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Mapping interest group access to politics: A presentation of the INTERARENA research project¹

Abstract

Studies of the political role of interest groups rely on mapping their presence in politics. This article presents the INTERARENA research project which mapped interest group access to the administration, parliament and the news media across several countries. The project departed from a definition of access that emphasized the role of gatekeepers in different political arenas. The article discusses the ambitions of the research project and the subsequent choice of empirical indicators for political access. In addition, it presents the data sources used and provides an overview of the data collected. The described datasets are available online for other researchers interested in empirical mapping of group access to politics.

¹ Access to datasets and codebook: www.interarena.dk [will be made available prior to publication of the article]

Introduction

Access to political arenas is central for any political actor trying to influence politics. Without political access, interest groups and other actors are not able to advance their viewpoints and influence political decisions – including decisions about what issues should be on the political agenda. While the ultimate goal for interest groups is usually political influence, access is thus a crucial intermediary step towards this goal (Binderkrantz et al., 2017a).

In effect, political access has also been a focus point of interest group scholars (Truman, 1951: 264). The study of political influence comes with challenges with respect to conceptualization and empirical measurement, and many have found access a more empirically feasible concept when it comes to evaluating the political role of interest groups. This article presents the data used in the INTERARENA research project to analyze interest group access in different political arenas (Binderkrantz et al., 2015), over time (Binderkrantz and Christiansen, 2015; Binderkrantz et al., 2016)) and across different countries (Binderkrantz et al., 2017b; Christiansen et al., 2018; Helboe Pedersen et al., 2015).

The INTERARENA project was carried out by a group of researchers at Aarhus University in collaboration with researchers at other universities². The project was the first to study interest group access in a cross-arena perspective and most of the datasets collected by the research group have been made available for other researchers to use. Even though access lends itself more readily to empirical analysis than influence, it does not come without tradeoffs and pitfalls. This article therefore discusses the challenges related to empirical measurement of access in politics. In

² In addition to the authors of this article, the project team included: Anne Rasmussen (Copenhagen University), Darren Halpin (Australian National University) and Helene Fisker (Aarhus University). Laura Chaqués Bonafont (The University of Barcelona) participated in the media study.

addition, it presents specific indicators of access used in the project and the central features in the datasets collected by the INTERARENA research project.

Conceptualization of political access

We rely on a definition of access that stresses the importance of gatekeepers in different political arenas. Access can thus be defined as: *“instances where an interest group (or another political actor) has successfully entered a political arena such as parliament, the administration or the news media passing a threshold controlled by a relevant gatekeeper e.g. politicians or civil servants”* (Binderkrantz et al., 2017a). While many studies do not explicitly define the concept of access, this definition captures the understanding of access in most contributions published in the last two decades. It is also consistent with a theoretical underpinning of access that stresses how access occurs as a result of an exchange between interest groups and gatekeepers. From this perspective, it is thus crucial that access is not only a result of an action by an interest group, but also entails some level of control by gatekeepers. It differs, however, from some studies where access is used in a more restrictive sense to denote a close working relationship between decision makers and interest groups (eg. Hansen, 1991). While our definition would also encompass such close working relationship as examples of high-level access, it is broader and include much less consequential instances of access.

A crucial element in the project is that we conceptualize access as a continuous phenomenon. Many discussions of access seem to assume that access is a dichotomous phenomenon: Either a group has access or not. There is, however, reason to emphasize that access is more appropriately seen as a matter of degree. In a specific situation, access can be an either/or question, but across multiple situations, groups can have very different levels of access. For example, some groups may always

be invited for parliamentary hearings in a specific policy field, whereas others may be invited only occasionally. In fact, the most important distinction in evaluating the political role of group is usually not whether they have access or not, but rather whether they are routinely included in for example government deliberations or news stories.

The definition distinguishes access from the related concepts of interest group strategies and influence. Conceptually, access is an intermediary step between group actions (strategies) and the ultimate results of these actions (influence). On theoretical grounds, this is relative straightforward. Strategies and actions are controlled by the interest group in question and differ from access because gatekeepers are not involved. Access is conceptually different from influence because access merely entails being present and not necessarily that the group is successful for example in changing the attitudes of decision makers or the policy content of bills or regulation (Binderkrantz et al., 2017a). As discussed below, distinguishing between these concepts empirically may, however, be more complicated.

