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What is This?
With a lot of help from their friends: Explaining the social logic of informational lobbying in the European Union

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Abstract
This article examines the informational advantages of interest group networking strategies and how these relate to the provision of policy-relevant information to EU decision-makers. Interest groups obtain a great deal of policy-relevant information through their network connections. In particular, weak tie networks are strong in terms of information sharing among network members. Well-informed groups are best positioned to provide much needed information to EU decision-makers and to thus influence the EU policy-making process. Using original survey and interview data, this article tests the extent to which weak tie strategies help interest groups provide information to the Commission, Parliament and Council. A central finding of this article is that strong ties, rather than weak ties, grant the most important informational advantages.

Keywords
European Union, information provision, interest groups, networking, strength of weak ties

Introduction
Lobbying in the European Union (EU) is largely structured by an exchange of information. Interest groups provide decision-makers with policy-relevant information in order to gain access to the EU legislative process and to have their voices heard at the EU level. Decision-makers tend to be understaffed and pressed
for time and thus welcome information that helps reduce uncertainties about policy outcomes. In other words, information provision is critical to interest group influence in the EU. It is little wonder then, that information provision has been the subject of considerable research. Scholars have mapped out the informational needs of decision-makers in different EU institutions (Bouwen, 2002; Crombez, 2002; Michalowitz, 2004); they have identified the factors that allow interest groups to meet these informational needs and provide the right information to the right decision-makers at the right time (Eising, 2007; Klüver, 2012); and they have analysed the broad range of informational strategies that interest groups use when lobbying various decision-makers (Beyers, 2004; Binderkrantz, 2005; Chalmers, 2013).

While we know a great deal about how information shapes lobbying in the EU, one important element is still missing: the social logic of information provision. How, in other words, do certain networking strategies help interest groups provide information to EU decision-makers? The underlying premise of this analysis is that interest groups commonly acquire a great deal of useful information through their various formal and informal networks, alliances and coalitions. These connections help interest groups share the latest news, pass along tips, forward privileged information, and even circulate research data. The importance of these networks as a means for acquiring information and staying well informed cannot be overstated. In fact, ‘success in lobbying,’ as a lobbyist interviewed for the present study explained, ‘depends entirely on doing things together’ (IP1).¹

In the following analysis I examine how interest group networks help individual interest groups obtain policy relevant information and how this, in turn, translates into providing more or less information to decision-makers. To this end I draw on existing research detailing how networking strategies relate to information sharing and acquisition. I make a distinction between strong-tie networks of tightly knit ‘friends’ and weak-tie networks of loosely linked ‘acquaintances’. Strong ties nurture bonds of trust among network members but tend to circulate redundant information. Weak ties, insofar as they bring together a diffuse group of members with diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise, tend to circulate new information and ideas. The ‘strength’ of weak ties, then, is informational.

To what extent does interest group participation in weak-tie networks grant specific informational advantages? Further, how do these informational advantages help interest groups provide information to EU decision-makers? To answer these questions I have gathered data in elite interviews and a large-scale survey of interest groups active in lobbying at the EU level. Advancing on existing research, empirical analysis was carried out using a multi-dimensional measure of tie strength. Existing research tends to focus on a single measure of tie strength thus occluding its multi-dimensional nature and limiting the persuasiveness of empirical results. I use the same data to examine how different networking strategies actually provide members with specific informational advantages. The existing literature only infers these informational advantages from network structure and thus does not consider them as part of a larger, coherent analytic framework.
In this analysis I find little evidence that weak-tie strategies help interest groups acquire or provide information to decision-makers in the EU. Instead, results present a case for the strength of strong ties. Interest groups are faced with an overabundance rather than paucity of information. The goal of interest groups in the EU is not to obtain ever more new information, but rather to make sense of the information they already have. Strong ties provide the best conditions for shifting and sorting the useful from the useless information and ensuring information reliability.

Information provision and lobbying in the EU

Information provision has largely been studied in terms of either demand-side or supply-side factors. On the demand-side, the stage of the policy-making process determines an interest group’s strategic choices of when and who to lobby as well as the informational needs of decision-makers. The Commission has long been acknowledged as the main target for interest group lobbying. Not only is it easiest to shape policies early on in the legislative process, but the Commission, by virtue of its position in the legislative process, is uniquely open to interest groups’ informational inputs. In particular, the Commission’s technocratic and regulatory functions make it a perfect target for expert and highly technical information (Bouwen, 2004). It also offers multiple points of access, in the form of social dialogue, consultative bodies, expert groups and online consultations, where interest groups are encouraged to provide information to decision-makers. The informational needs of the Parliament and Council are somewhat less straightforward. The dual nature of the Parliament as a branch of the legislative process as well as a public arena for wider political debate makes its informational needs less clear (Lehmann, 2009). The Council, notoriously ‘opaque, closed, elusive, secretive, and intractable’ (Hayes-Renshaw, 2009: 73) provides an even less tenable target for information provision.

