

# Interest heterogeneity and the effectiveness of German employer associations

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## Abstract/Summary

Traditionally, the German system of collective bargaining has impressed many observers by its stability, as well as by its simultaneous contributions to firms' competitiveness, a high wage level, and a low number of industrial disputes. For a large part, this stability of industry level collective bargaining rests on the unique capacity of German employer associations to extend the scope of collective agreements far beyond unionization levels. In the last fifteen years, however, due to a shrinking collective bargaining coverage of German workplaces, doubts have been raised whether employer associations are still able to integrate diversified interests within their organisations. In particular, increased interest heterogeneity among firms has been identified as a major cause for a tendency among employer associations to disintegrate.

Yet, on a theoretical level, the impact of interest heterogeneity on employer associations' associability is not as clear-cut as one would expect it to be. This is largely due to the fact that different theoretical approaches use different concepts of interest heterogeneity leading to contradicting diagnoses about employer associations' effectiveness. This paper aims to clarify the impact of interest heterogeneity on employer associations' capacity to organize and represent their constituencies by distinguishing two different dimensions of interest heterogeneity: First, interest heterogeneity caused by associations' definitions of associational domains, and second, interest heterogeneity caused by differences among member firms. We study the impact of these two types of interest heterogeneity on three aspects of associations' effectiveness, i.e. membership density, lobbying, and collective bargaining.

Empirically, with our dataset on German business interest associations (2005/2006), we are able to look more deeply into the structures and policies of German employer associations. Our estimation results for 124 German employer associations suggest that the impact of the two types of interest heterogeneity on the effectiveness of employers' associations do differ, indeed. While at the level of associational domains heterogeneity negatively affects membership density the effect is reversed in the case of heterogeneity defined in terms of associations' membership composition. A homogeneous membership structure comprising only of small firms is detrimental to membership density. In contrast to that, an association which has defined a narrower policy domain seems to benefit from interest homogeneity by realizing a higher membership density. Moreover, a heterogeneous policy domain increases the capacity of employer associations to lobby successfully the legislative process. These results lead us to conclude that the impact of interest heterogeneity on employer associations' effectiveness needs to be analysed in a rather differentiated way.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, German employer associations have shown signs of being affected by disintegration. As a currently popular argument holds, employer associations have become less effective in unifying demands in collective bargaining due to the increasing labour cost competition in a globalized economy. While large companies have some ability to cope with wage pressure through their cross-border activities, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are more affected by wage increases, even if individual SMEs manage to inhabit product niches in national markets. This change in the economic context of wage setting seems to be causing a differentiation of the interests that employer associations have to represent (Zimmer 2002). In short, diverging member interests have been identified as causing manifestations of disorganization: membership decline (Schroeder/Ruppert 1996), weakness in contract enforcement (Thelen 2000), and separation of members according to membership status, i.e. membership status differs depending on whether collective agreements apply to a firm or not (Voelkl 2002; Haipeter and Schilling 2006).

By relating to these phenomena of disintegration we ask: Does diversity in political interests really pose an unsurmountable problem for associations' effectiveness? Theoretically, using a domain concept, one might conclude that a more homogeneous associational domain (i.e. a more narrowly defined organizational boundary) is conducive to (re-)building an effective collective interest representation. As Streeck (1989: 19) has argued: "Actually, judging from observed patterns of associability, capitalist interests rather appear broad, heterogeneous, and complex that, to become narrow, homogeneous, and simple enough for organization, they must be subdivided in a large number of specialized (sub-)domains". Not surprisingly, some experts argue in favour of more homogeneity among member firms as beneficial to associability. From such a view point, diverging interests seem problematic for two interrelated reasons. First, diverging interests evolve in an institutional context of collective bargaining which favors fixing common minimum conditions throughout an association's jurisdiction (Thelen 2000). Second, interest heterogeneity might produce difficulties for the internal organization of employers' interest representation, since the corridor of common member interests becomes narrower. Growing diversity of members might negatively influence employer associations' capacity to define a coherent policy, leading to ineffectiveness in representing their members' interests (Silvia/Schroeder 2007).

