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What’s in a name? Framing Interest Groups in the European Union

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Abstract

In the vast literature on European Union (EU) public interest groups, scholars describe organisations like Greenpeace as civil society organisations, interest groups, or NGOs. The common practise of using such terminology interchangeably impedes characterising and understanding different organisational activities. I thus adopt a framing approach to ask which of these terms organise and signify sets of ideas concerning EU polity ideals. Framing means organising cognitive elements like ideas, practices or beliefs into coherent networks or frames and can be deployed strategically (Benford & Snow, 2000).

I start by identifying prevalent terminology used to describe EU public interest groups, then link sub-sets of terminology to prevalent theories of democracy. Keyword analysis of a sample of academic articles on EU public interest organisations was conducted to identify underlying democratic frames, and then drawing on interview data I juxtapose academic frames with the self-understanding of EU interest groups.

Preliminary results suggest that prevalent frames include ‘interest group’, ‘lobbying’ and ‘civil society’, with ‘NGOs’ used less. These frames can be linked to theories of liberal democracy (‘interest group’), deliberative/participatory democracy (‘civil society’) and network governance (‘NGO’). Interview data indicate that academic frames do not always correspond with the self-understanding of environmental organisations.
Introduction

A domain of organisational activity reaching beyond government or business is an established feature of Western societies and gaining prominence around the world. Labels for this ‘sector’ are multiple and often used interchangeably. They include non-government organisation (NGO), not-for-profit (NPOs), charities, civil society organisations (CSO), third sector organisations, interest groups or lobbies. In this article, I adopt the term interest group for narrative purposes.

Studying interest groups has a long tradition in political science and related disciplines (e.g., Baumgartner & Leech, 1998; Betsill & Corell, 2008; Lowe & Goyder, 1983), with increasing focus on the European Union (EU) in recent decades (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008). In the EU context, prevalent studies have addressed the number of interest groups, (Berkhout & Lowery, 2010; Wonka, Baumgartner, Mahoney, & Berkhout, 2010), their funding and regulation (see Greenwood, 2011), access to the European institutions (e.g., Gullberg, 2011), the level of influence of these groups (Dür, 2008a; 2008b; Klüver, 2013) and their contribution to democratic governance (Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2013; Saurugger, 2008). Furthermore, there is emerging work on interest group strategies (e.g., Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008; Eising, 2007) and professionalisation (Klüver & Saurugger, 2013).

Research on interest groups appears in journals across multiple disciplines. The launch of the new journal *Interest Groups & Advocacy* in 2012 intends to provide a common platform for multiple avenues of interest group research. Because the groups or entity under scrutiny field come in many forms and engage in multiple activities and functions, scholars in this field continue to struggle with a bewildering terminological jungle. This risks undermining the conceptual clarity of the field (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008) if terminology is used uncritically or randomly. Additionally, this contribution argues that more than definitional issues are at stake, because each label or term captures a normative framing of the role of interest groups regarding the delivery of social values and public goods such as democracy, environmental protection, citizens’ engagement and others. In an increasingly multi-disciplinary field, it is vital to work towards a common understanding of these terms, and the processes through which they acquire meaning and political relevance.
This paper seeks to contribute to this goal of subject clarity. I draw on concepts of the frame to suggest that different underlying visions of EU democracy may be lurking behind some of the most commonly used terminology. By uncovering the assemblies of idea elements that these terms organise I hope to both provide a more complete account of the political force of different terms and draw attention to the potential agency in shaping the conduct and outcomes of research in the field and beyond (see Grant, 2001).

The paper proceeds as follows: First, I provide an overview of framing as an analytic, and then proceed to review the main conceptual frames used in the literature on EU interest groups, and how these frames may be linked to prevalent theories of democracy. After describing my methodology, I present results from a bibliometric analysis of a sample of academic articles to expose the prevalence and emergence of these frames in EU interest politics research. I then juxtapose this analysis with interview data from a sectoral case study of environmental interest groups. I conclude by considering the role of this growing academic field in framing interest groups in the European Union.

