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Conceptualizing and measuring party-interest group relationships

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Abstract

Relationships between political parties and interest groups form structures that enable and constrain political action. Yet there is a lack of consensus on what ‘party-group relationships’ means. We propose a conceptualization focusing on ties as means for structured interaction, which is different from sharing or transfer of resources and ideological kinship. Our conceptual discussion suggests that organizational ties form a single yet hierarchical scale of strength: groups that have many formal ties with particular parties would also have weaker (ie, less formal) ties with these parties, but not vice versa. To validate our conceptual map, we furthermore check whether the distinction between organizational ties, resource sharing/provision and ideological kinship holds empirically. We explore our expectations by means of novel interest groups survey data from seven mature democracies. The results of our scaling analysis provide support for our predictions and have multiple implications for future research on the causes and effects of party-group relationships.

Keywords

conceptual definition, interest organizations, linkage, party-group ties

Introduction

Relationships between political parties and interest groups have deep historical roots. One important characteristic of the concept ‘mass party’ is that they have strong organizational ties with organized interests. Left-of-centre mass parties have strong ties to trade unions and left-of-centre parties. Right-of-centre mass parties have strong ties to business associations and religious groups to religious parties. As a matter of fact, the ‘mass party model’ denotes a type of party that is organizationally amalgamated with,

or even emerged out of a particular organized interest (Duverger, 1972 [1954]: 5–7; Von Beyme, 1985: 192; Warner, 2000).

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Later, these traditional connections declined (Allern and Bale, 2012; Kirchheimer, 1966). Ad hoc *contacts*, allowing groups to retain flexibility and freedom of manoeuvre, became more useful with a growing number of parties and interest groups. Nevertheless, recent research shows that both old and new parties interact on regular basis with numerous interest groups in contemporary politics (e.g. Allern, 2010; Berkhout et al., 2019; Eichenberg and Mach, 2017; Koger et al., 2009; Otjes and Rasmussen, 2017). Organizational connections still provide platforms for political influence and decision-making. Thus, party-group relationships form structures that may shape, enable, and constrain political action. Comprehending the properties and consequences of these relationships is therefore crucial for understanding the political world. Yet, we know relatively little about the nature, causes and consequences of these relationships across different political systems and policy sectors (Allern and Bale, 2012; Beyers et al., 2008; Fraussen and Halpin, 2018; Thomas, 2001; Witko, 2009).

One reason for this is the lack of consensus on what core concepts denote. While individual parties and interest groups are often described as being ‘aligned’, ‘interlinked’, ‘tied’ and ‘connected’ as organizations, it is unclear and contested what this means both in theory and in practice. This article seeks to clarify this conceptual ambiguity. Therefore, we will address the question of what attributes are constitutive of party-interest group relationships both theoretically and empirically. We make the case for defining ‘the relationship’ as what connects participants and reserve the term ‘tie’ to the various attributes that create some sort of connection between the two sides.

Our attention focuses on ties as *structured interaction*, which is different from *sharing or transfer of resources and ideological affinity*. In addition we make a conceptual distinction between organizational ties and the issue-based contacts which are often central to studies of interest groups. We also develop measures linking the relevant conceptual attributes with empirical observations to map the strength of organizational ties across countries. In this way, we are able to examine the questions of whether weaker (less formal) ties are a compensation for a lack of stronger (formal) ties – or whether they rather supplement each other? This issue may have been a moot point historically, with a lack of large N-data preventing the investigation of such conceptual questions empirically. Finally, we also examine how our conceptualization of the relationship between parties and interest groups as structured interaction is related to the other conceptualizations of this relationship empirically (i.e. to ties based on resources or ideology).

Thus, the article addresses three specific research questions empirically: 1) To what extent is interaction between interest organizations and political parties based on organizational ties? 2) Is such structured interaction a one-dimensional phenomenon? That is, are different categories

of organizational ties related, or do we need more than one dimension to analyze relationships? And more broadly: 3) Do the conceptual distinctions between different ties – interaction, resources and ideology – hold empirically? We use a broad concept of *interest group* (as associations), including non-party and non-governmental membership-based organizations and professional advocacy groups.¹ The conceptual discussion is followed by an empirical investigation of the dimensionality of ties through a novel, built-for-purpose dataset based on an interest group survey conducted simultaneously in seven mature democracies.

The empirical analysis largely confirms our conceptual map. It suggests that structured interaction is a one-dimensional phenomenon, but that a hierarchy of ties exists, and that organizational ties are empirically distinct from ties in terms of resource provision or ideological proximity. The results have multiple implications for future research. Firstly, the hierarchical one-dimensionality suggests that different ties are caused by the same factors but that their relative importance might vary at different levels of institutionalization. Future explanatory analyses of variation in party-group ties should therefore carefully consider this issue. Secondly, the results show that different conceptualizations of the relationship between parties and interest groups are empirically distinct. Therefore and thirdly, the various resources parties and interest groups might offer each other can be seen as possible explanatory factors or effects of structured organizational ties between an interest group and a political party. Fourthly, our findings also speak to the literature on political networks by confirming that many parties and interest groups are interdependent by means of institutionalized interaction. Thus, one should consider such ties as possible constraints when studying individual party-group choices of different kinds. Overall, our findings suggest that it is still crucial to understand party-group relationships if we want to understand the functioning of both party and interest group politics today.