The traditional notion of access restricts this to insider access to parliamentary and/or administrative fora (Binderkrantz and Pedersen, 2019). In INTERARENA, we explicitly aimed to include media access. In present-day politics, appearances in the news media are central for almost all political actors seeking influence. It is therefore crucial not to exclude this type of access from analysis – also in order to compare this type of access to more traditional types of insider access. In effect, three arenas are in focus in the mapping of access: The parliamentary arena, the administrative arena and the media arena.

The choice of behavioral indicators of access

The main research objective of the INTERARENA project was to account for levels of access across different types of interest groups. The ambition was to arrive at measures that made it possible to compare access across:

- 1) Political arenas
- 2) Interest group types
- 3) Political systems (countries)
- 4) Policy areas
- 5) Time

Two main approaches were available to meet these criteria: First, interest group surveys can ask groups to report their level of access across different political arenas and in different policy fields. Obviously, surveys can only cover present day access, but at least for Denmark, some survey material back in time was in fact available. The advantage of surveys is that these may cover formal as well as informal access. It is, however, difficult to arrive at very fine-grained measures of access as groups can hardly be expected to recall each instance of access in a given time-period. In addition, all surveys comes with issues related to response rates and ensuring that the respondent is in fact knowledgeable about the full set of questions asked. We therefore decided to use interest group surveys mainly to provide background information about groups and for validation of our measures of access. As demonstrated in Binderkrantz et al. (2017a), our validation analyses demonstrate much similarity in measures derived from surveys and the behavioral indicators discussed below.

The second approach is to collect data on behavioral indicators of access. Interest group access leaves empirical tracks, for example, in the form of lists of participants at meetings, appointments marked in calendars, membership of policy preparing commissions, and appearances in the news

media. Some of these tracks may be difficult to find especially over time and across a full political system, but others such as media appearances or oral evidence in parliament are available for systematic analysis (Binderkrantz et al., 2017a: 307). The advantage of relying on behavioral indicators of access is that this allows for relatively fine-grained measures of access. In addition, it is possible to fulfill the above criteria related to comparison over time and across countries as well as inclusion of various interest group types and policy areas.

Two limitations of the approach should be mentioned. First, the focus is on formalized access because this lends itself to empirical observation across the full spectrum of interest groups as well as over time. Interest groups may, however, also have informal access to for example politicians and bureaucrats and this access will in many instances be just as important – or more important – than the access to formal settings. The use of behavioral measures of access therefore largely relies on the assumption that many of the patterns observed in this type of data reflects more general trends in access including also more informal types of access. As mentioned above, our comparison to survey responses suggest that this is a reasonable assumption (Binderkrantz et al., 2017b; Pedersen 2013).

Second, access points may not be immediately comparable across arenas and countries or even in the same country and arena over time. Researchers therefore need to be highly conscious of the context when comparing different types of access. This is crucial, because a major ambition of INTERARENA and many other studies is exactly to be able to make these types of comparisons. Ideally, this calls for comparative measures where one instance of access can be assumed similar to another instance of access. This is, however, a rather questionable assumption as the role played by for example committees in parliament or the news media differ between countries.

Even in the same country, the role of a particular type of access may change over time. Among the prominent examples is the changing contours of corporatist involvement of interest groups. In the Scandinavian countries, involving groups in government boards and committees has been a main feature of corporatist arrangements. Over time, the main functions of these committees have shifted from a focus on preparation of specific policies to more general advisory functions and policy implementation. While the balance between representation of citizen groups and economic groups have shifted over time in the disfavor of the latter, this shift should be interpreted in the light of the changing role played by the boards and committees (Binderkrantz and Christiansen, 2015).

The publicly available INTERARENA data

Table 1 provides an overview of the INTERARENA data made available on www.interarena.dk. All data sets include classification of interest group types (See Table 2) as well as observational data related to interest group access to the three arenas that were at center stage in the project: 1) the administrative arena, 2) the parliamentary arena and 3) the media arena. For the parliamentary arena, the data also include letters sent to parliament although these do not constitute access according to our definition.