Frame analytics

Frame analytics has risen to prominence in social sciences as a way of expanding our understanding of how people make meaning in networked ways. Frames are “underlying structures or organising principles that hold together and give coherence to a diverse array of symbols, idea elements, metaphors and other cognitive elements” (Creed, Langstraat, & Scully, 2002, p. 36; see also Shore & Wright, 1997). Understood in this way, frames are “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21), which order what would otherwise appear as a confusing and disjointed world. Analogous to picture or window frames or frameworks, frames form boundaries through which we see the world, for example by highlighting what is important and what is not (Creed, Langstraat, & Scully, 2002).

There is a rich though somewhat divided literature on frames and framing processes (Chong & Druckman, 2007). On the one hand, scholars work at the intersection of political science and cognitive psychology to investigate how framing—in
this case often presenting information in different ways—affects individuals and their engagement with political issues. For example, empirical psychological research shows that rationally equivalent messages—presented as different frames—can elicit radically different individual responses and decisions, even though such responses may be considered irrational (e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Insights from the cognitive sciences reveal that frames, which encompass networks of ideas, find their parallels in the human brain and memory, where these ideas are interlinked (Lakoff, 2004).

These findings from individual framing effects underpin studies of social movement scholars who ask how social movement leaders use frames strategically to mobilise people (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). ‘Collective action frames’ (Benford & Snow, 2000) combine events and information that may otherwise seem disconnected, to define problems and, after linking them to solutions, provide rationales for action. Thus, in political terms, frames can be powerful—for example, ‘old’ issues can be turned into ‘new’ issues by reframing them (Chong & Druckman, 2007) and one can bridge, connect and extend, but also manipulate frames and use them strategically. In (Lakoff, 2004)’s terms,

In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing is social change. (p. XV; emphasis in original)

For example, Ruzza (2004) explains how environmentalism was reframed as ‘sustainable development’ by governments and interest groups, and that the new frame allowed a range of actors such as business, who had previously been adversaries to environmental policy-making, to come on board. Politicians also use the power of frames to further their causes. Lakoff (2004) shows how US-American conservatives used framing techniques to justify their political projects such as the war in Iraq. Furthermore, framing can assist citizen understanding of important scientific issues such as climate change (Nisbet & Mooney, 2007). By implication, social scientists create and manipulate frames by describing and researching social or political phenomena, including interest politics.

But not all frames are created equal or have the same effect. Benford and Snow (2000) identify a few ‘master frames’ that have been used to rally large constituencies
behind certain causes (e.g., the ‘environmental justice frame’). The authors explain that some frames are simply more credible than others, depending on how consistent they are with social movement actions, how well they fit with the wider life-world and whether people articulating the frames are perceived to be credible (Benford & Snow, 2000). The efficacy of particular frames also depends on other factors, such as the institutional environment in which they are used (Ruzza, 2004). In sum, frame analytics considers the interactions of particular frames with such outside factors.

Finally, it is crucial to recognize that framing is a dynamic process, as frames can be changed, adjusted and sometimes manipulated (Chong & Druckman, 2007; see also Benford & Snow, 2000; Tarrow, 1992). Indeed, as Callon (1998) argues, frames are inherently dynamic. This is because framing implies ordering sets of cognitive, ideational, metaphorical and at times physical elements in a frame, but these elements remain connected with the world by virtue of their origin. This means that what is contained in a frame contributes simultaneously to a constant process of emergence and re-framing, by creating forms of frame ‘overflow’ (Callon, 1998). In light of these properties, there is to date only very limited knowledge on the origin of frames, how they flow through political space, and how long they remain more or less stable (Chong & Druckman, 2007; but see Entman, 2009; Gamson, 2005). In the following section, I will consider signifiers of prevalent frames in EU interest group research and pay close attention the elements captured by related framing processes.

