The use of surveys in interest group research

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Abstract Scholars utilize a variety of research methods in studies of interest group formation, presence and influence. From aggregate counts of interest group populations to in-depth participant observation, scholars have used a variety of methods in studies of interest groups' role(s) in the policy process. The application of survey research has proven to be a successful method for obtaining group-specific information across a variety of group types and settings. Though organizational sampling and methods of survey dissemination can differ dramatically across studies, the subfield lacks a comprehensive review of the use of surveys within interest group research. This paucity leaves unanswered several questions regarding the frequency and efficacy of survey research within the subfield. What types of questions have been answered via surveys of organizations? What benefits are provided by this methodological approach? What challenges emerge when surveying interest groups and how have scholars overcome these obstacles? These questions are pertinent to scholars of interest groups and survey researchers alike, and this review provides guidance for the construction and dissemination of future interest group surveys.
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Scholars utilize an extensive array of research methods in the exploration of interest group formation, presence and influence. From aggregate counts of interest group populations to in-depth participant observation, the question of how interest groups function in the policy process has been, and continues to be, explored from myriad angles. Of these many approaches, survey research has proven to be one successful method for obtaining group-specific information across a variety of organizational types and settings. Though organizational sampling and methods of survey dissemination can differ dramatically across studies, the subfield lacks a comprehensive review of the use of surveys within interest group research. This review[1] provides information about the use of surveys in studies of interest groups with a focus on research questions that have been answered via survey methods, the unique challenge of identifying appropriate standards for group populations and appropriate response rates in surveys of organizations. The following sections outline some common methods for surveying groups before concluding with a brief discussion of areas for improvement and new directions for interest group survey research.

Why Survey?

Though landscape or aggregate counts of organizations provide information about differences in group presence, they frequently lack detailed information about specific groups. Alternatively, case studies reveal rich information about the internal workings of groups but generalizability is often limited. Surveys of organizations marry these two approaches by providing information about groups' internal operations and decision making across a range of organizations and socio-political contexts. There are a number of research goals for which surveys of organizations are particularly useful; first, they provide information across a large set of organizations and provide group-specific information that system-level research is unable to produce (Beyers *et al.*, 2014a). Surveys of interest groups also '… generate more robust empirical evidence than case studies can' (Eising, 2004) though as Tsujinaka and Pekkanen (2007) point out, surveys of organizations can be used to complement detailed studies of particular policy areas, thus expanding analysis beyond a single issue or type of organization. Also, broad surveys of organizations can combat potential sample bias produced by limiting analysis to sources that would be more likely to correlate with group size and resource availability (for example, website coding as mentioned by Dür and Mateo, 2013).

In this review of the literature, survey research was used to answer a variety of questions about interest groups ranging from the preliminary questions of why organizations form (Gray and Lowery, 1996; Nownes and Neeley, 1996) to explaining what they do and why (Mitchell, 1990; Nownes and Freeman, 1998; Dalton *et al*, 2003; Furlong and Kerwin, 2004; Binderkrantz, 2005; Hogan, 2005; Heaney, 2006; Solberg and Waltenberg, 2006; Holyoke *et al*, 2007; Holyoke, 2009; Constantelos, 2010; Chalmers, 2011; Dür and Mateo, 2013; Pross, 2013). Surveys also provide detailed information about the internal workings of organizations such as decision making about issue attention and lobbying targets (Hojnacki and Kimball, 1998; Halpin and Binderkrantz, 2011; Marchetti, 2014), groups' relationships with their constituents/the broader public (Sabatier and McLaughlin, 1990; King and Walker, 1992; Leighley, 1996; Cox and Vass, 2000; Strolovitch, 2007; Binderkrantz, 2009; Holyoke, 2009), and groups' interactions with like-minded or oppositional organizations (Hojnacki, 1997; Hojnacki, 1998; Heaney, 2006).

