Balancing constituency and congruence: How constituency involvement affects positional congruence between organized interests and the general public

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Abstract
This article asks to what extent and under which conditions interest groups are congruent with public opinion. We argue that interest groups can be caught in a balancing act between engaging with their constituency on the one hand and aligning their position with the broader public on the other hand. We contribute to previous studies by arguing that the effect of interest group type on congruence is moderated by the degree to which constituencies are involved in advocacy processes and the salience of policy issues. We test these expectations by analyzing 314 media claims made by Belgian interest groups regarding 58 policy issues. The results demonstrate that citizen groups with formal members are more prone to share the position of the broader public compared to concentrated interest groups such as business associations, especially if they involve their members in advocacy activities and when issues are salient in the media.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In May 2017, the Belgian government proposed a law to guarantee a minimum staff occupancy for operating public railway trains during strikes. Belgian public opinion overwhelmingly supported this measure. Railway employees opposed it, arguing that operating trains while...
understaffed would lead to chaos and pose safety risks for both personnel and passengers. On the one hand, labor unions representing train personnel consulted a large portion of their members, who strongly opposed the policy measure. On the other hand, the labor unions knew that their mobilization efforts were somewhat futile, as the government felt bolstered by the public's support for the proposed measure. This example illustrates that the policy position of an interest group’s constituency may collide with public opinion. A tension may arise between the need to adopt positions that resonate broadly with the general public and the need for interest groups to engage with their constituencies (Halpin, Fraussen, & Nownes, 2018; Jordan & Maloney, 1997, 2007; Lowery, 2007). Although interest groups are established to represent their constituents’ interests, their prospects of influencing public policy increase when their position is aligned with public opinion (Dür & Mateo, 2014; Kollman, 1998; Rasmussen, Mäder, & Reher, 2018).

The presumption that public support is important for influence has led to a number of empirical studies focusing on the congruence between interest groups’ policy positions and public opinion (Burstein, 2014; Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018; Gilens, 2012; Gilens & Page, 2014; Lax & Phillips, 2012). These studies demonstrated that congruence can be explained by the type of constituency a group represents and found that citizen groups are slightly more likely to be congruent with public opinion than business associations (see for instance Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018). We contribute to these studies by considering under which conditions different types of interest groups are congruent with public opinion, specifically by examining the role of constituency involvement and issue salience. Interest groups may strategically select policy issues for which they enjoy broad public support, but they can also win (or lose) public support through close interactions with their constituents. Indeed, the classic pluralist perspective emphasizes the “transmission belt” function of interest groups (Dahl, 1961; Truman, 1951), that is, to act as intermediaries by closely engaging with their constituents and maintaining strong ties with policymakers (Albareda, 2018; Albareda & Braun, 2019; Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018; Grömping & Halpin, 2019).

Although the image of interest groups as transmission belts does not fully align with the fact that organized interests tend to represent concentrated or narrow segments of society (Lowery & Gray, 2004; Olson, 1965). Some groups represent broad societal segments such as workers or consumers, but interest groups often also represent narrow constituencies such as farmers or the chemical industry. Moreover, organized interests substantially vary in their capacity to connect with their members and supporters (Albareda, 2018; Binderkrantz, 2009; Halpin, 2006; Jordan & Maloney, 2007), and consequently also in their ability to act as intermediaries between society and policymakers.

On the one hand, interest groups can learn about key societal challenges and grievances from interactions with their constituents (Halpin et al., 2018; Minkoff & Powell, 2006), which may strengthen congruence with the public. For instance, consumer groups that consult their members are presumed to provide strong linkages between the general public and policymakers as these groups’ membership encompasses broad societal segments (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018; Giger & Klüver, 2016). On the other hand, interest groups’ engagement with their constituencies can also incentivize them to circumvent public opinion in order to realize the constituents’ (opposing) policy objectives (Jordan & Maloney, 1997, 2007; Lowery, 2007). For example, the association of construction companies represents a narrow societal segment and hence intensely involving its constituents may restrain public approval.

This article argues that different types of interest groups enjoy varying levels of congruence with the general public depending on the extent to which they involve their constituents and the salience of policy issues. The empirical analysis is based on a large-scale content analysis of
314 media claims from Belgian interest groups on 58 specific policy issues situated across a wide range of policy domains. Responses regarding public opinion on these policy issues were collected via an online voter survey in March 2014. We combine this data with a survey with a representative sample of the Belgian interest group population (Beyers et al., 2016). The Belgian system of interest representation presents a representative case for other neo-corporatist systems, especially with a consociationalist legacy (e.g., Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, Netherlands, and Austria). In these systems, the relations between societal constituencies and interest groups are deeply ingrained and structured according to socio-economic, ideological, and cultural cleavages, which makes a tension between constituency involvement and congruence with the general public more likely (Beyers, Braun, & Haverland, 2014; Deschouwer, 2012).

The results demonstrate that interest organizations with highly engaged constituents in advocacy activities are not necessarily less or more congruent with public opinion; it much depends on the type of constituents represented. In addition, the level of media salience that policy issues attract, affects interest groups' congruence with public opinion. When diffuse interests are active on policy issues that attract high levels of media salience, they are significantly more congruent with the general public. These findings have implications for our understanding of the functioning of organized interests as transmission belts between the general public and policymakers.

2 | CONGRUENCE THROUGH CONSTITUENCY INVOLVEMENT?

