

# Transnational Civil Society and the Consumer-friendly Turn in Financial Regulation

Lisa Kastner

► **To cite this version:**

Lisa Kastner. Transnational Civil Society and the Consumer-friendly Turn in Financial Regulation. 2013. <hal-01070524>

**HAL Id: hal-01070524**

**<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01070524>**

Submitted on 1 Oct 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



**maxpo**

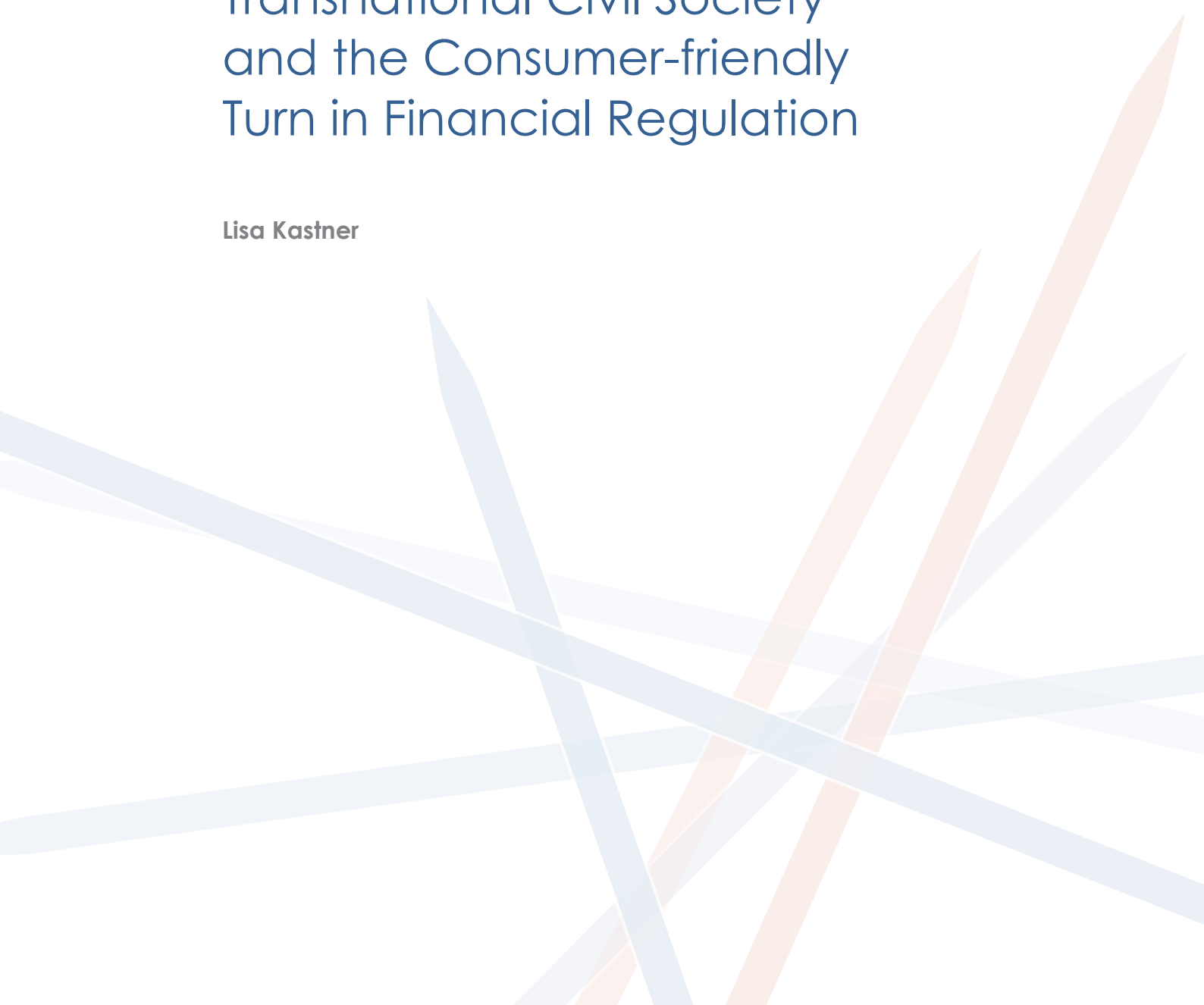
Max Planck Sciences Po Center  
on Coping with Instability in Market Societies

No. 13/2

maxpo discussion paper

# Transnational Civil Society and the Consumer-friendly Turn in Financial Regulation

Lisa Kastner



Lisa Kastner  
**Transnational Civil Society and the Consumer-friendly Turn in Financial Regulation**

MaxPo Discussion Paper 13/2  
Max Planck Sciences Po Center on Coping with Instability in Market Societies  
August 2013

MaxPo Discussion Paper  
ISSN 2196-6508 (Print)

---

© 2013 by the author(s)

Lisa Kastner is a doctoral fellow at the Max Planck Sciences Po Center on Coping with Instability in Market Societies in Paris.

