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HOW GENERALIST INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS CHOOSE ISSUES: TESTING
IMPLICATIONS OF NICHE THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Objective. In this article, I employ niche theory, as applied to interest group organizations, to help explain how generalist interest organizations choose issues on which to lobby. A core element to niche theory is issue partitioning, which implies two contrasting hypotheses. In the first issue partitioning scenario, as the interest group community becomes more dense, generalist interest organizations are likely to allow other, more narrowly focused groups to take the lead on issues. Here, generalists are passive in determining which issues to lobby. In the second scenario, generalist organizations are more likely to exert their presence in the face of more competition, taking an active role in determining their issues of choice. *Methods.* I test both hypotheses through survey information collected from state chapters of the Sierra Club concerning their involvement (or non-involvement) with the proposed Keystone XL Pipeline project. *Results.* Survey responses from Sierra Club state chapters supports the passive partitioning hypothesis, suggesting that a higher density interest group community lessens the likelihood of an old bull taking on an issue.

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According to “Generalist Interest Organizations and Interest System Density,” by Lowery, Gray, Kirkland, and Harde (2010) on interest group population ecology, competition within the interest group community highly influences the survival of interest groups as well as their areas of focus. New interest groups tend to have high mortality rates, often unable to compete with other similar groups in a highly competitive environment vying for finances, members, and political access. Large, semi-permanent generalist groups (commonly referred to as “old bulls”), face similar challenges, despite overcoming collection action problems. Although unlikely to perish in the face of competition, their lobbying activities are often influenced by the number of and focus of specialist organizations. Essentially, the traditionally generalist old bulls begin to specialize in order to remain competitive within the interest group community. Furthermore, Lowery et al. (2010) note that the old bulls, despite greater resources and ability to adapt, tend to avoid conflict with new, specialized interests by voluntarily narrowing their lobbying scope. This research leads to the question then, why does a generalist interest organization become active on a particular issue and not on another?

As discussed, old bulls have certain advantages over newer, more specialized interest groups. They have established a consistent membership base, continually generate revenue for their lobbying purposes, have cultivated relationships with politicians, and have established legitimacy with the general public. One may assume, then, that the issues old bulls chose to focus on will garner attention, both from the public and the government. As they narrow their interest niche, the resources and media attention granted to these organizations are focused on a smaller number of legislative bills. The issues left to the newer, more specialized groups may not gain as much public attention, as the newer organizations likely lack the extent of finances, membership, and political contacts compared to the old bulls. For example, an issue taken on by

the Sierra Club is more likely to be covered in major national newspapers than issues taken on by smaller, more focused environmental groups, such as Rainforest Action Network.

Due to an old bull's comparative advantages, the issues chosen by the old bulls are particularly interesting. While an established generalist organization does have a "foot in the door" compared to newer, more specialized groups, old bulls are still affected by population density and niche theory. For instance, the Sierra Club may be one of the most well known environmental interest groups in the United States, but the organization is still in competition with Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Natural Resources Defense Council, and countless other environmental groups. This competition is very likely to shape, at least in part, which issues the Sierra Club chooses to lobby, and, by extension, which issues gain media and public scrutiny. Not only is this research question interesting in terms of what issues are brought to the public's attention, but it also addresses how interest groups relate to one another in a competitive environment. Determining why a generalist interest group decides to take on one issue over another may indicate how interest groups partition resources as interest group communities become denser. Understanding why a generalist chooses one issue over another may help us to understand the generalist group's influence on the interest group community, either as a passive participant or a leading, active participant.

In this essay, I will examine why generalist organizations become active on a particular issue and not on another. First, I will begin with a review of the relevant research on this topic, specifically focusing on niche theory within interest group communities. Second, I will identify my hypothesis to the proposed research question along with possible alternatives and the null hypothesis. Third, I will assess why state chapters of the Sierra Club affected by the proposed

Keystone XL pipeline chose to become active or remain inactive on the issue. Fourth, and finally, I will conclude with a summary of the main points of this essay.