Congruence is conceptualized as the extent to which interest groups are aligned with the general public on specific issues (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018). To explain variation in congruence, previous studies have highlighted the diverse constituencies that interest groups represent (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018; Giger & Klüver, 2016). A classic distinction can be made between diffuse and concentrated constituencies (Olson, 1965). Interest groups such as the brewers association and the association of physiotherapists have a more concentrated and clearly delineated support base (Olson, 1965; Salisbury, 1969). Diffuse interest groups, such as environmental associations and women's organizations, typically represent broader societal segments that endorse specific causes, values, or the interests of disenfranchised constituencies (Salisbury, 1969). Recent research by Flöthe and Rasmussen (2018) demonstrated that groups representing diffuse constituencies are slightly more prone to be congruent with public opinion than groups representing concentrated constituencies.

We extend these insights by arguing that the extent to which different types of groups involve their constituency in advocacy activities affects congruence. Constituency involvement indicates the capacity of interest groups to be accountable to and act on behalf of their members and supporters after receiving their endorsement through internal consultation procedures (Halpin, 2006; Johansson & Lee, 2014; Kohler-Koch, 2010). Next to constituency involvement, interest groups' abilities to be congruent with public opinion are affected by issue salience—one of the most important moderators in studies analyzing public opinion-policy congruence (Burstein, 2014; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Shapiro, 2011). When policy issues attract low levels of salience, interest groups that represent specific business interests have more leeway in catering toward the demands of their members and supporters (Culpepper, 2010). Conversely, when issues are highly salient, public approval becomes decisive and
interest groups that represent concentrated interests in society may be confronted with a situation where acting on behalf of their members implies openly opposing a vigilant public (Lax & Phillips, 2012).

To theorize the relationship between interest groups and public opinion, we borrow insights from the party politics literature. Specifically, we apply two mechanisms of political representation from party politics literature to interest representation, that is, electoral turnover and rational anticipation (Achen & Bartels, 2017; Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011; Mansbridge, 2003; Powell, 2004; Stimson, MacKuen, & Erikson, 1995; Thomassen & Schmitt, 1997). Although, compared to political parties, these mechanisms manifest themselves differently for interest organizations; they are in many respects relevant for understanding how interest groups can be congruent with the general public. In short, the mechanism of electoral turnover implies that congruence is the result of citizens who vote for the party that represent their preferred policy views (i.e., prospective voting). Victorious political parties implement these policies, reducing the gap between what voters want and what the government provides, hereby increasing congruence. Alternatively, voters can also control policymakers by evaluating their past performance and choosing whether to re-elect them or not (i.e., retrospective voting). Here, rational anticipation allows policymakers who are currently in office to strategically anticipate public preferences to avoid electoral retribution. Figure 1 visualizes these two pathways to congruence.

When applying the mechanism of electoral turnover to interest groups, three aspects are key. First, interest groups compete with each other by supplying their potential supporters with the policy options they want to pursue, much like political parties presenting their party manifestos to the electorate (Dalton et al., 2011; Hakhverdian, 2010; Klüver, 2015). Second, while parties need to mobilize voters, interest organizations must mobilize members and supporters, for instance through donations or subscriptions (Dalton et al., 2011; Hakhverdian, 2010; Klüver, 2015). Third, whereas political parties gain authorization from their voters through elections and promise to follow the voters’ expressed policy views (Dalton et al., 2011; Hakhverdian, 2010; Mansbridge, 2003; Stimson et al., 1995), citizens as well as actors such as firms and institutions, can authorize interest groups to act on their policy views and hold the groups’ leaders accountable.

The key difference between political parties and interest groups is that authorization and accountability are not attributed through electoral processes, but rather through processes of constituency involvement (Johansson & Lee, 2014). For instance, members can take part in various activities such as developing and executing lobbying strategies, meeting in working groups to discuss policy objectives, selecting the organizational leadership, or ultimately abandon the group and withdraw their support (Albareda, 2018; Johansson & Lee, 2014). The mechanism of “electoral turnover” is thus closely related to constituency involvement. Interest groups may seek positional congruence with broader public segments in a bottom-up fashion by actively engaging with their constituency before becoming active on specific policy dossiers.

FIGURE 1  Two pathways to congruence (adapted from Hakhverdian, 2010)
then pursue political positions that help them consolidate and strengthen the connection with their constituency and avoid retribution from members or supporters (Strolovitch, 2006).

In addition to constituency involvement, interest groups can detect signals from the public by closely monitoring its mood—for instance by relying on public opinion polls and the news media (Kingdon, 1984; Stimson et al., 1995). An important condition for interest groups to be able to detect such signals from the general public is issue salience (Burstein, 2014). Higher levels of salience entail that the general public has more crystallized preferences on specific policy issues due to higher exposure rates to issue-specific information (Ciuk & Yost, 2016). If issues are highly salient, public preferences are activated and more easily detectable by organized interest; conversely, if issues attract low levels of salience, public preferences remain latent (Zaller, 1992). Moreover, the organizational leadership can anticipate, based on prior experiences and beliefs, their constituency’s preferences and/or reactions to certain policy positions. Here, the groups’ strategic behavior becomes crucial and reflects what has been called “rational anticipation” (Mansbridge, 2003; Stimson et al., 1995). Even when interest groups themselves aim to impact the saliency and preferences of the broader public on specific policy issues, they will anticipate whether or not their policy positions resonate with the general public (Dür & Mateo, 2013). Public opinion on specific policy issues is determined by multiple factors beyond the control of individual interest groups including political parties, real-world events, the mass media, and other interest groups mobilizing on the issue (Burstein, 2014; Klüver, Braun, & Beyers, 2015). Advocating on highly visible issues can thus easily backfire in the absence of public support. In sum, rational anticipation means that interest groups attempt to cater to public opinion and strategically decide to lobby on issues for which their policy positions correspond with views that gain widespread public support.