Research using formal modelling provides the underlying logic for these demand-side determinants of information provision. It is not just that some decision-makers require information or have certain informational needs, but that interest groups tend to provide information to decision-makers whose preferences are aligned with their own. More information, in other words, is provided to ‘friends’ than to ‘foes’ (Hall and Deardorff, 2006). And in the EU, as Crombez (2002) has shown, the policy stage matters most. Friendly lobbying dominates at the proposal stage and thus interest groups provide more information to decision-makers in the Commission. By contrast, friendly lobbying is a less reliable strategy at the vote stage and thus interest groups provide less information to the Parliament and Council. Indeed, Marshall (2010), in an analysis of lobbying MEPs (Members of the European Parliament), even demonstrates when and why interest groups would lobby unfriendly decision-makers in the Parliament.

On the supply side, an interest group’s capacity to effectively generate and transmit information is the determining factor. Scholars examining the access patterns of interest groups in the EU have related supply-side factors to the
organisational characteristics of interest groups. Private interest groups, like companies and professional organisations, are assumed to be better equipped at providing information to EU decision-makers than diffuse groups, like trade unions and NGOs (Bouwen, 2002, 2004; Dürr and de Biévre, 2007; Michalowitz, 2004). Having greater finances and more personnel are important, but so too is the fact that lobbying in the EU prioritises expert, technical and market-based information. Private groups not only have greater resources than diffuse groups, but are also well-positioned to provide the type of information valued most by EU decision-makers. The capacity to provide information is also a function of an interest group’s internal ability to effectively process information, taking the form of information monitoring, research strategies and information filtering (Chalmers, 2011).

Klüver (2012) has expanded on some of the more basic assumptions of supply-side explanations, assessing the material resources along with the professionalisation, decentralisation and functional differentiation of interest groups as determinants of ‘information supply’ in the context of online consultations.

These demand-side and supply-side explanations provide a compelling picture of the determinants of information provision in the EU. How interest group networking fits into this picture of information provision, however, has garnered considerably less attention in the literature. Carpenter et al.’s (1998, 2004) analyses of information sharing amongst interest groups are rare exceptions, albeit in the US-lobbying context. Interest group networking activities, more generally speaking, have certainly not been ignored in the literature and scholars have long recognised the link between networks and information exchange. In fact, information is one of the central resources that scholars have used to explain when and why networks emerge. Alongside pooling time, staff and money and the promise of generating valuable ‘social capital’, information sharing among network members is a central factor drawing individual interest groups into formal and informal networks and ad hoc coalitions (Heclo, 1978; Hojnacki, 1998; Hula, 1999; Michel, 2010; Schlozman and Tierney, 1986). How information sharing facilitates the information provision process in the EU, however, has yet to be examined.

The social dimension of information provision

The existing research, while providing important insight into the determinants of information provision in the EU, is limited by a more general trend towards an ‘overindividualised’ or ‘a-social’ view of interest group behaviour (Van Winden, 1999: 1). The ‘social embeddedness’ of interest group activities and how this relates to lobbying efficiency and success are overlooked. This is a serious oversight given the important social dimension of interest group activities. Interest groups are, to speak with Heclo (1978: 103), first and foremost ‘network people’. Drawing on these insights, I argue that understanding interest group information provision to EU decision-makers necessarily requires a consideration of this social dimension. As such, the following analysis examines the extent to which networking strategies grant individual interest groups certain informational advantages over other
groups and how this relates to information provision in the EU’s decision-making institutions. Following Mahoney (2007: 366), this analysis understands networking in rather broad terms. Networking ‘ranges on a continuum from very informal and loose […] to highly coordinated enterprises with logos, letterheads, and secretariats’. This broad definition of networking reflects the fact that networks are, to speak with Baumgartner et al. (2009: 65), ‘hard to describe’ in large part because they are ‘characterised by indistinct boundaries’. Importantly, any effort to capture the differences in information flows between different types of networks needs to take these indistinct boundaries seriously. Using a narrow definition of networking would bias analysis to one type of network at the expense of any other and give a false impression of the overall effect of networking strategies on information provision.

This analysis draws heavily on insights from Granovetter’s strength of weak ties hypothesis. Different networking strategies provide different informational advantages for individual network members. The main difference is between the so-called strong tie and weak tie networks. Tightly knit cliques of ‘friends’ in strong tie networks tend to share reliable yet largely redundant information. This is a function of the similarity of network members. As Granovetter (1973: 1366) explained prosaically: If someone ‘tells a rumor to all his close friends, and they do likewise, many will hear the rumor a second and third time, since those linked by strong-ties tend to share friends’. Loosely linked ‘acquaintances’ in weak tie networks, by contrast, are ‘strong’ in an information-sharing sense. In particular, these types of networks bring individuals together ‘from distant parts of the social system,’ with sometimes radically divergent backgrounds, expertise and preferences (Granovetter, 1983: 202). The diversity of network members in weak tie networks gets reflected in the diversity of information shared amongst members. Indeed, interest groups benefit most from weak tie networks because they provide a steady stream of new and novel information. In a system where information is the currency of lobbying, interest groups exploiting their weak-tie networking connections would have a considerable informational advantage over those groups that cannot. This leads to my central hypothesis.

