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# Explaining interest group position-taking across partisan policy dimensions

Vibeke Wøien Hansen <sup>a</sup> and Lise Rødland <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Institute for Social Research, Oslo, Norway; <sup>b</sup>Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

## ABSTRACT



Some interest groups have policy positions on one or more policy dimensions in partisan policy space while others do not. In this paper we examine explanations for differences in interest group position-taking across policy dimensions. While group characteristics are likely to explain parts of such variation in interest group position-taking, we hypothesise that the salience and polarisation among parties and citizens of the respective policy dimension also matter. By utilising novel survey data on interest group positions (within a predefined policy space) in six different countries as well as survey data on citizen and party positions, we investigate interest group position-taking across policy dimensions. The analysis shows that interest groups with more resources, core interests linked to the examined policy dimensions and a connection to the traditional party system are more likely to have policy positions than other groups. Furthermore, we find evidence of groups supplementing citizens and parties in policy space by articulating positions on policy dimensions that the average citizen and party pays less attention to. Moreover, when party polarisation increases on a dimension, greater party salience is negatively associated with group position taking.


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**KEYWORDS** Interest groups; parties; polarisation; policy dimensions; positions; salience

## Introduction

While parties' positions in policy space are well known through their actions, their party manifestos, and their rhetoric, it is only recently that researchers have studied interest group placement in the same policy space. These recent contributions show that groups occupy a wide variety of positions in

**CONTACT** Vibeke Wøien Hansen  v.w.hansen@socialresearch.no  Institute for Social Research, Postboks 3233 Elisenberg, Oslo 0208, Norway

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partisan policy space (Boräng *et al.*, 2024), and that where groups position themselves matters for their contacts with, access to and influence on political parties (Allern *et al.*, 2022; Berkhout *et al.*, 2021; Røed *et al.*, 2023). However, not all interest groups place themselves in partisan policy space and so far, we know little about the causes behind interest group position-taking. In this paper we address this gap by raising the question: Why do some interest groups have positions on one or more policy dimensions while others do not?

The main reason for this research gap is the general assumption that interest groups are primarily concerned with one or few policy issues (Beyers *et al.*, 2015). Thus, research on interest group position-taking has mainly focused on positions on substantive policy issues and not overarching policy dimensions (see, e.g., Bunea (2014)). Still, a clear position on a single policy issue can touch upon one or more overarching policy dimensions. In their study of party-group alignment on more than 100 proposals in the EU, Beyers *et al.* (2015) find that 'EU interest group mobilisation corresponds to a considerable extent with party competition' (p. 547).

Interest groups' placement in partisan policy space has recently received more attention from interest group scholars who place interest groups, parties and citizens in the same policy space. A recent novel and descriptive study by Boräng *et al.* (2024) places interest groups in a two-dimensional policy space based on the ideological left-right and GAL-TAN dimensions and conclude that interest groups have the potential 'to supplement multidimensional gaps in representation between the political party system and citizen preferences' (p. 1799). Another line of studies looks at consequences of group position-taking and find that interest groups have a higher likelihood of contacting (Berkhout *et al.*, 2021), getting access to (Allern *et al.*, 2022) and influencing (Røed *et al.*, 2023) parties that are closer to them in policy space. That said, not all groups place themselves in partisan policy space, and groups that do might differ significantly from the groups that do not. Thus, to get the full picture of how we can interpret findings placing citizens, parties and interest groups in policy space, we must understand group decisions about placing themselves in this policy space in the first place. Yet, which groups take positions, and which do not have not received any scholarly attention. This is a paradox given that whether groups position themselves in policy space and what dimensions they take positions on can have consequences for party competition, interest representation and democratic decision-making. First, interest group position-taking may lead one or more political parties to adapt their positions to be better able to respond to new policy demands and, thus, shape party competition. Second, groups might enhance representation of citizens by prioritising dimensions that receive little attention by political parties (Boräng *et al.*, 2024). Third, to the extent that groups supplement parties, their position taking might enhance the quality of democratic decision-making by bringing in the perspective of other citizens.

In this paper, we argue that interest group placement in policy space is tightly interlinked with the process of issue-prioritisation. Given the large demands for attention today, all types of individuals, organisations and institutions need to decide what issues to act upon, and what issues not to prioritise. The available resources constrain interest groups in the issues they can take on and can make it impossible to pursue all (prioritised) policy interests of a given group (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001). Consequently, even if a group has policy positions on several issues, it can only prioritise a subset of these (Halpin & Fraussen, 2017). As groups prioritise policy issues not all policy dimensions become equally relevant to all groups. The result of this exercise in prioritisation is that some positions are being voiced in the public debate and others not. Hence, investigating interest group position-taking can shed light on the strategic considerations made by interest groups in the context of agenda setting and issue prioritisation.

We examine a dual set up of hypotheses, where the first set up looks at the groups' internal considerations (our baseline expectations) and the second set up looks at the external considerations (dimensional salience and polarisation among parties and citizens). We first test the expectation that groups that have more resources, a core interest embedded in the policy dimensions included and stronger connections to the traditional party system are more likely to position themselves in policy space. Next, we hypothesise that the external environment groups operate in matters for interest group position-taking (Halpin *et al.*, 2018). As a start, we test two potential explanations: salience and polarisation among political parties and citizens. We theorise that if the policy dimension is highly salient for citizens and parties respectively and thus more likely to set the agenda than other dimensions, interest group position-taking is more likely. However, when the policy dimension is also highly polarised, the incentives for interest group position-taking are reduced due to higher stakes and a higher chance of alienating decision-makers, group members or supporters with other views on these policy dimensions. We thus hypothesise that when polarisation is high, salience is negatively associated with interest group position-taking.

