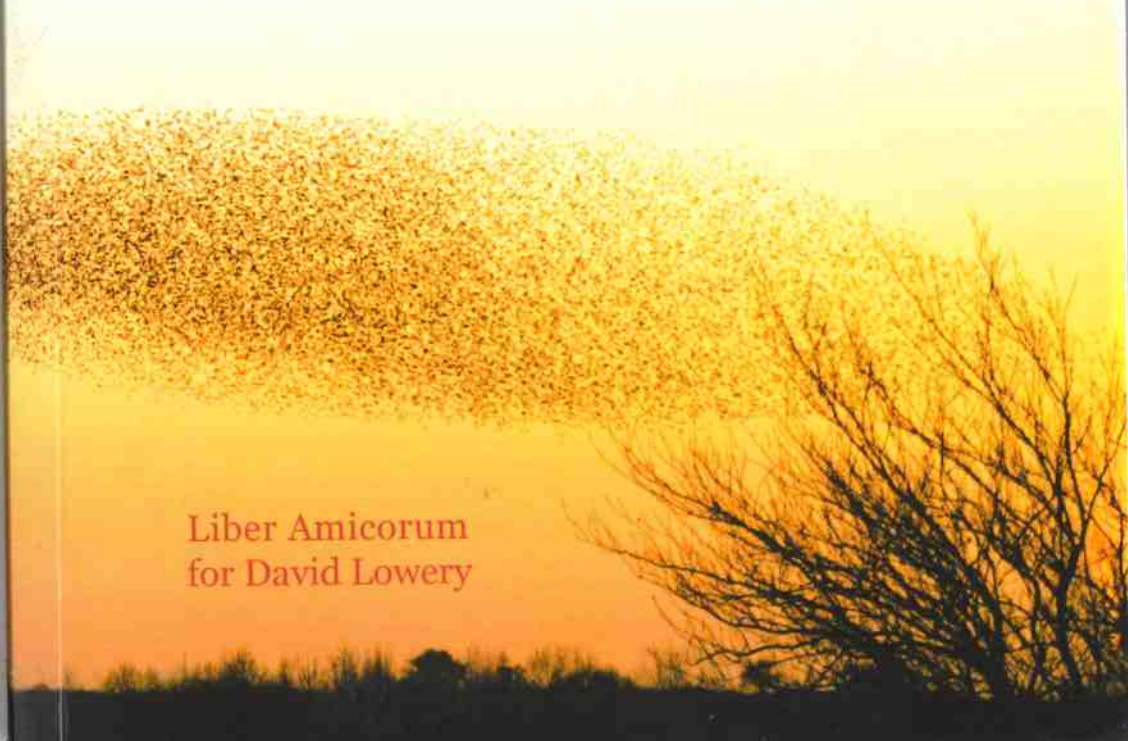


# Flight of Wisdom

On the importance of community in  
interest representation and academic progress

Liber Amicorum  
for David Lowery

A photograph of a large flock of birds in flight against a bright, golden sky, with the silhouettes of trees in the foreground.

**Celebrating an Unrepentant Pluralist in  
“Interest Group Land”:  
Dave Lowery & his Contribution to  
Interest Group Research**

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I came to Leiden University in 2008 with the intention to expand my research from legislative politics to interest groups. What I did not know back then was that I would meet a scholar who would not only help me broaden my research horizon but play a substantial role in what became a major shift in my research agenda. Ever since interest groups have been at the very core of it.

Dave Lowery has not only had an impact on my scholarship. He is one of the world's most productive political scientists (Metz and Jäckle 2017) who has fundamentally influenced the way we think about interest groups. Introducing interest group research to the world of population ecology, his work with Virginia Gray has convincingly argued that the structure of interest group communities and their environment affect fundamental aspects of interest representation, including the mobilization and maintenance of groups (e.g. Gray and Lowery 2000).

This perspective departs significantly from some of the leading approaches towards the study of groups labelled by Dave himself in his influential textbook as the “pluralist” and “transactions” perspectives (Lowery and Brasher 2004). On the one hand, it rejects the pluralist idea that the population of interest organizations at any given point of time can be seen as the sum of mobilizing events stimulating all salient interests to be represented (Truman 1951). On the other hand, it also criticizes the transactions argument that the severity of the collective action problem of different types of organizations is key to understanding the composition of interest group populations (Olson 1971). Collective action problems are not constant and can in principle be solved (Lowery et al. 2015).

Together with Virginia Gray, Dave Lowery argues that economic production and economies of scale affect the ‘carrying capacity’ of different political systems with respect to the number of groups that can form and survive (e.g. Lowery, Gray, and Fellowes 2005). Moreover, differences in the activity and contents of policy agendas create differences in the demand for groups by affecting ‘the stakes’ of (different types of) groups with respect to mobilizing (e.g. Gray et al. 2005). Consequently, the mobilization of individual groups becomes insufficient to understand the dynamics of interest group communities. The available resources in a given environment play a key role, no matter whether we look at the density or diversity

of the types of interests represented in a given political system.