The challenge of conceptualization

What constitutes ‘relationships between interest groups and parties’ is unclear and contested (Allern and Bale, 2012). Some scholars use the term relationships in a wide, system-oriented sense. Heaney (2010) approaches, for example, party-group relationships as how parties and interest groups act or compete as ‘brokers’ vis-à-vis each other. Others identify party strategies vis-à-vis interest groups in terms of affiliation, alliances and co-optation (Schwartz, 2005). Likewise, interest group scholars have mainly focused on groups’ lobbying strategies towards parties: in particular, attention has been paid to the relative importance of issue-based contact with parties or parliamentary groups compared to interaction with other political actors or institutions (Binderkrantz, 2005). In the case of social democratic

Table 1. Alternative manifestations of party-interest group relationships at the national level.

Kind of Relationship	Interaction	Resources	Ideology
Examples of specific ties	Guaranteed (mutual) executive representation, liaison committee, regularized (elite) meetings, leadership overlap/transfers	Financial donations, transfer of labour, shared resource pools, provision/sharing of information	Degrees of ideological affinity, the idea of enduring 'friends and foes'

Source: Allern and Bale (2012, 2017) with own modifications.

parties, Kitschelt (1994: 225) emphasizes trade union control of leadership appointments and thereby power relations.

Such aspects are certainly relevant for the intersection between party and interest group politics. However, lexically, 'relationship' means 'connection' or 'association', and 'the relation' is what connects or binds participants in a relationship. In the remainder of this article, we understand 'relationship' in this way. Connections can be facilitated by different means, which we call 'ties'. These are the attributes that create connections between the two sides (Granovetter, 1973) – in our case, between parties and interest organizations. Also in this sense, however, party-group relationships have been conceptualized in different ways. Table 1 sums up some of the most common alternative understandings and manifestations of party-group relationships as 'connections': *interaction*, *resources* and *ideology*. Some scholars also combine different understandings (e.g. Thomas, 2001; Von Beyme, 1985: 191).

In all cases, the focus is implicitly or explicitly on the mechanisms that connect the sphere of social interests with the sphere of political parties. The emphasis on *interaction* goes back to the foundations of comparative politics. In the pioneering sociological studies, relationships between particular parties and interest groups were seen as manifestations of underlying social cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). These studies were relatively unconcerned with the organizational structure of party-group relations. However, organizational links with interest groups were a focal point in the early, more institutionalist literature. According to Duverger (1972 [1954]), the strongest links were manifested by parties whose members were collectively affiliated through trade unions. The literature on social democratic parties later showed that individual parties and trade unions could also be closely connected through, for example, liaison committees, leadership and membership overlap and interchange, and a wide arena of common collective activities (Allern and Bale, 2017). The focus on ties securing regular interaction is also widespread in newer studies (e.g. Eichenberger and Mach, 2017; Rasmussen and Lindeboom, 2013).

The second common understanding emphasizes provision or sharing of *resources*, including finances, material support and information (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998; Hojnacki et al., 2012; Wilson, 1990). This emphasis goes

back to the early studies of relationships between social democratic parties and trade unions, but is also echoed in more recent studies (e.g. Brunell, 2005). The involvement of interest groups in election campaigns and (indirect) partisan finance in the United States has even been interpreted as an indication of weakened formal autonomy of parties as organizations. In some studies parties are no longer primarily seen as the statutorily defined entity, but as networks of organizations (Bawn et al., 2012: 571; Koger et al., 2009), and interest groups that donate money as an integral part of this network (Herrnson, 2009). The sharing of less tangible resources, like information, has also been analysed as a possible component of party-group relations as 'networks' (Koger et al., 2010). However, when investigating interest group relationships with the stronger, less permeable European parties in addition to US parties, it seems appropriate to treat parties and interest groups as analytically distinct actors that may vary in the extent to which they are connected through sharing and provision of resources.

Third, 'relationship' as connections is regularly applied in a nonconcrete sense, by pointing to a *degree of ideological kinship* (Poguntke, 2006). This conceptualization is, for example, at the core of the historical-institutional literature on labour movements (Minkin, 1991). The idea of ideological ties is also echoed by the debate in the interest group literature on whether interest groups tend to lobby their 'friends' or 'foes' on specific issues (Hojnacki and Kimball, 1998; Marshall, 2015).

The conceptual fuzziness illustrates that an ordinary term like 'relationship' even in the narrow sense does not provide sufficient clarity to decide what attributes must be included in a definition. Rather, like in many conceptual debates, the content depends on our research interest (cf. Munck and Verkuilen, 2002: 8). On the one hand, scholars approaching the topic from a societal angle, for example by addressing parties' embeddedness in civil society, tend to focus on institutional ties providing interaction and perhaps ideology (e.g. Poguntke, 2000). On the other hand, scholars primarily concerned with parties' and interest groups' influence on policy outputs are inclined to identify relations by following the flow of information and money rather than mapping organizational structures (e.g. Hojnacki et al., 2012).

We focus on relationships in terms of *structured interaction* in the remainder of this article, as we believe such ties are a part of the democratic ‘infrastructure’ and relevant for both the input side and output side of politics. However, after discussing how we can specify this concept for empirical research, we also address the distinction and possible association between such ties and other types of ties (resources and ideology).

Relationships as structured interaction

Structured interaction is a specific version of relationship that manifests itself through different types of organizational ties. In this sense, our approach echoes political network analysis: we consider established relationships to be (possible) constraints on the action of individual actors (Victor et al., 2017). That said, we still assume parties and groups at the outset *choose* the extent to which they would like to get or keep being involved in structured relations with others and hereby become organizationally interdependent.² Moreover, we look at the relationships between parties and groups only: we do not also aim to study parties’ possible ties to other parties and ties between groups, i.e. the complete, national ‘party-group network’ and hereby possible dependencies between different dyads (Huhe et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2011).