Table 1: Overview of observational data on interest group access to political arenas

Administrative arena	Parliamentary arena	Media arena
DK: Seats in government boards and committees (N = 4227 seats at 437 committees)	DK (2009-2010): Deputations (N=495) (and letters (N =2,686) to parliamentary committees).	DK: Appearance in two national newspapers, Politiken and Jyllands-Posten (N = 3,672)
DK: Government consultations including achieved goals (N = 1721 answers to 229 proposals)	DK (1975-76): (Letters (N=359) from interest groups to parliamentary committees)	UK: Appearance in two national newspapers, The Guardian and The Telegraph (N = 3,266)
	UK (2010-2011): Oral (N=2,054) (and written (N=6,393)) evidence to bill and select committees	Spain: Appearance in two national newspapers, El Pais and El Mundo (N = 1,754)
	NL (2011): Hearings (N=1651 participants in 183 hearings), <i>gesprekken</i> (N=351 actors in 267 meetings), petitions (183 actors in 146 meetings), (and letters (6,952))	

Note: Anne Rasmussen (Copenhagen University) was responsible for collecting data on the parliament in the Netherlands. Darren Halpin (Australian National University) was co-responsible for collecting media data in the UK and Laura Chaqués Bonafont (The University of Barcelona) for collecting media data in Spain.

Access in the administration

To measure access to the administration we relied on representation in government boards, committees, and commissions (hereafter named committees). We also used participation in administrative hearings and achieved goals as a measure of influence, i.e. the next step after access.

As for the seats in government committees, the decision was not very difficult. Policy preparation and implementation via committees with – among others – representatives from interest groups is a more than 100 years old Danish (and Scandinavian) tradition. Johansen and Kristensen (1982: 196) in an older study argued that “there are reasons to believe that public committees have long since become one of the most important, if not the single most important, mode of interest intermediation”. Johansen and Kristensen collected a full set of committees and their members for the years 1946, 1955, 1965, and 1975 with altogether 22,093 committee seats. By creating a dataset similar to these, we were able to do longitudinal studies (Binderkrantz and Christiansen, 2015; Binderkrantz et al., 2016).

These committees are established by law or by government order. Most of them are permanent and perform administrative and/or advisory tasks while the remaining committees are temporary and typically set up in order to scrutinize a politically defined problem and come up with more or less detailed suggestions for their possible solutions. The membership of a committee is decided by the ministry – often after deliberations with important stakeholders. Membership is considered advantageously and from time to time neglected actors complain over not being member of a specific committee. Membership is therefore a clear indication of access to whatever the committee in question is doing.

There is no official register over public committees. The ministries are supposed to flag all such committees in a manageable way on their homepage, but they far from comply with this principle.

We therefore hired students to scrutinize all possible sources such as the homepages of the ministry, all outlets from the ministries in the form of annual reports, other reports, white papers etc. The committee had to be active on 31 December 2010 to be included in the database. In a number of cases we contacted the ministry to make sure, that a committee was still active at the end of 2010. In one case the ministry after some time reported, that it was unknown whether the committee was still active. Apparently not a very important committee.

With respect to group participation in consultations, it is an integrated part of the Danish lawmaking process that proposals for bills – with few exceptions such as the financial bill – are sent in hearing before they are presented to parliament. This allows for a broad group of actors to scrutinize the proposal and come up with endorsement, protests, or alternatives to the proposal. The minimum hearing period is four weeks. After the deadline, the ministry – and minister – adjusts the proposal before it is presented to parliament. Together with the proposal, the minister supplies parliament a note in which all suggestions from the hearing are commented, and the changes that have been made as a consequence of the hearing procedure. All hearing answers are publicly available. This makes it possible to study not only access, but also influence in the meaning *control over outcome*.

Hearings are invited, but the hearing lists appear to be quite inclusive, and it is also possible to submit a comment without being invited. Simultaneously with the invited hearing, a proposal is uploaded to a government homepage – www.hoeringsportalen.dk – which makes all proposals publicly available. In this sense, access to hearings is easy, perhaps too easy to satisfy the demand for access as defined above. However, influence is more difficult. To map the extent to which groups were successful in hearings we therefore coded all substantial hearing comments made by groups and the reaction to the comments by the ministry – that is whether proposals from groups were followed fully or partly or whether they were rejected. While we cannot be certain that the

ministry's response is a direct consequence of a group's proposal this approach enables large N-studies of the influence of groups (Binderkrantz et al. 2014).