H1: The more interest groups pursue weak tie networking strategies, the more information they will provide EU decision-makers.

While borrowing many of its central insights from the extant literature, this analysis also advances on the existing literature in two important ways. First, the type of informational advantage afforded network members by certain networking strategies have rarely been put to the test. Informational advantage is assumed to be a function of the structure of a network and the nature of the relations among network members. We know little about the extent to which this is the case. Where previous research only makes assumptions about these informational benefits, this analysis investigates. It thus elaborates on the specific informational advantages certain networking strategies afford their members and how this affects an interest group’s ability to provide more information to EU decision-makers.
The second advance made in this analysis is measuring tie strength. Tie strength is notoriously difficult to measure and Granovetter’s famously nebulous definition provides little help. He explains that ‘the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize a tie’ (Granovetter, 1973: 1361). Tie strength clearly consists of several different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, elements. Scholars, however, tend to measure tie strength by focusing on only one of these elements, selecting the single dimension of tie strength that perhaps best fits their needs or that is easiest to operationalise given specific research conditions (see Friedkin, 1982; Levin and Cross, 2004; Liu and Duff, 1972). Using a single measure of tie strength conflates and potentially confuses the different dimensions of tie strength. What is more, some networks might be strong on certain dimensions of tie strength but weak on others. A single measure tells us little about which dimensions of tie strength are doing the most causal work.

The determinants of information provision in the EU

Data for this analysis were collected in 64 elite interviews and a large-scale online survey of 1000 interest group representatives active in lobbying at the EU level. For the survey, an initial list of 2500 interest groups was generated by drawing together information from three sources: the European Commission’s Register of Interest Groups, the 2008 edition of Landmarks’ ‘European Public Affairs Directory’, and the ‘Brussels-Europe Liaison Office’ list. Combining these three sources addressed potential bias towards lobbying in any particular EU institution. A sampling frame of 1000 interest groups was established using a simple proportional sampling technique. A total of 308 responses was collected, putting the response rate at about 30%.

Two central variables are tested in this analysis: tie strength and information provision. In what follows, I discuss how each of these variables was measured using survey questions.

Measuring strong and weak ties

Combining Granovetter’s definition and insights from the existing research, I measure tie strength across three dimensions: (1) time, (2) reciprocal service and (3) emotional intensity/intimacy.
Time. Time is the most commonly used and straightforward measure of tie strength. The amount of ‘time required to maintain a contact’ (Boorman, 1975), the ‘frequency of contact’ (Hansen, 1999) or ‘frequency of communicating’ (Levin and Cross, 2004), for instance, reflect tie strength. The central assumption is simple: more time equals stronger ties and less time equals weaker ties. Time was tapped by asking survey respondents how frequently their organisation is ‘in contact’ with other interest groups. A list of the following 11 different types of interest groups was provided: NGOs, professional associations, companies, trade unions, public authorities, consultancies, law firms, think tanks, academic organisations, chambers of commerce and religious organisations. Frequency was indicated on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 being ‘never’ and 5 being ‘very often’. Higher scores correspond to stronger ties and lower scores to weaker ties.

Reciprocal service. Reciprocal service is the extent to which interactions among network members are balanced, even and symmetrical. Do network members engage in lopsided interactions, frequently providing resources, advice or information but receiving none in return? Or do they reciprocate these services in kind? Reciprocating services, while conducive to building trust within networks, require considerable time and effort. Non-reciprocated interactions, by contrast, free-up network members to pursue other contacts or lobbying activities and are ideal for acquiring a great amount of novel information with a minimum of effort and time (Friedkin, 1982; Granovetter, 1973). Non-reciprocated interactions nurture weak ties while reciprocated interactions nurture strong ties. Reciprocal service is measured as the extent to which individual interest groups have symmetrical or asymmetrical interactions with their network partners and is calculated as the difference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest group type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>25.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional associations</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>23.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companies</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public authorities</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultancies</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade unions</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chambers of commerce</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think tanks</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic organisations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious organisations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law firms</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
between each individual respondent’s reported interactions with all of their network partners and the average of each partner’s reported contact with the respondent. Higher scores correspond to a greater symmetry of interactions and thus to more frequent reciprocal service. Lower scores correspond to greater asymmetry of interactions and thus to less frequent reciprocal service.

**Emotional intensity/intimacy.** What Granovetter refers to as emotional intensity and intimacy is perhaps the most difficult dimension of tie strength to measure. It relates to the nature of the bonds between network members as well as the reasons why individual interest groups pursue networking strategies at all. Following the existing literature, this analysis examines emotional intensity and intimacy in terms of: (1) similarities amongst network members in terms of organisation type (referred to as Homophily and Heterophily); (2) similarities amongst network members in terms of aims and goals; and (3) the perceived informational advantages associated with networking.

