



Who are the lobbyists?

A population study of interest groups in Sweden

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Purpose and aims

The purpose of this project is to define and study the population of organised interests in Swedish national politics.¹ Organised interests constitute a dilemma in democratic systems of governance. On the one hand, it is a fundamental democratic right for any group of citizens to organise and petition the government. Only authoritarian regimes would put a ban on lobbying. Furthermore, governments are dependent on input from that society which they are set to regulate, both for the quality and the legitimacy of their policy. On the other hand, a central finding in interest group research is that interest group populations tend to be biased (Schattschneider 1960, Olsen 1965). Some groups have better opportunities than others to mobilise resources to pursue their case, thus distorting the democratic principle of equal effective participation (Dahl 1989). Schattschneider concluded, in critique of defenders of a pluralist “laissez-faire” interest group system, that “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent” (Schattschneider 1960:35).

Sweden, along with many other European countries, for a long time had a system of corporatism structuring the relations between

organised interests and the state. Corporatism may partly offset the pluralist mobilisation of bias, described by Schattschneider and Olsen, but may on the other hand create new biases. In a corporatist system the state/government selects which interest groups to consult with, and gives privileged access to these in return for legitimacy and grass-root control (Schmitter 1979, Öberg 1994). Corporatist institutions have often included representatives from competing camps (such as employers and employees), but the government may also choose to give privileged access to ideologically close groups – which may or may not have the ability to mobilise strong resources on their own – and shut the door for other groups whose policies or ideologies contrast with the government’s. The type of bias produced by corporatist systems thus partly depends on the preferences of the government.

Studies of interest group populations give information on which type of bias – if any – that exists in which voices that are heard by the government between elections. To analyse this crucial democratic issue we propose to conduct the first bottom-up census of active interest groups in Sweden. The project will use a combined top-down and bottom-up research strategy, and include variation in both space (different policy areas, different political systems) and time (before and after the decline of corporatism). We will make comparisons along several lines. First, we will compare the population of organised interests that are invited to give their input

1 We use the terms interest groups, organised interests and (somewhat carelessly) lobbyists/lobby groups interchangeably, referring to non-governmental organisations that act with the purpose of influencing public policy (cf., for instance, Baumgartner and Leech 1998, Naurin 2001).

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to the political decision-making (top-down) with the population of organised interests that seek to influence political decision-making (bottom-up). Second, we will compare interest group populations between different policy areas. It is well known that corporatist institutions have been stronger in some policy areas (labor market policy, social policy, agricultural policy) than in others (environmental policy, foreign policy, judicial policy) (Hermansson 1993). Third, we will study the development over time in the population and behaviour of interest groups. Whereas the “decline of corporatism” has been thoroughly studied, the question of the eventual “rise of pluralism” remains to be addressed. Forth, we are doing this in close collaboration with similar population studies in Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and the UK, thus making system level comparisons possible. Moreover, an important output from the project will be a published dataset of the population of organized interests in Sweden that will be highly valuable for future interest group research.

Survey of the field

The 1990s saw a strong interest among Swedish political scientists in studying the development of de-corporativisation of Swedish politics (Hermansson et al. 1999, Johansson 2000, Rothstein & Bergström 1999, SOU 1990:44). The old corporatist institutions were crumbling and a sharp increase in lobby organisations was found, indicating a shift towards more pluralist relations. A government commission on the state of democracy in Sweden noted that the previous corporatist system had been “undemocratic” (SOU 2000:1). Predictions of the character of the state-society relations that would replace the corporatist system were common. Some observers were more prone to emphasise the risk for pluralist bias (Hermansson et al. 1999) while others underlined the chance for less of corporatist bias (SOU 1990:44) – in practice,

two sides of the same coin. Similar developments have been observed in the other Scandinavian countries (Christiansen et al. 2010).

But what actually came after corporatism has been less well studied. A recent summary of the research field in Scandinavia, clearly documenting the decline of corporatism, concluded that:

Finally, in line with the interest group perspective one may ask how strong organized interests have reacted to the decline in preparation corporatism and the privileged positions they enjoyed in the 1970s and before. Have they devised new lobbying strategies (cf. Binderkrantz 2005; Rommetvedt 2000)? Are new types of interaction between government, parliament and interest organizations evolving (cf. Christiansen and Rommetvedt 1999)? Is pluralism supplanting corporatism (cf. Rommetvedt 2005; Christiansen and Nørgaard 2003)? And what are the consequences of the decline in preparation corporatism for the equality of interest group representation and the legitimacy of interest group representation in the democratic process? Is the interest group system in Scandinavia becoming a flawed pluralist heaven in which “the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent” (Schattschneider 1960, p. 35)? (Christiansen et al. 2010:37)

Our project is a response to this call for more studies of how the interest group system works twenty years after de-corporativisation in Sweden was first acknowledged. With what accent does the chorus sing today?