Literature Review

To more fully consider why large, semi-permanent interest organizations chose to lobby some issues and not others, previous interest group research, particularly niche theory, should be considered. Some of the most fundamental research on niche theory comes from William P. Browne's work on interest group coalition building. In Organized Interests and their Issue Niches: A Search for Pluralism in a Policy Domain (1990), Browne studies organized agricultural interests and their willingness (or unwillingness) to join coalitions. For this essay's purposes, Browne's main conclusion concerns issue partitioning. Browne finds that multipurpose interest groups have less impact within the issue domain than smaller, more focused interest groups. He writes, "The time is past when multipurpose groups can effectively address comprehensive issues of agricultural policy change as sectorwide reformers" (1990:503). Importantly, Browne found that interest groups are most likely to avoid both cooperation *and* conflict. To ensure survival and influence, an organization's main goal becomes establishing themselves as an "elitist" within their interest domain. When legislators need information on a subject, the interest group wants to be the chosen organization to provide that information. An organization will establish an extremely specialized niche in order to become the "expert" within a given area. As other organizations engage in the same process, organized interests become increasingly isolated. From this research, we can see that population ecology pressures all organized interests, including old bulls, to develop specialties. Browne (1990:477) writes, "Organized interests cultivate specific and recognizable identities." Virginia Gray and David Lowery's Life in a Niche: Morality Anxiety among Organized Interests in the American States

(1997), found supporting evidence for Browne's specialization theory. Their work, focusing on morality anxiety, found that organized interests feel most secure when they dominate a particular issue domain.

Gray and Lowery (1996a) build upon Browne's research, focusing more intently on niche theory. They highlight that competition drives organized interests to partition their fundamental niche space until a realized niche is established for all surviving interests within the community (1996a:93). Realized niches are established in one of three ways: conflict, cooperation, or partitioning. Interest groups may either engage in conflict with similar organizations, vying for the same finances, members, and issues, cooperate with each other by forming alliances and coalitions, or partition the resources, in which case interest groups would have very little interaction. Analyzing survey data from interest organizations registered to lobby in six states between 1990 and 1991, Gray and Lowery (1996) found evidence for all three ways to develop a realized niche. However, the partitioning of resources had the most striking results. It appears that resources have been so partitioned, establishing a sense of security for interest organizations, that most organized interests did not recognize any competitors, a form of passive partitioning. The opposite of passive partitioning is active partitioning, in which organizations recognize competitors and the division of resources. Gray and Lowery (1996a:107) found, "Active and passive partitioning—which account for roughly two thirds of the responses—are the strategies of choice," when forced to develop a realized niche within a dense interest group community.

Therefore, niche theory suggests that interest organizations partition resources, including finances, members, and issues. But the theory is not clear on how that partitioning occurs. Do all organized interests partition resources in the same manner? Are old bulls more or less likely to engage in active or passive partitioning? Passive partitioning suggests that as an interest group

community becomes denser and more competitive, generalist interest organizations are *less* likely to take on an issue, allowing other, more specialized groups to take the issue. Active partitioning suggests that as the interest group community becomes denser and more competitive, generalist interest groups are *more* likely to take on issues, fearing that they will lose out by letting another group take the lead. These conflicting conclusions warrant more research on niche theory, particularly in regards to issue partitioning. My research will focus on the active and passive partitioning suggested by niche theory, focusing on the passive and/or active partitioning of large, semi-permanent interest organizations.

Hypothesis

As the previous literature suggests, organized interests may partition their resources either passively or actively. In this essay, I will test both hypotheses; however, I believe that old bulls will be more likely to partition issues passively. Unable to control which new interest organizations enter the issue domain, old bulls have issues taken from them. As more specific issues are championed by smaller groups, old bulls will be left with what issues do not have specialized interests to represent them. Furthermore, research by Lowery et al. (2010) suggests that organized interests are more likely to specialize than engage in conflict. Therefore, to avoid conflict with the new organizations, old bulls will represent the issues the new organizations do not acknowledge. As the population ecology of interest groups becomes denser, the role of the old bull will be more and more passive. Still, it is possible that old bulls, accustomed to dominating issue domains, will actively chose which issues to lobby on, even if such an active role requires conflict for a short period of time. Old bulls may feel the need to exert themselves in the face of conflict to maintain their legitimacy and dominance within the interest domain.