To be clear, rational anticipation does not entail that interest groups will radically change their policy positions in order to be more congruent with the public. Each interest group has some defining core identity which may change over time, but on which the group cannot easily compromise (Halpin & Daugbjerg, 2015; Minkoff & Powell, 2006). Rather, rational anticipation implies that groups are sensitive to public support and that they will try to select issues for which their policy positions correspond with prevailing public opinion—which is easier when issues are salient (Kollman, 1998). Rational anticipation, however, may not be perceived as substantive representation of the constituency and could lead to a loss of credibility and a decline of membership support as groups lobby on issues, which are less prioritized by their constituencies (Jordan & Maloney, 1997, 2007; Lowery, 2007).

Political parties often also face a dual constituency (i.e., voters and members) and policy-seeking parties with strong intraparty democracy are less flexible in adjusting their policy views to the median voter (see Strøm & Müller, 1999). Similar to political parties that face a trade-off between maximizing their votes and insisting on particular policy preferences of the party members (Strøm & Müller, 1999); interest groups experience a tension between the need to engage with their constituency and the need to adopt positions that resonate broadly with the general public (Fraussen & Halpin, 2018; Halpin et al., 2018; Jordan & Maloney, 1997, 2007; Lowery, 2007). When constituents are actively involved in establishing the positions an interest group pursues, constituency support is generally secured but the group’s alignment with the broader public may be constrained, diminishing its chances of lobbying success (De Bruycker, Berkhout, & Hanegraaff, 2018; Lowery, 2007). A group’s constituency may hold policy positions opposed to (or in line with) prevailing public opinion on an issue. Moreover, internal processes of constituency involvement are complex and time-consuming, sometimes limiting a group’s flexibility to prioritize certain issues and adapt to the political context (Grömping & Halpin,
2019; Halpin et al., 2018). For instance, members and supporters who agreed on the overall organizational policy objectives may disagree on concrete objectives when the saliency of policy issues increases (De Bruycker et al., 2018; Jordan & Maloney, 2007).

In sum, constituency involvement and congruence may be driven by countervailing mechanisms, exemplifying an important tension in interest representation. As a result, some organizations tend to focus on only one representation mechanism, prioritizing either constituency involvement or strategically anticipating public opinion. We do not intend to empirically test these mechanisms, but rather rely on them in the subsequent section for informing our theoretical expectations.

3 | HYPOTHESES: THE NEXUS BETWEEN GROUP TYPE AND CONSTITUENCY INVOLVEMENT

We expect that a more intense engagement with constituents and issue salience affect congruence with the general public, depending on the type of constituency groups represent. We distinguish between three types: representative concentrated, representative diffuse, and solidarity organizations (Halpin, 2006).

First, representative concentrated organizations typically have a narrow and clearly delineated membership base of companies, institutions, or professionals that are formally affiliated members (Olson, 1965; Salisbury, 1969). Examples include associations of chemical companies, hospital associations, and associations of lawyers. For these interest groups, authorization and accountability for advocacy activities comes directly from the members—making them “representative” due to their formal membership structures and processes of membership involvement (Halpin, 2006). The members of these organizations are often not interested in passive involvement and want to express themselves when policy positions are formulated, as their economic self-interest is directly at stake (Binderkrantz, 2009; Halpin, 2006). When concentrated interest groups involve their members in internal processes, it may secure them with membership allegiance and support for their advocacy activities. However, such involvement can also entail that these organizations have less flexibility in selecting issues and adopting positions that resonate with the general public (Halpin et al., 2018; Minkoff & Powell, 2006). Since concentrated interests typically represent more narrow societal segments, their policy objectives could differ substantially from the objectives of the general public (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018; Giger & Klüver, 2016). Intense membership involvement in advocacy activities is expected to shift concentrated interest organizations toward the more particular interests of their members and away from positions that resonate strongly with the general public (Halpin et al., 2018; Minkoff & Powell, 2006).

Second, representative diffuse organizations typically have a diffuse constituency and a formal membership base consisting of (associations of) individual citizens mobilized around a public interest or cause (Halpin, 2006). Examples include women’s organizations and consumer organizations. Typically, the scope of these organizations’ membership base is more encompassing and representative of broader societal segments compared to the membership of concentrated interests. Moreover, these organizations are labeled “representative” due to their formal membership structures through which they can directly involve their constituents in advocacy activities (Halpin, 2006). Representative diffuse organizations can learn about the societal grievances from broad societal segments through close interactions with their constituents (Halpin et al., 2018; Minkoff & Powell, 2006). This enables them to secure higher levels of
congruence in comparison to concentrated interest organizations (Binderkrantz & Kroyer, 2012; Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018; Giger & Klüver, 2016). While representative diffuse organizations also face constraints when involving their members in advocacy activities, these constraining forces do not weigh up against the strengthening societal embeddedness which results from such membership engagement. Hence, in contrast to representative concentrated organizations, we expect constituency involvement to strengthen congruence for representative diffuse organizations.

Third, solidarity organizations typically have a diffuse constituency of loosely affiliated donors or supporters, but no formal members (Halpin, 2006; Jordan & Maloney, 1997, 2007). Examples include animal rights groups and development non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many advocate for certain causes, values, or the interests of disenfranchised groups (such as children, the poor, future generations, animals) that do not necessarily coincide with supporters’ own self-interests (Halpin, 2006; Warleigh, 2001). The constituencies of these organizations are often satisfied with expressing themselves through paying annual fees and may even consider a low level of participation—or no participation at all—to be an attractive quality (Jordan & Maloney, 1997, 2007). Even if solidarity organizations closely involve their constituents in advocacy activities, these organizations still experience considerable flexibility in aligning their advocacy priorities with public opinion. The constituents of solidarity organizations typically do not occupy decision-making or financial veto player roles, and usually their own private self-interest is not at stake (Binderkrantz, 2009; Warleigh, 2001). This gives the leadership of solidarity organizations more opportunities to seize strategic policy momentum and to lobby on issues where public opinion is on their side (Jordan & Maloney, 1997, 2007), regardless of whether they involve their supporters. Therefore, we expect that constituency involvement will not meaningfully impact congruence for solidarity organizations. Our expectations are summarized in Hypothesis 1.

