



Using the Comparative Agendas Project to examine interest group behavior

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) has drastically increased data availability on the policy agendas of government outputs. These data are coded using a system to allow for valid comparisons in policy agendas across issues, time, and systems. However, less data are available for interest groups outputs, and that data have mostly been limited to the USA. In this paper, we propose methods for measuring the policy agendas of interest groups using the CAP system. Scholars can estimate the policy content of interest group activities by linking them to existing CAP datasets. These data can be used to compare the distribution of policy attention of interest groups and the institutions they attempt to influence. Because the CAP datasets are highly detailed and widely available, researchers can examine interest group activities at low costs. Furthermore, we discuss higher-cost methods of coding interest group policy outputs that may be of interest to scholars.

Keywords Interest groups · Agenda setting · Comparative Agendas Project

Introduction

Interest group scholars are increasingly interested in the policy activities of their subjects. It has been well argued that interest groups influence the policy process, particularly in the agenda-setting phase (Dahl 1961; Gais et al. 1984; Schattschneider 1960). As neighboring institutions to government, interest groups both influence and are influenced by the formal policy agenda. However, the study of the relationship between the policy agendas of interest groups and governments has been

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limited by data availability. What research that has been conducted has relied on data from the Encyclopedia of Associations, which is limited in both time frame and granularity.

Beginning with Schattschneider (1960), interest groups have played an essential role in theories of agenda setting. Long before government attention lurches toward an issue, interest groups work to highlight or frame policy problems, mobilize public support or opposition, push issues to different venues, and subsidize legislative activity through information provision (Baumgartner et al. 2008, 2014; Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Hall and Deardorff 2006). After the government changes policy, interest groups grow and feed back into the new policy areas, participate in subsystems, and inform policymaking decisions (Jones et al. 2019; Leech et al. 2005).

However, despite their prominence in theories of agenda setting, interest groups are far less studied than later stages of the policy process such as lawmaking. This gap is in part caused by data availability. The Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) has made dozens of datasets on the policy agendas of legislatures, executives, and courts available for researchers across many different countries and levels of government. However, only one such dataset exists for interest groups, which is drawn from the Encyclopedia of Associations (EA). Scholars have used EA data to draw a number of conclusions about the relationship between US interest groups and policy agendas (Bevan and Rasmussen 2017; Jones et al. 2019; Leech et al. 2005). However, scholars could gain more insight into age-old questions of interest groups and agenda setting with other data sets at different stages of the policy process or by comparing interest group activity across countries or levels of government.

In order to increase the available data on the activities of interest groups, we propose various methods to link existing data on their policy agendas to the government agenda. These methods expand the scope of data available to researchers at low cost. Scholars can infer group policy agendas by observing interest group activity related to policy outputs coded using the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) topic coding system. These data can then be used as a dependent variable to examine how interest groups choose to distribute their attention among various policy topics, or as an independent variable to assess the impact of interest group activities on the policy process. The CAP system allows researchers to make valid comparisons in attention to public policy across time, issues and context.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first section, we review the literature on the Comparative Agendas Project and interest groups. We find that nearly all interest group inquiry using CAP data has been conducted using data from the Encyclopedia of Associations. While scholars have learned much from these data, they are somewhat limited in granularity, scope and time period. Scholars have used other data sources, but the literature remains underdeveloped relative to legislative and executive agendas due to a lack of availability. In the second section, we propose methods to link data on interest group hearing testimony, roll call votes and bill activity such as lobbying to existing data with minimal cost. We also propose higher-cost methods for coding other interest group outputs such as information provision. For each activity, we provide descriptive examples of interest group activities



coded for policy topic.¹ In the final section, we conclude and discuss gaps in the research that can be filled using the data produced by these methods, noting in particular the need for comparative analysis of interest group policy agendas.

The Comparative Agendas Project and interest groups

The Comparative Agendas Project² (CAP) assembles and codes information on the policy processes of governments from around the world. The project investigates trends in policy making across time and between many countries. Beginning in the USA with the Policy Agendas Project, there are now projects around the world, including in Australia, Brazil, Israel, South Korea, and many European countries. The policy processes investigated by CAP include numerous activities undertaken by governments, including parliamentary questions, official executive speeches, hearings, court rulings, and the introduction and enacting of legislation. These outputs are comparable across countries with different institutional systems, and through these means, attention and government decisions can be traced over time. Interest groups influence and are influenced by all of these policy outputs, and thus CAP data can be used to understand their relationship to the policy process.