A large number of studies utilize surveys to better understand the role of interest groups in the policy process (Hoefer, 1996; Cox and Vass, 2000; Dalton *et al.,* 2003; Heaney, 2006; Fried, 2007; Reenock and Gerber, 2007; Hall and

Miler, 2008; McKay, 2012) including the role groups play in shaping legislative behavior (Wright, 1990), and the influence of interest groups generally (Binderkrantz, 2005; Chalmers, 2011; Klüver, 2012a) or within particular policy areas (Goldsmith, 2002). Several studies use surveys to shed light onto how variations in institutional structure affect organizational behavior (Eising, 2004; Reenock and Gerber, 2007; Tsujinaka and Pekkanen, 2007; Klüver, 2010; Constantelos, 2011; Pleines, 2011) and to better understand groups' relationships and interactions with bureaucratic institutions, political decision-makers or governmental bodies (Braun, 2012a, b; Klüver, 2012b; The LSE GV314 Group, 2012; Rasmussen, 2012; Chalmers, 2013).

Despite the multitude of research questions that can be answered via survey methods, this approach also comes with limitations, one of which is that surveys are often unable to capture the policy context in which interests groups operate (Beyers *et al.*, 2014a). In terms of niche theory, Gray and Lowery (1996, p. 97) point out that 'survey data is more amenable to identifying modal or typical patterns of niche design than exploring variations among subpopulations' and that comparative case studies may ultimately be the best way to study interest organization niches. As Halpin and Binderkrantz (2011) observe, scholars tend to survey known groups and then ask them for a self-assessment of their typical patterns of behavior as it is far more difficult to observe groups' actual patterns of policy engagement. Similarly, Braun (2012a) provides a concise summary of the limitations of interest group surveys, noting that survey data can appropriately measure *preferences* about policy but are less ideal in their measurement of the *availability* of policy issues and access (emphasis my own). That is, surveys of organizations are useful when authors want to gain information across organizations and possibly across issues, but without supporting contextual information, it can be difficult to parse out the preferences of groups from the realities and influence of their actions.

Population Identification and Sampling

Upon choosing survey methods as an appropriate methodological approach, scholars face an array of options for carrying out their study. One key question faced by all survey researchers is how to define a universe and sample that will reflect the goal(s) of their study. The complexity of this question is enhanced by the interest group subfield's reluctance to adopt a universal definition of what constitutes an 'interest organization'; this ambiguity leads to unclear and highly variable boundaries for group populations. Beyers *et al.* (2014a) connect these complications to a general lack of context in organizational surveys, noting '… if official records [of groups or issues] are available, they mostly do not map whether and how the different issues are related to each other' (p. 162). One common rectification of the dual problem of fuzzy population boundaries and lack of context is to survey groups that are active within a single or limited number of issue area(s). Reenock and Gerber (2007) illustrate this method in their study of interest groups' access to the bureaucracy. Examining a single policy area (air quality regulations at the state level) allows Reenock and Gerber to isolate active groups while maintaining variation across bureaucratic features that structure groups' access to agency officials. This approach, what Beyers *et al.* (2014a) call 'policy-centered sampling', is frequently employed in studies with the goal of gaining contextual insights while maintaining generalizability (that is, combining the benefits of case study and large-*N* approaches).

Hojnacki's (1997) study of interest group alliances focused on groups active within five specific policy issues while Holyoke (2009) used six issues taken up by Congress from 1999 to 2002 to define the group population boundaries of his sample. To understand how civil servants' policy attitudes correspond to that of actors who have other political functions (for example, interest groups), Montpetit (2011) focused on interest group representatives and non-governmental experts who contributed to biotechnology policy development in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France and the European Union. Additional research questions answered through policy-centered sampling include whether lobbying success in the European Union varies systematically across interest group types and how information provision to decision-makers varies across organizations and organizational traits (Klüver, 2012a, b), what factors affect groups' decisions to lobby particular legislators (Hojnacki and Kimball, 1998), how interest groups play their brokerage roles in a decentralized health-care system (Heaney, 2006), and the role organizations play in the policy oversight process (Hall and Miler, 2008).