**Framing in EU interest group research**

Facing remarkable growth in EU interest group research in recent decades, the academic field continues to be plagued by conceptual issues, and often normative implications of common terminology are only implicitly clear (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008). A curious fact is that scholars are now turning their attention to how interest groups in the European Union frame policy issues. As researchers they start asking questions about framing, I suggest that it may be useful to also turn to their own framing of EU interest groups.
The current argument builds on earlier contributions, such as Beyers and colleagues (2008), who provide an overview of the proliferation of terminology used by scholars in the interest group field. They divide the literature into two broad strands: “interest groups and interest organisations” and “special interests, social movements and civil society” and lament that “it is quite remarkable how such a relatively modest field is so heavily Balkanized” (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008, p. 1108). They argue that different conceptual approaches result from historical use of terminology, but acknowledge that there are often normative assumptions enmeshed with the terminology, particularly in the case of ‘civil society’ (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008). Indeed, as terms develop over time, they continue to carry with them older meanings that interact with new frames they come to signify (Shore & Wright, 1997).

Precisely because terms such as ‘civil society organisation’ or ‘NGO’ remain diffuse and variable, their use implies constant re-framing and linking with normative ideas about the European polity, even if this is done in an academic context. Importantly, frames may be used strategically by academics to advance their normative agendas (Grant, 2001; Keane, 2010). As academic publications accumulate, related visions may conceivably percolate to political elites and lead to political consequences regarding the nature of the EU polity in the medium and long run. In the following section, I provide an overview of the most prevalent terms used in the research literature on interest groups, and the frames they have come to signify. The selection of terms is based on my own reading of the literature and informed by the empirical analysis described later.

The ‘civil society [organisation]’ frame

The civil society organisation frame is one of the most theoretically developed in political theory (e.g., Cohen & Arato, 1992), though the definition of a civil society organisation hinges on defining notions of ‘civil society’. Keane (2010) details that there are three broad ways in which researchers have approached and used civil society terminology: as an idealtyp in empirical investigations of its origins and nature; in pragmatic ways, where “strategic usages of the term have an eye for defining what must or must not be done” (p. 463) or normatively, where civil society stands for an expression
of ‘good society’, often filling gaps left by markets and states. In contrast to NGOs (see below), civil society is often conceptualised as working ‘with the state’ (Cohen & Arato, 1992), and it comes with positive connotations, because civil society is understood as a sphere of political life that connects citizens with their governments or governing institutions. Therefore, scholars often link civil society with participatory and deliberative approaches to democracy (e.g., Kohler-Koch, 2010c).

In the context of research on EU interest organisations, scholars have typically relied on using civil society as an analytic category to guide empirical analysis of a burgeoning number of actors in EU policy-making, and they frequently drawn on normative notions of civil society. It however remains a contentious concept (Kohler-Koch, 2010a). Finke (2007) explains that “[…] two scholars who refer to ‘civil society’ do not necessarily mean the same thing and this is even less obvious if journalists, politicians or public officials allude to civil society” (p. 1). Indeed, even academics working on civil society in the EU disagree about which organisations should be classified as civil society organisations. In a recent survey, Kohler-Koch and Quittkat (2009) found that scholars either understand civil society as modes of social interactions or as a collection of civil society organisations that bring citizen interests into policy-making. General interest organisations tend to be classified as civil society organisations; there is disagreement when it comes to trade unions and professional organisations, and fewer researchers thought that business organisations classify as civil society organisations. Importantly, whether or not an organisations classifies as civil society depends on underlying notions of democracy; for example, people who adhere to pluralist or governance visions may classify organisation as civil society organisations as long as they add to the number of voices represented in political discourse in the EU (Kohler-Koch & Quittkat, 2009).