**Homophily and heterophily.** Many scholars have taken intensity and intimacy to be reflected in the basic similarity or dissimilarity of kind or type of network members. This can be expressed succinctly as either a preponderance of homophily (being similar) or heterophily (being dissimilar) amongst network members (Rogers and Bhowmik, 1971). Homophily and heterophily have been studied in terms of demographics (Constant et al. 1996) and class (Liu and Duff, 1972) as well as whether network members are ‘friends’ or ‘acquaintances’, ‘relatives’ or ‘neighbours’ (Erickson and Yancey, 1980; Lin et al., 1981). In this study, homophily and heterophily were tapped by asking survey respondents how frequently their organisation is in contact with other types of interest groups (using the same list of 11 interest group types noted above). Homophily is measured as the frequency with which each individual group interacts with ‘like’ groups (i.e. an NGO interacting with other NGOs). Higher scores reflect greater homophily amongst network members. Heterophily is the frequency with which each individual group interacts with ‘unlike’ groups (i.e. an NGO interacting with other types of groups except other NGOs). Higher scores reflect greater heterophily amongst network members.

**Similarity of aims and goals.** In addition to the more superficial network member characteristics, intensity and intimacy also have an important cognitive dimension. It is not only about whether members look alike, but also if they think alike. Thus, for instance, scholars have examined the extent to which network members share opinions, ideas, goals and aims (Carpenter et al., 1998; Levin and Cross, 2004). Sharing more goals and aims produces stronger ties than sharing fewer goals and aims. Thus, intensity and intimacy were also tapped by asking survey respondents about the importance of networking based on ‘shared interests and goals’. Respondents indicated importance on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 being not important at all and 5 being very important. Higher scores reflect stronger ties and lower scores weaker ties.
**Informational advantages.** A lack of intense or intimate relations amongst network members does not mean an absence of networking. While only inferred by Granovetter, individuals or interest groups can also be motivated to interact with others because of the perceived informational advantages associated with networking. These informational advantages have only rarely been examined (for exceptions see Carpenter et al., 1998 and Levin and Cross, 2004). This analysis directly assesses the extent to which interest groups pursue networking strategies specifically to reap these informational rewards. To this end, respondents were asked to assess the importance (using the same 1 to 5 scale mentioned above) of networking in order to obtain (1) ‘new information’, (2) ‘novel ideas’ and (3) ‘new contacts’. On all three indicators, higher scores indicate weaker ties and lower scores stronger ties.

Table 2 summarises the various dimensions of tie strength, the indicators used to measure them and the predicted effect each will have on the dependent variable, information provision. Principal component analysis (using a promax rotation) of the eight indicators of tie strength provides some evidence of a distinction between strong and weak ties. ‘Time’ and ‘reciprocal service’ clearly load on one factor while networking for ‘new information’, ‘new ideas’ and ‘contacts’ load on another factor. However, results for homophily, heterophily and similar interests and goals

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**Table 2.** Overview of variables and indicators for tie strength.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Predicted effect on the dependent variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Frequency of contact with all other types of interest groups.</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal service</td>
<td>Frequency of symmetrical contacts individual interest groups have with network members.</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterophily</td>
<td>Frequency of contacts with ‘unlike’ groups</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophily</td>
<td>Frequency of contacts with ‘like’ groups</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar ideas and goals</td>
<td>Importance of networking because network members share goals and interests</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informational advantages</td>
<td>Importance of networking to gain information</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of networking to gain novel ideas</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of networking to gain new contacts</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
load on unexpected factors and with lower load values. It might be the case that these results are picking up on the less than clear definition of tie strength we have inherited from Granovetter. As such, I have retained all of the indicators in the following empirical analysis. Scholars have correctly pointed out the limits of such a ‘tournament of variables’ approach, issuing strong warnings against potential ‘pathologies’ that creep into regression analyses that use a large number of variables (Achen, 2002; Schrodt, 2010). Nevertheless, one of the central aims of this analysis is not only to test the strength of weak ties hypothesis in the case of EU lobbying, but to provide insight into which specific dimensions of strong and weak tie networking are doing most of the causal work when it comes to providing information to EU decision-makers.

Control variables

Following the existing literature, detailed above, two control variables will also be examined in order to isolate the effects of networking on information provision. First, demand-side factors related to policy stage are important in determining when interest groups provide information to the EU. Interest groups tend to provide more information in an effort to support friendly decision-makers at the proposal stage than they do at the vote stage. As such, respondents were asked to assess the frequency (using the same 5 point scale) with which they provide information in order to ‘support the position of EU decision-makers’. Responses were recorded for each EU institution and thus provide insight into differences across the various policy stages. Supply-side factors like resources, personnel and interest group type have often been linked to the organisational characteristics of interest groups. EU-level lobbying has been characterised as a type of elite pluralism, where private interest groups dominate at the expense of diffuse interest groups. This might be because private interest groups tend to not only be better financed and staffed than diffuse groups, but also because they tend to be in a better position to provide the type of technical and expert information that the EU requires. To control for organisational characteristics, a dummy variable was created for private interest groups that includes companies, professional associations and consultancies.