The first agendas project was US-based and focused solely on various components of the American political system. The US Policy Agendas Project (PAP) was created with the aim of tracing public attention to all issues from the post-World War II era to present. The first datasets in the PAP were congressional hearings, public laws passed by Congress, all stories in the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, a sample of stories in the *New York Times Index*, and the US federal budget. Since then, the US project has expanded to include more than 20 datasets spanning a broad range of policy inputs and outputs. More importantly, scholars of comparative politics founded the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) using an adapted version of the PAP codebook to other countries. To date, there are 25 CAP projects, with more coming online each year. While these projects were initially concentrated among Western national governments, they now include a broader range of contexts, including subnational governments, the European Union, and non-Western countries like Brazil and China.

CAP assigns observations to one of 21 major topics, such as health care, labor, or defense policy, and within them, 221 subtopics, such as pharmaceutical regulation, workplace safety, or military readiness. The topic areas are mutually exclusive and exhaustive; all observations can be accommodated under one of the categorical topics. Observations that are relevant to two or more topics are coded using a set of rules to maintain internal validity (Baumgartner et al. 2002, 38). Using the same coding schema across countries allows for comparison across them. Common analysis can be done comparing disparate data sources. The focus is therefore on

¹ We provide example data and both STATA and R code to reproduce these analyses in our online appendix so that researchers can adapt these example processes to their own work. These files are available at <https://www.comparativeagendas.net/pages/iga-data>.

² All Comparative Agendas Project data is publicly available at <http://www.comparativeagendas.net>.



the policy issues; observations can be compared on the dimension of their agenda status instead of within the institutional arena. The greatest strength of the project is its ability to trace the distribution of policy attention over time across outputs or contexts.

The Comparative Agendas Project is rooted in the theory of punctuated equilibrium by Baumgartner and Jones (1993). The theory holds that policy attention and action on issues do not take place in a slow, incremental process, but in a constant friction between gridlock and short periods of rapid policy change. In these punctuated periods of policy change, an issue advances to the forefront of the policy agenda; bills may be introduced, public laws passed, congressional hearings called, or newspaper stories printed. These issues may be pushed by or pull internal institutional forces or by forces outside of government such as interest groups.

In the scholarly literature on agenda setting, incrementalism plays little role. Rather, focusing events, chance occurrences, public opinion campaigns by organized interests, and speeches by public opinion campaigns by organized interests, and speeches by public officials are seen to cause issues to shoot high onto the agenda in a short period (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 10).

The literature explaining how government distributes its attention and the relationship between that attention and policy change was largely developed through the work of Baumgartner and Jones but has since expanded to encompass a variety of government outputs and applied to many different countries.

Interest groups are key players in shaping policy agendas. They provide an opportunity for citizens to participate in government, and to influence the policy agenda (Dahl 1961; Truman 1951). They may form close “iron triangle” arrangements between groups, Congressional committees, and the bureaucracy (Gais et al. 1984). Interest groups function as a means of representation to mobilize potential members’ interests, “prompting them to interact and become increasingly aware of their shared interests” (Walker 1983). Groups can also break down status quo arrangement by reframing policy images and breaking policy monopolies (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Furthermore, as neighboring institutions to government, trends in governing institutions affect the interest group system. For example, scholars have found that interest groups form only after the federal government enters a policy area, rather than trying to draw government into new areas (Jones et al. 2019; Leech et al. 2005). In their book, *The Great Broadening* (2019), Jones, Theriault and Whyman describe a vast expansion of the scope of the federal government’s policy agenda in the 1950s–1970s. The vast expansion of the interest group system came only after this growth. However, social movements appeared before the broadening. During the broadening period, environmental, consumer, and civil rights groups grew in numbers and were active in government through lobbying. The authors use the policy agendas data to conclude that social movements are a likely cause of government expansion into new policy areas, while interest groups are caused by them.