Of course, a complementary hypothesis may predict that the results will show a mixture of passive and active partitioning, depending upon the time frame, issue domain, and other factors. For instance, another factor may be the relationship between the chapters of an generalist organization. Many generalist organizations have chapters across the country, including national, state, and local chapters. Decisions to lobby or not lobby may be more influenced by the national chapter's leadership or, conversely, the state or local chapter's independence than by population pressures. The national chapter's vision of the future of the organization may dictate which issues the state chapters lobby or do not lobby. This relationship has the potential to undermine any generalizations about old bulls and issue partitioning, with issue partitioning being determined on an individual basis. Still, while it is possible that no distinct conclusion in favor of either passive *or* active partitioning can be made, it is also plausible that old bulls, being in a particular position in the interest group community, may have a common response to competition pressure on lobbying issues.

Other hypotheses concerning issue partitioning must also be addressed and controlled for. One competing hypothesis may examine the saliency of an issue to explain issue partitioning, particularly for large, semi-permanent interest organizations. As specialized interests take on more and more issues, the old bulls may narrow their focus to the most important, media attention-grabbing issues of the day, or the issues most prominent for the issue domain. Rather than generalists choosing an issue and then bringing attention to that issue, generalists may rely on issues that have already garnered significant media coverage. Regardless of how many other interests groups are taking on the issue, an old bull may consider certain issues essential to their organization's relevance and noticeability. Another possibility in issue partitioning may be the extent of membership vocalization. In other words, if members of an organization feel strongly

that the organization should lobby on a particular issue, the organization may lobby on that issue regardless of population density. A study by Lawrence S. Rothenberg (1992) on member vocalization influence within the interest organization Common Cause lends support to this hypothesis. Traditionally a good government advocacy group, Common Cause dramatically changed direction in 1982 when the organization decided to lobby against the highly controversial MX missile development project supported by President Reagan. Although Common Cause lacked legitimacy and expertise in the areas of military spending and defense, Rothenberg's study found that the activist members of Common Cause—those members organizing on the grassroots level—felt strongly about taking on these issues. Since activist members are extremely important to the organization's survival (they are not only volunteers across the country but they also tend to give generous donations), leadership at Common Cause responded to the activist's desire to lobby an unusual issue for the organization. While this is just one case example, Common Cause and the MX missile debate illustrates the influence of member vocalization.

Therefore, both these factors—saliency and issue importance to members—should be controlled for to test the niche theory, as uncommonly salient or important-to-member issues may skew the test results. Although I believe these hypotheses may play a role in issue partitioning, I hypothesize that population density is likely to have a greater influence on resource partitioning, including issues. Furthermore, greater population density will encourage old bull organizations to become more passive in issue selection.

In order to test the two contrasting conclusions of niche theory (one in which interest groups are *less* likely to take on an issue and one in which interest groups are *more* likely to take on an issue), I will use two models to test the hypothesis: $y = a - b_{x1}$ and $y = a + b_{x1}$. In this model,

y , the dependent variable, is the issue that an old bull organization may lobby. The independent variable, b_{xI} , represents interest group community density. In the first model, as the density increases, I expect interest groups to be less likely to take on the issue. With other groups willing and ready to take on issues, any individual interest group is less likely to lobby on the given issue. Table 1 represents the expected results of this hypothesis, with interest group community density taken from Lowery, et al. (2010). The density of the interest group community dictates the level of lobbying activity for each state affected by the Keystone XL pipeline. As the table shows, low density in the interest group community--such as in Nebraska, Oklahoma, and South Dakota--leads to high levels of lobbying activity. Due to little competition, I expect the state chapters of the Sierra Club in Nebraska, Oklahoma, and South Dakota to be the leading organization lobbying on the Keystone XL pipeline, to be highly active on the issue, and for the issue to be of high importance to the organization. The Montana Sierra Club chapter, with a moderately dense interest group community in the state, is expected to be correspondingly moderately active. Finally, the Texas chapter, in competition with a highly dense interest group community, is expected to be the least active on the Keystone XL pipeline. With many other organizations capable of taking on the issue, the Texas Sierra Club chapter is not expected to be a leader on the issue, is less likely to spend time and resources lobbying the issue, and the issue is not likely to be of significant importance to the organization.