We test our hypotheses by combining information about interest groups', parties' and citizens' placement on six different partisan policy dimensions. More specifically, we combine a dataset collected by the 'Party-Interest Group Relationships in Contemporary Democracies' (PAIRDEM) project on interest groups (Allern *et al.*, 2023) with data from the Chapel Hill Expert survey (Bakker *et al.*, 2015) and the European Election Studies (Schmitt *et al.*, 2016) to investigate group position-taking on policy dimensions with statistical analysis. This enables us to address whether and how position taking by groups is affected by the positions and the prioritisation of positions by the other actors in the political system in six different countries.

The hypotheses are tested in a set up where groups and the six policy dimensions are paired with each other. The analytical set up constitutes a first approach to shed light on why some interest groups take positions in policy space and others do not by looking at their internal considerations (such as resources and core interest) and their external considerations and constraints generated from other actors such as parties and citizens in the political system. However, since we lack data on interest group positions over time, our first approach to tackle this important research question comes with causal caveats. We are thus only able to identify key correlates. Still, triangulating data from interest groups, parties and citizens takes us one step closer to address the position-taking of interest groups vis-à-vis the positions of parties and citizens.

By exploiting the within- and cross-country variation across policy dimensions, we contribute to the literatures on interest group mobilisation and political competition by showing that interest group characteristics as well as external factors such as salience and polarisation affect interest group position-taking in partisan policy space. In particular, we find that interest groups' internal considerations and constraints matter for group position-taking. The analysis shows that interest groups with more resources, core interests linked to the examined policy dimensions and a connection to the traditional party system (embedded in the economic left-right dimension) are more likely to have policy positions than other groups. Second, groups appear to be more likely to position themselves on policy dimensions that receive less attention from the average citizen and party. This is the opposite of what we expected as we hypothesise that greater citizen and party salience will increase the likelihood of interest group position taking. Thus, in line with the descriptive study of Boräng *et al.* (2024), there is an indication of groups' supplementing parties and citizens in policy space in our multivariate analysis by taking positions on policy dimensions that matter less to the average citizen and to the parties at large. Third, while we find some support for an interaction between party salience and party polarisation on group position-taking, we do not find support for an interaction between citizen salience and citizen polarisation.

### **Interest groups and the dimensionality of policy space**

We define an interest group as any non-party and non-governmental formal association of individuals or organisations that, on the basis of one or more shared concerns, advocates a particular interest/cause in public and usually attempts to influence public policy in its favour in one way or another (Beyers *et al.*, 2008). Interest groups are strategic actors in politics pursuing three goals: (1) to protect its core interest, (2) to keep its members and/or supporters, and (3) to survive as an organisation (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998).

The latter can be a product of the group's performance on the first two goals but can also be affected by external factors such as competition from other interest groups or trends making the core interest of the group less relevant than it used to be.

While parties take positions on a range of different issues and are held accountable through elections, interest groups work on a circumscribed set of substantive policy issues and respond to their members, supporters and donors. Positions on substantive issues can be grouped together to describe more overarching policy dimensions defined as a 'bundle of issues that are deemed to be associated with one another in such a way that to know the position of a party or citizen on one issue allows a reasonable degree of confidence in predicting her/his/its position on another issue from the same bundle' (Wheatley & Mendez, 2021, p. 56). This bundling together of different issues enables a more aggregated representation of policy space that can be used to describe overarching cleavages that structure political divisions among parties and citizens. Even if interest groups take positions on substantive policy issues that can be bundled together in a similar way, an underlying assumption in the interest group literature has been that groups generally try to stay unpartisan and thus avoid placing themselves in the policy space that defines party competition (Beyers *et al.*, 2015). However, position taking on more overarching dimensions can facilitate strategic lobbying that enhances groups' access to and influence on policy-makers and thus help groups reach their goal of policy influence.

How many dimensions are needed to describe the main axis of conflict in policy space depends on how fine-grained descriptions you seek (Benoit & Laver, 2006). At the highest level of aggregation, policy space can be described as one-dimensional with all policy positions being placed either to the left or to the right (Benoit & Laver, 2006). The left-right division initially followed the traditional economic cleavages that divided different societal groups in the post-war years (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Key issues related to state ownership and distribution of income (Inglehart, 2017) and different societal groups organised their interests along these lines and found an ally in the party that promoted their particular interest. In the 1960s and 1970s, 'new' issues centred around post-material policy areas like environment, culture, education, and immigration emerged (Franklin *et al.*, 1992; Inglehart, 1990). This has led some to argue that there exists two general dimensions in politics (Kitschelt, 1994): one economic left-right dimension that concerns redistribution and state management of other economic questions, and one cultural/GAL-TAN dimension that revolves around social lifestyle-questions, like the environment and rights of sexual minorities, and the conflict between libertarian and authoritarian values (Rovny & Polk, 2019). Recent research has questioned whether the issues bundled together in the cultural/GAL-TAN dimension actually constitute one coherent

dimension or not. Wheatley and Mendez (2021) find that the issues traditionally bundled together as non-economic fail to form a coherent dimension when studying citizens. A recent study by Kenny and Langsæther (2023) find that environmentalism distinguishes itself from other aspects of the cultural/GAL-TAN issues and thus should be considered a dimension of itself. Others again consider European integration to be a separate dimension (see e.g., Bakker *et al.*, (2015)). To account for this, some recent work studies party competition and responsiveness on different issue specific dimensions (Dassonneville *et al.*, 2024; O'Grady & Abou-Chadi, 2019).