Importantly, however, scholars have recognized that “[…] it is difficult to agree on the political role and the democratic credentials of civil society in the EU not just because the concept of civil society is ambiguous but also because civil society is linked to different images of the nature of the European polity” (Kohler-Koch, 2009, p. 47). A prevalent one is the normative approach that civil society aggregates and transmits opinions from citizens to the public sphere and political institutions, thus evoking notions
of participatory and sometimes deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996). In the context of EU studies, scholars continue to use the civil society concept precisely because of its normative and utopian aspects (Freise, 2008). These aspects gain much currency when civil society is proposed as a possible remedy to numerous issues plaguing the EU, including the democratic deficit, lack of a European identity, preventing authoritarian structures, reducing excessive national regulation, ameliorating marketisation and building a community of citizens (Freise, 2008). In sum, more often than not civil society terminology used by interest group researchers evokes powerful frames about problems of the European polity and corresponding solutions.

However, this framing is being challenged by evidence that EU ‘civil society organisations’ have in fact great trouble engaging European citizens in EU policy-making processes (Kohler-Koch, 2010b; e.g., Warleigh, 2001). There continues to be the risk, however, that the positive normative orientation of this frame may crowd out empirical realities. As Apthorpe (1997) explains,

[…] we should also be suspicious of a term which is agreed among so many people, which everybody likes, and which everybody is in favour of. One crucial characteristic of these sorts of keywords is that they do not require an opposite word to give or enhance their meaning. They acquire much of their winning warmth from their popular meanings in everyday usage. A further characteristic is that, as a rule, they are not ever put to serious empirical test—or if they are, and they fail, they continue to circulate in good currency nevertheless. (p. 43f)

Indeed, discussions of less favourable features of ‘civil society’ are only slow to emerge (e.g., Chambers & Kopstein, 2001). In sum, key features of the frame signified by ‘civil society organisation’ include (a) a normative focus on citizen participation, often in the frameworks of participatory and deliberative democracy; and (b) a relatively positive view of the term, although this is not always supported by empirical evidence.

The ‘interest group’ frame

The ‘interest group’ frame continues to be one of the most popular in the study of interests in the EU—and even though I used it here for narrative purposes, this is not to suggest that it does not signify a frame of its own. Indeed, it is a contentious concept in
political science. As Jordan, Halpin and Maloney (2004) explain, interest groups were originally understood to be comprised of voluntary members who sustain the group (see also Dalziel, 2010). As such, they have an ‘underlying rationale’ based on the attitudes or interest of members (Eising & Lehringer, 2013). In practice, scholars often deviate from this membership-based idea to include all groups that seek to influence the policy process under the ‘interest group’ label (the functional approach—Jordan, Halpin, & Maloney, 2004). As a response, there has been a movement to clarify the concept, by re-focusing it on the original membership-inspired idea while engaging with functional approaches: Jordan and colleagues (2004) suggest labelling all entities seeking to influence policy as ‘pressure participants’, but distinguishing between ‘policy participants’, who could be individual companies, and ‘interest/pressure groups’, who are typically groups of individuals or other organisations/companies that seek to influence the policy process. However, some staff-based groups may also be included under the label of interest groups (Jordan, Halpin, & Maloney, 2004).

Other scholars, such as Beyers, Eising, and Maloney (2008) seek to define interest groups based on the key organisational features of ‘organisation’, ‘political interests’ and ‘informality’. The ‘organisation’ component distinguishes the interest groups from other influences on policy, such as social movements or public opinion. ‘Political interest’ means that they group seeks to influence policy, and ‘informality’ refers to the fact that these groups do not seek to fill formal political positions (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008). However, they highlight that this fairly broad definition encompasses a very broad and diverse spectrum of actors (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008).

The aforementioned attempts to clarify the concept are mostly done by researchers seeking to operationalise the concept for data collection and comparison purposes. There are however, normative notions that are included in the frame that the term interest groups signals. The basic idea here is that there are multiple groups in a polity pushing for interests that they represent—and therefore the frame brings with it pluralist notions (Truman, 1951). This vision assumes that interest groups have more or less fixed preferences which are brought to the fore and reconciled to some degree in the available institutional political context, such as the EU. In this line of thinking, the ‘interest group’ label insinuates a ‘Europe of interests’. The latter argument sits well with
liberal democratic ideas about political processes (Held, 2006). Unfortunately, these normative notions are often readily forgotten when the term interest groups is used.