Access in the parliament

Access to parliament may include access to political parties, to individual politicians and parliamentary committees. For INTERARENA we collected data on tracks of contacts to parliamentary committees in the British House of Commons, The Dutch Tweede Kamer, and the Danish Folketing. Parliamentary committees are key parliamentary institutions organizing legislative processes and scrutiny (Mattson & Strøm 2004) and therefore relevant access points for interest groups seeking influence through parliament. In contrast to contacts to political parties or individual politicians, contacts to parliamentary committees are documented in parliamentary documents. Therefore we relied on this type of contacts to cover a complete parliamentary access point across the three selected countries.

Procedures for contacting parliamentary committees vary across the three parliaments (Pedersen et al. 2015). In all three parliaments, we collected data on letters and meetings. Sending a letter to a parliamentary committee does not qualify as access according to our definition, since we do not know whether committee members read the letter and thus allowed the sender access. However, the available data also include these letters (placed in parentheses in Table 1 to indicate that letters may rather serve as an indicator of strategy than access). For meetings, the validity of the access measurement depend on the specific procedures. In the Dutch and British case, interest groups (and other actors) may be invited by the parliamentary committee to provide oral evidence in the British case or participate in various types of meetings in the Dutch case. This invited contact provides a highly valid measure of access, since interest groups have to be invited – passing a gatekeeper – and show up – seeking access. In Denmark, groups may also give oral evidence through meetings (deputations), but these are not invited meetings, anyone can ask for a committee deputation and

parliament almost never declines a request. In practice, this is a case of open access (Pedersen et al. 2015), which somewhat harms the validity of our access measure. Still, in all deputations interest groups actually get 15 minutes of attention from committee members, which does entail more than sending a letter.

In INTERARENA, we collected data on all committee meetings and letters, which also includes letters and meetings related to other actors that interest groups (as shown in Table 1). In UK, we identified 2,260 letters from and 674 meetings with interest groups during one parliamentary term. In the Netherlands, we identified 3,228 letters from and 610 meetings with interest groups in one year. In Denmark, 1,071 letters from and 228 meetings with interest groups in one parliamentary term. Only in Denmark, where survey data was available did we collect data back in time (parliamentary term 1975-1976) to allow for analyses across time. Deputations are not documented in committee agendas at that time, and we therefore only registered 359 letters sent to parliamentary committees from interest groups in this parliamentary term.

Access in the media

The main decision with respect to mapping interest group access in the news media concerns the choice of news outlets. We focused on traditional media and included two national newspapers from each of the countries/time periods in the project. It would obviously be interesting to include electronic media as well as new social media, but given the resources associated with coding appearances in the news media, we prioritized a more thorough coding of a limited sample of news media. In each country, we chose newspapers of different political leaning: one relatively centre-left leaning and one relatively centre-right leaning. This decision was made to ensure that the results were not due to particular characteristics of a news outlet. The coding of interest group appearances was manually conducted with student coders reading news stories to identify interest groups. This

allowed for identification of all interest groups appearing in the absence of a full list of the relevant population of groups.

A crucial consideration is whether all interest group appearances in the news media can be seen as instances of political access. Two issues are relevant here. First, interest group names sometimes appear in the news media in a non-political context. Groups may for example be mentioned in anniversary portraits of individuals. In our coding, we therefore included a variable for ‘clearly non-political’. Second, it is questionable whether news stories casting negative light on a group can be considered access in the sense implied by the conceptualization. We therefore also included a variable to gauge whether a group appearance could be seen as positive, neutral or negative. It is crucial that we coded appearances as positive even if other political actors disagreed with the group. This is based on the assumption that groups prefer to have their viewpoints covered rather than being ignored. Negative appearances were thus only those covering for example misconduct in a group or internal fights in the organization.