Table 1: High density interest group communities leads to passive issue partitioning

States	Interest Group Community Density	Leading Organization Lobbying Keystone XL	Level of Lobbying Activity	Importance of Keystone XL
Montana	Mid-High (12)	Equally working with other organizations	Moderate activity	Moderate importance
Nebraska	Low (3)	Leading organization	High activity	High importance
Oklahoma	Low (3)	Leading organization	High activity	High importance
South Dakota	Low (5)	Leading organization	High activity	High importance
Texas	High (22)	Not the lead organization	Low activity	Low importance

In the second model, I expect the exact opposite: interest groups will be more likely to take on the issue as density increases. Scrambling to remain relevant and a key player within the interest group community, organizations will be more willing to take on issues as the community becomes denser. Table 2 illustrates the expectations of this second model. Whereas before Nebraska, Oklahoma, and South Dakota were expected to be highly active on the Keystone XL pipeline, now these state chapters are not predicted to be highly active. Presumably, these state Sierra Club chapters have more freedom in choosing their lobbying issues. As one of only a few environmental groups in the state, they are remain relevant by default and can, therefore, chose issues with less constraints. Montana and Texas, on the other hand, are more likely to be actively lobbying on the Keystone XL pipeline in order to remain a dominant presence in their dense interest group communities.

Table 2: High interest group density leads to active issue partitioning

States	Interest Group Community Density	Leading Organization Lobbying Keystone XL	Level of Lobbying Activity	Importance of Keystone XL
Montana	Mid-High (12)	Equally working with other organizations	Moderate activity	Moderate importance
Nebraska	Low (3)	Not the lead organization	Low activity	Low importance
Oklahoma	Low (3)	Not the lead organization	Low activity	Low importance
South Dakota	Low (5)	Not the lead organization	Low activity	Low importance
Texas	High (22)	Leading organization	High activity	High importance

Adding in the control variables, the models become: $y = a - b_{x1} + bx_2 + bx_3$ and $y = a + b_{x1} + bx_2 + bx_3$. Here, bx_2 represents member vocalization. As discussed above, extremely vocal members may highly influence which issues an interest organization decides to lobby, regardless of population density. bx_3 represents the saliency of an issue. Again, if any issue is particularly salient, either with the general public or specifically within the interest group, the organization may decide to lobby on the issue. Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate the influence of member vocalization and issue saliency, respectively. I have linked member vocalization for each state chapter with the density of the interest group community, but the table is purely hypothetical and has no bearing on actual member vocalization from each Sierra Club chapter. The table is designed to highlight the expected issue partitioning results when member vocalization is the most influential factor. As can be seen, low member vocalization tells the organization not to be

active on the issue and high member vocalization indicates the importance of the issue to the members and the organization’s necessity to become active.

Table 3: High member vocalization leads to active issue partitioning

States	Member Vocalization	Leading Organization Lobbying Keystone XL	Level of Lobbying Activity	Importance of Keystone XL
Montana	Mid-High	Equally working with other organizations	Moderate activity	Moderate importance
Nebraska	Low	Not the lead organization	Low activity	Low importance
Oklahoma	Low	Not the lead organization	Low activity	Low importance
South Dakota	Low	Not the lead organization	Low activity	Low importance
Texas	High	Leading organization	High activity	High importance

The saliency of the Keystone XL pipeline in each state is, conversely, not hypothetical but derived from the number of newspaper articles from two selected publications in each state. This indicator is described in more detail below. Let it suffice that the newspaper articles have been aggregated to a three-point scale, in which 1 is very low saliency and 3 is very high saliency. As can be seen, saliency ranged from a low of 1 in Oklahoma to a high of 3 in Nebraska and Texas. If the saliency of the issue is predominant in determining an organization’s goals, then I expected Oklahoma to not be active on the Keystone XL pipeline in any substantive manner, and conversely, Nebraska and Texas should both be the dominant interest organization lobbying the Keystone XL pipeline.