[lisa.kastner@sciences-po.org](mailto:lisa.kastner@sciences-po.org)

**Downloads**

[www.maxpo.eu](http://www.maxpo.eu)

Go to *Publications*

Max Planck Sciences Po Center on Coping with Instability in Market Societies  
Sciences Po | 27 rue Saint-Guillaume | 75337 Paris Cedex 07 | France

Tel. +33 1 45 49 59 32

Fax +33 1 58 71 72 17

[www.maxpo.eu](http://www.maxpo.eu)

[info@maxpo.eu](mailto:info@maxpo.eu)

**Abstract**

The literature on financial regulation has typically emphasized the role of the powerful financial industry in shaping regulatory outcomes. However, capture theories cannot explain the prominence of financial consumer protection in post-crisis reform agendas. By contrast, this paper argues that, despite their collective action disadvantage, a polymorphous network of civil society organizations was able to gain momentum after the financial crisis and to influence the financial reform process. In this policy window, where decision-makers were looking out for an alternative source of expertise, a transnationally connected civil society network successfully raised the issue of consumer protection on reform agendas in tandem with public entrepreneurs and on the back of a popular backlash against big finance. This argument will be explored through a comparative study of the impact of transnational pressures on policy-makers in Europe and the US in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. In the conclusion, the paper discusses the substance of the financial reforms that have been undertaken.

**Contents**

Introduction	1
Explaining regulatory change in international finance	3
Organized interests	4
Transnational networks of experts	4
Electoral politics	5
An alternative explanation: A civil society perspective	6
Empirical observations: The emergence of financial consumer protection	7
The international level	12
The transnational civil society network	13
Leverage politics and public entrepreneurs	13
Direct lobbying	16
Symbolic politics	17
Information politics	18
Boomerang politics	19
Conclusions	21
References	24

# Transnational Civil Society and the Consumer-friendly Turn in Financial Regulation

## Introduction

When it comes to the influence of non-state actors on international finance, scholarly attention has focused on the role the powerful financial industry has played in international regulatory politics. Maintaining “symbiotic relations” with regulatory agencies, the financial industry has been able to influence the nature of financial governance and has the potential to capture regulatory processes (Helleiner/Zhang 2008: 541). Analyses of the recent crisis have seemingly confirmed this conventional wisdom. According to many observers, national and international financial reform efforts after the crisis were considerably watered down or scaled back by transnational private-sector lobbies (Johnson/Kwak 2010; Engelen et al. 2010; Wolley/Ziegler 2011). However, this capture narrative misses an important aspect of current regulatory dynamics. By declaring continued private financial sector dominance in financial regulatory developments, these explanations cannot account for structural changes in the regulatory architecture in response to the crisis. In particular, scholars focusing solely on the role of the financial industry cannot explain why consumer protection has moved from the periphery to the center of political debates about reforms of the financial regulatory system in Europe and the United States in the aftermath of the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression. How can we explain the reform outcome and the political processes that led to it?

Consumer protection is one of the main domains treated in the “Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act” (short: Dodd-Frank) signed into law by President Obama on July 21, 2010. For the first time in the history of American finance, this legislation established a Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) as an independent federal agency to protect consumers from abusive financial practices. Similarly, under the banner of “restoring consumer confidence in financial markets,” the European Commission has brought forward a policy that includes legislative proposals on basic banking services, stronger deposit guarantees and investor protection as well as on stricter regulations of complex retail investment products and responsible lending. Among other issues, consumer protection is also a remit of the new European Supervisory Authorities (ESAs). Leading financial service providers talk about a “clear shift in regulatory focus” from market efficiency toward transparency and investor protection (State Street 2011). Establishing a first international standard in the field of financial consumer protection, the G20 finance ministers and Central Bank governors endorsed “high-level principles” in October 2011. Moreover, civil society groups and other international organizations

launched various additional international initiatives, including the World Bank's "Good Practices," which complement the principles and give practical advice on ways to implement them (The World Bank 2012).

This consumer-friendly turn in the international financial reform agenda is somewhat surprising given that the strong and well-organized financial lobby has traditionally prevailed over weaker and less well-organized consumer organizations. Caught in a classic collective action dilemma (Olson 1965), consumer groups struggle to organize their members in order to influence politics. When we look at developments in financial regulation over the last decades, Olson's reasoning has held true: concentrated costs and more political leverage for the tightly organized financial industry have generally led to more industry-friendly than consumer-friendly policies. People's protests against deregulatory measures had little to no effect (Kroszner et al. 2011).