We will also connect to another theme in contemporary research on interest groups, namely population research. An early and influential study of interest group populations is that of Gray and Lowery, building on data from a large number of American states (Lowery and Gray 1995, Gray and Lowery 1996). Apart from the issue of mobilisation of bias, one of the dependent variables in this research theme is the density of the interest system, i.e. how heavily populated with organised interests a particular political system or policy area is (Messer et al. 2010, Gray and Lowery 1996). Other recent studies

of interest group populations include Berkhout et al. (2010a, 2010b), Halpin and Jordan (2009), and Poppelaars (2009).

One important finding here is that the higher the density of the population, the more interest groups tend to specialise. A fundamental aspect of any organisation's political strategy concerns issue prioritisation. Interest groups are confronted with a large number of potential issues in which they can invest resources. For long, a common expectation from the (in particular American) interest group research was that interest groups generally tend to specialise, that is being involved in a relatively narrow issue agenda ("niche-seeking") (Baumgartner and Leech 1998). More recently, scholars have begun to address the existing variation in issue specialisation in order to identify factors that affect degrees of niche-seeking. Such factors include both individual organisational characteristics, such as resources (larger staff numbers imply a more generalised engagement) and group type (citizen groups and groups where members can influence the agenda to a larger degree tend to engage more broadly), but also contextual and institutional factors. For example, according to Halpin and Bindekrantz, interest groups with a privileged position (as in a corporatist institution) can be expected to be more generalist in the policy issues they choose (Halpin and Bindekrantz 2011).

Just as the level of bias in the interest group population is of fundamental democratic importance, so is the degree to which interest groups behave in a niche-seeking manner. In this respect, Sweden has previously been described as an anomaly in the international interest group research, having unprecedentedly generalist interest organisations (Olsen 1982). The fact that the large centralised Swedish organisations during the hey-days of corporatism were involved in a broad variety of policy areas, representing large parts of society, contributed to their tendency to take responsibility for broader cross-cutting public interests. Specialisation and

niche-seeking may have detrimental effects both from a pluralist competitive perspective, and from a more deliberative democratic perspective. With reference to the first, Halpin and Bindekrantz conclude that:

A well-populated and diverse system of organized interests is deemed important to ensure that public policy is made in an inclusive manner (Schlozman 2009). It follows, therefore, that group specialization – sticking to narrow policy areas and avoiding conflict – is likely to undermine the pluralistic competition that scholars see as crucial to the democratic contribution of groups. Moreover, the existence of generalists is viewed as important in linking policy communities (Browne 1990). (Halpin and Bindekrantz 2011:201)

A forthcoming research project, supported by Vetenskapsrådet 2010, contains the second perspective (Öberg and Svensson 2010). Interest organisations may contribute to democratic deliberation by bringing ideas, arguments and perspectives to the public debate. However, in order to contribute to public deliberation a sense of general responsibility for public interests is important. Narrowly focused special interests may lack arguments that speak to others, and will therefore not contribute in the same way to deliberation.

In sum, an important question is to what extent de-corporativisation has led to more of specialisation and niche-seeking. If the Swedish interest group population displays a high degree of density, this is potentially both good and bad news for democracy. Good, since an increase in the population of interest groups implies that more voices are heard. Bad, since these voices are likely to be less valuable from a public deliberation point of view.

Project description

Following the discussion so far, the project addresses four general research questions:

- *What does the Swedish interest group population look like today (2011)? Who are the lobbyists, i.e. how many interest*

groups are active, and what characterises those groups that are active? The crucial characteristics addressed, relating to the issue of bias, are types of interest being represented (business, social group interests, ideas and values) and access to resources (financial and membership). Furthermore, to what extent do the groups display a niche-seeking behaviour in their choice of policy issues?