**Hypothesis 1** Constituency involvement will impede congruence with the broader public for (a) representative concentrated organizations and (b) strengthen congruence for representative diffuse organizations, while (c) it will not affect congruence for solidarity organizations.

While concentrated interest organizations may see their congruence with the public diminished when they actively involve their constituents, they can still enjoy considerable levels of public support if they anticipate the public mood and adjust their policy objectives accordingly. For the mechanism of rational anticipation to function and for interest groups to be able to detect signals from the public, a key condition is that policy issues are salient. Salience can be understood as the relative importance and visibility of certain policy issues in the media, on the government agenda, or among the public (Beyers, Dür, & Wonka, 2018; Burstein, 2014; Wlezien, 2005). Here, we focus on media attention for specific policy issues, as this likely captures the government agenda as well as the public agenda at least to some extent and thus provides important incentives for interest groups to prioritize particular issues (Halpin et al., 2018). The more media salience issues enjoy, the more the public will be informed about these issues, meaning that citizens will be more likely to adopt policy positions in favor or against particular policy outcomes (Ciuk & Yost, 2016; Zaller, 1992). Hence, media salience enables interest groups to strategically anticipate public opinion, that is, they can more easily determine what the public wants on salient issues and anticipate public (dis)approval before mobilizing on issues. On issues that attract little to no salience, it is more difficult for groups to estimate
whether public opinion is on their side, as they lack information on the general public’s policy views (Burstein, 2014; De Bruycker, 2017).

The effect of salience, however, is not equal for every interest group. Depending on the type of constituency, interest groups experience more or less flexibility in rationally anticipating public opinion and adjusting their issue priorities accordingly. Concentrated interests typically represent well-circumscribed constituencies, and therefore these groups have less discretion in anticipating and accommodating public opinion into their issue priorities. These groups will therefore not necessarily find themselves more congruent with public opinion on salient issues. To the contrary, their constituents can more closely monitor the organization’s activities on visible dossiers and are more eager to see their specific interests defended in the face of public contestation (De Bruycker et al., 2018).

Representative diffuse organizations and solidarity organizations, in contrast, have a broader societal support base and therefore have more freedom in anticipating and incorporating public opinion in their policy objectives. Media salience allows these groups to more accurately estimate public preferences and incorporate these into their issue priorities, which increases congruence with public opinion. This is summarized in Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 2 The more media salience issues attract, (a) the more congruent the positions of solidarity interests and (b) representative diffuse interests, while salience affects congruence negatively for (c) representative concentrated organizations.

4 | DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The empirical analysis relies on a sample of 110 specific policy issues, which were included in an online voter survey of 2,081 eligible Belgian voters (Flanders \( n = 1,053 \), Wallonia \( n = 1,028 \)). This sampling approach provides data on public opinion, which is necessary to capture our main dependent variable “congruence” (Rasmussen et al., 2018). The voter survey was conducted in the run-up to the sub (national) and European elections of May 25, 2014, and resulted in an average response rate of 17%. Respondents could either agree or disagree with issue statements (Lesschaeve, 2017). All of the 110 sampled policy issues—of which 37 national issues, 34 Flemish issues, and 39 Walloon/ Francophone issues—meet the following criteria: unidimensionality, specificity, attributable to a dominant government level, and deal with substantive policies instead of administrative acts (e.g., accumulation of political mandates) or budgetary allocations (e.g., subsidies for cultural policy). The sample accounted for variation across policy issues in terms of policy domains, legislative initiatives introduced, interest group mobilization, and media prominence of specific issues (Figure S1).

To identify interest organizations and their positions on the sampled policy issues, we relied on an extensive news content analysis for each specific policy issue (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2015; Rasmussen et al., 2018). First, we applied computer-automated Boolean keyword searches in four news media outlets for the period June 2013–December 2017. This resulted in 26,512 unique newspaper articles. Next, we automatically identified interest organizations in these articles based on a curated dictionary containing the names and abbreviations of 2,340 Belgian interest organizations (Beyers et al., 2016). Subsequently, we used a multistage stratified sampling approach to ensure the coding of interest groups’ policy positions would be feasible (see Appendix S1 for an overview of this procedure). This resulted in a sample of 2,740 articles that were manually coded. We coded whether or not the identified interest groups made relevant
claims about the specific policy issue at hand. Claims were defined as quotations or paraphrases in the news that can be connected to specific interest organizations (De Bruycker, 2017; Koopmans & Statham, 1999). In total, 239 unique interest organizations made 986 claims on 83 issues (leaving 27 issues with no relevant interest group identification and/or claim). Coded claims are made both before ($n = 133$ in 2013) and after ($n = 853$ in 2014–2017) the public opinion measurement (March 2014).

Based on these claims, we coded the organizations’ positions in favor and against the issue statements included in the voter survey. The coding was conducted by one of the authors, a research assistant, and two student assistants; intercoder reliability checks were performed and found to be satisfactory (Appendix S1). Subsequently, interest groups’ claims could be linked to the share of the public that adopted the same position as the group, which constitutes our measure of congruence. The share of the public in favor and against a specific policy issue was measured based on the percentage of respondents that “agreed” or “disagreed” with the issue statement. For example, on the issue “The retirement age should not rise,” 72% of the public agrees, while 22% disagrees with the statement. In this case, all interest organizations that agreed were given the value of 0.72, while all organizations that disagreed were given the value of 0.22. This coding was performed for each organization that made a claim on one of the issues in our sample and resulted in a continuous variable ($\min = 0.10; \mu = 0.48; \alpha = .19; \max = 0.83$). The percentages for national issues were calculated by taking the respective averages between the percentages of Flemings and Francophones holding each position, since both publics were surveyed separately on these issues. Alternatively, we created a dichotomous variable measuring whether the position of the largest share of the public coincides with the position adopted by each interest group. For example, on the issue of the retirement age, groups holding a position in favor of the statement, receive the value “1” because the share of public that agrees is larger than the share of the public that disagrees with the statement. In sum, linking public opinion to interest groups their media claims on specific issues created a dataset with repeated measures, that is, interest groups making claims nested in several policy issues.