Since we are focusing on interaction, ties that can shape mutual decision-making, planning, and coordination of activities or simply involve communication about political issues are at the centre of attention. The question is how to distinguish relations, in terms of structured interaction, from frequent contact on specific issues (‘lobbyism’) (see e.g. Celis et al., 2016), and how to measure the whole range from integrated organizational structures and formal alliances to the looser ties created by informal routines and personnel overlaps and transfers.

First, we may conclude that relationships imply a certain degree of permanence, which is different from sporadic contact between parties and interest groups. Second, relationships imply a certain degree of routine in that these interactions do not occur randomly or purely related to a specific issue. Instead, they are the result of organizational routines, which may or may not be formalized. To know each other by name, or from time to time meet by chance at different arenas or events, does not qualify as a relationship between parties and interest groups. A minimum level of structure (regularity) is required for a relationship to exist. What we aim to capture is ties securing stable access, not isolated interaction only at a single point in time, regarding a particular issue, or simply the sum of such contacts.

Third, a distinction can be made between ties in terms of the degree of formalization. Highly formal ties – like a joint policy committee – are more difficult to terminate than informal ones because the political costs tend to be higher in that they require highly visible – formal or even statutory – change

(Poguntke, 2002: 47). A prominent European example is the ‘Co-operation Committee’ between the Norwegian Labour Party and Confederation of Trade Unions. Here top-leaders have met regularly to discuss important policy matters for more than a century (Allern, 2010: 132–133). Less formal (not rule-based, but official) ties, on the other hand, may also exhibit a substantial organizational component, which can raise the political costs of termination. If they consist of ‘tacit agreements’ about regular meetings of specific office holders of parties and organizations, they are also difficult to cancel because this inevitably makes the relations between a party and a given interest group a highly visible public issue. For instance, the Dutch Catholic party had the tacit understanding with Catholic labour and business interest groups that they would have representation on its decision-making bodies between the 1920s and 1960s (Lijphart, 1968). Regularized informal meetings of leading figures of parties and interest groups which do not have the character of an ‘official summit’ are also relevant as the organizational structures must be invested and lived and since some parties and groups might prefer to only have such ties. Since such ties do not involve specific incumbents, they are clearly less visible and hence easier to discontinue. Hence, we assume there is an underlying continuum ranging from strong (formal; written and/or official) to weak ties (informal; unofficial, i.e. no specific incumbents).

We define, then, *relationships to consist of ties that connect decision-making bodies, headquarters and/or the decision-makers or staff, i.e. those means by which a party and an interest group may interact repeatedly* (Allern and Bale, 2017: 9). From hereon we will use the term *organizational ties* between parties and interest groups to denote the object of study. Based on such ties, pairs of parties and groups make up organizational dyads, but both are also connected to more than one actor on the party/group side (see below).³ This definition is narrow but sufficiently rich to discriminate between dyads. It is narrower than the well-known concept of ‘linkage’, which includes more forms of interaction between parties and society, including parties’ own collateral organizations (Poguntke, 2002).

As indicated above, *the strength of organizational ties* primarily reflects the extent to which contact is made formal or otherwise structured. Ties – such as collective affiliation of interest groups to parties, liaison committees or routines for invitations to regular party/group events – *create* such structures. Also, a less formal or purely informal contact might be predictable and structured if it is regular and normalized (Kitschelt, 1989: 231–233). Thus, ties can be characterized by different degrees of formalization and thus institutionalization. We can therefore distinguish between *statutory ties*, *inter-organizational ties* and *informal ties*.

Statutory ties are by definition durable; they may be reciprocal or one-sided and can include collective

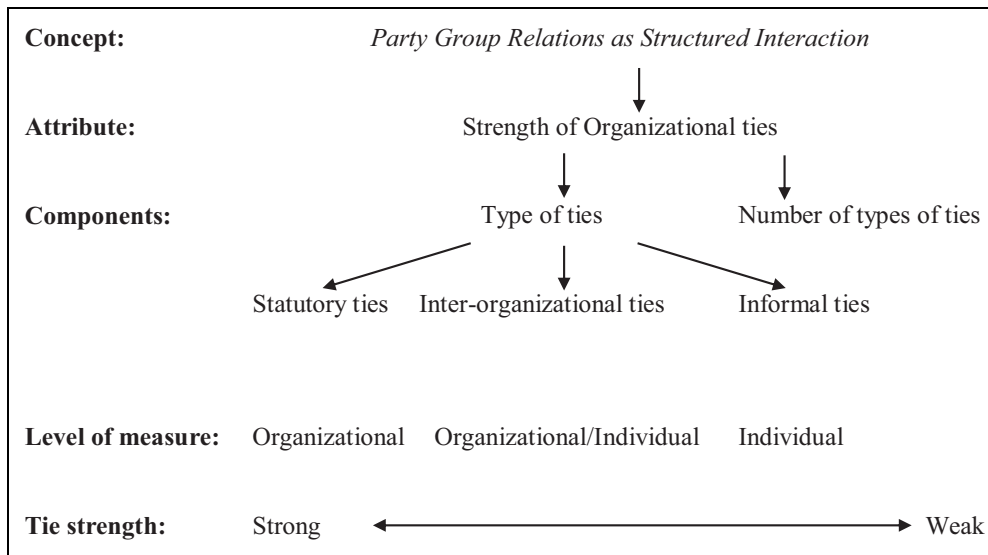


Figure 1. Relations between parties and interest groups as structured interaction.

membership or reserved seats in leadership bodies. A trade union leader may, for example, sit on the national executive of a Labour party or may have the right to cast a vote on behalf of his or her membership in a leadership contest (Bale and Webb, 2017). Joint party-group arrangements are the strongest example of *inter-organizational ties*. They are also durable and reciprocal, whereas others like arranged consultations or regularized congress invitations are by nature one-way and occasional (event-related). Such ties are by nature easier to establish to multiple actors than the durable ties as they are less costly (time-consuming).