In opposition to that, applying Olson's ideas, greater interest heterogeneity should make collective action and interest representation easier, not harder, because with greater diversity the probability increases that at least one dominant group member would even accept to carry the burden of collective action alone (Olson 1965). In this context, Traxler (1993: 696) has argued that interest heterogeneity has been understood either as differences in individual members' interests with respect to a specific organizational goal (Olson 1965), or as differences in 'objectified interests' serving as an input factor for collective action (Offe/Wiesenthal 1980). As such, criteria for heterogeneity and homogeneity in interests need to be defined on the level of groups and on the level of individual members at the same time (Keller 1998). By acknowledging these two approaches for capturing interest heterogeneity, we define interest heterogeneity to appear in two forms: first, as a heterogeneous composition of the membership structure, and second, as heterogeneous organizational boundaries (industries represented, policy areas selected). Moreover, we claim that these two forms of interest heterogeneity differ in terms of their effects on the effectiveness of associations.

## **INTEREST HETEROGENEITY AND REPRESENTATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS**

Not only do the perspectives on interest heterogeneity differ sharply, but they also have contradictory expectations for employers' associability or representational effectiveness. Most observers would expect employer associations to be effective if they represented a large number of members; either in terms of the absolute number of member firms or in terms of a relative portion of firms with membership status compared to all firms within an association's domain. However, this is only one type of associations' success. In some cases, relationships with

external actors are even more important than internal associability to represent interests effectively. As argued by many writers on employer associations, employer associations need to cope with a tension between two basic principles: the logic of membership and the logic of influence (Streeck and Schmitter 1999) or the ability to discipline members and the ability to make compromises (Weitbrecht 1969).

Using this distinction, we test whether the influence of interest heterogeneity differs between different kinds of representational effectiveness. In order to point out different effects of (1) homogeneous versus heterogeneous domains and (2) homogeneous versus heterogeneous membership composition, we focus on two dimensions of associations' effectiveness. First, there is an internally focused effectiveness that applies to whether the association is able to cover its relevant business community, i.e. success in organizing all firms which might join a given association as expressed by an association's membership density. Second, there is a form of effectiveness which is directed towards influencing external groups. In this case, effectiveness is defined in terms of the political influence an association has on external actors (Mueller-Jentsch 1997). For employer associations this means to look at their success in influencing the process of lawmaking by lobbying and at associations' success in bargaining with trade unions on collective agreements. All these aspects of effectiveness can be affected by both aspects of heterogeneity, i.e. heterogeneity in the composition of an association's membership as well as heterogeneity in substantive domains of interest representation. The following two sections will elaborate the causal relationship between the two different forms of heterogeneity and associations' effectiveness more closely.

## **Domain definition and representational effectiveness**

According to the organizational view on business associations, the articulation and aggregation of interests is much easier when associations are highly selective in allowing firms to acquire membership status and in defining the scope of their political ambitions (Schmitter/Streeck 1999). A narrow definition of an association's domain leads to a strong identification by existing members with the association and allows the association to be more homogeneous in its political ambitions and strategies. The major disadvantage of a narrow domain definition is more competition among members, since members that are more similar to each other will also be more likely to compete in the same labour or product markets. In any case, the trade-off between the breadth of the associational domain and the effectiveness of interest representation is of crucial importance not only in terms of membership density, but also with respect to lobbying and collective bargaining as well. This involves distinguishing between two central dimensions, according to which domains can vary: the range of industries and the scope of policy areas.

The industry domain is especially relevant to the participation of firms in an association. An extension of representational domains to more industries will lead to an expansion in the number of potential member firms. Local or regional business associations often expand their domain by opening themselves to all firms that operate at the same location. This gives an association the opportunity to build a reputation as being a representative of the local business community. A second dimension of associational domains is the policy domain or the association's substantive purpose, i.e. the fields of policy in which the association is active. The more policy fields an association operates in, the more member firms can be brought under its umbrella, because the association appeals to the political needs of different types of firms. In the case of German employer associations, mixed forms are of a peculiar importance, i.e. those that do both, collective bargaining and representing other economic interests of members. Exactly this type of associations is exceptional for German business interest representation which is characterised predominantly by the separation of employer and business associations.

## **Composition of membership and representational effectiveness**

Due to the intensified internal debates over bargaining policy since the mid-1990s, notably within the German metalworking association (Gesamtmittel), the size of member firms has become an

important criterion to determine interest heterogeneity in the literature on German employer associations (Völkl 2002; Traxler 2007; Streeck and Visser 2006). In collective bargaining, the interests of SMEs and large firms differ first and foremost with respect to the wage level and the effects of wage increases. Large firms are able to accept higher wage increases, since their production is shaped by higher capital intensity, greater ability to introduce flexible firm level compensation schemes, and the possibility to relocate work between locations with different compensation levels. Conversely, smaller firms usually deploy more labor-intensive production processes and have fewer opportunities for relocation what makes them highly sensitive to wage increases. As a consequence, for interest aggregation, employer associations need to take into account the relative salience of large or small firms in their membership, since collective bargaining interests differ according to average firm size.