Table 4: High issue saliency leads to active issue partitioning

States	Saliency	Leading Organization Lobbying Keystone XL	Level of Lobbying Activity	Importance of Keystone XL
Montana	2	Equally working with other organizations	Moderate activity	Moderate importance
Nebraska	3	Lead organization	High activity	High importance
Oklahoma	2	Equally working with other organizations	Moderate activity	Moderate importance
South Dakota	1	Not the lead organization	Low activity	Low importance
Texas	3	Lead organization	High activity	High importance

Analysis

The research design is based upon a comparative case analysis, specifically drawing upon the “most similar nations” design as described by Ragin (1987). This study restricts units of analysis—US states specifically affected by the Keystone XL pipeline project—to those that are, as Ragin (1987:47) writes, “as similar on as many theoretically relevant variables as possible.” By constraining the study in such a manner, I ensure that only truly comparable units of analysis are being compared. These states can reasonably be expected to react in predictable ways to the constraints placed upon them, namely population density, member vocalization, and issue saliency. The states, themselves, also serve well as units of analysis. Similar in governmental structure, they are likely to practice similar lobbying norms and, thus, are likely to partition

issues in a similar manner. The states' similarities create a control on variables whose values are similar across the states/

I test the implications of issue partitioning within niche theory using survey data from state chapters of the Sierra Club specifically affected by the proposed Keystone XL pipeline. To begin, the Sierra Club, established in 1892, is one of the most widely acknowledged environmental advocacy organization in the United States. The national organization claims 1.4 million members and lobbies on a number of issues each year, ranging from coal usage to the protection of rivers and streams. With a strong membership base, public legitimacy, and political access, the organization clearly fits the definition of an "old bull." As an exemplar of old bull organizations, the results from a Sierra Club analysis should be generalizable to other old bulls organizations championing different issue domains. Furthermore, the Sierra Club is comprised of a national organization as well as state and local organizations. Using data from state chapters of the Sierra Club allows for variation and, thus, inferences to be made about old bull organizations and issue partitioning. For instance, the environmental interest group community density greatly varies among the affected states, which include Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, Oklahoma, and Texas. As of 2007, Nebraska and Oklahoma have the least dense environmental interest group community with only three groups in the state, including the Sierra Club, and Texas holds a high of twenty-two environmental interest groups (Brasher et al. 1999). If population density affects issue partitioning, there should be tangible differences between Texas and Oklahoma's Sierra Club chapters. Following the hypothesis prediction, the Sierra Club is likely to take on the Keystone XL pipeline in Oklahoma, as little competition threatens the group. The Sierra Club chapter's lobbying choices in Texas are much more ambiguous.

Also, these states are specifically affected by the Keystone XL pipeline project, a unique factor that ties them together more so than with other chapters of the Sierra Club. Next, the Keystone XL pipeline project serves as the dependent variable and is an ideal issue to test density dependence. The pipeline has attracted significant attention across the US, from environmental groups as well as industry and the general public. Since May of 2010, the *New York Times* has published nearly 100 articles addressing Keystone XL. Clearly, the Keystone XL pipeline has generated a high level of saliency, and the pipeline stands to be particularly salient in the chosen states, as they are the states standing to gain or lose the most from the implementation of the pipeline. If the saliency of an issue is enough to influence issue partitioning within an interest group niche, my analysis should indicate that the saliency of Keystone XL pipeline influence issue partitioning for the Sierra Club chapters. Furthermore, Sierra Club members are likely to be vocal on the issue, due to the issue's saliency. With a high probability of high member vocalization, the Keystone XL also serves well to test the influence of member vocalization. Therefore, the decision to lobby or not lobby on the Keystone XL pipeline could be affected by all three of the independent variables: population density, saliency, and member vocalization.

Measures

All five state chapters of the Sierra Club were surveyed on the Keystone XL issue with four questions. An initial e-mail was sent to each chapter's director, and four chapter directors (from Oklahoma, Nebraska, Montana, and South Dakota) responded to the initial email with attached answers to the four survey questions. The chapter director responded directly from Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Montana while the vice-chair responded from Nebraska. Following the e-mail to the Texas chapter, a phone interview was conducted with a member of

office staff. Responses ranged from answers to the survey questions along with detailed explanations to answering the survey questions with no added information.