And yet, dynamics are changing. With taxpayers' money used for expensive bank bail-outs, financial regulatory issues became politicized and attracted the public interest in a way that was most unusual for this highly technical and complex issue area. In a reaction to the subprime crisis in 2007, much public anger arose about the perceived unfairness of the international financial system – famously described as a system that privatized gains and socialized losses. "Occupy Wall Street" protests occurred in numerous cities in the US and Europe, directed against financial elites held responsible for the devastating social consequences the financial meltdown had triggered. In an attempt to channel the outburst of public anger, numerous civil society organizations, such as consumer NGOs, unions and grass-roots groups started to build transnational alliances to influence the reform negotiations. Even though they were pitched against the fierce opposition of the financial industry, new coalitions "for financial reform" mushroomed.

This article argues that the transnational efforts of civil society groups account for the sudden popularity of consumer-friendly regulations on international financial reform agendas. Despite their collective action disadvantage, a polymorphous civil society network was able to gain momentum in the aftermath of the crisis. In this policy window, where decision-makers were looking out for an alternative source of expertise, a transnationally connected civil society network successfully channeled widespread public support to call upon well-positioned public entrepreneurs and raise the issue of consumer protection. This argument will be explored through a comparative study of the impact of transnational pressures on policy-makers in Europe and the US in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis. The article will focus on activities by which transnational non-governmental actors seek to influence the agenda-setting process rather than the ways in which they mobilize their members. The similarity of reform dynamics will be traced on the basis of policy documents, public statements and 24 semi-structured interviews with representatives from civil society, international organizations and central banks in Brussels, Paris and Washington, DC, conducted in the summer of 2011 as well as the winter of 2012/2013.

There is a growing consensus in the literature that internationally organized NGOs or non-profit transnational actors make a difference in world politics (Finnemore 1996; Batliwala/Brown 2006). Social scientific scholarship demonstrates, for example, that civil society groups acting across borders have had an impact on global policy decisions in the field of human rights, environmental protection and security policy as well as economic transactions, thereby underlining their status as major actors in international affairs (Keck/Sikkink 1998; Price 1998; Florini 2000). Yet, for all the scholarly attention paid to these transnational acting groups, the conditions under which civil society can impact financial regulation remain poorly understood. Friesen (2012: 3) notes that “although much has been written on both international finance and transnational social movements, little has been written on how these two bodies of literature might be connected.” This study addresses this gap by investigating the process by which transnational civil society seeks to influence international financial regulation in order to provide “more detailed knowledge of how the mobilization of these groups beyond the financial industry can influence the direction of state policy” (Helleiner/Pagliari 2011: 179). Finally, if I can show that non-state actors are responding to challenges in international finance, an issue area where their power appears to be relatively ineffective, then we can expect to find them playing a role in other sectors of the global economy as well.

I first outline potential answers to the question of financial regulatory change as suggested by the literatures on organized interests, transnational expert networks and electoral politics. I choose a different analytical lens that stresses the role of transnational civil society in channeling public attention and support for reform as main explanatory factor. Having sketched the empirical pattern of EU and US regulatory reform agendas, I focus on civil society groupings and their various strategies which aimed at raising the profile of financial consumer protection. I conclude the article by evaluating the contrasting results of the case studies.

### **Explaining regulatory change in international finance**

Analyses about financial regulatory outcomes tend to emphasize private capture explanations of policy-making. As I will demonstrate, however, these theories in the study of regulatory change have difficulty accounting for the consumer-friendly turn in financial reform agendas. After the financial crisis, policy-makers markedly stepped up their rhetoric on consumer protection in financial services. At the signing ceremony of the Dodd-Frank Act, President Obama (2010) called the reforms “the strongest consumer financial protections in history.” The European Commissioner for Internal Market and Services Michel Barnier (2010), called for “consumer protection across the board.” And the G20 leaders included a call to enhance consumer protection in their common declaration of the Seoul Summit (G20 Declaration 2010). This rhetoric is all the more surprising, since past research has shown that private financial sector participation in



setting and implementing rules tends to put consumers at a disadvantage (Frangakis 2009). I argue that focusing on the role of a civil society network helps us understand the post-crisis regulatory framework and in particular, the rise of consumer protection.

### Organized interests

One set of explanations for regulatory outcomes in a domestic politics tradition has focused on societal actors with a vested interest in financial regulatory affairs. Past literature has shown the increasing involvement of the private financial sector in national decision-making. Some scholars pinpoint the risk of capture due to the disproportionate influence of the domestic private financial sector in shaping regulatory policies and its ability to fully internalize its preferences in the policy process (Hacker/Pierson 2010; Johnson/Kwak 2010). As a result, regulatory outcomes traditionally favored “the narrow ‘few’ at the expense of society as a whole” (Mattli/Woods 2009), and bodies governing international finance have become “instruments of private economic interests rather than of the public good” (Underhill/Zhang 2003: 86). Accordingly, Hacker and Pierson (2010) explain striking income inequalities among Americans in terms of the organizational capacity of resourceful private interests to bring public policy in line with their interests. This pattern has been most pronounced in the field of finance, they argue, where the massive political leverage of financial industry lobbyists accounts for overly industry-friendly regulatory politics. Frangakis (2009: 102) draws a similar picture regarding European financial services policy, which is “heavily oriented towards serving the interest of ... the financial industry.”