As Völkl (2002) has suggested, a heterogeneous size structure of member firms could also be beneficial for employer associations. On the one hand, larger firms can justify the refusal of unions' wage claims by emphasizing the situation of smaller, supposedly economically weaker member firms. On the other hand, from the point of view of small firms, large firms provide a disproportionately larger share of the resources needed for a collective organization. In any case, effects of diverging interest structures within employer associations make clear that domain boundaries are not the only source for interest heterogeneity of employer associations. The size composition of membership also needs to be taken into account if one wants to assess the impact of interest heterogeneity on associability.

### **The dataset: business associations in Germany, 2005/2006**

The following analysis of the effects of interest heterogeneity on the representational effectiveness of employer associations is based on a mail survey of executive managers and chairpersons of German business associations. The sample is based on a database which includes a total of 1.054 associations put together from various secondary sources listing business associations (e.g. directories like Hoppenstedt, Oeckl). The cross-sectional data have been obtained by a standardized questionnaire sent out in 2005/2006. In total, 244 executives of different German business associations participated in the survey. Since we are interested in the effects of diversity among members, we selected from the responding employer associations those that are involved in collective bargaining and directly organize firms. Excluded were issue-specific organizations, associations of the self employed, pure trade associations, umbrella organizations, peak bodies, and craft associations. Of the 128 remaining associations with a collective bargaining function, 74.2 percent are employer associations and 25.8 percent are mixed trade and employer associations. The average association has 557 member firms. The sample includes employer associations from all sectors of the economy with manufacturing and raw materials accounting for 55.5 percent. Metals, printing, food, and chemicals are the main manufacturing sectors; the rest of the associations operate in construction and services, of which retail and wholesale associations are the most numerous.

### **The influence of heterogeneity on representational effectiveness**

**Dependent variables.** To look more closely on the effectiveness of employer associations in empirical terms, we concentrate on three aspects (for definitions and sample means of all variables, see Table 1). In the first estimation, the membership density of associations will be used as a dependent variable. An association can be seen as successful to the extent that it succeeds in winning over a large percentage of potential members in its representational domain. Membership density is measured according to the rate reported by an interviewed executive. The second dependent variable we include in the study is the influence of the association in the legislative process. The main goal of associations' lobbying work can be seen as influencing the process of law making and the passage of certain statutes or amendments. A third model estimates the success of employer associations in negotiations with trade unions. In this case, executives were asked for an assessment of the association's success in collective bargaining.

**Independent variables.** To measure the factors influencing the three above-mentioned aspects of employer associations' effectiveness, we examine their covariation with a set of independent variables. All three estimations contain, first, a series of characteristics of interest heterogeneity. In order to operationalize heterogeneity at the level of associational domains, the variables 'industry domain' and 'policy domain' are introduced into the estimation. The variable 'industry domain' is coded as '1' if the association acts as a multi-industry association. The variable 'policy domain' is coded as '1' when the association simultaneously has the function of a trade and employer association, i.e. it represents the product and labor market interests of its members. An association is considered as being heterogeneous when it organizes members in many industries and is a 'mixed' association that simultaneously represents the labor market and product market interests of its members.

Two further variables measure heterogeneity at the level of membership composition. The first variable, 'the most important member group = small business', identifies those associations with a membership dominated by small firms. This operationalization is based on a question in which associations' executives were asked to rank different member groups according to their numerical strength within the association. The criterion for ordering member groups was the number of employees in member firms. Five categories were available: firms with fewer than 20 employees, with 20 to 100 employees, with 100 to 250 employees, with 250 to 500 employees, and with 500 employees or more. We define associations as dominated by homogeneous group of SMEs only if both, the first and second most important member group, are firms with fewer than 100 employees. All remaining cases were treated as relatively heterogeneous in terms of the membership composition. In addition, all three estimations include another variable measuring heterogeneity related to membership composition: the estimate of the interviewed executives of the influence of large firms in the decisionmaking and policymaking processes of the association ('1' when they exert a very strong influence, '0' for other associations). Using this variable allows us to control for the heterogeneity that can emerge when an association includes many SMEs, but its decision-making processes are dominated by single large firms, yet. This allows the general argument of Olson – but also of other authors (e.g. Traxler 2007) – to be tested that large firms play a decisive role in the membership of employer associations.