In this paper, we rest on what Benoit and Laver (2012, p. 196) labels an 'a priori approach whereby key policy dimensions are specified ex ante, in advance of measurement' in accordance with existing knowledge. To address the concerns of dimensional coherence, we use six different policy (sub-)dimensions identified by Benoit and Laver (2006) in their mapping of the main axes of political competition between parties. The six dimensions concern: the trade-off between improving public services and reducing taxes, redistribution, state intervention in the economy, social lifestyle, immigration and the trade-off between environmental protection and economic growth. As an example, positions on abortion and same sex marriage can be bundled together into placement on a social lifestyle dimension. The six dimensions capture a range of policy dimensions with varying importance across countries and cover both the broader economic dimension and the broader cultural/GAL-TAN dimension (Bakker *et al.*, 2015).

It might be that the policy space of parties is not necessarily the same as the policy space of interest groups or citizens. Still, a predefined policy space is necessary to compare the positions of groups, citizens and parties, and it enables interest groups to occupy other (vacant) spots in policy space than parties (see Boräng *et al.*, (2024)). While our aim is to describe when groups take positions rather than to compare positions across groups, parties and citizens, we add to the literature on group positions by shedding light on group and dimensional characteristics that shape position taking. Thus, we regard the predefined set of policy dimensions as an advantage rather than a drawback (see also Benoit and Laver (2012)). In the following, we present our hypotheses about how internal (baseline) and external considerations shape interest group position taking.

### **Theorising interest group position-taking on policy dimensions**

We treat interest groups as strategic goal-seeking actors that must prioritise between issues and respond to cues from their environment which they again use to update their position-taking behaviour. Group placement on policy dimensions comes with both costs and benefits. We assume that an interest group weighs the costs and benefits up against each other in light

of how it affects group attainment of their three goals: (1) protecting its core interest, (2) keeping its members and/or supporters, and (3) surviving as an organisation (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998). By placing themselves in policy space, groups will have an easier time identifying other relevant issues to work on or to which they can link their core interest. This is beneficial for group goal-seeking in at least two ways. First, placing oneself in policy space makes it easier for groups to identify other interest groups with similar positions on related issues and who can be potential allies. Identifying potential allies among other interest groups is crucial to form coalitions which increase the chances of lobbying success (Junk, 2020) and help the group protect its core interest. Second, it makes it easier to identify friendly policymakers that are empathetic towards group positions. Targeting the right policymaker is likely to matter for lobbying success because groups have more access to (Allern *et al.*, 2022) and influence on (Røed *et al.*, 2023) parties that are closer to them in policy space. Third, by linking their core interest to issues on the political agenda, groups can demonstrate to members and supporters that their cause is relevant.

The benefits that follow from placement in policy space, like coalition making, enhanced tools for strategic lobbying decisions and issue linkage, also come at a price. These strategies imply that resources and attention will shift to these efforts which might leave less resources for protecting the groups' core interest and to run recruitment campaigns. Furthermore, groups depend on their members and supporters for survival, and on policymakers like legislators and bureaucrats for influencing policies. If a group takes an unpopular position, it can end up repelling potential and/or current members, donors and allies among decision-makers and the interest group community. Groups that prefer to be perceived as non-partisan in order to keep all doors open might avoid taking positions on dimensions shaping party competition. Thus, it is not given that groups will place themselves in policy space.

In the following we discuss how these costs and benefits interact with the five main drivers of interest group issue prioritisation: internal responsiveness, policy capacities, niche dynamics, political opportunity structures (POSs) and issue (here dimensional) salience (see Halpin *et al.* (2018) for a thorough conceptualisation). While internal responsiveness, policy capacities and niche dynamics concern internal organisational considerations, political opportunity structures and salience relate to external factors shaping group position-taking (Fraussen *et al.*, 2021). When discussing internal considerations, we focus on internal responsiveness and policy capacities. We analyse position taking on aggregated policy dimensions that structure party competition. Thus, niche dynamics are not considered because whether groups seek out their own niche or work on what other groups are already working on is mainly a question at the level of substantive



policy issues. When discussing external factors, we zoom in on agenda-setting dynamics defined as the preferences of the other actors in the political system and the prioritisation (salience) of preferences by these actors (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001). Here, we limit the discussion to the preferences of political parties and citizens because these are particularly relevant to interest groups' goal achievements.

### ***Internal considerations: resources, relevance, and party system connection***

Several internal organisational considerations play a role for group position-taking. As a result, groups differ in their overall propensity to place themselves in policy space. First, resources matter for issue prioritisation (Halpin *et al.*, 2018; Salisbury, 1969) and groups with more resources have positions on more policy issues (Halpin & Binderkrantz, 2011). Groups with less resources might be forced to specialise in order to protect their core interest. More resourceful groups on the other hand have the capacity to follow up on coalitions while still paying attention to their core interest. Thus, the cost of position taking is likely to be lower for groups with more resources. Second, all policy dimensions are not equally relevant to all groups. One of the main drivers of issue prioritisation is internal responsiveness (Halpin *et al.*, 2018) and thus whether the dimension is relevant to the group's core interest is likely to matter for position-taking. As an example, we would expect the cost of position-taking to be lower on the environmental dimension than on the immigration dimension for an environmental group. Third, because these are dimensions of party competition, they might be more relevant to groups with a strong connection to the party system in the first place, also in a historical perspective. Some groups follow a non-partisan strategy to avoid repelling any potential supporters among citizens, other groups and decision-makers, while others again defend an interest that is clearly linked to conflicts in the party system. The latter is particularly true for groups defending an economic interest rooted in the conflict between capital owners and workers that also shaped the party system (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Furthermore, such groups may be incentivised to take clear stances on a variety of economically related questions and not just their primary concern because this concern is tightly interlinked to other aspects of the economy and the society. Such groups already have a tight connection to the traditional party system embedded in the economic left-right dimension and the costs of position-taking should thus be lower in comparison to groups without such a connection.

This leads to three hypotheses and baseline expectations about internal considerations and interest group position-taking on policy dimensions:

**H<sub>1a</sub> Group resources hypothesis:** Interest group position-taking is more likely among groups with more resources.