An exclusive focus on organizational measures can, however, lead to a bias towards firmly organized parties. Yet, parties and organizations may develop routines for regular meetings between their elites without invoking any formal party organizational body. As long as they meet in their official roles, these are still formal meetings and are therefore included under inter-organizational ties. Once such meetings are merely informal, they are subsumed under *informal ties*, together with personnel overlaps, namely the extent to which party elites hold positions in interest groups and vice versa. While the latter are not about frameworks and activities, they still open up multiple opportunities for interaction between decision-makers (for a complete list of different ties see Table A1, online appendix).

The overall structure of the concept of relationship as structured interaction between individual parties and groups is summarized in Figure 1. As the preceding discussion indicates, we assume that there is a hierarchy of ties and that the number of ties matter for the overall strength of organizational relationships. The specific property of structured interaction is that this interaction is based on:

- (a) Most formal: statutory ties (Figure 1, left ties)
- (b) Less formal: inter-organizational ties (Figure 1, middle ties) and/or
- (c) Informal ties (individuals without specific organizational roles) (Figure 1, right ties)

Individual types of ties might of course be interesting by themselves. However, we focus on how to measure strength of relationships more broadly. To capture the different components of attributes, one needs to rely on multiple *organizational indicators* (like the existence of joint party-group arrangements) but also *behavioural measures* (like regular top-leadership contact). The former ensure that we do not underestimate the degree of institutionalization; the latter will capture weaker ties. However, we concentrate on those who occupy formal roles and do not seek to capture purely informal ties. We thus analyse interactions between organizational elites because they are politically mandated to represent their organizations.

To assess the general level of strength ('institutionalization'), one will have to count the number of ties and take the types of ties into account: from the strongest (most formal) to the weaker (less formal/informal) ones (see Figure 1). However, it is not given that they form a single scale (Rasmussen and Lindeboom, 2013). The distinction between our main categories of ties could also imply different basic categories of relationships. Hence, it requires empirical examination whether we can aggregate organizational ties across all types and party organizational spheres. There are, to begin with, good reasons to assume multidimensionality: Historically, weaker (less formal) ties have been seen as an alternative to and compensation for the lack of stronger (formal) ties. For example, when a group enjoys formal representation in party committees or vice versa, a

liaison committee seems superfluous (Allern, 2010). Likewise, a tie based on overlapping leadership has been seen as the tool for those preferring formal autonomy but still close relations – like in the French case of left-of-centre parties and trade unions. Here informal ties have been argued to create an ‘organic liaison’ (Parsons, 2017: 113). If different categories of ties were unrelated, more than one dimension might be necessary to analyse relationships.

Yet, different ties may also supplement each other in that having a strong (formal) tie increases the chance of having lower-level ties (Allern and Bale, 2017). The reason for this is, at least, two-fold: First, it may appear unreasonable to exclude someone you are formally committed to from a less ‘exclusive’ arrangement even if they might need this access less than others. Second, if representatives of parties and groups regularly meet in formal settings, they also get frequent opportunities to participate in informal meetings in hallways and the like. Hence, we expect that ties form a *single/one-dimensional yet hierarchical scale* of strength:

The dimensionality expectation: *Dyads that have more formal (stronger) organizational ties tend to have also weaker organizational ties, while dyads that have less formal (weak) ties do not necessarily have stronger ties.*

We also argue that structured interaction is different from provision or sharing of material resources and ideological proximity as organizational ties might exist without financial and ideological connections and vice versa. From a theoretical perspective, it is perfectly possible, for example, that parties and interest groups interact in a structured manner with no money involved or without being ideologically close. To be sure, intensive resource provision and policy alignment makes organizational ties more likely, but they are not logically dependent on each other. Informational networks do not necessarily require formal organizational ties. Empirically, this means that we expect that different types of relationships are not strongly correlated because they reflect different underlying dimensions; they are not just indicators of the same phenomenon. Hence to validate our conceptual map, we will also check *whether it holds empirically that there are no strong positive correlations between material resources, ideological proximity and organizational ties.*

Research design

To test our theoretical expectations, we concentrate on mature democracies in order to compare parties with similar historical preconditions but different institutional settings. We use a new cross-national interest group survey data set on interest group-party connections in Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁴ The countries differ in terms of party finance regime (e.g. level of state finance and degree of regulations), the level of corporatism/

pluralism and the extent to which a single individual party controls the policy-making process. These are all aspects that might influence the incentives for interest groups and parties to establish relations.