Of course, policy-centered sampling is not the only way for scholars to gain information about organizations' presence and influence in politics. Another common method, especially when researchers want to learn about general patterns of organizational presence and behavior, is that of organization-centered sampling. In this sampling framework, researchers focus on particular types of organizations or entire populations of groups in given states or countries, making this approach highly dependent upon the availability of a reliable record of interest group presence. One major advantage of this approach is its production of a broad and diverse sample of organizational types, activities and policy issues beyond a single or limited number of policy topics. Relative to policy-centered sampling, this approach may more accurately reflect the diversity of organizational presence and behavior within political spheres.

Many studies employ organizational-centered sampling, including much of early interest group research like Berry's (1977) examination of public interest organizations in Washington D.C. or Walker's research (1983, 1991) on interest group formation and mobilization. More recent studies of organizations' representation of disadvantaged identities (Strolovitch, 2007; Marchetti, 2014) and how organization type and availability of resources affect lobbying strategies across five European countries (Dür and Mateo, 2013) also employ organization-centered sampling methods. In fact, many quantitative studies of interest groups in the EU sample groups rather than issues often with a focus on how the changing institutional structures of the EU shape interest group presence and activity (Beyers, 2004; Eising, 2004; Dür and Mateo, 2012). Organization-centered sampling has been used to answer a variety of research questions including the effect of business lobbying groups on public policy in fledgling African democracies (Goldsmith, 2002), strategies of influence among Danish interest groups and the relationship between strategy choice and access to elected officials (Binderkrantz, 2005), understanding the role of interest organizations in Japan's civil society and policy-making process (Tsujinaka and Pekkanen, 2007), and how European umbrella organizations affect the integration of interest groups from new Central and East European EU-member states (Pleines, 2011). If an author's main goal is the exploration of group behavior across a range of organization types and/or locations, organization-centered sampling can be a laborious, but fruitful, sampling framework.

Response Rates in Surveys of Organizations

In addition to the definition of a survey's population, survey response rate is another primary indicator used to judge the legitimacy and representativeness of original survey data. Parameters for reasonable response rates frequently correspond to the unit of analysis within a given study, thus posing yet another question for interest group scholars: what is a typical response rate for studies of organizations? Owing to the unique time constraints placed upon a population of professionals (that is, interest group leaders/representatives) versus a general population of individuals, it is problematic when response rates for surveys of interest groups are held to the same standards as surveys of individuals. Also, while census data can provide information about the representativeness of a sample of individuals vis-à-vis the general population, the frequently unclear boundaries of interest group populations and variation in record-keeping makes a similar task quite difficult for surveys of organizations. Thus, interest group scholars frequently justify their response rates and sample representativeness through comparisons with studies that ask similar research questions or focus on similar group populations, reinforcing the need for a general benchmark of 'typical' response rates in studies of organizations. For example, Klüver's (2010) survey of French and German agricultural interest groups returned a response rate of 39 per cent, which, she argues, '…corresponds to response rates obtained in comparable research projects … the EUROLOB-project … had a response rate of 40.9 per cent (Eising, 2007, p. 342)' (Klüver 2010, p. 183). Based on the studies included in this review, surveys of interest groups typically produced response rates between 25 and 45 per cent, a fact that should be considered when judging whether a particular response rate is in line with previous surveys of organizations.

When surveys produce a lower than desired rate of return, scholars frequently employ additional recruitment methods to increase their response rates. One of the most common methods for increasing response rates is to send multiple waves of mail surveys so that respondents are reminded (or pestered!) to complete the survey at a later date (Dalton *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, 14 of the surveys included in this review utilized a multi-wave approach, producing an average response rate of 41 per cent, which falls within the typical range of response rates for surveys of organizations. Scholars typically did not note the extent to which a multi-wave approach improved their response rate between the first and second waves, making it difficult to directly ascertain the efficacy of this method. However, multi-wave approaches have been associated with higher response rates in mail surveys for many years, thus making their use relatively commonplace in survey research.