**H<sub>1b</sub> Dimensional relevance hypothesis:** Interest group position-taking is more likely on dimensions that are directly relevant to a group's core interest.

**H<sub>1c</sub> Party system connection hypothesis:** Interest group position-taking is more likely if the interest group is rooted in the traditional party system emphasising the conflict between capital owners and workers.

### ***External considerations: dimensional salience and polarisation***

In addition to internal considerations, external considerations like political opportunity structures and salience matter for group position-taking (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2011; Halpin *et al.*, 2018; Kingdon, 1984). Here, we focus on the agendas of political parties and citizens because these actors are crucial for interest groups' goal achievement. First, political parties play important roles in setting the agenda and deciding policies in party-based democracies. Thus, they are important targets for interest groups seeking to protect their interests. Second, many groups depend on citizens to take on roles as members, activists and supporters, and in this way ensure group activities and survival. Consequently, because groups depend on the support of citizens and policymakers to reach their goals, the costs and benefits of position taking are likely to vary with the agendas and priorities of these actors just as issue prioritisation is related to the agendas of governments, the public and the media (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2011; Halpin *et al.*, 2018).

Linking their core interest to issues on the public agenda can be a way for groups to stay relevant and draw attention to group demands. If a group can link its core interest to issues on the public agenda, it can 'ride the wave' and demonstrate their relevance to members, supporters and policymakers. First, by responding to citizens' issue priorities and linking their core interest to these, groups are more likely to keep members and supporters making the benefits of position-taking higher. When citizens put more emphasis on some issues, interest groups respond by increasing their attention to the same issues (Klüver, 2015; Rasmussen *et al.*, 2014). Second, party issue emphasis is positively associated with group access to and influence on parties (Rødland, 2024; Røed, 2023). Thus, prioritising issues that are on the party agenda, might increase interest groups' access and influence. To summarise, the benefits of position-taking are likely higher when the dimensions are salient to citizens and parties, because it increases the chance of groups expanding their support base and influencing policies. This leads to two hypotheses about salience and interest group position-taking on policy dimensions:

**H<sub>2a</sub> Citizen salience hypothesis:** Interest group position-taking on policy dimensions is more likely on dimensions that are salient to citizens.

**H<sub>2b</sub> Party salience hypothesis:** Interest group position-taking on policy dimensions is more likely on dimensions that are salient to parties.

The salience hypotheses assume that taking a clear position is not (too) costly for the interest group. However, prioritising salient issues can mean alienating potential supporters that hold opposing views. The risk of repelling potential supporters and allies, and thus also the cost of position taking, is related to the political opportunity structures and the signals of support or opposition from citizens and parties. When citizens and parties are more divided, the cost is likely to be higher, especially when the dimension is also salient. If a dimension is salient and unpolarised, position taking is likely uncontroversial, and position taking might go under the radar if the dimension receives little attention. On the other hand, if a dimension is polarised and salient the position will be unpopular among actors holding opposing views and receive attention. Thus, there is a higher chance of repelling potential allies among members of parliament and other party representatives which might make it more difficult for the group to reach its goal of policy influence. Furthermore, the group might repel potential or even current members or supporters among citizens by taking positions that are unpopular among a substantial share of citizens. Applying cost–benefit analysis, a group may assess that due to the higher stakes and controversy surrounding the dimension it prefers not to take a stance on this particular policy dimension despite the potential increase in access and influence. The expectation thus is that when polarisation is high, increased salience among parties and citizens is negatively associated with interest group position-taking.

**H<sub>3a</sub> Citizen polarisation interaction hypothesis:** When citizen polarisation is high, interest group position-taking is less likely if the policy dimension is also highly salient.

**H<sub>3b</sub> Party polarisation interaction hypothesis:** When party polarisation is high, interest group position-taking is less likely if the policy dimension is also highly salient.

## Research design

We utilise data from the PAIRDEM interest group survey in Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway and United Kingdom in 2017/18 (Allern *et al.*, 2023; Allern & Hansen, 2022). The country samples were randomly drawn from carefully created country populations generated based on specific guidelines and as similar as possible, across countries, group population sources and the groups were invited to the relevant country/language specific version of the same online survey. For the countries included here the average response rate across countries is 33 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Response rates

differ between countries but there is no substantial response bias at the level of group types. For more information about the survey design, sampling frames and the distribution of responses across countries and group categories, see Allern *et al.* (2023).

The interest group survey asked the groups to self-locate on six different policy dimensions included in the Chapel Hill Expert survey (CHES). This makes it possible to combine data on group position-taking with data on party salience and polarisation from CHES (Jolly *et al.*, 2022). To measure citizens' dimensional salience and polarisation we combine data from the European Election Studies (EES, Schmitt *et al.*, 2016) and the Norwegian Election Study (NES, Institute for Social Research & Statistics Norway, 2022) to cover all six countries. The final dataset contains information about 830 groups on 6 dimensions, constituting 4980 group-dimension dyads.

### ***Dependent variable: group position-taking***

The dependent variable is a binary variable tapping whether a group has a position on a given dimension or not. The variable is based on groups' placement on each of the six CHES dimensions included in the PAIRDEM survey. To recapitulate, these six dimensions are: (1) position on improving public services vs. reducing taxes, (2) position on redistribution from the rich to the poor, (3) position on state intervention in the economy, (4) position on social lifestyle (e.g., homosexuality), (5) position on immigration policy and (6) position towards protecting the environment at the cost of economic growth. The original positional scale ran from 0–10 just as in CHES and the groups were provided with the 2014 party positions in their country as a reference point for their own self-placement (see Figure 1). Figure 1 shows the general question formulation including explanations and party abbreviations provided for one country (the UK) that were shown to the respondents before the self-placement on the six policy dimensions. If the group did not hold a clear position on a policy dimension, it was asked to pick the 'not applicable/no position' alternative.