Sampling and survey data

A random sample in each country was drawn from an identified population of interest groups. When creating the frames for interest group sampling, we relied on existing directories and lists of national interest group populations in all countries (see Allern et al. 2020 for an overview of the interest group definition and the primary sources used).⁵ To make sure that a significant number of key players were covered, a purposive sample was added including up to 10 ‘most important interest groups’ within eight broader categories closely related to specific policy fields and political cleavages. Merged with the random sample, the total sample mirrors the general group population with a certain ‘over-sampling’ of major, politically relevant actors. We asked interest groups about their ties with all relevant parties in their country: i.e. parties that had representation (at least one seat) in national parliament in one or more of the last three elections and scored more than 1% of the votes in at least one of the three elections or more than 2% of the votes in the last election but no seats.

Obviously, it is empirically impossible to identify all existing ties between parties and interest groups. Both have multiple organizational faces horizontally, several levels vertically (territorial, organizational, individual) and take part in an endless number of decision-making processes where relations may manifest themselves. Hence, we choose to concentrate on the relationship between the central organizations/headquarters of both sides, plus the legislative party groups, and their leaderships.

To gather the data we used an online survey of the samples.⁶ 857 out of 2944 interest groups responded (29%). The response rates across countries vary, as in previous interest group research. The response rates for different group types vary to a lesser extent – from 20% to nearly 40%. When comparing the composition of samples and the groups that responded, we see that there are no major biases in terms of group types although professional/occupational groups are slightly over-represented and business groups somewhat under-represented in general. Country biases exist, but we will not disaggregate the results to the country-level here (see Allern et al. 2020 for details on samples and response rates). We continually look at both the entire sample (which contains both randomly and purposively sampled groups) and the purposive sample separately to see if the associations are different when we zoom in on major organizations of high party-political relevance.

Our unit of analysis is *pairs of individual interest groups and parties* and their relations as reported by the interest group side. We cannot validate this with reports from the party side,⁷ but it is reasonable to assume that groups have

not withheld much information, as the survey questions are very technical in nature and respondents were promised anonymity. The high level of variance and the high number of valid responses suggest that in general the survey questions have worked well.⁸

Operationalizations

The article has a theory-driven measurement strategy. The goal of the analysis is twofold: Firstly, when it comes to structured interaction, we aim to analyse whether dyads that have less common, more formal (stronger) ties also have the more common, less formal (weaker) ties (Dimensionality Expectation). We therefore measure ties both at the organizational and individual level (in terms of regularized leadership contact). Secondly, we seek to assess to what extent the different kinds of relationships between interest groups and parties are not only conceptually but also empirically distinct.

To operationalize *structured interaction*, we use two indicators (see Table A1, online appendix). The first indicator is formed by inter-organizational ties measured at the organizational level, namely the existence of general organizational ties like joint arrangements, agreements and regular event invitations between groups and parties' central organization *and/or* legislative group. Statutory ties are excluded (the first column in Table A1, online appendix) as only central party organizations can have this.⁹ The second indicator is formed by ties generated from individual level, in terms of regularized top-leadership contacts between groups and parties' central organization and legislative group. In both cases, we calculate aggregate tie scores. Hence, we cover a broad range of levels of formalization and we are able to tap into relevant individual-level activities in terms of leadership meetings (among specific incumbents). We leave informal ties out as these require data on the entire elite universe and biographical data.¹⁰

To operationalize *provision or sharing of resources*, we focus on tangible material resources that can be transferred from groups to political parties. In the PAIDEM dataset groups report if they provided a direct financial contribution, an indirect financial contribution, or if they contributed labour, material resources or their organizations' premises during election campaigns to particular parties. We construct a five-item scale – named *group donations* – from these items.¹¹

To measure *ideological proximity or distance* between a political party and interest groups we need information on both. The PAIDEM survey asked groups to position themselves on six eleven-point scales. Three concerned 'new politics' issues: the environment, immigration and, social lifestyle. Three concerned 'old politics' economic issues: government intervention in the economy, redistribution and the choice between lower taxation or better public services. We borrowed these items from the Chapel Hill

Expert Survey (CHES, see Bakker et al., 2015; Polk et al., 2017). Our survey respondents were provided with the party positions from CHES, so they could position their group relative to the parties in order to avoid the Differential Item Functioning problem (Golder and Stramski, 2010) and compare the interest groups' self-positioning directly with the CHES positioning to calculate the absolute *party-group distance on six issue dimensions*.¹²

Method and structure of analysis

The unit of analysis is, as noted above, group-party dyads. First, we look at how widespread the different ties are and see if the frequency pattern mirrors the theoretical hierarchy of ties (see items in Table A1 in online appendix). Next, we examine the dimensionality using Mokken scaling as measurement model. This method belongs to the techniques associated with Item Response Theory (IRT) and is very well-suited for our analytical purpose and binary variables (van der Ark et al., 2005): it tests whether responses form a single hierarchical scale. Our expectation is that groups that have stronger (less common) ties also have weaker (more common) ties at the organizational level: If groups have permanent joint committee with a party, for example, they also invite that party to their national congress. In assessing the scalability, we use the following benchmark values (H): below 0.3 (very poor), below 0.4 (poor), below 0.5 (medium), below 0.6 (good), beyond 0.6 (very good).

Based on the results, we calculate an index – labelled *strength of organizational-level ties*. Thereafter we do the same for two different items of top-leadership-contact and see whether this is strongly correlated with organizational-level aggregate ties score, as we expect (i.e. that ties at the organizational-level nurtures this at the individual level). We also perform a scaling analysis to confirm this pattern. Finally, we look at the correlations between these measures of ties securing structured interaction with the measures of *resource provision* and *ideological proximity* to see whether concepts are not only analytically but also empirically distinct. In online appendix 2 we validate these patterns by looking at a factor analysis for tetrachoric correlations.