Information provision

Information provision was measured by asking respondents how frequently (using the same 1 to 5 scale described above) their organisation provides information to the EU’s main decision-making institutions – namely, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council. Measuring information provision in terms of frequency is in line with other empirical analyses. Eising (2007), for instance, examines how the amount of policy-relevant information an interest group can provide is linked to interest group access to EU decision-makers. More recently, Klüver (2012) has assessed information supply in terms of the number of words contained in individual online consultations.
Empirical analysis

Table 3 presents the results of an empirical analysis of survey data using ordered logistic regression. The networking determinants of information provision (corresponding to eight different indictors measuring tie strength and the two control variables) are tested in three models, each corresponding to different EU institutions.

Regression results show little evidence that weak ties help interest groups provide information to EU decision-makers. Rather, the findings highlight the importance of strong tie factors as well as lobbying to support friends. Specifically, information provision is largely a function of the degree to which interest group and decision-maker preferences are aligned.4 With a one unit increase for ‘lobbying to support decision-makers’, the odds of providing more information are at least 1.70 greater in all three EU decision-making institutions (odds ratios not shown in table). The results also show significant differences (at the 0.01 level) in all three models. This finding is consistent with a general and long-standing consensus in the literature that interest groups tend to lobby friends more frequently than foes (Bauer et al., 1963; Heinz et al., 1990; Potters and Van Winden, 1990). Hall and Deardorff (2006) have explained how interest groups act as service bureaus to allied decision-makers to whom they provide a type of professional information service.

Table 3. Determinants of information provision to EU decision-makers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>European Commission</th>
<th>European Parliament</th>
<th>Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>0.28 (.15)*</td>
<td>0.02 (.15)</td>
<td>0.27 (0.15)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal service</td>
<td>0.05 (.04)</td>
<td>0.10 (.04)**</td>
<td>−0.07 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterophily</td>
<td>−2.92 (1.55)*</td>
<td>−0.52 (1.56)</td>
<td>−1.9 (1.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophily</td>
<td>0.20 (.16)</td>
<td>0.40 (.16)*</td>
<td>−0.19 (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared goals and interests</td>
<td>0.86 (0.18)***</td>
<td>0.57 (0.17)***</td>
<td>0.57 (0.17)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network to gain information</td>
<td>−0.00 (0.17)</td>
<td>−0.40 (0.18)**</td>
<td>−0.04 (0.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network to gain novel ideas</td>
<td>0.04 (0.13)</td>
<td>0.19 (0.12)</td>
<td>0.33 (0.15)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network to gain new contacts</td>
<td>−0.40 (0.17)**</td>
<td>−0.38 (0.16)**</td>
<td>−0.58 (0.15)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobby friends</td>
<td>0.91 (0.14)***</td>
<td>1.00 (0.14)***</td>
<td>0.53 (0.13)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation characteristics</td>
<td>0.82 (0.32)***</td>
<td>−0.05 (0.32)</td>
<td>0.17 (0.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>−265.43</td>
<td>−306.98</td>
<td>−329.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LR $\chi^2$ (10)</td>
<td>115.40</td>
<td>108.55</td>
<td>68.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo $R^2$</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entries are ordered logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *p < 0.10. **p < 0.05. ***p < 0.01.
Information provision is a type of ‘legislative subsidy’ that is meant to reduce the workload of decision-makers instead of changing their minds. But this is not, as Crombez (2002) argues, relegated to the proposal stage of the EU decision-making process. Lobbying friends appears to be correlated with providing more information in the proposal and vote stages of the EU decision-making process.

Organisational characteristics, the second control variable, are also significant (at the 0.05 level), albeit only in the Commission. This finding provides some support for the idea that the Commission remains the main target of interest group lobbying and that private interest groups tend to dominate at this level. It thus speaks to the notion that lobbying in the EU is characterised by a type of elite pluralism, where private interests dominate at the expense of diffuse interest groups (Mazey and Richardson, 1997; Streeck and Schmitter, 1991). Importantly, this finding contrasts with other evidence suggesting that MEPs have changed their preference for information sources from NGOs (in a 2005 study) to industry actors (in a 2009 study) (Burson-Marsteller, 2005, 2009). Where these studies show a more recent tendency towards elite pluralism in the Parliament, my findings suggest that this is not yet the case. The difference in the findings might reflect the fact that the Burson-Marsteller studies (2005, 2009) are based on data collected from decision-makers while the data used here are from the perspective of interest groups. It stands to reason that decision-makers would prefer to paint a picture of equal and balanced access to all types of interest groups.

The findings of this analysis also give some support to Klüver (2012) regarding the importance of the organisational characteristics of interest groups when it comes to information provision. It should be noted, however, that organisation type is a weak proxy for group resources and personnel. Direct measures of interest group finances and personnel, for instance, would be needed to get an accurate picture of the role that these factors play in the process of providing information to the EU. Nevertheless, this proxy for organisational characteristics does provide more direct insight into the issue of elite pluralism in the EU lobbying arena.