The first three addressed the organization's participation in lobbying the Keystone XL pipeline, and the last question aimed to measure member vocalization. The first three questions were as follows:

1. *Would you say your chapter of the Sierra Club was one of the leading organizations lobbying on the Keystone XL pipeline in your state?*
 - a. *We were the lead organization*
 - b. *We worked equally with other organizations, but not the lead organization*
 - c. *We were not the lead organization*
2. *Irrespective of if you were the lead organization or not, how active would you say your chapter was on lobbying the Keystone XL pipeline:*
 - a. *Very active*
 - b. *Moderately active*
 - c. *Not very active*
3. *Irrespective of if you were the lead organization or not, how important would you say the outcome of the Keystone XL pipeline is to your organization?*
 - a. *Very important*
 - b. *Moderately important*
 - c. *Not very important*

Answers were ranked on a three point scale, with two points given for high activity and zero points for low activity. For instance, in the first question, "We were the lead organization" would be assigned a two, while "We were not the lead organization" would be assigned a zero. Scores were aggregated so that a six would be the highest possible score. The hypothesis, that higher density leads to passive general interest organizations, predicts that state Sierra Club chapters with low interest group population density will score highest. Therefore, I predict that Oklahoma, Nebraska, and South Dakota will score closest to six.

The first independent variable, population density, is taken from data presented in Brasher, Lowery, and Gray (1999), accounting for all environmental groups registered lobby in

the five states of interest. While this data is not precisely up-to-date, dramatic changes in the population of environmental groups within the last five years seems unlikely.

The second independent variable, saliency of the issue, is measured by the number of articles appearing in major newspapers in each state concerning Keystone XL within the last year (March 18, 2011 through March 18, 2012). Two major newspapers were chosen for each state in an attempt to curb potential bias from one newspaper. In other words, one newspaper was not relied upon in case the chosen newspaper had a particular interest in Keystone XL, skewing the true saliency of the issue. The number of articles ranged from a high of 549 in Nebraska's *Lincoln Journal Star* to a low of 56 articles in South Dakota's *Argus Leader*. Once again, these numbers were aggregated on a one to three point scale. As the lowest number of totaled articles was 261 in South Dakota, under 300 articles received a point of 1. Next, 300 to 500 articles was assigned 2 points, and over 500 articles was given 3 points. This assignment of points allowed for meaningful variation of saliency among of the states while also accurately representing the different levels of newspaper coverage on the issue in each state. To illustrate, then, in Oklahoma, the *Oklahoman* published 264 articles on the Keystone XL pipeline within the past year and *Tulsa World* published 113 articles, totaling 377 articles and giving Oklahoma a saliency point of 2.

Member vocalization, the third independent variable, was measured through a survey question administered to each state chapter of the Sierra Club reading: *In the past year, how vocal would you say your members were in encouraging the organization to lobby on the Keystone XL pipeline? Vocalization may include e-mails, phone calls, conversations, or any way in which members made their preferences clear on the issue. Please rank your members vocalization on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being little vocalization and 5 being high vocalization.*

While this measurement can only be imprecise, the chapters themselves are in the best position to measure how vocal their members were concerning any issue. Furthermore, the Sierra Club contacts were able to easily aggregate member vocalization.

Results

Survey results from state chapters of the Sierra Club most closely followed the passive partitioning hypothesis. In other words, the higher the interest group community density, the less likely the state Sierra Club chapter was to be the lead organization in lobbying the Keystone XL pipeline. As outlined in Table 5, both Montana and Texas reported to not being the leading organization and to have low (in Montana) or moderate (in Texas) lobbying activity. Their aggregated scores both totaled two points, supporting the passive partitioning hypothesis. In Montana, John Wolverton indicated that the chapter was focused on other environmental issues, writing in an e-mail, “Almost all of our Montana Chapter dirty fuels efforts have been focused on stopping the Exxon/Mobil megaloads from traveling through Idaho and Montana to Alberta, Canada.” Similarly, Conversely, where interest group community density was low, Sierra Club chapters were more likely to be the leading organization lobbying the Keystone XL pipeline. For example, the Oklahoma, Nebraska, and South Dakota chapters were all the leading organization in their respective states, where all organizations were faced with low competition. Interestingly, although South Dakota was the leading organization lobbying the Keystone XL pipeline, the chapter chair James Heisinger only considered the chapter to have moderate lobbying activity on the issue. He explained, “We are focusing our resources on preventing the construction of the massive Hyperion Energy Center in southeastern South Dakota.” This may indicate that the absence of other environmental organizations willing or able to take on the Keystone XL pipeline, the South Dakota Sierra Club may have become the leading organization in a de facto