**Control variables.** In addition, all three estimations contain a series of control variables. The log of the number of association members is used as an indication of absolute association size (not to be confused with the size composition of member firms discussed above) and the regional jurisdiction is included by a dummy variable coded as "1" when its jurisdiction is in East Germany. The dummy variable for East Germany controls for the special conditions and problems of the comparatively short history of employer associations in this region of Germany (Artus 2001). The variable 'mobilization' operationalizes the significance of member mobilization and actions that are the concrete manifestation of member involvement. Although, recently, doubts have been raised on the link between member mobilization and associability (Silvia and Schroeder 2007), the literature on employer associations has repeatedly expressed the assumption and provided some evidence that strong associations get their strength from conflict (Schnabel/Wagner 1996; Mueller-Jentsch 1997). Here, organizational strength can emerge, for example, from the necessity to resist a trade union's strike threat or to mobilize members to participate in a campaign, which gives rise to enhanced internally oriented discipline on the part of the association's members. Finally, the variable 'social partnership' includes the political orientation of the surveyed executives. It reports a social partnership orientation if the interviewee agrees with the following statement: 'German social partnership is an advantage in international competition.' As different studies have shown, the relationship between employers and trade unions emerges from a complex, historically contingent process on both sides (Behrens and Jacoby 2004). This interaction can be captured by the assessments of executives who lead the association operationally and deal with trade union representatives most of the time. A positive opinion of the executive towards social partnership – which remains the dominant model of employer and trade union relations in Germany – signifies a relatively cooperative relationship with trade unions. Conversely, a rejection of social partnership is probable when the association's policy towards

trade unions is conflictual (Hassel 1999; Streeck 1997). In controlling for this social partnership attitude, we assume that a social partnership orientation influences the perceived success of employer associations.

Variable	Value	Relative frequency or mean (n=76)
Dependent Variables		
Membership density	Relationship between actual and possible member firms (in percent)	57.50
Influence on law making	How successful do you think your association is in the formulation of laws? (1= 'very unsuccessful to 5 = 'very successful.')	3.14
Success in collective bargaining with trade unions	How successful do you think your association is in dialogue and negotiations with trade unions? (1 = 'very unsuccessful to 5 = 'very successful')	3.65
Independent variables		
SMEs are the most important members	Member group by number of employees (1 = most important and second-most important group employ fewer than 20 and 20-100 employees, 0 = other, Dummy)	0.51
Influence of large firms	What is the influence of large firms in the policymaking process of the association? (1 = 'strong or very strong influence', 0 = other, Dummy)	0.13
Industry Domain	In which area is your association active? (1 = multi-industry association, 0 = industry-specific association, Dummy)	0.09
Policy Domain	What characterization best represents the main thrust of your association's activity? (1 = trade group and employer association, 0 = only employer association, Dummy)	0.30
Number of members	Number of members in the association (log)	5.26
East Germany	Regional jurisdiction in East Germany (1= East Germany, 0= West Germany, Dummy)	0.14
Mobilization	How important is it to mobilize members for action? (1='very unimportant' to 5='very important')	2.89
Social partnership	German social partnership is an advantage in international competition. (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree')	2.67

Table 1: Definitions of Variables and Frequencies

**Estimation.** The estimations take into account three different aspects of representational effectiveness of employer associations. Although the estimates for several control variables reveal some interesting associations in themselves, we leave these results aside in our following discussion. In the case of membership density we use linear regression (OLS); due to the ordinal qualities of the independent variable - influence on law formulation and success in collective bargaining - we use ordered probit models (Long 1997: 114ff.). It is also worth mentioning that the estimates are based on data from only 76 employer associations. Given the existence of 650 to

750 employer associations in Germany, despite the missing data, we expect our results to have some relevance for the entire population of German employer associations.

	OLS Membership Density		Ordered Probit Influence in law making		Ordered Probit Success in collective bargaining	
	Coeff.	Standard error (A)	Coeff.	Standard error (A)	Coeff.	Standard error (A)
Most important group of members (SMEs)	-12.484**	5.419	-0.118	0.236	-0.348	0.263
Influence of large firms	17.819***	5.687	-0.223	0.311	0.312	0.383
Industry domain	-14.032**	6.793	-0.336	0.451	0.675*	0.379
Policy domain	6.175	5.318	0.573**	0.263	0.119	0.295
Number of members (log)	-4.259**	1.660	0.195*	0.101	0.043	0.101
East Germany	-19.699***	6.590	-0.247	0.387	0.016	0.394
Mobilization	2.476	1.965	0.128	0.119	-0.052	0.111
Social partnership	0.239	1.821	0.336***	0.124	0.206*	0.108
Constant	78.471***	12.799	-	-	-	-
F-value/ Wald	10.82*** (8)		22.10*** (8)		13.59* (8)	
Chi <sup>2</sup> (df)	76		76		76	
N	0.40		0.10		0.04	
R <sup>2</sup> / McFadden R <sup>2</sup>						

\*/\*\*/\*\* statistically significant at the level of 10/5/1%, A) Robust standard error (Huber-White sandwich estimator)

Table 2: The influence of organizational heterogeneity on different aspects of representational effectiveness.