While our study does not enquire about interest groups gaining media attention, it should be noted that the news media have their own rules of engagement and consequently do not include all interest groups active on a particular issue. Previous studies on interest groups’ media attention demonstrated that well-endowed organizations, business groups, and organizations that seek to change the status quo attract relatively more prominence in the news. Moreover, our focus on the news media makes us more likely to capture groups expressing positions that resonate with the broader public compared to other more secluded advocacy arenas (Kollman, 1998). Even if media claims offer only part of the picture, news media still constitute an important arena for interest groups to make their voices heard (Rasmussen et al., 2018). Claims can reach the largest audiences through the media, and media coverage is generally not limited to one side of a political conflict, as journalists are expected to offer balanced reporting (Hopmann, Van Aelst, & Legnante, 2012).

To measure our independent variables, we relied on a survey of the population of Belgian interest groups and linked this to the 239 interest groups making media claims. The survey of 1,678 organizations had a response rate of 43%, and 68 of these surveyed organizations could be linked to our media dataset (which constitutes 29% of the identified organizations in the media). This resulted in 314 organization-media claim dyads on 58 policy issues, providing us with the unique opportunity to connect key organizational traits to the extent to which interest groups align with public opinion on specific policy issues. The representativeness of this sample is further discussed in the Appendix S1.
First, we created a variable categorizing organizations into: (a) representative concentrated interests, including business associations, professional associations, and associations of institutions and (semi-)public authorities \((n = 144\) dyads); (b) representative diffuse organizations, including labor unions, cause, and identity groups with formal members \((n = 129\) dyads), and (c) solidarity organizations, including cause and identity groups without formal members \((n = 40\) dyads) (Binderkrantz, 2008; Halpin, 2006). Although labor unions can also be viewed as concentrated (economic) interests due to their association with specific professions, they differ significantly from the other organizations in this category. Belgian labor unions all have comprehensive individual membership bases and specific occupational branches are part of large organizational conglomerates active on a wide range of policy issues (Faniel, 2012). These conglomerates coordinate the political and organizational strategies of the smaller branches.

Second, to measure constituency involvement we constructed an index based on the following item-response question (Heylen, Fraussen, & Beyers, 2018): “How important are your members for the following activities?” These activities included (a) “helping to influence public policy,” (b) “providing ideas about your organization’s campaigning strategies,” (c) “identifying problems or providing ideas about your organization’s activities,” (d) “providing evidence of support from affected members or concerned citizens,” and (e) “running local groups or branches.” Respondents could indicate the intensity of constituency involvement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “unimportant” to “very important.” These responses were then summed to create a scale of constituency involvement ranging from 5 to 25 with a mean of 21 \((\alpha = 4.02, \text{Cronbach’s alpha} = .71)\). Alternatively, we created a dummy variable measuring whether the constituency or the staff/board exclusively formulates policy positions.

Third, media salience was measured through the number of newspaper articles that addresses a policy issue directly or discusses the broader policy theme. The measure is right-skewed; only a few issues are highly salient. The variable was therefore logarithmically transformed \((\min = -0.68; \mu = 0.49; \alpha = .45; \max = 1.08)\). More information on the distribution of the key independent variables can be found in Appendix S1.

We also included a set of organizational control variables. First, we controlled for the number of staff organizations employed. Organizations with a larger staff have more capacity to involve their members and supporters, and are better able to monitor policy issues, hence being better equipped to anticipate public opinion. To gauge the number of staff, we asked “How many paid staff (full time equivalent), does your organization employ?” The variable was logarithmically transformed due to the distribution being right-skewed \((\min = 0; \mu = 4; \alpha = 1.77; \max = 8.52)\). Next, we controlled for the degree to which interest groups depend on government funding, as this might make groups more sensitive to the preferences of the government rather than the preferences of their constituencies or the broader public (Heylen & Willems, 2019; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). To capture dependencies on government funding, respondents indicated the percentage of (sub) national subsidies within their 2015 budget. This measure is right-skewed. The variable was therefore recoded as a categorical variable: no subsidies \((n = 168\) dyads), 0.01–50% of the budget consisting of government subsidies \((n = 87\) dyads) and 51–100% of the budget consisting of government subsidies \((n = 58\) dyads). Third, we created a categorical measure distinguishing between interest groups that seek to change the status quo \((n = 196\) dyads) and groups that defend the status quo \((n = 117\) dyads). Finally, we controlled for the cultural-linguistic origin of the constituency based on a survey question. We created a categorical variable distinguishing between Flemish \((n = 92\) dyads), Walloon/Francophone \((n = 39\) dyads), and nationwide organizations \((n = 182\) dyads).
A second set of control variables was used to account for the issue context. First, we controlled for subnational or national government authority over the respective policy issues, as public opinion may vary across regions. We created a categorical variable, distinguishing between Flemish issues \((n = 43\) dyads\), Francophone/Walloon issues \((n = 42\) dyads\), and national issues \((n = 228\) dyads\). Second, we controlled for the number of months interest groups’ media claims are distanced from the public opinion measurement (March 2014). This measure is slightly left-skewed \((\min = -8; \mu = 16.34; \alpha = 15.67; \max = 46)\).