The ‘lobbying’ frame

The lobbying/lobbyist frame is perhaps the most straightforward. Following Baumgartner and Leech (1998), Nownes (2006) defines lobbying as “an effort designed to affect what the government does” (p. 5). As Baumgartner and Leech (1998) explain, the concept of lobbying originates from people waiting in the lobby of the British House of Commons to influence members of government by speaking with them directly. At that time, it was mainly understood to be a commercial activity (Eising & Lehringer, 2013). Today, there is broad consensus that lobbying is done by some sort of organised group or intermediary, and there are multiple theories on the necessary preconditions and mechanics of lobbying (for a review, see Yoshioka, 2010). This makes lobbying a complicated process, rather than a single event (Nownes, 2006). Persistent definitional issues with the ‘lobbying’ frame revolve around disagreements about what kind of activities count as lobbying (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998). Aside from these definitional issues, the lobbying frame has negative connotations in the general public, where ‘lobbying’ or ‘lobbyist’ comes with a sense of illicit influence by often corporate actors with little public accountability and detrimental effects to democracy (Warleigh & Fairbrass, 2002). The periodic emergence of contributions such as the 2009 movie “The Brussels Business”1 shows that there is great public interest in what is perceived to be a dark business behind closed doors.

The ‘non-governmental organisation [NGO]’ frame

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) frame, originally created in 1945 by the United Nations (UN) to formalise how non-state organisations may participate in UN processes, has become increasingly prevalent, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s when neoliberal agendas sought to roll back the state, and allocate tasks to markets and other actors, including NGOs (Lewis, 2010). However, “while the term ‘NGO’ is widely used,

1 http://www.thebrusselsbusiness.eu/
there are also many other overlapping terms used such as ‘non-profit’, ‘voluntary’, and ‘civil society organisations’ (Lewis, 2010, p. 1057), which may be in part due to historical path dependencies in term usage in different parts of the world, but also because NGOs are very diverse organisations and because it is a negative classification (Lewis, 2010). Lewis (2010) argues that NGO activities may be understood in two broad categories: service provision and political advocacy. Many of the NGOs active in the EU are indeed ‘umbrella organisations’ performing political advocacy for a range of NGOs in their membership (Melville, 2010), or they represent an organisation that is active globally, such as Greenpeace.

On a very basic level, the term NGO signifies an organisation that is neither the government, nor a market actor. This framing becomes a source legitimacy deriving from a sense of independence. Given that some environmental groups such as Greenpeace have great capacity to attract public attention, and tend to self-identify as NGOs, the term has stuck historically. In other words, ‘NGO’ became popular to describe organisations that are perceived to be “defenders of the public interest, presenting neutral, value-free accounts of issues and problems”, driven by positive media images and public stunts (Grant, 2001, p. 338). Although this frame has been criticized for a number of reasons, it enjoys considerable use in certain sectors. Interestingly, the term NGO is often used to describe organisations active in the environmental sector or some other campaigning cause (Grant, 2001).

There’s often the notion that NGOs are the basic element of civil society, or play an important role in the constitution of civil society (Kohler-Koch & Rittberger, 2006). These claims notwithstanding, I argue that in theoretical terms, the NGO frame contains notions of governance, an organisational form that envisions networks, rather than hierarchies, at the root of policy-making (Rhodes, 2007). The underlying rationale here is different from approaches to civil society that often rely on participatory or deliberative notions (see above).
Summary

While the above terms and some of the frames which they have come to signify have been discussed in relevant literatures (see Table 1 for a summary of key elements), there is to date no systematic knowledge of how frequently these terms are used in academic research on EU interest groups, and particularly how they emerged over time. In the next section, I will draw on a bibliometric analysis to begin such an evaluation.