To measure group position-taking on each dimension we create a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if the group positioned itself on the dimension and 0 if it answered 'not applicable/no position'.

### ***Independent variables***

#### ***Resources, relevance and party system connection***

To test our baseline hypotheses H1a–H1c about the association between internal considerations like resources, dimensional relevance and connection to the political system, we include three independent variables. First, to measure resources we include a variable called *political group resources*

**Q21.** Public debate about public policies often revolves around some basic ideological conflicts defined by the major political parties represented in Parliament. The organisations making an input into public decision-making are, in contrast, often non-partisan/formally politically neutral. But they might still represent interests with which parties are strongly concerned in their platforms and policies. Therefore, we would like to find out where your organisation places itself in your country's ideological landscape. Where would you locate your organisation's policy positions along various policy dimensions? Recall that the responses will be anonymised so it will not be possible for anyone to identify individual organisations' answers to this question.

**Note:** The scales run from 0 to 10. For reference, the policy positions of the different parties already are located along each dimension. The locations of the parties are based on the University of North Carolina's Chapel Hill expert survey from 2014. If your organisation does not have any clear position on the different dimensions, please choose 'not applicable/no position'.

**Abbreviations:**

Cons: Conservative Party

Green: Green Party

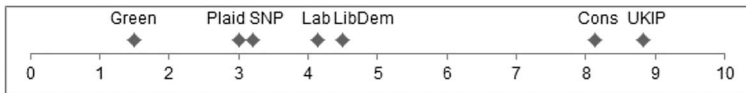
Lab: Labour Party

LibDem: Liberal Democratic Party

Plaid: Plaid Cymru

SNP: Scottish National Party

UKIP: United Kingdom Independence Party



**Position on improving public services vs. reducing taxes:** On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is 'Fully in favour of raising taxes to increase public services' and 10 is 'Fully in favour of cutting public services to cut taxes', where would you locate your organisation's policy position overall?

**Figure 1.** Illustration of interest group self-placement: one dimension with explanations.

(staff). The variable is based on an ordinal survey item from the interest group survey where groups were asked how many of their employees that deal with monitoring and commenting on public policy for at least half their working time. The variable is coded so that groups with more than five employees working with policy development get the value 1, and those with five employees or less get the value 0.

Second, to measure whether a dimension is relevant to a group's core interest, we use a question from the survey where the groups were asked to select up to three policy areas the group had been the most active in the last two years. The groups could choose between 24 policy areas and we match each of the six CHES dimensions to the most relevant policy area. We code the variable as follows: (1) the dimension tapping positions on improving public services vs. reducing taxes was coded as relevant for groups that had healthcare and social affairs among its most active policy areas, (2) the dimension tapping position on redistribution from the rich to

the poor was coded as relevant for groups that had taxation as one of its most active policy areas, (3) the dimension tapping position on state intervention in the economy was coded as relevant for groups that had finance and competition as one of its most active policy areas, (4) the dimension tapping position on social lifestyle (e.g., homosexuality) was coded as relevant for groups that had equal opportunities as one of its most active policy areas, (5) the dimension tapping position on immigration policy was coded as relevant for groups that had immigration as one of its most active policy areas and (6) the dimension tapping position towards protecting the environment at the cost of economic growth was coded as relevant for groups that had environment as one of its most active policy areas. The measure allows for more than one dimension to be of particular relevance to the group but we believe this is the best approach because we do not know how the groups would rank the three policy areas. For stringency, we only match one policy area to each dimension in the main analysis. In the Online Appendix, we report results from analyses where we match both education and taxation to the redistribution dimension.

Third, to measure historical party system connection, we utilise the group category variable included in the PAIRDEM dataset. The categorisation is based on previous research (e.g., Binderkrantz *et al.*, 2015) and was coded with the assistance of different country teams into six categories: (1) Trade unions and labour groups, (2) occupational and professional groups, (3) business/industry/employer organisations, (4) identity/religion/national sport organisations, (5) public interest groups and (6) institution/think tanks/other organisations. Based on this we create a variable called *economic interest*, where labour groups and trade unions as well as business/industry/employer organisations are coded as 1 and the other group types as 0. Trade unions and business groups are, arguably, the group categories with the clearest connection to the long-established party system and are both rooted in the traditional conflict between capital owners and workers.

### ***Dimensional salience and polarisation***

The variables *Citizen dimensional salience* and *Citizen dimensional polarisation* are used to test hypotheses  $H_{2a}$  and  $H_{3a}$ . To cover all countries, we combine data from the 2014 EES (Schmitt *et al.*, 2016) and the 2013 NES (Institute for Social Research & Statistics Norway, 2022).

To measure *citizen salience*, we use survey questions asking citizens about what the most and second-most important issue facing their country is. Both EES and NES code respondents free text answers into different categories. To code the citizen salience variable, we match the six policy dimensions from CHES/PAIRDEM to relevant policy categories in the election surveys (see Online Appendix for an overview of the assigned policy categories). Next,

we calculate the share of survey respondents that mention the relevant policy categories associated with a given dimension in each country. This gives us a citizen salience measure mirroring the general tendency among the citizens.

To measure *citizen polarisation*, we match different questions from EES and NES to the different policy dimensions from CHES. The questions in EES give a perfect match with CHES both with regards to question formulation and answering scale. For NES, however, we have to make some adjustments (see Online Appendix). All variables were standardised to an 11-point scale in accordance with CHES. To measure citizen polarisation, we take the standard deviation per dimension in each country (Dalton, 2008; Dreyer & Bauer, 2019). A higher value indicates that more citizens have chosen more extreme values meaning there is more polarisation.