5 | ANALYSIS

We first present a bivariate analysis of the relationship between group type and congruence. We performed a one-way analysis of variance test to determine if the mean positional congruence is significantly different for the three group types, representative concentrated \((n = 145)\), representative diffuse \((n = 129)\), and solidarity groups \((n = 40)\). Here, a statistically significant difference is observed between groups \((F[2,311] = 5.90, p = .003)\). A Tukey post hoc test indicates that the mean positional congruence is not significantly higher for representative diffuse groups compared to representative concentrated interests, which is used as the control group \((0.025 \pm 0.02\) percentage points, \(p = .513)\). In contrast, solidarity groups significantly differ from concentrated interests \((0.116 \pm 0.03\) percentage points, \(p = .002)\) and from representative diffuse groups \((0.091 \pm 0.03\) percentage points, \(p = .023)\).

To test our hypotheses, we ran mixed effects ordinary least-squares models with a random intercept for policy issues to account for repeated observations, that is, the nesting of organizations within policy issues. Given the hierarchical data structure, the assumptions of independence and homoscedasticity are violated. Therefore, we used a two-level model that allowed the intercept for policy issues to vary. Numeric predictors are standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing this by two times the standard deviation (Gelman, 2008). This allows for an interpretation analogous to a dichotomous variable. Moving one unit of analysis corresponds to moving one standard deviation below the mean, to one standard deviation above the mean.

Table 1 presents our regression analyses. In Model 1, we test for group type, taking representative concentrated organizations as the reference category. Compared to representative concentrated organizations, diffuse representative organizations and solidarity organizations are more likely to be congruent with the positions held by larger shares of the public. The control for staff has a positive effect—the more employees the organizations have, the more congruent they become with public opinion. Regarding government funding, we found that interest groups relying on subsidies are less likely to have a congruent position with larger shares of the public. Finally, it does not matter if issues address national, Flemish, or Walloon/Francophone policies. We also observe no significant difference between interest groups supporting or opposing the status quo. In Model 2, we include our measure of constituency involvement and find no significant direct effect on congruence. In Model 3, we add our measure of media salience, which does not have a direct effect on the congruence of interest groups.

In Model 4, we include the interaction terms for group type and constituency involvement to assess Hypothesis 1. Figure 2 displays the predicted probabilities for congruence moving from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean for the intensity of constituency involvement. The average marginal effects are presented in the Appendix S1.
### TABLE 1  OLS-mixed effects models with a random intercept for policy issues

| Group type (ref. cat = concentrated) | Model 1: group type | Model 2: constituency involvement | Model 3: media salience | Model 4: interactions | Model 5: interactions |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Representative diffuse               | 0.047*              | 0.051**                          | 0.057**                 | 0.036                 | -0.080**              |
|                                     | (0.024)             | (0.025)                          | (0.025)                 | (0.026)              | (0.031)              |
| Solidarity                           | 0.177***            | 0.190***                         | 0.195***                | 0.173***             | 0.059                 |
|                                     | (0.045)             | (0.047)                          | (0.047)                 | (0.048)              | (0.052)              |

| Constituency involvement            |                     |                                   |                         |                       |                       |
| Constituency involvement (index)     | 0.024               | 0.023                            | -0.062                  | -0.024               |                       |
|                                     | (0.023)             | (0.023)                          | (0.038)                 | (0.036)              |                       |

| Controls: organizational             |                     |                                   |                         |                       |                       |
| Staff (log)                          | 0.059***            | 0.061***                         | 0.059***                | 0.093***             | 0.059**              |
|                                     | (0.023)             | (0.023)                          | (0.023)                 | (0.025)              | (0.024)              |

| Government subsidies (ref. cat = 0%)|                     |                                   |                         |                       |                       |
| 0.01–50%                            | -0.055*             | -0.051*                          | -0.046                  | -0.055*              | -0.021               |
|                                     | (0.029)             | (0.029)                          | (0.029)                 | (0.029)              | (0.028)              |
| 51–100%                             | -0.098***           | -0.097**                         | -0.089**                | -0.076**             | -0.038               |
|                                     | (0.038)             | (0.038)                          | (0.038)                 | (0.038)              | (0.037)              |

| Membership origin (ref. cat = national) |                     |                                   |                         |                       |                       |
| Flemish membership                   | 0.015               | 0.021                            | 0.019                   | -0.004               | -0.014               |
|                                     | (0.027)             | (0.027)                          | (0.027)                 | (0.028)              | (0.027)              |
| Walloon/francophone membership       | 0.030               | 0.029                            | 0.033                   | 0.040                | 0.017                |
|                                     | (0.041)             | (0.041)                          | (0.041)                 | (0.041)              | (0.039)              |
| Group position (ref. cat = change status quo) | -0.024            | -0.024                           | -0.027                  | -0.036*              | -0.050***           |
| Supports status quo                  | (0.021)             | (0.021)                          | (0.021)                 | (0.021)              | (0.020)              |

| Issue context                        |                     |                                   |                         |                       |                       |
| Media salience (log)                 | 0.065               | 0.052                            | -0.113**                |                       |                       |
|                                     | (0.047)             | (0.047)                          | (0.056)                 |                       |                       |

| Controls: issue context              |                     |                                   |                         |                       |                       |
| Political level of competence (ref.cat = Nat.) |                     |                                   |                         |                       |                       |
| Flemish issue                        | -0.006              | -0.006                           | 0.023                   | 0.020                | 0.019                |
|                                     | (0.051)             | (0.051)                          | (0.055)                 | (0.054)              | (0.054)              |
| Walloon/francophone issue            | 0.016               | 0.022                            | 0.056                   | 0.056                | 0.053                |
|                                     | (0.054)             | (0.054)                          | (0.059)                 | (0.058)              | (0.058)              |