From this perspective, where regulatory change depends upon the means and the power of the financial industry lobby to (re-)shape regulatory reform, we would expect the outcome to reflect domestic financial sector preferences. Instead, in the wake of the crisis, various scholars have stressed the industry’s relative resilience to reform (Johnson/Kwak 2010; Engelen et al. 2011). While the banking industry stated that it supports “regulatory reform to improve consumer protection” (Yingling 2009), industry lobbyists were particularly opposed to the creation of a US consumer protection bureau. Similarly, in the EU, financial industry lobbyists tried to defend the status quo rather than push for reform. Hence, for our case studies, the organized interests’ perspective falls somewhat short of explaining sudden change.

### Transnational networks of experts

Drawing on the “epistemic communities” literature, scholars have sought to explain regulatory change in terms of transnational or transgovernmental networks of experts (Baker 2009; Haas 1992; Mosley 2009). Contrary to organized interest explanations, ap-

proaches in this tradition stress the political influence of the financial epistemic communities that hold highly specialized knowledge. Past literature has shown that governments are largely dependent on the expertise of self-regulatory international bodies, such as the Financial Stability Board (FSB) and the Basle Committee, whose membership consists largely of private industry associations (Underhill/Zhang 2010). In a similar vein, Tsingou (2010) describes how the private sector has been actively influencing financial policy-making through a “coherent transnational policy community.” This explanation highlights the transnational nature of informal governance networks such as the “Group of 30,” whose membership blurs the public-private distinction by including supervisors, regulators and representatives of business associations. She argues that “the financial industry is now organized ... in a way that is qualitatively different from interest groups” (Tsingou 2010: 23). Indeed, financial governance today relies on a combination of rule-setting and implementing by both the private and the public sectors (Mosley 2009).

Yet, if the transnational community of financial experts caused the shift towards consumer protection, one would expect to see a degree of consensus among the financial elite on a set of reform provisions, “for without a clear mission and rationale experts are unlikely to influence policy” (Finnemore 1996: 99). However, the global financial and economic crisis called the expertise of the existing financial epistemic community and their past consensus on light-touch regulation into question. In the aftermath of the crisis, the financial community was divided over the desirability of reform. Divisions emerged among politicians, regulators and industry representatives as well as between parts of the private financial sector, thereby reducing the sector’s post-crisis political influence (Helleiner/Pagliari 2011; Engelen 2011). After the damage the financial crisis had done to the economy and linkages between the financial industry and the political system became publicly denounced, this transnational community of experts partly lost its political leverage.

## Electoral politics

Another plausible hypothesis would hold that electoral contingencies and public opinion are a causal factor influencing decision-makers. This explanation is clearly perceptible for several of the Dodd-Frank measures, such as a tougher derivative regulation due to Senator Blanche Lincoln’s position in response to an electoral challenge or the dilution of the “Volcker Rule” wording after the election of Republican Scott Brown (Woolley/Ziegler 2011). Polling data gives us clues to about why the topic was very popular with decision-makers in general, with 57 percent of those polled supporting the creation of a new federal agency to protect consumers (Limbach 2009). It should have been clear to decision-makers that there was very little appetite among voters for a soft line on the industry. Hence, in the US case, electoral politics cannot be denied as a factor in the increased focus on consumer issues in financial reforms. In Europe, how-

ever, electoral contingencies cannot account for why the technocrats of the European Commission put the issue at the forefront of their reform proposals. After all, 85 percent of Europeans reported that they have never had a problem with a financial product or service (Eurobarometer 2012).