Table 1. Concepts and frames in interest group research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept/terminology</th>
<th>Key elements of the frame</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil Society [Organisation]</td>
<td>Focus on citizens and the connection between citizens and governmental institutions; working ‘with the state’; often in participatory and deliberative democratic frameworks; positive connotation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest group</td>
<td>Focus on organisation, aggregation of interests and political advocacy; perceived neutrality in academic circles; often in pluralist/liberal democratic frameworks (‘Europe of interests’).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobbying</td>
<td>Focus on the process of influencing governmental institutions; often negative connotations in the public (undue influence that is detrimental to democracy).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>An organisation separate from the state/government and the market; often positive connotation; often used for environmental organisations; connected with conceptual frameworks of ‘governance’.</td>
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Methods

Bibliometric analysis

In order to evaluate the prevalence of frames in the literature on interest groups, I draw on methodological approaches developed in bibliometrics (Andrés, 2009; Donohue, 1973). The current analysis is restricted to a descriptive analysis of publications in the multidisciplinary field of European interest research, and the terminology used in the titles of these publications. In addition, I evaluate the temporal emergence and distribution of the keywords.

First, I searched the prevalent databases Web of Knowledge® (which contains the Social Sciences Citation Index and Web of Science®), as well as SciVerse® Scopus®
and Worldwide Political Science Abstracts (ProQuest LLC) for relevant articles. Taken together, these databases provide a broad, multidisciplinary coverage of academic fields engaging with interest groups in the EU, such as political science, sociology, geography and others. The sample from these databases thus provides a good estimation of the nature of publications in the field, which is necessary for any bibliometric analysis (Andrés, 2009). I based my search on an extensive collection of search terms\(^2\) drawing on the literature review by Beyers and colleagues (2008). Raw data were imported into the reference management software program RefWorks, and duplicates removed. In addition, I removed all articles whose title did not clearly indicate that they addressed EU interest groups. The advantage of coding article titles is that many articles that publishers often only translate articles and abstracts of non-English publications, which can also be captured with this method.

**Interviews – Case study of environmental groups in Brussels**

Following standard methodology in fields studying interest groups (e.g., Nownes, 2006), I conducted semi-structured interviews with staff members of large environmental groups active in Brussels between October and December 2012 to gain an understanding of the self-perception of these organisations and their role in the European polity. In general, interviewees were asked to what extent (if any) they thought their organisation contributes to democracy at the European level.

**Results**

The initial database search returned more than 1,500 hits (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Number of Original Hits</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCOPUS</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web of Knowledge</td>
<td>1082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worldwide Political Science Abstracts</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^2\) I searched for documents which were listed with the following keywords (linguistic variations and abbreviations were included and in relevant cases captured with ‘wild cards’ and combinations defined with Boolean operators: European Union, interest group, political interest, political interest group, interest association, interest organisation, organised interest, pressure group, specific interest, special interest group, citizen group, public interest group, nongovernmental organisation, social movement organisation, civil society organisation, third sector, lobby, lobbying, charity, nonprofit.
After the data screening process (see above), a sample of 228 studies remained. These studies were coded into different categories depending on the appearance of relevant keywords in their titles, including lobbying/lobbyist; interest group; civil society organisation; NGO and others. The following four frames emerged as strongest (all other frames were used in the titles of four or fewer articles between 1992 and 2013 and are therefore not reported here). See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Interest group research: Keywords in article titles

In a second step, I traced the emergence of the four major frames over time (see Figure 2). The year 2013 was excluded in this instance.

3 The time span used in this analysis was based on available data from the searches; 1992 was the earliest contribution recorded in this data set.
Figure 2 reveals the remarkable growth of studies in this academic field, especially in the early 2000s and after 2005. Furthermore, this graphic reveals the rise of ‘civil society’ as a keyword in article titles from the early 2000s onwards. Particularly recently, this frame has been used increasingly, whereas the ‘interest group frame’ and ‘lobbying’ appear to have been used somewhat less.