Structured interaction: Empirical results

Firstly, we look at whether groups report having organized arrangements and routines for interacting with political parties, be it to the central organization and/or the legislative party group (Table 2).¹³ In the complete sample, these ties are scarce: less than 1% of groups report the least common tie (tacit agreements about one-sided/mutual representation) and 13% of groups report the most common one (parties being invited to the group's congress). In the purposive sample, these ties are, as expected, much more

Table 2. Inter-organizational ties (organizational level).*

Sample Variable	Total		Purposive	
	H	%	H	%
Tacit Agreement on One-Sided Mutual Representation	0.54	<1	0.62	2
Written agreements on Regular meetings	0.43	<1	0.45	2
Permanent Joint Committee	0.54	1	0.54	5
Temporary Joint Committee	0.40	3	0.52	9
Joint Party-Groups Conferences	0.39	3	0.41	9
Joint Party-Group Actions	0.43	3	0.30	12
Interest Group Invited to Party's National Congress	0.44	5	0.45	21
Tacit Agreement on Regular Meetings	0.51	6	0.46	24
Interest Group Invited to Party's Internal Meetings	0.55	8	0.55	31
Party Invited to Interest Group's Internal Meetings	0.51	11	0.45	36
Interest Group Invited to Party's Special Meetings	0.54	11	0.57	39
Party Invited to Interest Group's Special Meetings	0.54	12	0.52	36
Party Invited to Interest Group's National Congress	0.48	13	0.44	41
H	0.49		0.48	
Mean	0.78		2.61	
Median	0.00		2.00	
Standard deviation	1.73		2.75	
Minimum	0.00		0.00	
Maximum	13.00		13.00	
N		4474		625

*The table presents scaling (H) values, frequencies of individual ties (percent) and descriptives for the aggregated 'strength of organizational-level ties' (0–13) at the bottom.

Table 3. Regularized top-leadership contacts (individual level).*

Sample Variable	Total		Purposive	
	H	%	H	%
Leadership contacts group-central party organization	0.88	9	0.85	28
Leadership contacts group-legislative party group	0.88	13	0.85	39
H	0.88		0.85	
Mean	0.11		0.33	
Median	0.00		0.00	
Standard deviation	0.29		0.43	
Minimum	0.00		0.00	
Maximum	1.00		1.00	
N		6058		1126

*The table presents scaling (H) values, frequencies of leadership contact with central party organizations and legislative party group separately (percent) and descriptives for the aggregated 'total leadership contact score' (0–1) at the bottom.

common. Here, for instance, parties are invited to the group's congress in 41% of the dyads. For about 2% of the purposively selected party-group pairs, a tacit agreement about regular meetings is reported. Hence, the ascending frequency of ties mirrors the theoretical hierarchy presented in Table A1, online appendix.

We see from the H-values in Table 2 that the items form a scale of medium strength for both samples. The resulting scale – a total tie score ranging from 0 to 13 – has a strongly left-skewed distribution (see bottom of Table 2). A minority of group-party dyads score high and have all the possible ties, some have a medium score, but most have a lower score or not even a few weaker ties. On average, groups in

the total sample report less than one kind of tie per party while groups from the purposive sample report on average more than two.

The next question is whether groups report regular top-leadership meetings between the group and individual parties.¹⁴ These ties are reported in Table 3 separately for the central party office (CPO) and legislative party groups (LPG). Contacts with CPOs are less common than contacts with LPGs. On average groups report contacts with 1 in 10 CPOs and 1 in 7 LPGs. In the purposive sample, such ties are more common. Purposively selected groups report contact with one in three CPOs and two out of five LPGs. The items form a good

scale: the groups that have ties to some LPGs report having ties to that party's CPO as well.

Finally, the question is whether strong ties at the organizational level preclude or nurture top-leadership ties. Do the scales on organizational ties and leadership contact measure the same variance? We find that there is a strong correlation between the inter-organizational ties and regularized top-level leadership contacts (see Table 5). In both samples, there is a strong correlation between regular top leadership contacts and organizational ties. The leaders of groups and parties that have organizational ties also tend to interact regularly with each other at the individual level. To validate, we also run a scaling analysis. The combined scale with the top-leadership contact score and the inter-organizational ties scale has a H-value of 0.51. This implies that these two items fit the hierarchical structure of the inter-organizational ties scale. In the hierarchical structure, leadership contacts fall in the same range as the informal ties. This confirms the *internal* pattern revealed at the organizational level regarding formalization. Hence, we see that the *Dimensionality Expectation* receives empirical support.

Is structured interaction empirically distinct from other concepts?

The central idea of this contribution is that structured interaction is distinct from the other possible relationships between interest groups and parties, most prominently, in terms of transfer or sharing of resources and ideological proximity (see Table 1). We begin by examining the descriptives and diagnostics of these variables, before we present the correlations between the different variables.

Firstly, we look at material resources. We asked groups about five kinds of donations, including financial and material support (see Table 4). These direct resource exchanges are extremely rare: they occur in 1% of dyads in the total sample and 3% of the purposive sample. Groups that donate one kind of resource also donate other kinds of resources. The items form a medium to good scale. The combined scale – a score of *group donations* ranging from 0 to 5 – has quite a skewed distribution: the average score is only 0.02 out of five for the total scale and 0.08 for the purposive scale (see Table 4).