### An alternative explanation: A civil society perspective

Given the public outcry and emerging popular pressures in response to the latest financial crisis, recent efforts on the part of scholars to explain regulatory changes pay strikingly limited attention to the role of civil society actors such as transnational consumer associations, trade unions and grass-roots organizations. Woolley and Ziegler (2011: 4) argue that the Dodd-Frank Act is the result of a “creative brokering of elites and grass roots interests.” While elected officials in Washington tried to cultivate friendly relations with Wall Street, they also tried to appeal to popular activists. Indeed, the involvement of these societal actors in the financial reform debate was one of the most striking aspects of the crisis. Despite the growing consensus in the literature that transnational actors play an active part in world politics (Josseline/Wallace 2001), research examining the links between these emerging actors and global finance in particular is relatively young. In the field of global economic policy, civil society activism has been described as “economic justice movements” or “anti-globalization movements” (Clark 2006: 180). O’Brien et al. (2000), for example, found increased engagement on the part of civil society in multilateral economic institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. These developments marked a shift away from the state-focused “international relations” theory to the study of the “global society,” which recognizes the increased role of non-state actors in global policy (Barnett/Sikkink 2008). Accordingly, scholars started to pay more attention to civil society as alternative source for regulation and an increasingly important actor in standard-setting processes of regulation, especially in the EU (Dunkerley/Fudge 2004). Some scholars have recognized the various social responses to financial crises, identifying civil society as an emerging actor in financial regulatory policies in Europe and the US (Helleiner/Pagliari 2011; Friesen 2012; Woolley/Ziegler 2011). Scholte and Schnabel (2002) attribute an active role to civil society, but limited impact in shaping regulatory outcomes. Non-state actors’ impact on financial regulation has yet to be explored in more detail. This analysis will therefore try to shed light on the following questions: how can we explain the sudden popularity of consumer protection on financial reform agendas on both sides of the Atlantic in response to the latest financial and economic crisis? Did civil society provoke real policy change, and if so, how?

In order to understand regulatory change, this paper adopts the analytical framework proposed by Keck and Sikkink (1998) in their analysis of conditions under which transnational networks can stimulate change. In doing so, I trace the appearance of consum-

er protection back to activism by a civil society network,<sup>1</sup> which encompasses the range of transnational non-state actors who are committed to reforming financial regulation in the interest of the broader public – that is, in the interest of consumers of financial services. Such civil society groups include a wide range of organizations, from consumer associations, think tanks and policy research institutes to trade unions, business associations and other NGOs.

Illustrating the critical role of “demonstration effects” as triggers of regulatory reforms, this article underlines the cataclysmic effects of the crisis, which demonstrated to a wider public the social costs associated with light-touch regulation (Mattli/Woods 2009). In the empirical section, I will demonstrate that by exploiting this widespread public and media attention and strong pro-reform citizen base, NGOs, consumer associations and trade unions established transnational networks among themselves as well as with important public entrepreneurs fostering their ideas (“leverage politics”). NGOs and consumer groups engaged in “direct lobbying” in order to influence the agenda-setting process – which was successful because civil society groups not only “framed” the reform debate in a way that connected with the wider public and decision-makers alike (“symbolic politics”) but also gathered politically usable information (“information politics”). Finally, through a variation of “boomerang politics,” activists were able to generate additional effective political pressure on states through other channels, such as international organizations whose decisions would echo back into national politics (Friesen 2012). As we will see in the case studies, a combination of these strategies proved to be particularly effective in bringing about a consumer-friendly turn in finance.

### **Empirical observations: The emergence of financial consumer protection**

In Europe and the US alike, policy-makers reacted to the crisis and recognized the importance of financial consumer protection (see Table 1 for a detailed comparison). I will consider the two cases in turn in order to explain what accounts for this convergence. Due to their market power, both are central actors in financial market regulations with consequences for the rest of the world. Comparing the two cases with a common outcome and very different political structures will allow us to identify the dynamics of civil society activism as a common factor that can explain the consumer-friendly turn.

---

1 Although some organizations refer to a “consumer movement” to describe their actions to influence financial reforms, I prefer the term “network,” since the emphasis here is not on the mobilization of a broader public (as with movements) but on the way civil society became organized to bring about policy change. I use the term transnational to highlight the cross-border linkages among the groups involved.

*The US case*

The US administration set an ambitious post-crisis reform program in motion. For the first time, Dodd-Frank created an independent Consumer Financial Protection Bureau – a new regulatory agency, housed in the Federal Reserve, with the sole responsibility of protecting consumers of financial products. In charging one single agency with consumer protection responsibilities, the reform succeeded in replacing a patchwork of seven different agencies, thereby consolidating and strengthening the regulation of consumer financial products. The new bureau also hosts a national consumer complaint hotline as well as a new Office of Financial Education to promote financial literacy. Most importantly, the CFPB conducts rule-making, supervision and enforcement for federal consumer financial protection laws; it monitors financial markets and can enforce laws that outlaw discrimination and other unfair treatment in consumer finance.<sup>2</sup> Consumer groups have widely acknowledged the CFPB as a powerful new regulator: “It is the first federal regulator that not only has the ability to write rules for non-banks, but it also has the ability to supervise and examine non-banks. That’s a power that has never accrued to any federal bureau before,” summarizes a consumer representative.<sup>3</sup> At its inauguration, civil society celebrated the new bureau as “a huge victory for the consumer movement.”<sup>4</sup> Addressing the financial industry, a consumer advocate noted effusively: “They lost. We won.” (Mierzwinski 2010: 596).

