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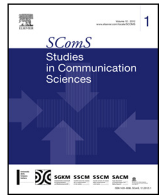

Communication of political interest groups in Switzerland: Adressees, channels and instruments☆

Erik Jentges[a,*], Matthias Brändli[a], Patrick Donges[b], Otfried Jarren[a]

[a] IPMZ, University of Zurich, Andreasstrasse 15, CH-8050 Zürich, Switzerland
[b] Department of Political and Communication Science, University of Greifswald, Rubenowstrasse 3, 17487 Greifswald, Germany

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ABSTRACT

We present a broad overview on the Swiss interest group population and the results of a quantitative online survey on the communication repertoire of 985 interest groups. We then discuss sample construction and the different addressees of interest group communication, the perceived relevance of mass media channels, and which instruments and measures are used to communicate with external and internal environments. We identify four different logics – influence, support, reputation and reciprocity – that influence the communication activities of political intermediaries such as interest groups.

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1. Introduction

"Swiss democracy is geared to pressure groups; it is a form of government calculated to bring such groups into existence and give them power. The system could conceivably continue for a time without parties, but without pressure groups it would not work at all." (Katzenstein, 1984:112)

Pressure groups or political interest groups are key actors in Swiss politics. Some assessments of interest groups in Switzerland go as far as to hypothesise a manipulation of the will of the people and the corruption of democratic processes (Baeriswyl, 2005). Leaving such normative criticisms aside, it is appropriate to consider them as influential political players that can be as important or more important than parties (Church, 2004; Kriesi & Trechsel, 2008; Mach, 2007; Rucht, 2007). As actors in an open and functioning intermediary system between the state and the society, they are relevant for modern democracies (Armingeon, 2007; Habermas, 2006; Halpin, 2010; Jordan & Maloney, 2007). However, there are many studies on interest groups and how they perceive the importance of the media's role in their day-to-day activities. There are also numerous studies on intermediary actors and their relationships with mass media (Binderkrantz & Krøyer, 2012; Donges, 2008; Dür & Mateo, 2013; Hackenbroch, 1998; Koch-Baumgarten, 2010; Steiner & Jarren, 2009; Vowe, 2007), but there remains a need for a systematic overview of both the population of interest groups in Switzerland as well as their communication strategies and repertoires.

The strength of interest groups in Switzerland has historical origins. Even prior to the development of political parties, firms and small manufacturers organised into national umbrella organisations. The corporatist tradition dates back to at least the 18th century, when guilds of traders and craftsmen (Zünfte) participated in the governance of economic and political affairs in the cities. Trade unions emerged in the second half of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, almost 150 organisations existed, more or less evenly divided into employer associations and associations representing workers and professionals (Church, 2004:72). Subsequent differentiation of the interest group system has led to an explosion of interest representation in all policy sectors. Sidjanski (1974) outlined the structures of the Swiss interest group landscape and highlighted the importance of groups in the referendum and the initiative. Due to the provisions of direct democracy, they can mobilise members and the citizenry in general to initiate public debates and call for referenda on their particular issues. Pre-parliamentary consultations (Vernehmlassungsverfahren) guarantee that marginal interests are heard. The embedding and formalised integration of interest groups into political processes is quite particular, compared to other countries. Policy studies that address the interactions between politicians, journalists and interest representatives – for example Wenzler (2009) – have offered insights into the dynamics of the Swiss energy and cultural policy sectors.

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: e.jentges@ipmz.uzh.ch (E. Jentges).

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Overall, Swiss national political tradition is based on a unique form of 'democratic corporatism' (Mach, 2007:369; Zeigler, 1993). According to Katzenstein (1984), its characteristics are "a centralized and concentrated system of interest associations; a voluntary and informal coordination of the various interests in continuous political negotiations between their associations; political parties and the various branches of public administration; and an ideology favouring social partnership" (summarised in Kriesi & Trechsel, 2008:99). Another relevant aspect is rooted in the militia system's peculiarity: "some staff members of important BIAs [business interest associations] and employees of major corporations have always held seats in the national Parliament for these parties and major corporations have always relied on their members in the Parliament to represent their interests" (Kriesi & Trechsel, 2008:114). Building on these aspects, our research seeks to provide a descriptive overview of the landscape of interest groups in Switzerland and to map their communicative activities. Who are their addressees, through which channels do they communicate, and which instruments do they use?