(Continues)
In line with expectations, representative diffuse interests are more congruent, the more they involve their constituents, while we observe the opposite effect for representative concentrated groups. For example, Figure 2 shows that the predicted congruence for representative diffuse organizations is, on average, 20% higher than representative concentrated organizations when both intensely involve their constituencies. In contrast, when involving their constituents to a limited extent, representative concentrated groups are significantly more congruent (50%) than representative diffuse groups (38%). Representative concentrated organizations see their congruence with the general public diminished when they more closely engage their constituents. This suggests that these groups’ constituencies are more prone to disagree with the public majority position on an issue. We observe no significant effect of constituency involvement for solidarity organizations. Regardless of the degree

| TABLE 1 (Continued) |
|----------------------|
| Model 1: group type | Model 2: constituency involvement | Model 3: media salience | Model 4: interactions | Model 5: interactions |
| Months from PO measurement | 0.019 | 0.018 | 0.018 | 0.018 | 0.017 |
| (0.022) | (0.022) | (0.022) | (0.022) | (0.021) |
| Interactions | | | | |
| Group type × constituency involvement | | | | |
| Representative diffuse × involvement | 0.158*** | 0.080* |
| (0.050) | (0.049) |
| Diffuse solidarity × involvement | 0.062 | 0.029 |
| (0.063) | (0.060) |
| Group type × media salience | | | | |
| Diffuse representative × salience | 0.289*** |
| (0.048) |
| Diffuse solidarity × salience | 0.113 |
| (0.090) |
| Constant | | | | |
| Fixed effects intercept | 0.455*** | 0.449*** | 0.422*** | 0.449*** | 0.534*** |
| (0.033) | (0.034) | (0.039) | (0.040) | (0.042) |
| Random effects intercept | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Number of media claims | 314 | 314 | 314 | 314 | 314 |
| Number of issues | 58 | 58 | 58 | 58 | 58 |
| Log likelihood | 78.220 | 75.895 | 74.697 | 75.607 | 89.498 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | −128.441 | −121.791 | −117.394 | −115.215 | −138.995 |
| Bayesian Inf. Crit. | −75.949 | −65.550 | −57.404 | −47.726 | −64.008 |

*p ≤ .1.  
**p ≤ .05.  
***p ≤ .001.  
Abbreviation: OLS, ordinary least-squares.
of constituency involvement, their congruence with public opinion is consistently higher (61%) compared with the other two group types. This confirms our first hypothesis, that is, constituency involvement impedes congruence with the positions held by the broader public for representative concentrated organizations and it does not constrain congruence between solidarity organizations and the broader public. When representative diffuse organizations more closely involve their constituents, they see their congruence with public opinion improved, arguably because these organizations are able to learn about the societal grievances from broad societal segments through close interactions with their constituencies. This is exemplified by organizations including polling results from their members in their media claims. For instance, Touring—a Belgian automobile drivers association—opposed the introduction of driver’s licenses with penalty points and justified its position by relying on an internal opinion poll indicating that most of their members opposed the policy measure. If the federation of driving schools would communicate such a poll, it would be less representative of the general public as their members constitute a narrow set of corporate interests. Overall, the findings from our regression analyses hold when using alternative measurements for the dependent and key independent variables (Table S1).

Model 5 also includes the interaction terms between group type and media salience, for which the predicted probabilities are presented in Figure 3. We find that when representative diffuse organizations experience higher levels of media salience, they are more congruent with larger shares of the public. For example, on policy issues that receive little media attention, the predicted congruence for representative diffuse organizations is on average 25%, while congruence jumps to 60% when issues are discussed in a high number of articles. This is in line with Hypothesis 2b; media salience positively affects congruence for representative diffuse organizations. These organizations have broader societal support bases and therefore seem to have more freedom in anticipating and incorporating public opinion in their policy objectives when issues grow salient. The results indicate that these groups might especially prioritize highly salient issues for which their preferences align with public opinion (Kollman, 1998).

In addition and as anticipated (H2a), media salience has a negative effect on representative concentrated organizations. The predicted congruence for these organizations moves from 62% at one standard deviation below the mean of salience to 40% of congruence at one standard deviation above the mean of salience. Concentrated interest organizations, having a more narrow and well-circumscribed membership base, seem to experience less discretion in rationally anticipating and accommodating public opinion into their policy objectives. Salience makes the costs and benefits of particular policy outcomes exceedingly visible to the members. Our results

![Figure 2](attachment:image.png)

**Figure 2** Predicted probabilities of congruence for different levels of constituency involvement by group type with 95% CIs.
suggest that under these circumstances concentrated organizations side with their members to the detriment of being congruent with public opinion. This is, for example, clearly the case when looking at the Federation of Belgian Enterprises that is almost exclusively active on highly salient issues ($n = 14/15$ issues) and on half of these salient issues the organization defends an “unpopular” position ($n = 8/14$ issues).

Finally, contrary to expectations (H2c), we find no mediating effect of issue salience for solidarity organizations. When examining our descriptive results, we can identify two possible reasons for this nonfinding. First, it appears that solidarity groups especially prioritize issues for which their positions correspond with prevailing public opinion, irrespective of the levels of salience policy issues attract (Kollman, 1998). For example, solidarity groups defending popular positions on highly salient issues such as “All nuclear weapons should be removed from the Belgian territory” can benefit from this public visibility to put pressure on policymakers ($n = 11/28$ organizations). Conversely, solidarity groups defending popular positions on issues of low salience such as “The rules for the export of weapons and military components must become stricter” might perceive their congruence with public opinion as an opportunity to seek media attention and stimulate public debate ($n = 9/28$ organizations). Second, in the rare occasion that solidarity organizations advocate for “unpopular” causes such as issues affecting minority interests, they do so irrespective of the levels of salience policy issues attract. For instance, contrary to popular opinion and regardless of the relatively higher levels of salience, most solidarity groups in Belgium believed that “Municipal administrative sanctions” had to be abolished.