The initial idea for a consumer protection agency had come from Harvard law professor and consumer advocate Elisabeth Warren, who had published articles in 2007 and 2008 arguing in favor of a Financial Product Safety Commission responsible for consumer credit products as a single regulator. In March 2009, two years after Warren’s first article was published and in the midst of the turmoil caused by the financial crisis, two Congressmen picked up the idea and formally introduced it into Congress. The President himself as well as Treasury Secretary Michael Barr became advocates of the idea, and later that year, in June 2009, the Treasury included the proposal of a new agency in its White Paper “Financial regulatory reform: A new foundation,” which served as a blueprint for financial reform. Warren’s proposal enjoyed widespread public support, as her election as United States senator from Massachusetts in November 2012 confirmed. She was also the candidate of choice as head of the new agency of a group called “Americans for Financial Reform”, a coalition of 200 consumer, housing and labor groups, which made passing the CFPB its top legislative priority.

The fact that the CFPB came into being was a “remarkable event” (Woolley/Ziegler 2011) given the strong opposition from industry groups, who reportedly increased their lobbying efforts. According to the Center for Responsive Politics (2010), industry mobi-

---

2 For more information on the CFPB and its core functions, see: [www.consumerfinance.gov/the-bureau/](http://www.consumerfinance.gov/the-bureau/).

3 Interview with a representative of a consumer association, Washington, DC (August 2011).

4 Interview with a representative of a consumer organization (July 2011).

lized and spent \$224.6 million on lobbying in 2009, more than any other sector (except for the health sector which spent \$263.6 million during the same time period). Arguably, the new consumer bureau attracted more hostility from industry groups than any other reform proposal. In September 2009, right after Senator Dodd had introduced a version of the bill in the House in July, a group of 25 business associations, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Financial Services Roundtable and the Business Roundtable, sent a letter to members of the House opposing the new regulator. “The drastic powers granted to a new agency ... will impose severe unintended consequences on businesses and consumers alike,” the groups wrote (US Chamber of Commerce 2009). In a testimony before the Senate Committee on Banking, the president of the American Bankers Association said that the CFPB would undermine innovation and limit consumer choice, as well complicating existing regulatory structures. “Simply put, this would appear to be the most powerful agency ever created in that it has almost unlimited power to regulate and even mandate the products offered by the regulated,” (Yingling 2009: 11).

The US Chamber of Commerce even set up a “stoptheCFPA.com” website which could be used for online activism against the new bureau. Professor Warren herself said that industry’s aim was to “to stick a knife in the ribs” of the new bureau (Interview with Jon Stewart 2011). As a result, several consumer protection provisions did not make it into the final bill or were “significantly watered down” (Carpenter 2010: 828). For instance, a provision for consumer-friendly financial products (so-called “plain vanilla” products), favored among consumer groups, was completely eliminated. Auto dealers are also exempted from oversight by the CFPB, another example of how a consumer-friendly proposal did not make it into the Dodd-Frank Act, despite lobbying of the AFR coalition which had actively tried to block the exemption of auto dealers from CFPB oversight. Most of all, even though civil society had thrown all its weight behind Elisabeth Warren to become head of the new agency, President Obama eventually nominated Richard Cordray as the first director of the bureau, following strong Republican and industry opposition to Warren’s appointment. To sum up, consumer protection remained a prominent feature of the reform bill, but after fierce opposition by business organizations, individual measures were severely watered down.

### *The EU case*

Similar to the US reaction to the crisis, the European Union (EU) agreed on a series of reform proposals that significantly altered the regulatory architecture of European financial regulation and deepened the single market in financial services. Although there is no overarching initiative in the EU that would be comparable to the Dodd-Frank Act, the Commission brought forward several legislative proposals, some of which, at the time of writing, are being discussed in the European Parliament (EP) and the Council. In October 2008, as a first step in response to the financial crisis, Commission President Barroso appointed a high level group of financial services experts to lay out the

foundations for reform of the European financial system architecture. The Larosière Report, issued in February 2009, was the first EU-level document that gave a comprehensive account of required structural changes. Based on that report, the EP – following agreement by all the member states – voted through a new supervisory framework for financial regulation in the EU on September 22, 2010; it came into force in January 2011. Within the new framework, consumer protection falls within the jurisdiction of the three new ESAs that work in tandem with the existing national supervisory authorities. Although there is no equivalent to the American CFPB on the European level, the ESAs have a mandate to protect consumers against abusive practices, with stakeholder groups representing consumer associations in all three organizations. The European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA), for instance, issues reports on consumer trends as well as warnings, and it monitors new financial activities as well as the development of common rules on information transparency.<sup>5</sup>