In the first estimation model, the dependent variable is membership density. The two variables for the heterogeneity of associational domains have different signs, and only the coefficient for the industry domain is significant, at the 5% level. Accordingly, the membership density of an association, controlling for other variables, declines by 14% when it operates as a multi-industry association, i.e. shows a relatively heterogeneous domain in this regard.

Both variables that express heterogeneity at the level of association membership are significant. While, under conditions of relatively great sectoral heterogeneity, we see lower membership density, this relationship is the opposite with regard to size composition of membership. Accordingly, membership density declines by 12% when the association has a relatively homogeneous membership consisting of SMEs. However, if the executives report a significant influence of large firms – which we interpret as a sign of heterogeneous membership structure – density is considerably higher. In total, then, organizations with heterogeneous policy domains differ from those with a relatively homogeneous membership structure. While a homogeneous policy domain is beneficial to higher membership densities, a more homogeneous composition of the membership is detrimental to higher membership densities.

In our second estimation model, which uses the influence of associations on lawmaking as a dependent variable, the influence of the policy domain has a positive and significant influence at the 5% level. If an association is heterogeneous in terms of its policy domain i.e. it includes both product markets and labor market interests of its members, it is likely that the assessment of its influence on law making is more positive. This effect can be interpreted in terms of the greater range of issues covered by heterogeneous associations. Thus, a mixed association has significantly more opportunities to gain influence in law making than a pure employer association focusing exclusively on labor and social policy issues. However, heterogeneity/homogeneity of the membership composition does not seem to play a prominent role in this regard.

The third estimation model which uses perceived success in negotiations with trade unions as the dependent variable does not lead us to interpretable results. The explanatory power of this model (McFadden  $R^2$  of 0.04%, Wald Statistic significant at a level just over 10%) is insufficient. Apparently, success in collective bargaining can be explained by the characteristics of associations only in a very limited way. Other explanations might be more conducive in this case: Next to the business cycle and the concrete bargaining goals of member firms (Schnabel et al 2006), it may be that negotiation-specific processes play a more crucial role for the explanation of success in collective bargaining than associations' organizational characteristics. Among other things, these processes might include the capacity of the unions to mobilize and strike as well as the influence of third parties, such as politicians and courts. These data are specific to negotiation rounds and could not be captured by a cross-sectional survey of employer associations.

## Conclusions

Our analysis shows that the effect of interest heterogeneity depends on whether we look at heterogeneity at the level of membership composition or at the level of domain definition. Regarding membership composition, we find support for Olson's thesis that relatively heterogeneous interests are conducive to collective action. Membership densities are higher in associations which are composed of small and large firms alike since both types of members seem to depend on each other. While large firms might use smaller firms as a justification for refusing unions' wage demands, small firms profit from the resources of large firms which are often necessary to create or sustain associations. With respect to substantive policy domains, there is some evidence that a heterogeneous industry domain has disadvantages for internal effectiveness in terms of membership density. However, associations with heterogeneous policy domains are better at getting access to political decision makers than pure employer associations. In conclusion, one might say that the effect of interest heterogeneity not only differs according to the type of heterogeneity (formal structure or membership composition) but also according to the criteria used to conceptualize an association's effectiveness (membership density or lobbying). This differentiation of the types and effects of interest heterogeneity is important to understand the effectiveness of associations in representing their members interests and their power to influence and shape outcomes.

The implications of this result for the policy of associations need to be analysed further. On the one hand, whether large or small firms join an employer association cannot be entirely controlled by an association itself. In industries in which there are only a few or no large firms, such as the hotel industry or landscaping, a homogeneous membership structure seems inevitable. Also the domain boundaries of associations are to some extent given and self evident. However, it is possible – despite some problems and difficulties – to change these boundaries through mergers or constitutional changes. Whether this limited repertoire of action can be used to overcome organizing problems or whether it needs to be accompanied by introducing new forms of membership without obligations to comply with collective bargaining agreements remains an important question for future research.

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