Identifying and classifying interest groups

A major task for any interest group scholar doing large N studies is identifying interest groups among other policy actors. In line with the European tradition, in INTERARENA interest groups are defined as associations of members or other supporters working to obtain political influence. However, in the data on access to parliament and the administration we have also mapped the appearances of other types of actors including for example private businesses and institutions. These dataset will therefore also be relevant for scholars defining interest groups in a broader sense. With respect to the news media, we decided to register only interest groups as we define them since the task of mapping all actors appearing in the media would be highly time consuming and raise additional complications.

A central goal of the project was to map the access of different group types across political arenas. For this purpose, a classification scheme was developed. Overall, the scheme reflects our interest in the extent to which different societal groups are represented in politics. The main line of division is between economic groups and citizen groups and within these broad categories, further distinctions are made based on the membership of groups and/or the causes represented by the group. Table 2 presents the main categories in the group classification scheme. A detailed coding scheme including subgroups of these main categories can be found at the INTERARENA webpage.

Table 2: INTERARENA group classification scheme

Main Categories	Description	Examples
Trade Unions	Groups that organize workers and handle salaries and work conditions on behalf of their members	Trade Union Congress (UK) Danish Trade Union Confederation (DK)
Business Associations	Associations of businesses, industries and employers	Confederation of British Industry (UK) Danish Chamber of Commerce
Institutional Groups	Organize public institutions and authorities	Local Government Association (UK) Danish Universities
Professional Groups	Organize professionals to facilitate professional development and networks, do not negotiate salaries and work conditions	Royal Colleges of Surgeons of England Association of High School Music Teachers (DK)
Identity groups	Organization of individuals with similar identity markers such as ethnicity, gender or age	Royal National Institute of Blind People (UK) Danish Association of the Disabled
Public interest groups	Organization based on similar interests which will not only or mainly benefit members if realized	UK Youth Climate Coalition

		Keep Denmark Clean
Hobby groups	Organizations of people with a common sport/leisure interest	The Kennel Club (UK) The Sports Federation of Denmark
Religious Groups	Organizations of people sharing a religion.	Salvation Army

For many actors appearing in the data it was straightforward to decide both whether they were interest groups according to our definition and how to code their interest group type. In contrast, other actors could not readily be classified, and we therefore spent a substantial amount of time on the classification task. For this, we used organizational webpages as the main source of information focusing on descriptions of the purpose of groups and its membership and supporters. The coding was done by the research team and reliability tests were conducted.

The structure of the dataset and the main variables

A main feature of the INTERARENA data is that it allows for analysis at different levels. As an example, the data on media appearances include some variables that are coded at the level of the newspaper article – policy area for example – and some coded at the level of the specific interest group appearing in the article. The data is made available at the most disaggregated level allowing researchers to decide the most suitable level of analysis for the purpose at hand.

The main variables in the dataset are the following:

Country: The most extensive data exists for Denmark. In addition, the dataset includes data from the UK, The Netherlands and Spain.

Time-period: Most data collected relate to the period 2009-11. Somewhat different periods were used in the different countries for example to avoid data collection during a national election. For Denmark, a dataset from 1975 is also available.

Actor type: For the datasets on the administration and parliament, INTERARENA coded all member types, including central government civil servants, national interest groups, local interest groups, international interest groups, elected politicians, experts, representatives of state institutions, representatives of local or regional government institutions, representative of private companies, individuals without identifiable affiliation, and finally a miscellaneous category.

Policy area: Most of the text material used for coding interest group access relates to policy issues. We have therefore coded the policy area related to the access points. For this, we used the codebook of the Danish Agenda project (slightly adopted to the context in the other involved countries) distinguishing between 19 main policy areas.

Group ID: Each group has a unique group ID allowing researchers to identify the same group as it appears in different data sources.

Conclusion

This article has discussed and presented the datasets collected by the INTERARENA research project. We hope that other scholars will use the data and compare the patterns in these data with data on other countries or time-periods. It should be noted that a number of other researchers have established datasets that are largely comparable to the INTERARENA project. This is for example the case in Spain and Germany, where the parliamentary arena has been a particular focus (Chaqués-Bonafont and Muñoz Márquez, 2016; Eising and Spohr, 2017) and in Switzerland, where researchers have mapped access across different political arenas (Weiler et al., 2018). We hope many more will follow in the future.

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