Other interest group scholars employed a mixed methodological approach, whereby recruitment or reminders for survey completion were completed via a different method than the survey itself (for example, Rasmussen's (2012) reminder phone calls for completion of a web-based survey).[2] The average response rate for studies using mixed methods was slightly over 45 per cent compared to an average response rate of 54 per cent for studies that did not employ mixed methods. However, it is important to note that very few of the studies included in this review employed mixed methods. Thus, the comparatively greater range of research questions and subjects for non-mixed methodological studies may be driving this result.

In fact, the wide geographical and topical range of the studies included in this review makes it difficult to identify a single factor motivating particularly high, or low, response rates. That said, the inclusion of some type of personal engagement within studies seemed to produce response rates that fell above the range of 'typical' responses for surveys of organizations. Within studies of US organizations, all surveys with response rates of 60 per cent or more contained some type of personal contact, whether it was delivery of the survey over the phone or, more frequently, in-person interviews. In some studies, researchers spoke ahead of time with organizational representatives or policy actors who interact with interest groups and referred back to this information when recruiting survey participation. This additional contact in the form of referrals for in-person interviews helped Heaney (2006) produce an extremely high response rate of 95 per cent and was also used in Baumgartner *et al.*'s (2009) *Lobbying and Policy Change* study. However, this method is costly both in terms of time and money, and scholars may make more efficient use of personal contact via a multi-wave approach or telephone survey, which combine interpersonal contact with the efficiency of a standardized questionnaire.

Conclusion

Decisions about survey methodology should be primarily driven by theory and are not limited to a single type of interest organization or research question. Survey methods have been used to study organizations in a variety of political conditions including fledgling democracies, the laboratories of democracy within and across US states, the high-profile world of national politics in the United States and abroad, and the emerging international coordination of the EU. Recently, large-scale survey research on interest group presence, activity and influence has been produced at the national level in the United States (for example, Baumgartner *et al.*'s Advocacy and Public Policymaking Project (http://lobby.la.psu.edu/)), and at the international level via the INTEREURO Project (http://www.intereuro.eu/public/), which aims to provide a more comprehensive theoretical and empirical understanding of the role that interest groups play in the European polity.[3] *Interest Groups & Advocacy's* special issue on large-*N* studies makes note of the 'remarkable transformation in the study of European national and European Union (EU) interest representation' (Lowery, 2014, p. 123) that has recently shifted towards large-*N* research designs across various contexts.

Though interest group scholars benefit greatly from the transparent and sophisticated survey methods included in these projects, the subfield as a whole lacks a consistent presentation and discussion of survey methodology in published studies of interest groups. Indeed, many studies included in this review provided only partial information about their survey method, population identification and response rate. As such, this review of the literature reveals the need for a common standard of information provision for any published study that utilizes surveys of interest groups so that scholars are able to replicate methods in future research. Also, the subfield would benefit from additional analysis of the effectiveness of particular methodological approaches as compared to others (for example, mail versus telephone surveys of organizational representatives; mixed versus single-methodological approaches) so that scholars can identify the approach best-suited to their specific research question and unit of analysis. The large variation in organizational types, research questions and locations complicates the task of identifying a method that is 'most effective' in surveys of interest groups. To definitively answer this question, the subfield would also benefit from experimental research examining the efficacy of various survey methods across similar group populations. Ultimately, this review is intended to serve as a first cut at understanding the use of survey methods in the study of interest groups with the hope that it will provide guidance in the construction and dissemination of future interest group surveys.

Notes

1 Information about the approach used to identify studies for inclusion in this review, as well as information about the studies' research questions and samples, can be found in an online appendix hosted on the *Interest Groups & Advocacy website* (www.palgrave-journals.com/iga).

2 For more information about the benefits of mixed methodological surveys, see Leeuw, E.D. (2005).

3 Detailed information about the INTEREURO project appears in a special issue of *Interest Groups & Advocacy*: Beyers *et al.* (2014b)

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Supplementary information accompanies this article on the *Interest Groups & Advocacy* website (www.palgrave-journals.com/iga)