

# Beyond Policy Influence: A Deeper Dive into the Factors Driving Advocacy Group Prominence

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## Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of prominence among advocacy organizations within the legislative process in democratic societies. Prominence refers to an advocacy organization perceived as a preeminent voice for a constituency and a valuable resource for policymakers, embodying a form of soft power indicative of interest group success. This paper examines why certain groups attain prominence over others and on specific issues, challenging the traditional assumption that older advocacy organizations exert more influence. The analysis suggests a more complex dynamic in gaining prominence, with broader policy agendas and the use of external lobbyists contributing to higher prominence levels. Politician-specific factors yielded mixed results, questioning conventional assumptions about seniority, term status, and legislative activity. The findings provide valuable insights into the nuanced factors contributing to an interest group's prominence and encourage further research in this under-explored area of interest group success.

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## **Introduction**

In democratic societies, advocacy organizations compete for attention and influence, representing diverse constituencies and offering expertise on various issues to shape policies, discourses, and perceptions. Within this landscape, not all advocacy groups receive equal attention; some become more prominent, positioning themselves as key voices in political discourse. This prominence extends beyond traditional measures of influence, serving as a metric of an organization's taken-for-grantedness in the legislative process. Understanding the factors that drive advocacy group prominence provides a valuable lens to assess their relevance and success in policy-making arenas.

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## **Research Gap, Motivation, & Relevancy**

Despite the critical role of advocacy groups in shaping policy, the relationship between these groups and politicians, particularly regarding the attainment of prominence, remains under-researched. Traditional studies often focus on direct influence through lobbying and policy outcomes, neglecting softer indicators like prominence. This research addresses this gap by quantifying prominence and identifying its determinants using legislative debate data from the 114th and 115th U.S. Congresses. By employing supervised machine learning and regression analysis, this study offers a methodological and empirical contribution to understanding interest group success beyond direct policy influence.

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## **Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Relevance**

Prominence, access, and involvement are alternative measures of interest group success that capture different facets of policy engagement. Prominence specifically refers to an advocacy organization's recognized authority and utility among policymakers, distinct from mere access or involvement. This study builds on the framework proposed by Halpin and Fraussen (2017), which emphasizes the audience dynamic as a key driver of prominence. By operationalizing prominence through legislative mentions and employing a supervised machine learning approach, this research advances the theoretical understanding of interest group dynamics in policy-making.

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## **Literature Review and Conceptual Model**

## **Prominence**

Prominence is defined as the recognized authority of an advocacy group among specific audiences, such as politicians or journalists, regarding particular issues or constituencies. Unlike access, which involves direct engagement with policymakers, prominence signifies the weight and visibility an organization commands within policy dialogues. Previous studies have highlighted that prominence results from external perceptions of relevance and utility, influenced by factors like issue salience and organizational characteristics.

## **Access and Recognition**

Access refers to an advocacy group's ability to engage with policymakers through formal and informal channels, while recognition involves the attention given to an organization by decision-makers. Although related, prominence and access are distinct; an organization may have access without prominence and vice versa. This distinction underscores the multifaceted nature of interest group success and the importance of examining different metrics to capture their influence comprehensively.

## **Institutional Pluralism**

Grossman's theory of institutionalized pluralism posits that political influence is distributed across multiple institutions, allowing various interest groups to prosper based on their traits and strategies. This theory supports the operationalization of prominence as a measure of success that precedes direct policy influence, emphasizing the importance of early-stage engagement and recognition in the legislative process.

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## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

The study utilizes legislative debate transcripts from the 114th and 115th U.S. Congresses obtained via the GovInfo API. The dataset comprises nearly 78,000 documents, capturing Senate and House proceedings. Additionally, data on interest groups was sourced from the Washington Representative Study, encompassing 14,368 interest groups and 43,012 cases, which were refined to 5,447 organizations relevant to this study.

### **Operationalization of Variables**

**Prominence:** Measured through mentions in legislative debates, differentiated between prominent and non-prominent mentions using a supervised machine learning classifier.

**Issue Area and Public Salience:** Identified using committee-to-policy area mappings and classified through a pre-trained congressional bill classifier. Public salience was quantified using Google Trends data, categorizing policy areas into low, medium, and high salience based on search popularity.

**Group Characteristics:** Operationalized through variables such as age, membership status, policy agenda breadth, and lobbying expenditure.

**Politician Characteristics:** Included policy-domain overlap, election-year status, seniority, party affiliation, and number of bills sponsored.

## **Classifier Data and Methodology**

Prominence was classified using supervised machine learning, trained on a labeled dataset of 1,000 manually coded mentions. The Support Vector Machine (SVM) with a count vectorizer was selected for its performance, achieving an accuracy of approximately 81% and an ROC AUC score of 0.72. The classifier distinguished between prominent and non-prominent mentions based on contextual cues within legislative texts.

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## **Analysis**

### **Classifier Performance**

The SVM classifier effectively differentiated between prominent and non-prominent mentions, with higher precision for prominent mentions (0.82) and higher recall for non-prominent mentions (0.90). The F1-score indicated a balanced performance, particularly favoring the identification of prominent mentions.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Out of 24,000 unique mentions, 9,506 were classified as prominent. The distribution revealed significant disparities, with a small percentage of interest groups accounting for a large proportion of prominent mentions. For instance, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America had 1,712 mentions, with 642 being prominent.

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## **Modeling and Results**

### **Model 1: Policy Saliency**

This model examined the relationship between issue area saliency and prominence. Contrary to the hypothesis, high saliency policy areas were associated with lower prominence (OR=0.702), while medium saliency areas showed a positive association (OR=1.489), though not statistically significant.

### **Model 2: Politician-Specific Factors**

Investigating factors such as policy overlap, term status, and seniority revealed mixed results. Seniority negatively impacted prominence (OR=0.983,  $p<0.001$ ), challenging the assumption that more senior politicians grant higher prominence to interest groups. Other variables, including term status and policy overlap, did not show significant effects.

### **Model 3: Organizational Characteristics**

This model assessed the impact of organizational age, policy agenda breadth, and external lobbying on prominence. While age and policy breadth showed trends contrary to expectations, external lobbying significantly increased prominence (OR=1.105,  $p=0.001$ ), highlighting the role of professional intermediaries.

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## **Discussion**

The study provides novel insights into the factors influencing advocacy group prominence. Contrary to traditional assumptions, older organizations do not necessarily achieve higher prominence, suggesting that other dynamics, such as lobbying efforts and policy agenda breadth, play more critical roles. The significant impact of external lobbying underscores the importance of professional intermediaries in enhancing organizational visibility and influence. Politician-specific factors, particularly seniority, exhibited unexpected negative associations with prominence, indicating a more nuanced relationship between legislators and interest groups than previously understood.

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## **Conclusion**

This research advances the understanding of interest group success by focusing on prominence as a distinct metric. The findings challenge conventional wisdom regarding the determinants of prominence, emphasizing the roles of lobbying and policy breadth over organizational age and traditional politician attributes. These insights contribute to a more comprehensive framework for assessing advocacy group influence and highlight the need for further studies to explore the complex interplay of factors driving prominence in legislative contexts.

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