The variables *Party dimensional salience* and *Party dimensional polarisation* are used to test hypotheses  $H_{2b}$  and  $H_{3b}$ . Both variables are measured using the CHES 2010 dataset. *Party salience* is the mean salience across parties in a party system on the policy dimension in question. CHES measures party salience on a scale from 0 to 10 where higher values mean a greater importance to the respective party. *Party polarisation* is based on the party positions and measured as the maximum absolute distance between the two most extreme parties in the party system on each policy dimension. Studies of party polarisation on a general left-right dimension, often weigh the measure by party seat share or vote share (Dalton, 2008; Vegetti, 2019). Here, we study policy dimensions and different parties might drive polarisation on different policy dimensions. Consequently, a weighted measure makes less sense here (e.g., Allern *et al.*, 2021).

While not ideal, the CHES 2010 data is used instead of the 2014 data because dimensional salience is not included in the 2014 version. Since the dimension tapping positions on state interventions in the economy was not included in 2010 this dimension is not part of the analyses testing the effects of dimensional party salience and polarisation on interest group position-taking. This means that the unit of analysis here is dyads of interest groups and the five remaining policy dimensions.

The salience and polarisation measures for both parties and citizens are standardised to range between zero and one. The correlations between party and citizen polarisation and salience are 0.06 (n.s.) and 0.51 ( $p < 0.01$ ). This is in line with other studies that find only a weak correlation between party and citizen polarisation (Dalton, 2008).

## Methods

Logistic regression is used to test the hypotheses because of the binary nature of our dependent variable. The unit of analysis is interest group position-taking on a particular policy dimension. Because of the multi-level structure of the data, we run models that include random effects at the interest

group level and the country level. We do not include control variables beyond the ones used to test the hypotheses because we believe the relevant variables to be covered by our baseline hypotheses.

As a robustness test, we run the models with country fixed effects and report the results in the Online Appendix. Country fixed effects adjust for the risk of omitted variable bias at the country level. Utilising within unit level variation rather than between, fixed effects ensure that unobserved differences between higher level units (here countries) do not bias the results (Clarke *et al.*, 2015).

## Results

### *Descriptive statistics*

Before presenting the results from our regression models, we present some descriptive statistics (see Online Appendix for details). Overall, 61 per cent of the groups who answered the interest group survey placed themselves on at least one policy dimension. Looking closer at how many dimensions the groups place themselves on, the largest categories are made up of groups that did not place themselves on any dimensions (39 per cent) and groups that placed themselves on all six dimensions (20 per cent). Approximately one in ten groups placed themselves on one, two, three, or four dimensions, while one in twenty groups placed themselves on five dimensions. We also see variations within policy dimensions, group interest and countries.

At the group level we find preliminary support for the resource hypothesis and the party system connection hypothesis. While 87 per cent of groups with more than five policy employees took a position on at least one dimension, only 56 per cent of groups with less than five policy staff took a position. On average, groups with more than five employees took a position on 3.75 policy dimensions compared to 2.24 for groups with five employees or less. In terms of party system connection, 66 per cent of trade unions and business groups place themselves in policy space, while 55 per cent of other groups do so. The differences are statistically significant at the five per cent level (Pearson's chi-squared test). Thus, groups with more resources and closer connection to the traditional party system seem to have a lower threshold of placing themselves in policy space.

With regard to the six policy dimensions, the overall share of groups that positioned themselves ranges from 35 per cent on the immigration dimension to 45 per cent on the environmental dimension. When a dimension is related to a group's core interest, groups take positions in 58 per cent of the group-dimension dyads compared to only 36 per cent when the dimension is unrelated. This lends some support to the dimensional relevance



hypothesis. Looking at variation across dimensions and countries, only 22 per cent of UK groups position themselves on the immigration and redistribution dimensions while 72 per cent of French groups place themselves on the environment dimension. The environmental dimension is where most groups place themselves in all countries except the Netherlands where state intervention seems most salient among interest groups.

When it comes to country differences, we find evidence that groups occupy a range of different positions in policy space across dimensions and countries. Position taking is most prevalent in France where 79 per cent of the groups took a position on at least one dimension and 36 per cent place themselves on all six dimensions. The share of groups that placed themselves on all six dimensions ranges from 11 per cent in Denmark to 36 per cent in France. The fewest groups placed themselves on any of the dimensions in the UK (47 per cent). Differences between the share of groups that place themselves on different dimensions are bigger across countries than within countries. This indicates that system-level factors play a role both for interest groups' propensity to place themselves on dimensions and the extent to which they link the dimensions to each other.

### ***Regression results***

The results from the logistic regression models testing the hypotheses are reported in [Table 1](#). Model 1 tests the hypotheses concerning internal organisational considerations. The coefficients for policy capacities (political resources), dimensional relevance and traditional party system connection (economic interest) hold the expected direction and are statistically significant at the five per cent level in all models. According to model 1, the predicted probability of a group with little policy capacities and a weak connection to the party system taking a position on a dimension that does not touch upon the groups' core interest is 0.19. If the group has large policy capacities, the probability of position taking increases to 0.75. If the group has large policy capacities and a strong connection to the long-established party system, such as labour groups, trade unions and business groups, the probability increases to 0.87. If the group has large policy capacities, a strong connection to the party system and work on a policy area that is highly relevant to the dimension in question, the probability of position taking increases to 0.97. This supports our findings from the descriptive analysis, and we conclude that internal organisational considerations like internal responsiveness and policy capacities matter for interest group issue prioritisation on more general policy dimensions. The results for policy capacities, dimensional relevance and party system connection are robust to the inclusion of party and citizen polarisation and salience in the analysis (models 2-6).