Much of the data on interest group policy agendas to date has been collected from the *Encyclopedia of Associations* (EA). The EA catalogues the associations, societies, and other nonprofit membership organizations in the USA from 1970 to 2005 (Kimball et al. 2012). Each group is assigned to one major topic area based on its



overall mission. Thus, the data allow us to estimate the overall growth of the interest group environment across issues, as defined by each group's primary issue area.

The EA data have been used by a number of scholars to study the relationship between policy agendas and the interest group system. Early on, Jack L. Walker used the EA to find an increase in the subgovernment groups surrounding the Bureau of Indian Affairs increased from 16 in 1960 to at least 48 in 1980 in "The Origins and Maintenance of Interest Groups in America" (1983). Martin et al. (2005) test the EA's coverage of labor unions to find that its coverage is nearly universal for labor unions, including measures of organizational size and resources.

Bevan (2013) studied the survival of a subset of associations from 1974 to 1999 using CAP's EA datasets. This study used EA due to its focus on national organizations, and the ability to isolate voluntary associations, or groups whose membership joins for some common goals other than profit. Building from this initial finding, Bevan and Rasmussen (2017) discover that the increased number of voluntary associations actually acts as a transmission mechanism for public priorities by increasing both information and volume of the voices speaking to lawmakers. Walker et al. (2011) find that while whether non-membership citizen advocacy organizations have increased since the 1960s, they have not replaced membership-based groups. In *Lobbying and Policy Change* (2009), the authors use EA datasets to find membership size, budget, and staff size to answer questions on the influence of money in politics, access, ideology and partisanship, and the public interest in how interest groups may influence policy makers in Washington. Expanding on these questions, Kimball et al. (2012) find that the lobbying agenda doesn't necessarily match the public agenda.

While we have learned quite a bit about the policy agenda of the interest group system from the EA data, the data have a few limitations. First, the series ends in 2005, and we are aware of no plans to update the data to the present day. Second, the data only allow us to measure the primary CAP issue area where interest groups are active. However, groups are often active across a diverse set of issues (Fagan et al. 2019). This variation is both interesting on its own, and better expresses the overall policy agenda of interest groups. Third, the data are limited to American politics. Fourth, the data are coded at the major topic level, leaving out potentially interesting variation in the subtopics addressed by different groups. Finally, while the data are able to characterize the entire interest group system, they are less useful for scholars interested in particular groups or sets of groups.

There is some work on interest group policy agendas using the CAP system outside of the Encyclopedia of Associations. The first such article, by (Leech et al. 2005), uses the issue activities listed in lobbying disclosure reports to measure the policy agenda of lobbyists and compare it to the policy agenda of Congress. They find that lobbying on issues increased as a response to the expansion of policy agendas, rather than causing the expansion. Baumgartner et al. (2011) use similar data to measure the relationship between lobbying activity and demand from executive and legislative agendas, finding that the executive branch is able to divert lobbying attention away from Congress under some conditions. Fagan et al. (2019) use data from Maplight (see also Crosson et al. 2019; Lorenz 2019) paired with the Congressional Bills Project to examine the agenda diversity of interest groups, finding that more



party-aligned groups tend to have more expansive agendas. Fagan (2019a, b) uses data from party-aligned think tank white papers, coded for policy topic, to examine the relationship between their priorities and issue ownership, finding that elites at think tanks tend to work on issues owned by their party. McKay et al. (2018) examine congruence of public priorities and the policy agendas of interest groups in the USA, UK, the Netherlands and Germany primarily using two methods: interviews with lobbyists from about 100 interest organizations involved in policy advocacy at the national level, and survey responses from more than 1000 members of the public in each of the four countries. They find that countries with majoritarian systems (the USA and UK) have a greater divergence between interest group policy agendas compared with the proportional party systems (13).

These studies are just the tip of the potential iceberg for interest group scholarship using CAP data. If scholars could access additional data on the policy agendas of interest groups, they could further examine their relationship to the policy process. By relating new data to existing datasets on government outputs, they could also test existing theories of interest group influence, such as legislative subsidies (Hall and Deardorff 2006). In the next section, we suggest methods to allow scholars to do so.