Next, we turn to ideological proximity as basis for relationships. Here we do not look at scales but at the distance between expert placement of parties and group self-placement on each of the six Chapel Hill policy dimensions mentioned above: three of which are economic in nature and three of which touch on 'new politics' issues. Dyads vary between maximum distance and nearly full proximity (see Table A.5, online appendix for the descriptives).¹⁵ Table 5 sheds light on the correlations for both the purposive and total sample, but as the figures do not differ strongly, we focus the discussion on the total sample.

Table 4. Material resources: Group donations.*

Sample	Total		Purposive	
	H	%	H	%
Direct financial donation	0.64	<1	0.64	2
Indirect financial donations	0.59	<1	0.61	2
Offering labour	0.50	<1	0.50	1
Offering material support	0.62	<1	0.65	1
Offering premises	0.68	<1	0.68	1
H	0.60		0.54	
Mean	0.02		0.08	
Median	0.00		0.00	
Standard deviation	0.23		0.48	
Minimum	0.00		0.00	
Maximum	5.00		5.00	
N	4719		1063	

*The table presents scaling (H) values, frequencies of individual donations and descriptives for the aggregated *group donations* score (0–5) at the bottom.

As shown above, the correlations between the inter-organizational ties and the top-leadership contacts, both indicators of structured interaction, are strong. The remaining correlations are, in contrast, (rather) weak to negligible. Five out of 21 correlations were not significant. The correlations between donations and the other measure of the strength of ties are quite weak. This mirrors the strong left-skew in the donations scale. In the limited number of cases where donations occur, there always is some organizational tie, but in the large majority of cases where there are organizational ties, the groups do not offer material resources to the parties (98%).¹⁶ The pattern for top-leadership contacts is similar but weaker. Correlations tend to be significant and in the expected direction but weak. In the majority of cases where resources are provided, regular top-level contacts occur (71%), but material resources are only provided to parties in 3% of cases where top-leadership contacts occur.¹⁷

Ideological proximity is not strongly correlated with the strength of inter-organizational ties, regularized top-leadership contacts or donations. The correlations are weak. One out of three correlations for ideological distance is not significant. This shows that ideological closeness, resource ties and interaction ties are empirically distinct.

All in all, our expectation that the correlations between structured interaction and the other operationalizations of party-interest group relations are empirically distinct, is supported by the data: the correlations between the scores are positive but not very strong.

Conclusion

In this article, we first reviewed how party-interest group relationships have been conceptualized and measured in different strands of the scholarly literature. We focused

Table 5. Correlations between the various tie measures.

	<i>Ideological distance on . . .</i>							
	<i>Total Leadership Contact Score</i>	<i>Donations</i>	<i>Services and taxes</i>	<i>Redistribution</i>	<i>State intervention</i>	<i>Social life-style</i>	<i>Immigration</i>	<i>Environment</i>
Total sample								
Strength of organizational-level ties	0.65***	0.23***	-0.13***	-0.08***	-0.07***	-0.08***	-0.04	-0.11***
Total leadership contact score	–	0.14***	-0.10***	-0.15***	-0.08***	-0.06***	-0.06***	-0.08***
Donations		–	0.02	-0.05**	-0.05***	-0.02	-0.04	-0.03
Purposive sample								
Strength of organizational-level ties	0.62***	0.24***	-0.25***	-0.18***	-0.20***	-0.10*	-0.04	-0.21***
Total leadership contact score	–	0.11***	-0.12***	-0.23***	-0.13***	-0.06	-0.12***	-0.11***
Donations		–	0.05	-0.10**	-0.10**	-0.04	-0.05	-0.07*

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

on organizational interaction and argued that this differs from other variants of relationships such as resource provision/transfer and ideological alignment. This structured interaction is also analytically distinct from lobbying, i.e. ad hoc contact on specific issues. Moreover, we argued that organizational ties are likely to form a single/one-dimensional yet hierarchical scale of strength.

Taken together, the empirical analyses based on a novel data set largely confirm our conceptual map. First, stronger (formal) ties are rare but tend to go together with weaker and more common (informal) ties of groups to parties. This suggests that structured interaction is a one-dimensional phenomenon. Second, organizational ties are empirically distinct from ties in terms of resource provision or ideological proximity. Hence, the analytical distinctions identified above hold empirically.

Our findings have multiple implications for future research. The one-dimensional yet hierarchical structure suggests that different ties are stimulated by the same factors but that it probably takes more – for example tangible resources – to establish stronger ties than weaker ones. Could it still be that the importance of some factors vary for the various levels of institutionalization? And could it be that formal ties themselves nurture weaker ones? Future explanatory analyses should take these issues carefully into account.

Furthermore, the different relationship concepts presented in our literature review should be treated as distinct. If one studies financial or informational (e.g. resource) ties, for example, that does not necessarily mean that one identifies relationships in the institutional sense ‘by proxy’. Moreover, organizational ties are not an indication of ideological friendship and vice versa. Ideological neighbours can be political enemies and hence organizationally completely unrelated. Thus, scholars should carefully clarify *what* concept they address and *why*, preferably using a

more precise term than simply ‘relationships’, ‘networks’ and ‘ties’ when denoting the object of research.

Focusing on variation in structured interaction, our analysis suggests that a group and party that are ideologically close do not ‘magically’ develop organizational or leadership ties. Furthermore, if leadership ties or organizational ties are present, groups do not automatically transfer resources to parties. The various resources parties and interest groups might offer to each other should rather be seen as possible explanatory factors or outcomes of structured organizational ties between an interest group and a political party. Whether there is a causal relationship between variables measuring organizational ties and collaboration, resource transfer or provision and ideological affinity is a matter for future empirical research.