A note of caution is appropriate with respect to potential endogeneity problems. Media salience may be endogenous to interest mobilization by particular group types and congruence. Namely, different types of interest groups can increase (or decrease) the salience of policy dossiers, rather than only react to it, when holding congruent positions with public opinion. Applied to our results, this means that representative diffuse groups are particularly successful in increasing the salience of policy issues when they enjoy broad public support. The observational nature of our data implies that this alternative causal relationship cannot be entirely ruled out. However, previous studies demonstrated that the outside lobbying efforts of a single interest group do not significantly affect the salience of policy issues (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019; Klüver et al., 2015; Tresch & Fischer, 2015). Moreover, media attention is determined by multiple factors beyond the control of interest groups, including political parties, real-world events, journalists, and editorial lines. Hence, the interaction effects are unlikely to be caused by reversed causation. Nonetheless, future research adopting longitudinal research designs is warranted to further substantiate the causal relationship of the presented results and rule out concerns of endogeneity.

**Figure 3** Predicted probabilities of congruence for different levels of media salience by group type with 95% CIs
This article aimed to explain the congruence between interest groups and public opinion on specific policy issues in Belgium. Not only the type of the represented constituency, but also the extent to which constituents are involved in advocacy activities and issue salience affect congruence. We introduced two pathways to congruence for interest groups by borrowing insights from the party politics literature. As such, our study answers recent calls for further cross-fertilization between interest group and party politics literatures (Allern & Bale, 2012; Frassen & Halpin, 2018). On the one hand, interest groups may see their congruence with the public affected by the extent to which their members and supporters are involved in endorsing advocacy activities and holding the organizational leadership accountable (electoral turnover). Since the objectives of organizations, their constituencies, and the general public can and do at times diverge, interest organizations can find themselves forced to strike a balance between closely engaging their members and supporters and aligning their policy objectives with public opinion. On the other hand, groups may anticipate and incorporate public opinion in their advocacy objectives by observing direct signals from the public, if these become apparent (rational anticipation). In short, the outcome of this balancing act between constituency involvement and congruence varies according to the type of constituents represented and the salience of policy issues.

The findings demonstrated that interest groups with formal membership bases are less congruent with the general public compared to groups with more informal supporter bases. Namely, concentrated interests that represent well-circumscribed business interests experience significantly lower levels of public support. Organizations that lack a formal membership base and represent certain diffuse interests related to norms and values in society, or disenfranchised constituencies enjoy the highest rates of public support. However, these differences between group types are contingent on the extent to which the organization’s constituency is engaged in advocacy activities and the level of salience policy issues attract. In short, organizations that have a diffuse membership base can more easily align their position with public opinion when they involve their constituents and when media salience is high, while the opposite holds for concentrated interests. Hereby, this article empirically demonstrates the explanatory value of distinguishing between “representative” and “solidarity” organizations when analyzing interest groups’ practices (Halpin, 2006). Although higher levels of congruence for “solidarity” organizations might be especially due to these groups’ issue prioritizations—that is, selecting issues for which their pre-existing preferences already align with prevailing public opinion when mobilizing (Kollman, 1998)—the involvement of constituents is a determining factor for “representative” organizations to be congruent with prevailing public opinion.

Our findings unveil an important tension in interest representation and highlight the dual, sometimes conflicting function of interest groups in connecting the general public and policymakers (Albareda, 2018; Halpin et al., 2018; Jordan & Maloney, 1997, 2007; Lowery, 2007). The results indicate that we should not overestimate the transmission belt function of interest groups in the sense that they are always processing and articulating their constituents’ preferences in a bottom-up and proactive fashion. Some organizations are characterized by high levels of public support simply because they are formally detached from their membership and/or engage less with their constituency when determining their policy positions. Public support then results from a strategic decision rather than a form of aggregation and transmission of constituency preferences. At the same time, we should not overestimate the constraining effects of constituency involvement on congruence. Although concentrated interest organizations with
closely engaged members, are less congruent with public opinion, these groups still have, on average, substantial levels of congruence with the public (Flöthe & Rasmussen, 2018). Moreover, constituency involvement has a positive effect on congruence for representative diffuse groups. These findings therefore highlight the contingent effects of constituency involvement on congruence. Depending on their membership base—concentrated or diffuse—“representative” organizations see their congruence with the public decrease or increase.

Future studies could further disentangle this tension in interest representation by considering the preferences of specific socio-economic strata of public opinion and by integrating additional indicators of constituency support and involvement (e.g., by surveying actual constituencies). At present, we cannot generalize our findings beyond the Belgian case and the media arena, even though our theory is not country- or arena-specific. Comparative research could further clarify the external validity of our findings by exploring relevant interpoly variation and testing our arguments in other advocacy arenas. As previously mentioned, we considered Belgium as a representative case for other neo-corporatist systems of interest representation in which a tension is likely to emerge between congruence and constituency involvement due to well-ingrained ties between societal constituencies and interest groups. Consequently, we expect that interest groups in pluralist systems experience less tensions between their constituents’ preferences and the preferences of the broader public and are—as a result—more congruent with public opinion (Rasmussen, Reher, & Toshkov, 2019). In sum, our study shows that public concerns are echoed by interest groups’ voices depending on who their constituents are, whether constituents are actively involved and whether issues are debated in the public spotlight.

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