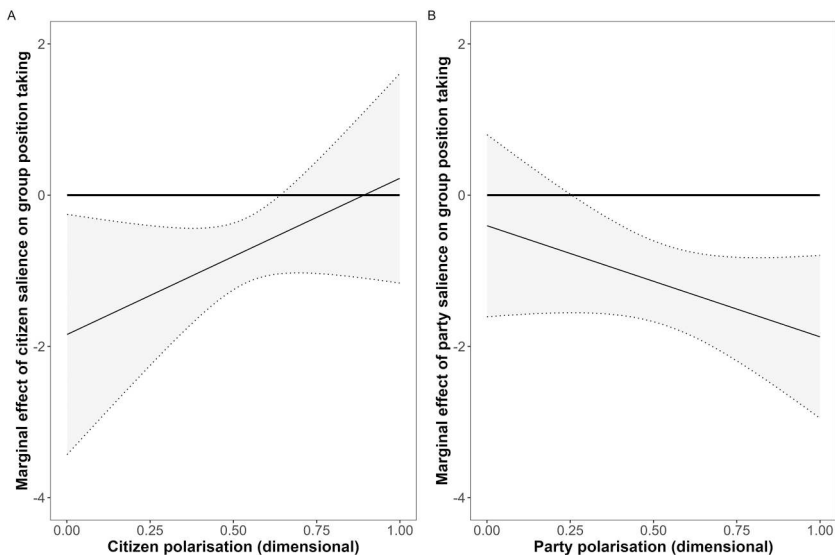
**Table 1.** Dimensional set up for analysing interest group position-taking. Logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. All models include random intercepts for countries and interest groups.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Political resources (staff > 5)	2.578*** (0.424)	2.590*** (0.427)	2.591*** (0.427)	2.340*** (0.409)	2.345*** (0.410)	2.352*** (0.411)
Dimensional relevance	1.437*** (0.165)	1.512*** (0.169)	1.523*** (0.169)	1.520*** (0.175)	1.514*** (0.175)	1.515*** (0.176)
Economic interest	0.811* (0.328)	0.819* (0.330)	0.819* (0.330)	0.743* (0.317)	0.743* (0.317)	0.744* (0.318)
Citizens: salience		-0.734*** (0.219)	-1.844* (0.811)			-1.611 (1.124)
Citizens: polarisation		-0.596** (0.213)	-0.850** (0.279)			-0.900* (0.369)
Citizens: salience x polarisation			2.067 (1.454)			2.515 (1.945)
Parties: salience				-1.193*** (0.270)	-0.404 (0.614)	-0.087 (0.744)
Parties: polarisation				0.223 (0.227)	1.063+ (0.632)	1.348* (0.659)
Parties: salience x polarisation					-1.470 (1.030)	-1.968+ (1.106)
Intercept	-1.467** (0.458)	-1.097* (0.463)	-0.935+ (0.480)	-0.951+ (0.493)	-1.371* (0.576)	-1.006 (0.621)
SD (Intercept group)	3.292	3.312	3.313	3.128	3.135	3.147
SD (Intercept country)	1.005	0.990	1.001	1.057	1.059	1.063
Num.Obs.	4369	4369	4369	3649	3649	3649
R2 Marg.	0.078	0.082	0.082	0.078	0.079	0.081
R2 Cond.	0.800	0.802	0.802	0.786	0.787	0.789
AIC	3866.4	3853.1	3853.1	3409.3	3409.3	3408.2
BIC	3904.7	3904.2	3910.6	3458.9	3465.1	3482.6
ICC	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
RMSE	0.28	0.28	0.27	0.28	0.27	0.27

+p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001.

Models 2 and 3 in Table 1 test the hypotheses about citizen salience and polarisation. The citizen salience hypothesis stated that groups would adjust their position taking to the agendas of citizens to stay relevant and attract members and supporters. We find no support for the hypothesis in model 2. On the opposite, increased citizen attention to a dimension seems to decrease the probability of group position-taking. Model 3 tests the citizen polarisation hypotheses. Our expectation was that polarisation would moderate the effect of salience, and that groups would be less likely to take positions on policy dimensions that are both salient and polarised due to the risk of alienating group supporters. To test the hypothesis, we include an interaction term between salience and polarisation. The marginal effect of salience for different levels of polarisation is visualised in Figure 2. We find no support for the citizen polarisation interaction hypothesis either. Rather, we find the opposite of what we hypothesised. The marginal effect of citizen salience is negative and statistically significant for low levels of polarisation, but as polarisation increases the confidence intervals for the marginal effect of salience include zero.

Models 4 and 5 in Table 1 test the hypotheses about party salience and polarisation. The party salience hypothesis stated that groups would adjust their position taking to the agendas of parties as a way of increasing their access to and influence on political parties. We find no support for the hypothesis in our analyses. On the opposite, increased party attention to a dimension seems to decrease the probability of group position-taking on



**Figure 2.** Marginal effect of salience on interest group position-taking for different levels of a) citizen polarisation (to the left) and b) party polarisation (to the right).

the same policy dimensions. Model 5 tests the party polarisation interaction hypotheses. Our expectation was that polarisation would moderate the effect of salience, and that groups would be less likely to take positions on policy dimensions that are both salient and polarised due to the risk of alienating potential allies among political parties. To test the hypothesis, we include an interaction term between party salience and polarisation. The marginal effect of party system salience does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance when polarisation is low, but becomes more negative as polarisation increases and is statistically significant at the 5 per cent level when polarisation is higher than 0.25. Thus, when party polarisation increases, greater party salience is negatively associated with interest group position-taking (see [Figure 2](#)).

To summarise, we find some evidence for citizen and party agendas affecting interest group position-taking. Our results indicate that the agenda of citizens influence group position-taking on policy dimensions but not in the direction that we expected. In contrast to our expectation, citizen salience is negatively associated with group position-taking but the size of the effect diminishes as polarisation increases. This contradicts former research that finds issue prioritisation to be a bottom-up process where groups are formed on issues that are salient to citizens (Klüver, 2015). However, the interest group survey was carried out in 2017 and 2018 while the data measuring citizen salience is from 2013 and 2014. Thus, the salience of a policy dimension might have changed between the citizen survey and the interest group survey. Unfortunately, EES 2014 and NES 2013 are the best available data that allow for measurement of citizen salience and polarisation at a similar point in time across all countries.