- *How does that compare with the days of corporatism?* A different type of bias? More of upper-class accent? More of niche-seeking among the organisations?
- *How does it vary between different policy areas?*
- *How does Sweden compare to other European countries?*

The data collection proceeds in two steps; identifying and characterising the organised interests that are active in Swedish national politics. We will collect data at two points in time, before and after the decline of corporatism – 1977 and 2011. The years are chosen to control for the electoral cycle, both being the year-after a general election.

IDENTIFYING ACTIVE ORGANISED INTERESTS

In the first step, we identify the population of organised interests and the degree of specialisation.

In contrast to studies of corporatism we are interested in all interest groups that try to influence policy-making, not only the privileged ones. Therefore, our most important data collection uses a bottom-up approach, in that the interest groups themselves signal their existence by being active. Our measure of activity is that there is at least one incoming letter in the public government archives during the time period studied. In Sweden all incoming mail to the government ministries is made public.

This indication of activity is chosen to make the population as inclusive as possible, while still limiting it to groups that are actively trying to influence the government.

Obviously, sending letters is not the only way to lobby the government, and direct (formal or informal) contacts are likely to be more important in terms of influence (Dur 2008). However, this is not a study of influence (which is very difficult to measure) *per se* but of presence (which is a prerequisite for influence), and it is very unlikely that groups that are active informally do not also leave traces in the form of documents in the government archives. The most confrontational activist groups that have no interest in contacting the Government directly will be missed. However, many groups – probably most of the groups active on national level – that use activist methods, such as protest or civil disobedience, usually combine these methods with more conventional channels for contact with politicians.

Writing letters to the Government Offices is arguably the strategy with the lowest threshold, why studying incoming letters should give the most inclusive list of groups. The senders that fit our definition of organised interests (excluding, for example, communications from individuals, public authorities and local government authorities) will be included in our population.

Complementing this bottom-up census we also use a top-down approach, based on the proposals referred for consideration by the government (*remisser*). The government archive includes lists of institutions and organisations (*remissförteckning*) that the government has selected as “interested parties”, which have been approached and asked for their views on particular policy issues. The sample of organisations that are included in the referrals will be more inclusive than what is normally referred to as the privileged interests in a corporatist context, but that nevertheless represents the government’s view (the “view from above”) of what constitutes the relevant population of interest groups for various political issues. The combination of a top-down and a bottom-up approach will make it possible to compare directly the

population of interest groups that in the government's view is relevant for the issue at hand, with the population of interest groups that in fact wish to make themselves heard on the matter.

For both the bottom-up and the top-down samples, we will also register how many times each organisation send a letter/is consulted during the selected time period, which types of political issues it comments on/is invited to comment on, as well as the responsible ministry for the issue at hand. The breadth of engagement – in how many different policy areas do one lobby – will be our measure of specialisation.

We will collect data for 2011 and 1977, i.e. before and after de-corporativisation. Both years are the-year-after elections, which controls for the electoral cycle. The data collection described so far is fairly straightforward for the year 2011. Today all communications (letters as well as e-mails) are stored electronically, which makes it possible to narrow the search among the incoming communications to the category “organisations and companies” (thus excluding the categories “individuals” and “other authorities”). We have conducted a search for 2010, which yielded 4142 incoming letters to all the government ministries. When the project starts we will do a similar search for 2011, and study all these communications to define the population as described above. It is possible that we will be able to program a code (for example in the software program Python) to do some (or all) of the categorisation automatically, but in the present budget we plan for the event that we will have to code the lists manually.

The period before the decline of corporatism is methodologically more challenging. The incoming letters for 1977 are stored at the National Archives (*Riksarkivet*) in paper form only, and there is no way to neatly separate organisations and companies from other senders. Moreover, both incoming and outgoing letters are stored together, which further increases the number of letters that need

to be searched. Again, we have made a preliminary search in the archives for the year 1978. Incoming and outgoing letters, from all sorts of senders, together amount to roughly 45000. To go through all these letters would be too comprehensive a task for the project.

Instead, we will focus on a few, strategically selected, ministries. We will choose ministries that have a similar counterpart in 2011 to make possible comparisons over time. We also want the chosen ministries to differ in the extent to which their issues according to previous research have been handled within corporatist structures. A preliminary selection of ministries include the Ministry of Employment, the Ministry of Agriculture (today the Ministry for Rural Affairs), the Ministry of Industry (today the Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications), the Ministries of Budget and of Economic Affairs (today the Ministry of Finance) and the Ministry of Justice. Of these, the first three handle issues that traditionally have a high degree of corporatist involvement, whereas the remaining ministries, while being powerful and important ministries, never had as much corporatist arrangements around its issues of responsibility.