In addition to confirming some long-held assumptions about information provision in the EU, regression results provide some interesting insights into the information provision process. Specifically, information provision appears to be less about the strength of weak ties and more about the strength of strong ties. Indeed, three strong tie indicators show significant correlations. The more time that interest groups invest in their networks and, to a slightly lesser extent, the more reciprocal services they offer other network members are statistically significant determinants of information provision in at least one of the Commission, Parliament and the Council. Most importantly, networking based on shared aims and goals is significant at the 0.01 level in all three EU decision-making institutions. With a one unit increase in the extent to which interest groups stress networks based on shared aims and goals, we can expect a 0.87 increase in the log odds of providing more information to the Commission and a 0.57 increase in the Parliament and Council. Networks based on homophilic relations, however, show somewhat weaker differences in the Parliament (significant at the 0.1 level).
Importantly, most weak tie indicators (including heterophily, networking to gain information and networking to get new contacts) are either unimportant determinants of information provision or are negatively correlated with information provision in at least one EU institution. Only networking to gain novel ideas appears to be important but only in terms of providing information to the Council. Taken together, these results do not provide much support for the strength of weak ties hypothesis nor the central hypothesis tested in this analysis. Instead, these findings support a case for the strength of strong ties.

The central findings of the regression analysis beg two questions. First, why do strong ties lead to more information provision than weak ties? What kind of informational advantages are strong ties affording network members? Second, why do some strong tie indicators appear to explain more variation in the models than others? Specially, how can we explain the seemingly contradictory differences between strong ties based on shared goals and interests and those based on homophilic relations? Do only specific aspects of strong ties afford network members certain informational advantages? In what follows I will discuss each question in turn.

The strength of strong ties in the EU

Why do strong ties trump weak ties when it comes to providing information to EU decision-makers? What informational advantages do strong ties afford network members and how does this relate to patterns of information provision? Interview data suggest that the real strength of strong ties in the EU context is related to information availability and reliability.

Effective lobbying is not just about providing information to decision-makers. It also involves the daily ‘pre-advocacy’ tasks of gathering and monitoring information sources in order to obtain useful, relevant and understandable information. In the EU, however, this task is especially daunting. Rather than information scarcity, interest groups in the EU suffer ‘information overload’ (IP2). Lobbyists explain that there is simply ‘too much information’ (IP3), that they are ‘drowning in information’ (IP4), ‘have more information than (they) need’ (IP5) and that they are faced with a ‘daily avalanche of information’. ‘I get over 200 emails a day,’ as one lobbyist explained, ‘and 170 are news. It’s just a pure nightmare’ (IP2).

Informational overload changes the value of information. As one lobbyist put it succinctly, ‘too much information is no information at all’ (IP6). The regression results already suggest that networks based on getting new information, novel ideas and new contacts – central weak-tie factors – are not important determinants of information provision. Informational overload simply makes the task of getting more and more new information irrelevant. It is no surprise then that interest groups in the EU place very little value on these activities more generally speaking. Figure 1 organises these variables, along with networking based on shared aims and interests (a central strong-tie indicator), on a bar graph.

For more than 57% of respondents, networking based on similar interests and goals is the most important consideration. Only about 25% of respondents accord
the same level of importance to networking in order to obtain new information or new contacts. A mere 15% of interest groups network because of the perceived benefits of novel ideas obtained from network members.

When it comes to networking in the EU, getting new information, ideas and contacts is not a priority. There is too much information and it has lost its value. This does not mean that networking no longer provides its members with some informational advantage. In fact, as the regression results demonstrate, strong tie networking strategies are correlated with providing more information to decision-makers. What are the informational advantages of strong tie networks? My contention is that strong ties are well suited to providing a specific type of informational advantage that is particularly useful under conditions of information overload. The basic idea is this: when new information loses its value, reliable information becomes invaluable. This is a point that critics of Granovetter’s strength of weak ties hypothesis have long acknowledged. He is indifferent to the context in which information is shared and thus posits that more new information is always more valuable information (see Boorman, 1975). My contention is that more information is not necessarily more useful or valuable information. If fact, information scarcity and abundance changes the calculus network members use to select weak or strong tie strategies (Carpenter et al., 2003). While weak ties trump strong ties when it comes to circulating new information, strong ties have greater advantages when it comes to circulating information that is useful and reliable. Strong ties not only nurture trust among network members, but they also change the way that information is received, understood and used by the receiver. For instance, members of strong tie networks ‘are more likely to expend effort to ensure that a knowledge seeker sufficiently understands and can put into use newly acquired information’ which, in turn, leads to ‘greater knowledge exchange’ (Levin and Cross, 2004: 1479). By reducing conflicts and the need to verify information, trust also makes knowledge transfer less costly.

Figure 1. Reasons for networking.
Given the conditions of informational overload in the EU context, it is little wonder that interest groups prioritise strong ties over weak ties. As one lobbyist explained, it is ‘not about being able to find out the information’ but rather ‘about sifting the information you get’ (IP7). Filtering information is therefore ‘the 60 million dollar question’ (IP7) and strong ties provide this filtering mechanism. Having ‘people you can trust’ in your networks aids in ‘separating information from gossip’ (IP8). ‘You don’t have to worry about [information] accuracy or getting bad information because you know who it came from’ (IP9). The ultimate value of information shared among strong-tie network members is that it does not need to be filtered, checked and double-checked. It can be assumed to be reliable.