Linking CAP data to interest groups

Interest group activity that is related to a CAP dataset can be assigned to a policy topic by linking it to existing datasets. Doing so requires collecting the unique identifiers for each dataset and merging those unique identifiers with the CAP data. These observations can then be aggregated by group or sets of groups to their policy agenda. This section will explain how to link to three different datasets from the US Policy Agendas Project and provide examples of their use.

Hearings

Congress holds hearings to call attention to important issues, gather information, question bureaucrats, and process legislation (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Lewallen et al. 2016). Representatives of interest groups are often invited to testify before these hearings. We can infer the policy content of this testimony using the policy code assigned to the hearing by the US project coders. Because witness testimony can be reliably measured over long time periods, hearing testimony is a good indicator of changes in interest group interest over time. For example, Fagan (2019a) uses testimony by party-aligned think tanks over time to measure their influence in Congress and relate that influence on polarization. Because the total number of hearings held by Congress has decreased over time, scholars should use witnesses per hearing measure think tank influence, rather than a count of hearings, in most cases. After hearings are assigned a policy topic, they can be compared to the overall distribution of hearings. If an interest group is more or less influential in a policy area, they should be asked to testify more or less on those issues. Their testimony activity may



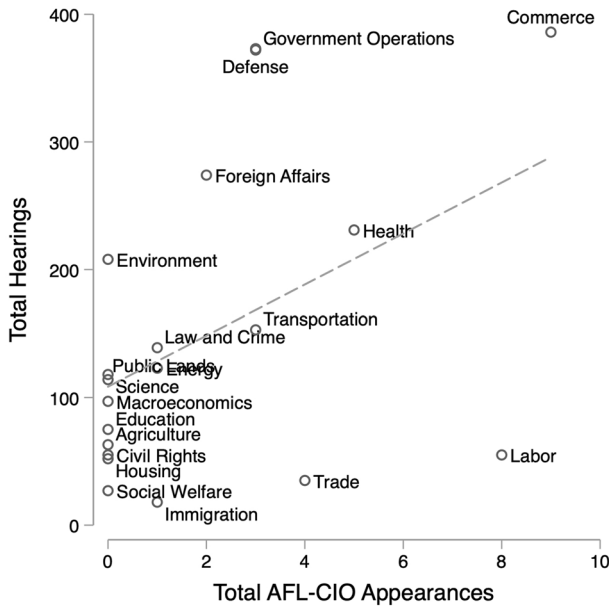


Fig. 1 Policy agenda of the AFL-CIO in the 111th congress

also be related to the group's partisan alignment; party-aligned groups will testify more frequently when their allies hold the chamber majority.

The US CAP hearings dataset uses the Legacy Congressional Information Service (CIS) unique identifier contained in the ProQuest Congressional database of Congressional hearings. Researchers can search in the ProQuest database for interest groups using the "Witness Affiliation" option and collect the Legacy CIS identifier for each hearing. They should then merge the unique identifier into the hearings dataset and aggregate it to their unit of analysis.

For example, we can use this technique to measure the policy agenda of an influential interest group like the AFL-CIO. After Democrats won large majorities in Congress and the Presidency in the 2008 elections, they entered the 111th Congress with an ambitious legislative agenda, including a large economic stimulus package, health care reform, financial regulation, and major climate change legislation. We might expect the AFL-CIO, an influential actor inside the Democratic coalition, to be involved in the legislative process on many of these efforts. Indeed, they testified before 47 hearings during the 111th Congress. Figure 1 plots the distribution of hearings where they testified against the distribution of all hearings in Congress. Unsurprisingly, the trade union testified most frequently on labor and trade policy hearings. However, they were also involved in a number of other issue areas, including domestic commerce (which included the hearings on financial regulation reform), health care, and transportation policy. They were not invited to testify on any hearings in nine issue areas, and tended to underemphasize foreign policy, defense and government operations.