After the financial crisis, the European Commission markedly stepped up its rhetoric on increasing consumer protection in retail financial services. Commissioner Barnier became a strong entrepreneur in favor of enhanced consumer protection, and he emphasized this point with respect to the new authorities when he asserted: “These measures will enhance consumer protection. And they will contribute to ensuring the taxpayer is not again the first in line to bear the costs of a crisis” (Barnier 2011). In addition to this institutional change, Commissioner Barnier has been promoting an extensive legislative agenda with financial reform documents issued by the Commission putting strong emphasis on consumer protection. Under the headline of “A more consumer-friendly financial system,” the Directorate General for Internal Market and Services (2010) listed several provisions for enhancing consumer welfare through a standardized information sheet (“ESIS”) to compare mortgage conditions from different providers, granting access to basic bank accounts and better investor protection. Highlighting benefits for consumers, a press release by the Commission called the reform provisions a “package to boost consumer protection and confidence in financial services” (EC 2010a). In June 2010, a famous EC Communication (2010b: 7) called “Regulating financial services for sustainable growth” stated that “the regulatory framework must ... make sure that the financial services sector works for the benefit of citizens and the real economy.” Finally, in its Financial Reform Progress Report in February 2011, the Commission reinforced this statement and underlined that “restoring the confidence of consumers in the financial sector and the single market – and making sure this confidence is based on strong and sound foundations – is an essential element” of reforms (EC 2011: 7).

As in the American case, the regulatory changes attracted pressure from business groups against certain reform proposals. The EP and the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs reportedly faced “extremely vigorous” lobbying pressure from financial service-sector lobbyists (Hoedeman 2009). Talking about the political influence of the financial industry through lobbying power in the EU, a representative of a Brussels-

---

5 Lecture by Verena Ross, Executive Director of ESMA, Sciences Po, Paris (November 2012).

Table 1 Consumer-friendly regulation post-crisis: A cross-Atlantic comparison

	European Commission proposals	US Dodd-Frank Act
Investor compensation	Commission proposal to amend Directive 97/9/EC on investor-compensation schemes (12 July 2010) to ensure a minimum of 50,000 euros protection for investors in investment products.	The Act provides new rules for transparency and accountability for credit rating agencies to protect investors and businesses.
Deposit guarantees	Commission proposal for a revision of the Directive on deposit guarantee schemes (12 July 2010) to further harmonize and simplify the protection of deposits and ensure faster payouts.	The Act permanently increases deposit insurance for banks, thrifts and credit unions to 250,000 dollars.
Mortgage lending	Commission proposal for a Directive on credit agreements relating to residential property (31 March 2011) to improve the way in which mortgages are sold to consumers, provided through an information sheet allowing consumers to compare mortgage conditions.	In January 2013, the CFPB laid out new mortgage rules under which banks and other lenders will be prohibited from making home loans that offer deceptive teaser rates or require no documentation from borrowers.
Financial inclusion	EU adopts Commission Recommendation on access to a basic payment account (18 July 2011) to give every European citizen access to a basic account with electronic payment instruments.	The Act authorizes CFPB to improve access to mainstream financial institutions and provide alternatives to payday loans.
Retail investment products (PRIPIs)	Commission proposal for a regulation on a new Key Information Document for investment products (3 July 2012) concerning risky retail investment products.	No equivalent.

based NGO stated that everything was “back to business as usual.” And when asked about the improvements brought about by the EU financial reforms, another NGO representative remarked that he was rather pessimistic about the reforms’ long-term benefits for consumers.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, NGOs denounced the new ESAs for placing too little importance on consumer protection in their mandate as well as for their member composition, which favors a strong presence of big banks.<sup>7</sup> On the issue of the European standardized information sheet, one NGO representative complained that the Commission consulted only four consumer organizations but 20 business organizations: “It is about pleasing the business and keeping NGOs quiet.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, while the Commission’s rhetoric left little doubt about the importance of making the financial system more consumer-friendly, consumer representatives remained skeptical about reform process as well as substance.

---

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.



## The international level

While financial regulatory policy is usually negotiated by regulators and private actors, the G20 has become a major player in financial reform debates and hence a crucial target for civil society campaigns. Consumers International (CI), the world federation of consumer groups, mobilized its 240 members to lobby the G20 meetings for example in the run-up to the Seoul Summit in November 2010, in close cooperation with the biggest European and American consumer associations.

European Consumers' Organisation (BEUC), the US Consumers Union (CU) and CI launched the "Consumers for Fair Financial Services" campaign, calling for the G20 to take urgent action to support financial consumer protection and develop new international guidelines. At the time, the campaign group had already been working on concrete propositions that were later released as "recommendations for the G20 on the enhancement of consumer protection in financial services," including a call for international standards and guidelines as well as development of an international organization to share best practices and support the development of standards and guidelines.<sup>9</sup> Following the CI campaign, and in response to a call by the G20 in February 2011, an OECD-led Task Force produced "High-level Principles on Financial Consumer Protection," which the G20 finance ministers endorsed in October of the same year. The final document calls on all G20 members to "assess their national frameworks for financial consumer protection in the light of these principles and promote international co-operation to support the strengthening of financial consumer protection in line with, and building upon, the principles" (OECD 2011). For the first time, decision-makers agreed on international (non-binding) standards to enhance financial consumer protection across all financial service sectors.