Moving on to party agendas, groups appear to also be more likely to position themselves on policy dimensions that receive less attention from the parties in the party system. While placement in policy space enables groups to make more strategic lobbying decisions which might increase their access and influence, another factor that could influence group position-taking is that interest groups, at least to some extent, compete with parties for members, resources and supporters (Richardson, 1995). From this angle, groups might follow a strategy of niche-seeking by prioritising dimensions to which parties are inattentive. Another interpretation could be that citizens feeling neglected by the party system establish groups to draw attention to the issues they care about.

Whatever the reason is, that groups are less likely to position themselves on dimensions that are salient to parties and to citizens in general, these findings might indicate that groups do supplement parties and citizens in policy space (see also Boräng *et al.* (2024) and Kaminski (2021)). That said, citizen polarisation does seem to dampen group position-taking (see model 2 (in [Table 1](#)) without the interaction effect). Furthermore, the

interaction between party salience and party polarisation is, as expected, negative for higher values of polarisation. Thus, the price of carving out a niche might be too high, if the result is that the group repels potential friends among decision-makers and constituencies.

## Conclusion

Why do some interest groups articulate policy positions on one or more policy dimensions while others do not? While we know a lot about party and citizen positions on policy dimensions across countries, we know far less about interest group position-taking on the same policy dimensions. A novel interest group survey where groups were asked to locate themselves in a pre-defined multidimensional policy space if they had a position on the different policy dimensions, enables us to shed some light on the explanations for interest group position-taking in six countries.

In general, the analysis shows that many interest groups hold policy positions on more than one policy dimension and that a majority of interest groups locate themselves on one of the six policy dimensions included in the research design. Hence, interest groups are able to place themselves in a partisan policy space and in particular on policy dimensions that lie at the core of their existence. This lends further support to interest groups being able to articulate and support a variety of citizen interests between elections (Schlozman, 2015). However, not all groups do place themselves in policy space. We examined a dual set up of hypotheses, where the first set up looked at the groups' internal considerations (our baseline expectations) and the second set up looked at the external considerations (dimensional salience and polarisation among parties and citizens). The first set up included variables that could be used as control variables in related contexts but in this context where we lack previous multivariate analyses, the variables are included as baseline expectations and supported by our multivariate analysis. We find that groups with more resources, a core interest that's relevant to the policy dimensions included and a closer connection to the traditional party system rooted in the economic left-right dimension were more likely to place themselves in policy space. This shows that the groups' internal considerations and constraints clearly matter for their position taking. However, with regard to our second set up of hypotheses rooted in the groups' external considerations, we find mixed evidence where the findings on citizen salience and party salience contradict our expectations. Groups are less likely, not more likely as hypothesised, to have positions on policy dimensions salient to citizens and parties respectively. This indicates that groups prioritise differently than the average citizen and the parties at large and thus supplement the behaviour of parties and the general citizens in this regard. When investigating dimensional party salience and polarisation in each country, we find some

support for the polarisation interaction hypothesis: groups refrain from position taking when the dimension is highly salient and polarised among the parties in the country. Still, party polarisation and salience might first and foremost matter for groups' propensity to position themselves on more secondary dimensions.

Similar to American studies who aggregate US think tank positions (Lerner, 2018) and interest group positions (Crosson *et al.*, 2020) into ideological measures, this study has argued that it makes sense for interest groups to aggregate their policy positions on policy issues into positions on policy dimensions in a predefined policy space. By treating the interest groups as strategic actors balancing the goals of policy influence, internal responsiveness and group survival, position taking is seen as a process close to the process of issue prioritisation (Halpin *et al.*, 2018). These simplifications can of course be questioned and while group resources can address the ability of groups to engage in politics, the internal process with regard to position taking is not the same across groups. Hence, future research should investigate how the internal position-taking processes vary across groups and how these are constrained by, for instance, internal decision-making rules, funding agencies and coalition partners. Furthermore, we assumed that the policy space of groups and parties is the same. Future studies could examine the comparability of policy space for interest groups, parties and citizens, also for policy dimensions not included in this analysis. This can be done by collecting information on substantive policy issues and check whether patterns of positional correlations are the same for groups, parties and citizens. Last, our data is limited to six old European democracies. Future studies should map interest group position-taking on policy dimensions in more countries and over time to get closer to the causal mechanisms driving group position-taking.

If we find salience estimates of policy positions provided by experts to be credible (see Lindstädt *et al.* (2020) for a critique), our paper shows that, when party polarisation is high, the incentives for group position-taking are different when the stakes are higher compared to when dimensions are less salient and less controversial. Taken together, the findings show that both group characteristics and agenda setting dynamics affect interest group position-taking. This contributes to a broader understanding of how interest groups enter and manoeuvre policy space by showing that both internal and external factors constrain their position taking.

## Note

1. The US was also part of this survey. Due to missing data on US when combining datasets, we do not utilise these survey answers. When including the US in the data, the response rate is 29 per cent.

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## Data availability statement

The interest group survey data used in the article are available from Sikt (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research), see <https://doi.org/10.18712/NSD-NSD2978-V3>. The combined dataset and replication materials that support the findings of this study are available from the authors upon request.

## Notes on contributors

*Vibeke Wøien Hansen* is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Research, Oslo, Norway.

*Lise Rødland* is a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science, University of Oslo.

## ORCID

*Vibeke Wøien Hansen*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0960-5463>

*Lise Rødland*  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5291-6083>

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