**Network representativeness and information provision**

The second question raised by the regression results is why do some strong tie indicators explain more variation with regard to information provision than others? In particular, how can we explain these differences in terms of the information advantages provided by different strong tie networking strategies? I suggest that two conditions help provide an explanation: first, the Commission’s propensity to consult with the so-called ‘representative’ networks; second, the exigency of issue-based lobbying in the EU.

As a consensus-driven institution, the Commission has had a long-standing preference for interacting with interest group networks that are ‘representative’ of an ‘EU-position’ rather than individual positions (European Commission, 2001, 2002). Thus, the preferred consultation partners of the Commission are networks that speak with a unified voice across a variety of policy areas, that represent as many member states as possible and that present, especially for private sector groups, a so-called ‘industry position’ (IP10). The Commission prefers representative networks partly because they lend the semblance of legitimacy to the policy-making process (Greenwood, 2007; Wonka et al., 2010) and partly because they signal to decision-makers where the ‘bulk of support lies’ on a given issue (Mahoney, 2007: 368). Indeed, the Commission even plays an active role (providing funding and privileged points of access) in creating these types of interest group networks, as recent research on EU social policy (Treib and Falkner, 2009) and anti-Tobacco groups (Boessen and Maarse, 2009) has demonstrated. But the Commission’s concern might also have a more pragmatic element. As one lobbyist explains: ‘Decision-makers don’t want to talk to 100 [lobbyists]. They want to know what [lobbyists] think together (…) They don’t really care who shows up, they want to speak one time, get the one position and that’s it’ (IP11). Either way, the Commission’s preference for representative networks seems to put homophilic networks comprised of superficially ‘like’ interest groups at a considerable disadvantage.

The Commission’s preference for representativeness in networks seems to disadvantage homophilic networks. This of course does not mean that certain homophilic groups do not exist in Brussels. Indeed, there are a number of very prominent
‘homophilic’ interest group networks operating at the EU-level. Concord and Social Platform, for example, are networks comprised exclusively of NGOs. The Regions with Legislative Powers network (REGLEG) represents public authorities. CEPLIS and EUROCADRES are prominent examples for professional associations. Homophilic networks serve important organisational functions and perhaps even facilitate resource pooling among network members. Indeed, these networks have long traditions, permanent secretariats, considerable resources, membership requirements and regular meetings (Greenwood, 2007).

When it comes to information provision, however, these homophilic networks seem to matter very little. Far more important than being of similar ‘type’ is having shared interests and aims. Two points are important to make. First, having similar interests and aims does not require homophily. Forming representative networks and meeting the preferences of the Commission do not require forgoing strong ties. It only means forgoing homophilic ties. This is perhaps reflected in the results for another important strong tie indicator, time (and to a lesser extent reciprocal service). Second, the EU’s representativeness requirement does not necessarily advantage heterophilic networks. As the regression results show, heterophilic ties are actually negatively correlated with information provision to the Commission. It therefore seems that superficial similarities and dissimilarities (homophily and heterophily) have little to do with representativeness. Instead, demonstrating an industry position or showing where the bulk of support lies only really require network members having similar goals and ideas. It is thus little wonder that this is the main reason lobbyists give for pursuing networks in the first place (Figure 1).

These types of representative, strong-tie networks that forgo superficial similarities also afford their members certain informational advantages. First, these types of non-homophilic strong-tie networks are suggestive of what Mahoney (2007: 368) calls ‘ad hoc coalitions’: networks of interest groups that form ‘for a single discrete issue fight’. Unlike formal, permanent homophilic networks such as Concord, Social Platform or CEPLIS, these ad hoc networks are characterised by informality and a lack of permanence. Ad hoc coalitions are more flexible than permanent, homophilic networks, giving them a unique capacity to mobilise quickly around a single issue. In the words of one lobbyist: ‘Networking helps to be in [the policymaking process] right from the start’ or ‘at the earliest stage possible’. Otherwise, ‘when you already have a written document it is too late’ (IP8). These ad hoc strong tie networks are built around similar interests and aims and thus are well suited to lobbying on a single issue. Where Concord or CEPLIS need to cajole members into a single position on an issue (a process that can be slow and can result in lowest common denominator positions), these ad hoc networks, formed around similar interest and aims.

Homophilic networks also appear to offer network members few informational advantages. According to one interest group representative, information that is circulated among members in homophilic networks tends to be ‘extremely broad. It focuses on overarching issues that might be of interest to the whole sector but that is just too general to be useful’ (IP12). Furthermore, these networks serve more
as information depositories than information exchange hubs, with each network member providing expert information on their own topic but benefiting little from the information provided by others. The broad focus of these networks, and the fact that they are not organised around a single issue, means very little substantive overlap between network members’ interests. Specialisation and an issue-based focus are, as Coen (1997: 96) has demonstrated with regard to business interest group networks, undermined by an unwanted ‘broadening of firms’ political agendas’. The only information that an individual member of such networks would find relevant is the information they have themselves provided. As one NGO lobbyist explained: ‘If [Concord or Social Platform] have information’ that is relevant for us, ‘we already know it because we supplied it’ (IP9).