**Interviews - Case study of environmental groups in Brussels**

In general, interviewees reacted positively when I used the term NGO to describe their organisation in the interviews or they raised the term themselves in their responses. However, there are differences in how environmental groups self-identify and with which of the above frames these views are most congruent. For example, one staff member viewed their organisation as a crucial part of EU democracy, remarking that

Well I mean, I think in a sense […] they’re keeping democracy alive. But certainly I think without NGOs, I would say hardly any democratic debate would
exist. Because we are at least able to somehow aggregate, you know, the public behind some public interests.⁴

A staff member from another organisation, however, had a radically different opinion: asked about their organisation’s possible contribution to democracy, they remarked that

It’s not something I really consider. My problem with EU climate and energy policy-making is not one of democracy.⁵

Interestingly, however, some environmental group staff member appear to have taken the ‘civil society frame’ on board, remarking that

Well, a democratic aspect is of course that [organisation’s name] is part of a democratic society and we present, that we start debates, that we contribute to civil society that is playing a role in, policy debates in broader societal debates etc. […] What is also important is that there is a kind of counterbalance to the big industry lobby that is ongoing.⁶

When prompted about contributions to democracy, environmental group staff members frequently insisted on fairly pluralist notions, commenting that their organisations represent views that are not otherwise represented in Brussels—often with reference to their membership or their supporters. For example, one individual remarked that their contribution to democracy was to “overcome maybe the influence of big industry. […] if it comes to industry demands versus our demands for example, it’s always very difficult to fight that out”⁷. In some instances, staff members stressed the fact that they aggregated their members’ views, if the organisation had a member base:

They [members] support what we do. So in that sense, you know we are an outlet for those views which generally within the economic mainstream and the priorities that the machinery has in terms of economic growth and political stabilization. Questions of climate change justice, development, have a very tough time to survive, so in that sense we do contribute to providing a bigger picture about what people’s concerns are.⁸

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⁴ Environmental group staff member, interview conducted on 2 November 2012
⁵ Environmental group staff member, interview conducted on 29 October 2012
⁶ Environmental group staff member, interview conducted on 30 October 2012
⁷ Environmental group staff member, interview conducted on 16 November 2012
⁸ Environmental group staff member, interview conducted on 11 December 2012
This view was corroborated by another staff member, who remarked that

I mean my very personal view is that NGOs usually, they support the positions that are not reflected in business, which is what the biggest part of lobbying groups consist of. […] a multiplying voices […]

In general terms, responses from environmental groups indicate that many of them self-identify with the NGO frame, but they see their contribution mainly in a pluralist way, providing an additional voice that would otherwise not be present. In addition, a number of interviewees mentioned the term ‘civil society’ in their responses, for example

Because we’re so specialized, we can be fairly confident that it kind of adds a civil society voice.

Similarly, another interviewee remarked

I mean I think NGOs being [a] representation of civil society are a necessity or a necessary tool if you want to speak about democracy […]. NGOs, the environmental NGOs, development NGOs, whatever NGOs are needed to inform the public about what is happening, what decision-makers are up to and give the public kind of a chance to voice their opinion also outside of-, of the election process.

In sum, the NGO and ‘civil society’ frames are often used by environmental group staff members, but their framing differs from prevalent frames in academia (see above). Specifically, they tend to emphasise pluralist visions of their organisations’ contribution to democracy, and importantly those interviewed did not subscribe to the participatory or deliberative democratic elements that are often invoked in conjunction with civil society.

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9 Environmental group staff member, interview conducted on 15 October 2012
10 Environmental group staff member, interview conducted on 10 December 2012
11 Environmental group staff member, interview conducted on 19 December 2012
Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to identify and describe prevalent frames used in EU interest group research using an empirically informed approach. Developing a better understanding of framing in interest group research matters for two reasons: first, for pragmatic reasons, it provides a clearer understanding of the field and may help to overcome some of the definitional and conceptual issues described earlier (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008). Second, it is possible that this growing field has or will have an influence on the development of the European polity vis-à-vis framing interest groups. Bibliometric analysis reveals that certain keywords signifying frames gained prominence over time. Frames may influence other academics, policy-makers and citizens regarding (1) what we can expect from interest groups in terms of the functions they have and the roles they play (2) the normative role interest groups should play in the European polity.