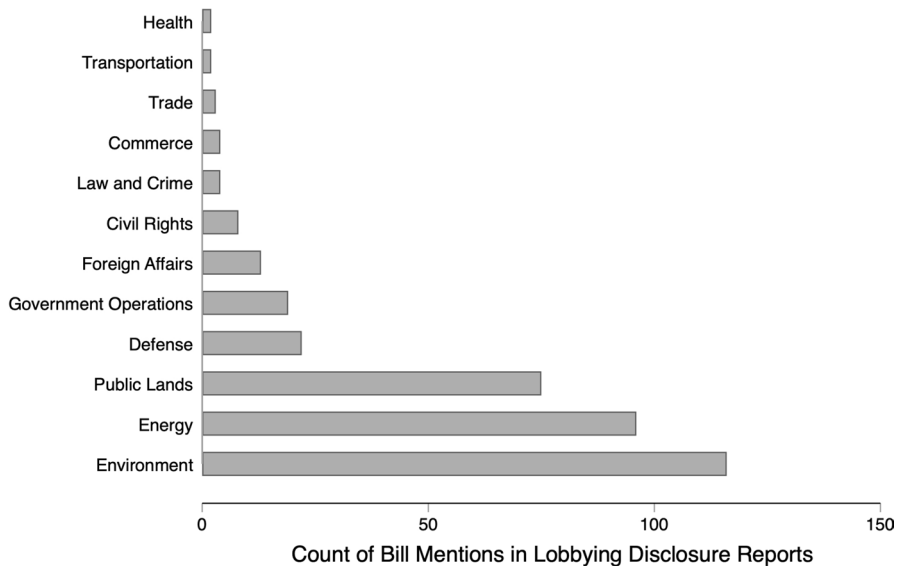


Fig. 2 Policy agenda of the Sierra club in the 114th congress. Notes: Lobbying disclosure report data is from the center for responsive politics. Policy content of bills is from the US Comparative Agendas Project and congressional bills project

Bills

Interest groups activity often involves position-taking, lobbying, or other advocacy around specific legislation. If these bills can be identified, we can infer the policy content of the activity by pairing it with preexisting data on the policy content of the bills. Interest group activity on bills is publicly available in a number of databases. For example, bills are often named as subjects of advocacy in lobbying disclosure reports. While these bills may not be a comprehensive list of the group's lobbying agenda, they can help us understand their issue priorities. These can be collected either directly, from the reports, or through a database, such as from the Center for Responsive Politics' OpenSecrets website. More recently, Maplight has also collected public position-taking data from interest groups (Crosson et al. 2019; Fagan et al. 2019; Lorenz 2019). Bills in all datasets, including the Congressional Bills Project data, are uniquely identified by a combination of the bill number and the Congress.

Figure 2 contains the policy content of bills named in Sierra Club, a prominent left-of-center environmental policy group, lobbying disclosure reports during the 114th Congress. The Sierra Club filed eight total lobbying disclosure reports during this time. Most of these bills are on public lands, energy, and environment, as we would expect from an environmental policy interest group. However, they also lobbied on bills like the Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2015, coded as civil rights, and Visa Waiver Program Improvement and Terrorist Travel Prevention Act of 2015, coded as defense.