manner. South Dakota scored five points while Nebraska and Oklahoma scored six points each. As suggested by the passive partitioning hypothesis, chapters with low interest group community density were most active on the Keystone XL pipeline, obtaining the highest possible score.

The control variables are split in terms of influence; member vocalization may have had some influence in lobbying decisions while saliency does not appear to be correlated. First, member vocalization seems to correspond with the level of lobbying involvement from most of the state chapters. Nebraska and Oklahoma were both leading organizations with high levels of activity and also reported high levels of member vocalization. South Dakota reported moderate member vocalization (ranked at a 3) and, also considered their lobbying activity to be moderate. Montana had both low levels of member vocalization and lobbying activity. However, the Texas chapter stands out: member vocalization was ranked at a 4, yet the chapter was not a lead organization and had only moderate lobbying activity. This may indicate member vocalization is not the determining factor in lobbying decisions for old bull organization. According to Jerome Collins, the contact from the Texas Sierra Club, a number of Club members were arrested in protests over the Keystone XL pipeline, a rather bold form of member vocalization. Still, the Texas chapter did not take a leading role in lobbying the issue, perhaps due to intense competition in which another organization had taken the leading role.

Finally, no obvious correlation could be seen between saliency and the decision to lobby the Keystone XL pipeline. In South Dakota, the saliency was extremely low, ranked at only a one; yet, the chapter was the leading organization in the state. The same followed for Oklahoma, where the organization was highly active on the Keystone XL pipeline and the issue saliency was only ranked at a 2. Conversely, in Nebraska, where saliency was ranked at a middling 3, the chapter was the leading organization with high levels of activity and high importance to the

organization as a whole. Only in Texas and Montana was issue saliency more closely related to the decision to lobby or not to lobby. Montana, for example, had a saliency ranking of 2 and was not the lead organization and only had low levels of lobbying. In Texas, saliency was ranked a middle-ground 3 and the chapter was moderately active, although they considered themselves neither a lead organization nor working equally with other organizations. Overall, issue saliency did not correspond strongly enough with the decision to lobby to be considered an influential factor.

Table 5: Results

States	Interest Group Community Density	Leading Organization Lobbying Keystone XL	Level of Lobbying Activity	Importance of Keystone XL	Member Vocalization	Saliency
Montana	Mid-High (12)	Not the lead organization	Low activity	High importance	2	2
Nebraska	Low (3)	Lead organization	High activity	High importance	5	3
Oklahoma	Low (3)	Leading organization	High activity	High importance	4	2
South Dakota	Low (5)	Leading organization	Moderate activity	High importance	3	1
Texas	High (22)	Not the lead organization	Moderate activity	Moderate importance	4	3

Conclusion

The population ecology approach, when applied to political science, suggests that higher density interest group communities causes higher levels of issue partitioning. Organized interests specialize their areas of focus in order to become the “elite” organization on a particular issue.