This framing is particularly relevant regarding ongoing questions about the EU’s democratic deficit, often characterized by a perceived distance between the EU institutions and its citizens (Saurugger, 2008). In the literature, interest groups—usually then re-framed as ‘civil society organisations’—are seen to have potential to plug the democratic deficit, though caveats apply (e.g., Saurugger, 2008). In addition to the rise of the term ‘civil society’ shown earlier, EU policy-makers use this term as well with similar goals (Freise, 2008). For example, in the important White Paper on European governance, the European Commission uses a very broad definition of civil society to claim that

Civil society plays an important role in giving voice to the concerns of citizens and delivering services that meet people’s needs. [...] Nongovernmental organisations play an important role at global level in development policy. (European Commission, 2001, p. 14)

What is striking in this document is that the term ‘lobbying’ is not used at all, the term ‘interest groups’ is cited once (p. 34), but ‘civil society’ seventeen times; ‘non-governmental organisations’ is used once (see quote above). Thus, European policy-makers are using the term strategically to make claims about the nature of interest groups in the European polity. Paying attention to the frames that EU policy-makers evoke
matters, because “policy language […] is itself a form and source of policy power” (Apthorpe, 1997, p. 42). Similarly, Kohler-Koch and Finke (2007) show that the European Commission has moved from talking about ‘special interest groups’ to ‘NGOs’ and finally ‘civil society organisations’ in relevant documents. As the authors show, this has resulted from a shift in the Commission from consulting interests towards notions of participatory democracy (Kohler-Koch & Finke, 2007).

The framing of interest groups in the EU by policy-makers and academics matters especially because the EU continues to be a polity-in-the-making. As new states join the EU (e.g., Croatia in 2013) and the policy-making reach of the EU expands, the role of interest groups is constantly being evaluated and contested. This is particularly relevant in light of continuous efforts to adjust interest group regulation and registration in the EU (Greenwood & Dreger, 2013). Given that academics can become involved in EU policy-making multiple ways (e.g., Gornitzka & Sverdrup, 2008), developing a clearer understanding of their framing of interest groups may open up possibilities to understand how academic and other frames interact and how academia influences the development of the European polity.

Framing in academia may be a slower process, and it tends to be less action-oriented than in the social movement sphere. However, the same principles apply—certain academic leaders frame or re-frame a phenomenon under study, their frames interact with political and social realities and serve to attract followers, who could be other academics, students or policy-makers. Future research should shed further light on the role of academics in political framing processes. If the EU institutions are receptive to voices from academia, their lobbying regulation and funding schemes for interest groups may change in response to the way in which these groups are understood. The field of interest group research as such—and the dominant frames used within that field—may have a collective impact that over time shapes aspects of the European polity.

What this study does not suggest is that all scholars who use a certain set of terminology argue for a particular democratic vision for Europe, or are necessarily making a conscious choice to this effect. It is clear that the empirical fit of the current argument remains imperfect at best; some scholars have pointed out to me that a great deal of terminology use may be random rather than structured. I suggest, however, that
paying more attention to how relevant frames unfold across the field how they may be linked to democratic theories could potentially provide a useful way forward.

Finally, if we accept Callon’s (1998) rationale that frames are intrinsically dynamic, attempts to provide ‘clear definitions’ of terms (e.g., Jordan, Halpin, & Maloney, 2004) will fail as the result of a continual process of re-framing and frame interaction. The current contribution can be understood as a snapshot in time. However, important insights could emerge from studies seeking to shed light on why certain framing happens at particular points in time and how academic frames interact with frames in politics and other arenas and how this relates to polity-building in the European Union.
References


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