Future analyses should also try to fill the descriptive gaps of this paper, for example by looking at personnel overlaps and transfers and by collecting other types of data on individual-level behaviour. So far, we have only looked at aggregated data and do not say anything about variation between countries or different types of parties and groups.

Our findings also speak to the literature on political networks. They confirm that many parties and interest groups are interdependent by means of ties creating institutional relations. Thus, when studying their behaviour in other respects, including policy-making, one should take such ties into account as they might enable cooperation and constrain individual party-group choices. The existence of durable ties means that external groups have stable access to party decision-makers and are likely to be consulted in key issues. For example, permanent consultation arrangements make contact in specific policy issues more likely and, in turn, also the alignment of preferences. Thus, stronger ties to specific groups might make the adoption of certain policies more likely (e.g. Guidi and Karagiannis, 2016).

Moreover, scholars have recently suggested that strong party organizations broaden the constituencies to which policymakers respond and help politicians to solve coordination problems. This might facilitate better economic management, public services, and political stability and hereby enhance economic growth (Bizzarro et al., 2018). Similar analyses could be conducted based on detailed knowledge on how major parties are organizationally linked to different civic actors.

Either way, we need more knowledge about these organizational structures in contemporary politics if we want to better understand policy outputs and decision-making across political systems. Our analyses suggest that one should continue bridging the field of party and interest group research. We have shown that in an age of eroding cleavages there is a considerable degree of structured and organizationally petrified interaction between political parties and interest groups in modern European democracies. It is essential to map and understand the inherent mechanics of these relationships if we want to understand the functioning of both party and interest group politics.

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Notes

1. Thus excluding companies and public institutions; for details see Allern et al. 2000.

2. A possible exception is parties and groups that were originally a single organization, like for instance the Norwegian Farmers' Union and Farmers' Party. However, usually such structures will eventually split into two (perhaps overlapping), due to the functional difference of each 'wing' (in terms of goal-seeking and methods).
3. Seen from both the individual party and interest group point of view, a basic aspect of party-group relationships is how inclusive they are. Are their relationships 'open' or 'exclusive', and if so, how many and what kind of groups/parties are involved in each 'web' of relationships? However, while the conceptual distinction between strength and inclusiveness will certainly facilitate mapping of the relational landscape of party-interest group relationships, we focus on how to identify and measure relationships between individual parties and groups in this paper.
4. 'Party-Interest Group Relationships in Contemporary Democracies' (PAIRDEM), see <https://www.sv.uio.no/isv/english/research/projects/elin-allern-pairdem/index.html>.
5. With the exception of Norway, where we had to do the identification from scratch based on a public legal register.
6. The top choice for informants was the person responsible for governmental affairs/public relations/public policy work. For groups that do not employ such a person, the director-general, head of communications, etc. was addressed instead. For more details on the party identification and sampling, see Allern et al. 2020.
7. Party survey data concerning ties to individual interest groups do not exist due to the high number of groups.
8. See Allern et al. 2020.
9. Previous research suggests that they are very rare (Allern and Verge, 2017).
10. Table A.6, online appendices, looks at the informant's subjective perception of both the strength of the collaboration and of the organizational connection (formal and informal). A scale of these two items correlates strongly with the structured interaction measures: where there are ties or contacts, respondents also tend to perceive connections and collaboration. This suggests that while theoretically distinct, the format and intensity of interaction is hard to distinguish from the strategic aspect related to the content of it. If you interact in a regularized manner you tend to do this with a certain purpose: coordinate your actions in order to achieve a shared goal. There are weaker but significant correlations with donations and ideological distance.
11. We compared the survey responses on direct financial contributions with publicly available information on such donations (both automatically and manually to the extent needed) to test the validity of the survey responses. There were extremely few cases of mismatch (i.e. 'no'-answers but registered donations) and the existing ones could be explained by response categories and reporting rules, rather than dishonest answers. Hence, we consider the validity of this survey measure to be sufficiently good.

12. An entry was removed from the analysis if the interest group did not have a position on the dimension in question.
13. The survey item used is: 'First, we would like to find out whether the organization has any joint arrangements or agreements or other organized routines for contact with parties at the national level. As these materialize, and might fluctuate, over time, we would like you to think not only about how things are at present but how they have been for the last few years. Has your organization had the following kinds of joint arrangements or agreements with one or more parties' central organization and/or parliamentary party in the last five years?' The question note specified 'If your organization was founded only in the last five years, please refer to however long it has been in existence'.
14. The survey item used is: 'Please indicate whether representatives of the organization's executive leadership have been in contact with leading figures from one or more parties to discuss current issues of political relevance on a regular basis in the last 12 months (yes-no).' The question note specified 'by leading party figures we mean the elected top leaders and other executive members in the national party organization, the party's parliamentary leader(s) and party spokespersons in different policy fields. By "regular basis" we mean that the meetings have been numerous and normalized'. Thus, this item captures ties at the individual level of parties and groups.
15. We only include groups that were willing and able to place themselves on items. As some groups did not for specific items, the N fluctuates.
16. This implies a hierarchical structure. If we include the donation items in the interorganizational ties scale, this scale has a H of 0.48 (the total sample) or 0.50 (in the purposive sample). The donations are of the same or higher rarity as tacit agreements about one-sided representation.
17. Here again a scaling approach shows that the structure is hierarchical (H = 0.77 for the total sample, H = 0.68 for the purposive sample).

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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