2. Methodology

2.1. Political interest groups

An analytical definition is important if researchers are confronted with an enormous variety of intermediary organisations, ranging from trade unions, employers' and professional associations to large and small civil society organisations. We have chosen the definition of political interest groups that researchers from the *ECPR Standing Group on Interest Groups* use. They define political interest groups via their shared characteristics: political interest, organisation, and informality (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008).

Political interest refers to activities related to monitoring and influencing policy processes. Relatively few interest groups regularly and professionally work on political issues; most groups are policy amateurs and are not continuously politically active. The aspect of organisation relates to an institutionalised administrative infrastructure, in other words, interest groups differ from both waves of public opinion and non-institutionalised social movements. Informality indicates that interest groups do not stand for elections and refrain from claiming public office.

Concerning the communication of interest groups, political theory distinguishes between an outward orientation to policy-makers and inward orientation to members. Accordingly, groups are assumed to operate with the logic of influence and the logic of membership logic (Streeck, 1994), or with the logic of information and the logic of support (Roose, 2009). This framework was recently extended to consider the media's role and the importance of a public image for interest groups. Berkhout (2010) argues that a third logic – one of reputation – needs consideration when assessing interest groups' outward communication with news media. This is crucial for public interest groups that depend on donations and whose main asset is their public image, but it has some relevance for all interest groups. In addition, we hypothesise that interest groups are not solitary monadic actors but have characteristic interdependencies, both formal (institutionalised) and in informal networks, with other associations in their policy circles and organisational fields. We explore whether this fourth logic of reciprocity becomes visible with which groups aim to share information between organisations in the intermediary network. These four logics are better understood as orientations and attempts to sort out the communicative activities of intermediary organisations with different environments. The well-institutionalised Swiss interest group system and the strong standing of groups in the political process presents us with an ideal background to research these four logics of organisational communication.

2.2. Sampling

Empirical research on interest groups is confronted with challenges in sample building (see the contributions in Halpin & Jordan, 2012). It is nearly impossible to count the total actor population, since new actors often emerge, older ones merge into larger alliances, and many policy amateurs only become active and therefore visible when their issues are on the political agenda. Following the method suggested by Wonka, Baumgartner, Mahoney, and Berkhout (2010), we compiled different data sources and sampled entries from public encyclopaedias, public affairs handbooks, online registries, and parliamentary consultations with relevant political associations. A database on the Swiss interest group population was created by drawing on the following sources: The 2010 online version of the *Publicus*, a registered handbook of public life published by Schwabe Verlag in Basel, which provided a sample of 1812 organisations. Data was then added from www.verbaende.ch, a Swiss website that supports the work of interest associations and which contained addresses of approximately 1300 national organisations that influence Switzerland's political and economic affairs.[1] A total of 1152 organisations fulfilled the criteria of our definition of interest groups.

We then added lists by the National Council (Nationalrat) and the Council of States (Ständerat), because both institutions have registries for the access passes issued for the lobby of parliament (Bundeshaus). Each parliamentarian is allowed to hand out two passes to the building; these usually go to secretaries, scientific counsellors, family members, friends and interest group representatives, resulting in a total of 128 interest organisations with admission to the building. Since the Swiss militia system allows to parliamentarians – both in the National Council and in the Council of States – to work in political organisations during their mandate, their affiliations must be made public in the *Interessenbindungsregister*, the group affiliations registry. Another 294 organisations could be identified. We then added interest groups that were contacted in pre-parliamentary consultations. The Swiss government addresses all potentially affected organisations concerning specific policy proposals and compiles a registry of who has been informed and invited to voice their opinions. All organisations listed for 2010 and 2011 were coded, a total of 1250 organisations. The European Union lobby registry was scanned for organisations based in Switzerland, assuming that they do not only lobby the EU; 21 organisations were added. Finally, we consulted the database assembled on the EU interest group population (Wonka et al., 2010); it delivered 59 entries for organisations from Switzerland. In total, a dataset of 4716 organisations was assembled. After deleting duplicates, 2649 organisations remained.

The registries were then merged. Existing entries were systematically screened, and all organisations that fulfilled our definition of interest groups were coded. At this preparatory stage, a first coding process included the main political activity level, central office location, organisations' internet and email addresses and, where possible, personal email addresses from an organisation's communication department. A manual check of the coding of policy fields was made; missing email addresses were added where they could be obtained from websites. In total, 2475 organisations with identifiable email addresses were contacted with an online questionnaire. An overview is provided in Table 1.

[1] The website is set up by and for interest associations and serves as an information platform. Any association and service provider may enter their contact details. There is little editing of addresses and no information about database maintenance.

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