- Ministerial Conference Geneva (1998),
- Third Ministerial Conference Seattle (30/11-3/12 1999),
- Work session on services (06/07/01),
- Work session on Trips-access to essential medicines (06/07/01),
- Work session on food safety and the SPS agreement (07/07/01),
- NGO’s attending the Ministerial Conference in Doha (2001),
- Public Symposium Doha Development Agenda and Beyond (29/04/02 – 01/05/02),
- All position papers for the period 27/10/1998 – 13/11/2002.

From all these sources we selected the lists of attendance for the Euro-level, Belgian, French, German and Dutch actors. Second, DG Trade of the European Commission has established a Civil Society Dialogue, an open process of consultation to which interest groups may subscribe (http://trade-info.cec.eu.int/civil_soc/intro1.php). Also from this source Euro-level, Belgian, French, German and Dutch actors were retained. Third, all interest groups listed in a policy event data set developed for the purpose of this project were coded. Fourthly, Euro-level, Belgian, French, German and Dutch actors listed in the WTO-history project conducted by a research team at the University of Washington were included (<http://depts.washington.edu/wtohist>).

⁵ However, it should be noted that some of the sources, such as the EU’s Civil Society Dialogue, have a very low access barrier as it mainly functions as a registration database.

⁶ In addition also 146 representatives of government institutions, parliamentarians and political parties were interviewed, but these interviews are not analyzed in this paper. The same project also includes 139 EU-level interest groups and public officials.