Conclusions

This analysis has examined the link between various networking strategies, their respective informational advantages and how this relates to information provision to EU decision-makers. It has presented three main findings. First, with regard to information provision, strong ties trump weak ties in the EU. This trend was found to hold across all three EU decision-making institutions (although with larger effects in the Commission and Parliament than in the Council). Rather than finding support for the strength of weak ties hypothesis, this analysis presents a case for the strength of strong ties. Thus, the second finding is related to understanding the specific informational advantages of strong ties. It seems that, in the EU, there is too much information and thus, rather than actively seeking out ever more new information, interest group tends to favour reliable information. When new information loses its value, reliable information becomes invaluable. Strong ties help groups filter information and ensure the receipt of reliable information. Finally, this analysis has found that homophilic network connections do not provide the same benefits as other dimensions of strong ties (especially ties based on similar goals and interests). The Commission’s preference for network representativeness and the exigency of issue-based lobbying in the EU explain why homophilic networking is less important in terms of information provision than other strong tie variables.

Two central advances were made in this analysis. The first was using a multi-dimensional measure of tie strength. Where most studies use just one measure, this analysis has brought together insights from the existing literature and used eight separate indicators. Doing so provides a more accurate measure of tie strength and allows us to pinpoint the specific aspects of tie strength that were doing most of the causal work in each model. This was particularly helpful in understanding why some aspects of strong tie networking strategies mattered for information provision more than others. The second advance was the examination of the actual information advantages related to different networking strategies. Most existing studies only infer these advantages from network structure. Focusing on information provision rather than, say, interest group access or influence, draws out a direct
correlation with different networking strategies. Further, data from interviews were used to provide additional details regarding the specific informational advantages of these different networking strategies. While we can pinpoint certain informational advantages of strong tie networking amongst interest groups, it is very difficult to rule out certain competing explanations. For instance, it might also be the case that strong tie networks have specific non-informational advantages that could prove beneficial in lobbying activities. Strong tie networks might also be responsible for greater interest group mobilisation or, by nurturing bonds of trust, they might also facilitate the sharing of strategies and tactics crucial to information provision. These alternative explanations are unfortunately not captured in this analysis. However, by focusing on information provision, this analysis has gone some distance in isolating the informational advantages of different networking strategies.

Several of the major limitations of the present analysis are related to the online survey data. These data measure interest group networking strategies in the aggregate and thus are not able to control for issue-specific effects (see Klüver, 2012). They also measure tie strength amongst network members in terms of group types and not specific individual network partners. This has important implications for the findings presented here: while responses were gathered from individuals, survey questions asked about the organisation’s networking activities. Do networking ties amongst organisations mirror those amongst individuals? Do the informational advantages of networking at the level of the organisation differ from those at the individual level? The data collected here are hard pressed to answer these questions. Fruitful future research should thus control for issue-specific effects and collect data at the individual level. Doing so would provide a more complete picture of interest group networking strategies and information provision in the EU.

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Notes
1. Interviews will be cited throughout using the following system: IP1, official, Coca-Cola Ltd., Brussels, 8 December 2009; IP2, Timo Schubert, Associate Director, ADS Insight, Brussels, 17 November 2010; IP3, official, Vertretung des Landes Niedersachsen bei der EU, Brussels, 20 October 2009; IP4, Martin Andersen, Head of Office, Kalundborg EU-Office, Brussels, 13 October 2009; IP5, official, Bureau Alsace, Brussels, 22 October 2009; IP6, official, Délégation Générale de la Région Rhone-Alps, Brussels, 23 October 2009; IP7, Martina Weitsch, official, Quaker Council for European Affairs,

2. Questions for the online survey were derived from information gathered in elite interviews with interest group representatives as well as the relevant academic literature. To ensure reliability and quality in responses, surveys were primarily sent to organisation presidents, vice presidents, executive directors, upper level management or those legally responsible for the organisation. While it is very difficult to remark on the effort given by respondents during the completion of the survey, especially considering that online surveys cannot be monitored, targeting these individuals directly should reflect a certain seriousness, care and thoughtfulness in the responses given.

3. The data used to estimate tie strength were based on information provided by individual respondents about their networking activities with other types of interest groups and thus not specific individual groups. Following an insightful point made by one of the reviewers, it needs to be mentioned that this kind of “non-sociometric” data (data gathered about groups and not individuals) might also be picking up on other aspects of lobbying. Factor analysis (discussed above) was used to examine the extent to which the data on each tie strength indicator did indeed reflect a distinction between strong and weak ties. While this provides some evidence that the survey data used here are measuring different dimensions of tie strength, planned future research will couple insights about the different dimensions of tie strength with the use of sociometric network data.

4. The estimation method used in this analysis was ordered logistic regression. Hence, pseudo $R^2$ scores do not provide an accurate picture of how much variation is actually being explained in each model. This is why my discussion focuses primarily on the direction of the correlation and its statistical significance.

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