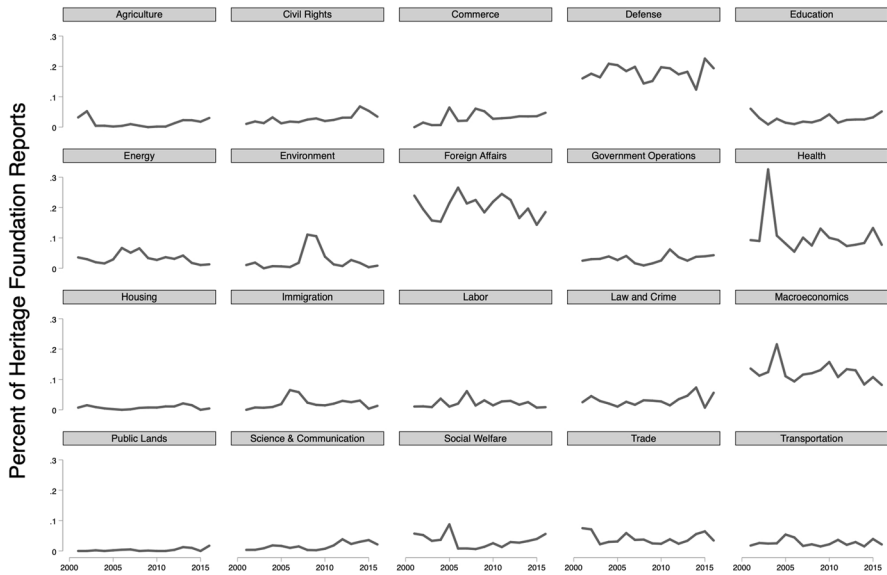


Fig. 3 Attention to policy in heritage foundation white papers, 2001–2016

Other interest group outputs

Researchers may also be interested in studying outputs by interest groups that cannot be directly connected to existing Comparative Agendas Project datasets. In this case, researchers will have to collect the documents and perform the necessary content analysis to assign a policy topic to each observation. Most datasets are double-coded and reconciled by trained research assistants, although some scholars are beginning to use supervised learning methods to reduce costs (Adler and Wilkerson 2013; Gilardi and Wüest 2018). Scholars should follow the best practices outlined in Bevan 2019, and researchers should train their research assistant coders on existing CAP data to ensure external validity. Two trained research assistants should read each observation and assign it to one policy topic. If the research assistants disagree, they should either go through a reconciliation process, or a third coder should break the tie.

For example, we can measure the policy content of white papers produced by The Heritage Foundation, an influential right-of-center think tank. Interest group scholars are increasingly interested in the role of groups or lobbyists in producing policy information for members of Congress (Hall and Deardorff 2006). Scholars might be interested in the impact of these activities on policy outcomes. Fagan (2019a) collected these reports and coded them for their policy content. Figure 3 shows the annual percent of white papers on each issue from 2001 to 2016. We see considerable variation in issue attention on some issues, and stability on others. One of the most consequential of these changes may be the large increase in environmental policy reports in 2008 and 2009, when conservative think tanks led the mobilization



to produce misinformation on climate change. The climate denialism literature finds that these organizations were decisive in persuading Republicans to change their positions on climate change (Dunlap and Jacques 2013).

Discussion and future research

Scholars are increasingly interested in the policy activities of interest groups, but little data exists exclusively on the policy activities of interest groups that can be easily compared to the wealth of existing data assembled by the Comparative Agendas Project. While we have learned quite a bit about their policy activities from the data that do exist, much of the relationship between the policy agendas of government and interest groups remains untested. In this paper, we proposed methods to leverage existing data to measure interest group policy agendas. Researchers can link data on interest group outputs with data on government policy outputs to infer the policy content of the group outputs. The resulting data can then be used to analyze the relationship between interest groups and the policy process.

These data could be used to examine questions in both the agenda setting and interest group literature. Subsidy theory (Hall and Deardorff 2006) predicts that interest groups will provide information to their allies in order to decrease legislative costs. If so, interest group subsidies in a policy area should predict increased attention from allied policymakers. If instead interest groups are attempting to persuade policymakers to change their preferences, those changes should follow increased attention from interest groups.

Interest group policy attention is also an interesting and understudied dependent variable. Interest groups respond to long-term shifts in governing attention by entering new policy areas after government has expanded to them (Jones et al. 2019; Leech et al. 2005), but we know less about how they distribute their attention in the short term. These data could be used to understand how interest groups set their agendas or under what conditions they respond to governing agendas. Finally, interest groups often take positions on roll call votes to inform scorecards or ratings. Members who vote with the interest group receive favorable ratings, while members who oppose them receive unfavorable ratings. These ratings are often used in elections to justify the member's alignment or misalignment with the group's interests. Groups may announce their ratings in advance to try and persuade allies to support their position. Scholars could use similar methods as described above to pair roll call voting data with interest group vote ratings and examine the effect of these ratings on legislator activity.

While the examples we presented are exclusive to American politics, these same methods can be used to measure interest policy agendas comparatively. Ample data from the Comparative Agendas Project is available on the policy content of government outputs from over a dozen countries. However, little of these data have been leveraged toward the study of interest groups outside of the USA. Given the importance of interest groups to many theories of agenda setting, researchers should endeavor to use the techniques presented here to create comparative datasets of interest group policy agendas.



Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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