In the 1970:s, for each year, a register has been set up by the ministry where senders are listed in alphabetic order (*ingivareregister*). For several of the ministries, the registers also contain a short description of the matter at hand. For our selected ministries, we will use these registers, and when necessary, the actual letters, to obtain the same information as for 2011. For each ministry, we will thus have information about approximately 4000 letters (according to estimation from staff at the National Archives). This is still a lot of information to handle, but it will be fairly easy to, as a first step, exclude outgoing letters (around 50 percent of all the letters, according to estimations) and letters from individuals or other authorities (the majority of the remaining letters), which leaves us with a much smaller number to handle.

CHARACTERISING THE ORGANISED INTERESTS FOUND

The second step in our data collection concerns characterising the interest organisations in the population. Two characteristics are especially important when assessing the degree of bias; the types of interests represented and the resources mobilised. We distinguish between four types of interest groups: companies, business organizations (for example employers' federations and trade associations), interest organizations with individual membership (such as trade unions and pensioner's groups) and idea-based groups (such as environmental groups and religious groups). Two types of resources are commonly mentioned as the most important in interest group research; financial resources that are spent on lobbying, and membership resources in the form of number of individual members (Dur 2008, Baumgartner et al 2009).

To obtain information on these variables, we will have to use different sources of information. For joint-stock companies we can obtain annual reports from the Swedish Companies Registration Office (*Bolagsverket*). From the Swedish Tax Agency (*Skatteverket*) we will obtain information about whether a group has any employees at all, and, if so, the annual amount of payroll tax paid by the organisation, which gives us an estimate of resources spent on employees. For organisations other than individual companies, this will be our estimate of financial resources. To get information about for example membership, we will first survey web-pages. If none of the above sources gives us the information we need, we will contact the organisations directly. If an organisation or a company no longer exists, we will see if a contact person can be identified from the letter sent to the government, and, if so, try to get in touch with that person. If that strategy fails, we will search for information in the National Archival Database (NAD). NAD assembles information from a large number of archives, among

them archives over popular movements (*Folkrörelsearkivet*). There is still a risk that we end up with missing data for some of the organisations in 1977 (namely those that do no longer exist *and* can not be found in the archives *and* where it is impossible to find a contact person), but this is likely to be a small part of the population.

It should also be noted that although our characterisation of interest groups in this project is limited to these distinctions, there is every possibility to make more nuanced descriptions in future projects. In the published database, each organisation will be identified by its name, so it will be easy to keep collecting information and add variables of interest.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

In order to address the fourth research question listed above – to compare our findings of the Swedish interest group population with other political systems – we will collaborate with researchers conducting population studies in various national contexts. Our research network includes Rasmussen (studying the Netherlands and the UK), Halpin (Scotland), Poppelaars (Netherlands), Beyers (Belgium) and Bindekrantz (Denmark). All these projects have partly different profiles and research strategies. The types of registers and data that are accessible differ between the countries, which means that some use top-down and other bottom-up approaches when collecting the data. However, all projects broadly have the same aim of assembling a population of interest groups. All researchers involved in these projects also appreciate the need to make research on interest groups more comparable across political systems, and coordination of research strategies in order to facilitate comparisons between countries are discussed within the network.

Significance

The project will be an important contribution

both to the international research field on interest group populations, and for our understanding of Swedish democracy. We know that corporatism has been in decline – in Sweden as in other countries – but not what has replaced it. We know that the number of lobbyists has increased, but we lack a systematic overview of who these groups really are and what type of bias we have now compared to before. The project contains the first bottom-up census of interest groups in Sweden, and the first systematic comparison of interest group populations over time and – in cooperation with the international research team – across countries.

Apart from the significance of the research questions addressed the population data that this project assembles will be of tremendous value for future research. Research on interest groups has traditionally been dominated by case studies, with a few exceptions (Hermansson et al 1999, Baumgartner et al 2009). Our database may be used for large-N studies based on random samples of groups, which will dramatically increase the possibilities for drawing general conclusions on issues such as lobbying strategies and tactics, networking, argumentation and lobbying success. We will make the data publicly available after the project is finished, and we also plan to continue to work with the data in the future.

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