Such a perspective has implications for a number of the broader questions that concern scholars of interest groups. The biggest one is perhaps the issue of bias in interest representation to which Dave Lowery’s work makes a major contribution. After the heyday of pluralism (e.g. Dahl 1961; Truman 1951), the transaction costs perspective became the dominant view of interest representation (e.g. Olson 1971). Its image of the interest group system was fairly pessimistic. Schattschneider’s prediction that its “heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent” is one of the most cited in the interest group literature (Schattschneider 1960: 34-35). Moreover, once mobilized the transactions perspective expected groups to survive indefinitely resulting in institutional sclerosis with those groups that can most easily overcome collective action problems playing a dominant role (Olson 1984).

It is fair to say that Dave Lowery has never become a strong fan of the transactions perspective. He distinguishes between four stages of what he refers to as “the influence production process”, i.e. the mobilization and maintenance stage, the interest community stage, the exercise of influence or the political and policy outcome stage (Lowery and Brasher 2004). In his inaugural lecture at Leiden University he made clear that in later research by so-called neo-pluralists the empirical predictions of the

transactions perspective have been “undermined [...] at every stage of the influence production process, although without returning to the overly benign assessment of traditional pluralists” (Lowery 2005: 5).

He has repeatedly pointed out that a challenge for research on bias in interest representation is determining what the relevant benchmark for judging bias is (e.g. Lowery and Brasher 2004; Gray and Lowery 2000; Lowery et al. 2015). His criticism has had a very direct impact on my own research, where I have tried to improve on existing scholarship by being more explicit about the potential benchmarks for judging bias and diversity at different stages of the influence production process. Rather than looking at raw counts of group types active in studies of participation in European Commission online consultations and advisory committees, Brendan Carroll, Vlad Gross and I have for example compared distributions of group types in the EU population of interest groups with those participating in these procedures and bodies (Rasmussen and Carroll 2013; Rasmussen and Gross 2015). Such an approach has allowed us to qualify some of the conclusions of the existing literature of bias. Hence, even if Gross and I found that business interests dominate advisory committees, we saw that they are not generally privileged over other types of groups in the selection processes and there is considerable variation in the access they enjoy between policy areas (Rasmussen and Gross 2015). Ultimately, our benchmark does not help us solve

the challenge that we will never know what the latent distribution of interests in society looks like but it helps qualify a lot of the existing research with respect to bias in strategy use and access. Importantly, they support Dave Lowery’s recent prediction that biases with respect to mobilization of groups might not be as large as expected (Lowery et al. 2015: 1222).

Linda Flöthe and I have also been inspired by Dave Lowery’s call for operating with an explicit benchmark for assessing bias in our most recent article from the GovLis Research Programme (see [www.govlis.eu](http://www.govlis.eu)). Rather than looking at “descriptive representation” of different group types in populations of groups active on the policy issue we examine, we study “substantive group representation” and introduce a new benchmark. On 50 specific policy issues in five countries, we look at the extent to which group positions are actually aligned with what the public wants (Flöthe and Rasmussen 2019). We argue this might help us get a better understanding of whether there is bias in the interest group landscape than comparing counts of different interest group types that are active on our issues. Our approach speaks to the “implicit yardstick” of bias in both the criticism of lobbyists in empirical commentary and the transactions literature. Here lobbyists are often criticized for representing narrow interests at the expense of the broader interests of the population of a country. The worry is that this might result in biased policy-making and possibly even regulatory capture. While there is no

shortage of such criticism, we actually find that more than 50 per cent of the active interest groups on our policy issues are aligned with the public majority. Moreover, even if there are some differences in how accurately different types of groups represent public opinion, we find that more than 40 per cent of the business interests often feared the most defend the same view as the majority of the citizens. Using public opinion as a benchmark thus leads us to present a more positive image of interest group mobilization than conventional wisdom might have led us to expect.

These studies are just a few examples of how I have been inspired by Dave Lowery's approach to the study of interest group in my own work. I am confident that his influence has pushed me to ask more interesting questions and present stronger research designs than I would have done without his mentorship. His work has also been an important source of inspiration when it comes connecting research on interest groups to other areas of scholarship, most importantly for the GovLis Research Programme where we link scholarship on organized interests and policy representation ([www.govlis.eu](http://www.govlis.eu)). It expands work on how interest group populations affect policy representation in the US, which he has conducted with Virginia Gray and coauthors (Gray et al. 2004).

Dave Lowery stands out by taking a more positive approach to groups and interest group bias than many of the scholars of his time and has even referred to himself a "repentant pluralist" in the recent volume about bias which he edited (Lowery et al. 2015: 1227). While he is clearly not a pluralist in a 'Trumanian' or 'Dahlian' sense, his neo-pluralist approach presents a nuanced view on the different stages of the influence production processes. Rather than having deterministic view of the outcomes at each stage, he advocates a view that is open to finding substantial variation in the level of bias in for example mobilization and influence depending on the contextual conditions of interest representation. I have little doubt that his work will serve as a role model for future generations of interest group scholars.