This specialization leads to more highly isolated interest organizations, affecting small, newer organizations as well as large, semi-permanent organizations, known as old bulls. Although old bulls are traditionally generalist organizations, they too must focus their issue domain as the interest group community becomes more crowded. Issue partitioning is predicted to occur in one of two ways for old bull organizations. Either the old bull will be active--even engaging in conflict with other organizations--to maintain their dominance within the community, or the old bull will be passive, choosing issues that have not been championed by other, more specialized organizations. The active/passive debate creates two contrasting hypotheses, both considered in this essay. In the first, high interest group community density heightens the likelihood of an old bull taking on an issue. In the second, high interest group community lessens the likelihood of an old bull taking on an issue. This essay has also considered two competing hypotheses to explain an old bull's decision to lobby. The first tests member vocalization, assuming the high member vocalization on an issues leads to the organization lobbying on that issue. The second tests issue saliency, predicting that high saliency of an issue attracts old bulls to lobby on the issue. After analyzing survey responses from state chapters of the Sierra Club on their decision to lobby or not lobby on the Keystone XL pipeline, I find that the passive partitioning hypothesis was most closely supported. Sierra Club chapters with low interest group density in their states were the leading organization on the Keystone XL pipeline and chapters with high interest group density were not the leading organization. Member vocalization appeared to correspond with the decision to lobby or not lobby, with Texas being the only state with strikingly contradictory results. The high member vocalization in Texas without correspondingly high levels of lobbying suggests that member vocalization, while influential, is not the determining factor in lobbying or

not lobbying. Finally, issue saliency did not appear to correspond with lobbying decisions and no affect was determined.

Since large, semipermanent organizations tend to be the organizations most trusted by the public and most quoted in the media, the issues they chose to lobby have a high probability of attracting political attention. Therefore, determining why old bull organizations lobby certain issues and not others determines, at least in part, what issues the public and the government gives high importance to. The Keystone XL pipeline may have received such national public scrutiny as a result of Sierra Club lobbying. Furthermore, understanding issue partitioning sheds light on an old bull's role in the interest organization--as either a passive or an active participant.

Although this research is not conclusive, it suggests that large, semipermanent organizations tend to passively chose their issues in the face of more competition and from specialist organizations.

While the Sierra Club is a prime example of old bull organizations and the results closely followed the passive partitioning hypothesis, there were limitations to the research, and the results cannot be considered comprehensive of old bull lobbying behavior. For instance, the saliency indicator may not have measured its intention. Since saliency was measured by the number of newspaper articles published, the saliency ranking may more closely reflect the size and capacity of the state's media outlets rather than the importance of the issue to residents of the state. While newspapers attempt to run articles that reflect reader's interest, the *number* of articles (what the ranking was based upon) depends on the resources of the newspaper organization. Therefore, newspapers from larger cities—such as Austin, Texas—with more financial resources, may have skewed the true saliency of the Keystone XL issue. The saliency hypothesis may be more accurately tested by choosing the most salient environmental issue in the state and surveying if the Sierra Club chapter lobbied on that issue. Furthermore, this

research considered only one case study—a public interest, environmental old bull organization. Results may be different for old bull organizations representing economic or other interests. By adding economic interest groups to the study, results may be more (or less) likely to support the passive partitioning hypothesis.

Undoubtedly, issue partitioning warrants continued research to more accurately understand how organizations choose which issues to lobby. Future research may consider the differences between economic and social interest organizations, surveying and analyzing both types of organizations. Whereas social organizations work toward the public good, economic organizations often work toward a private good. Therefore, their lobbying decisions may be quite different. Furthermore, survey questions may be expanded to study how organized interests feel they chose issues. Interviews with representatives from the Sierra Club chapters indicated other reasons than competition for not lobbying on the Keystone XL pipeline. Research may consider these alternative reasons compared to the population ecology argument. Ruling out competing motivations for lobbying decisions would strengthen issue partitioning as proposed by the niche theory. Finally, dismissing competing motivations helps to illuminate actual decision processes within organized interests.

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Field Manager with Grassroots Campaigns, Inc. (a fundraising organization for the Democrats and progressive interest groups)

Summer 2009

Intern with the Sierra Student Coalition (student branch of the Sierra Club)

Raised student awareness of coal use at Penn State and lobbied Penn State administration for cleaner energy sources

Fall 2009-Fall 2010

Intern with the British Parliament, House of Commons

Research assistant for Gordon Marsden, Labour Party M.P.

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Awards

Excellence in Communication Certificate

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Dean's List

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Memberships

Paterno-Fellow Scholar

2008-Present

The National Society of Collegiate Scholars

2010-Present

Board of Arbitration

2011-Present

Student Sustainability Advisory Council

2011-Present

Penn State Beyond Coal

2009-2011

President

2010-2011

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