To sum up, two observations are worth underlining. First, despite intense lobbying efforts by the financial industry, consumer protection became a key domain of the international regulatory overhauls. Neither in Europe nor in the US was the financial industry successful in terms of blocking a more consumer-friendly re-regulation of international finance. On the contrary, the creation of a watchdog for consumer financial products was a clear defeat for industry groups such as the American Bankers Association. Neither of the industry groups had supported cross-sectorial international principles on financial consumer protection. These observations run counter to the capture narratives. Second, while the initial reform agenda on both sides of the Atlantic seemed to mark a clear consumer-friendly turn in financial services, the subsequent reform and implementation process was not nearly as pronounced as pro-change advocates had wished for. How can we explain the political processes that led to the initial ambitious reform agenda on consumer financial protection as well as its subsequent dilution during implementation?

---

9 Interview with a representative of a consumer association (August 2011).

## The transnational civil society network

The subprime crisis also turned out to be a major catalyst for the formation of a broad inter-regional alliance among consumer associations, trade unions, NGOs and anti-globalization activists, allowing civil society to strengthen its capacity to influence the policy process. Groups that had never been involved in finance before reported that they started their work on financial issues after the crisis. Others stepped up their activities and built new coalitions that had not existed prior to the crisis.<sup>10</sup> While hundreds of groups have been engaged, the main focus here will be on the most visible umbrella organizations in the reform debates. Table 2 tries to capture the most relevant organizations.

A new alliance of more than 250 civil society organizations, named “Americans for Financial Reform” was announced in May 2009, at about the same time the US administration brought forward its reform proposals. The formation of such an alliance in the financial services sector, representing “a cohesive non-industry voice,” was a unique event in American history (Woolley/Ziegler 2011: 23). Cohen (2010) goes so far as to call it the “fourth wave of consumer activism” in the US. Modeling themselves after the American initiative, the coalition “Europeans for Financial Reform” (EFFR) was created in September 2009 by 23 different groups representing several hundred European organizations, ranging from development NGOs and trade unions to the European socialist party. A number of meetings among members of the two pro-reform groups took place in Washington, DC, New York and Brussels between 2009 and 2010,<sup>11</sup> allowing the groups to build a transatlantic alliance. The groups created the new position of a “Project Officer for Financial Reform” in Brussels to coordinate the campaign.<sup>12</sup> Both campaign groups were part of a rapidly expanding transnational network of organizations and individuals that became actively involved in the reform debate.

Following Keck and Sikkink (1998), this section will illustrate various tactics used by civil society groups to demonstrate their impact on regulatory reform. It will explore how civil society formed transnational networks, called upon and lobbied powerful political allies, reframed the issues, transformed the discourse and shifted the agenda of financial reforms.

---

10 Interviews with representatives of NGOs in Brussels (May, June, July and August 2011).

11 Ibid.

12 Interview with a representative of an NGO, Brussels (June 2011).

Table 2 Civil society engaged in reforming consumer financial protection 2008–2013

Name	Founded	Members	Countries	Type of organization
<b>International/transatlantic</b>				
CI	1960	220 consumer organizations	115	International federation of consumer organizations
TACD	1998	77 EU/US consumer organizations	≈22	Forum of EU/US consumer organizations
<b>European Union</b>				
ALTER-EU		≈ 160 organizations ranging from NGOs to trade unions		Coalition of public interest groups and trade unions
BEUC	1962	44 independent consumer organizations	31	Independent nonprofit EU consumer organization
EFFR	2009	18 organizations ranging from NGOs to trade unions	≈36	Coalition to campaign for financial reform
ETUC	1973	83 trade unions	36	Independent nonprofit EU consumer organization
Euroinvestors	2009	–	≈ 10	European federation of investors and other end users
FIN-USE	2004	15 expert groups on users of financial services	15	Independent expert forum including academics, small business experts, consumer groups
Solidar	1948	56 member organizations	25	European network of NGOs
<b>United States</b>				
AFR	2009	250 organizations ranging from consumer NGOs to small businesses	US	Coalition to campaign for financial reform
CFA	1968	300 non-profit organizations	US	Association of non-profit consumer organizations to advance the consumer interest
CU	1936	8 million subscriptions to newsletters	US	Independent, non-profit organization
NACA	–	1,500 attorneys	US	Non-profit association of attorneys and consumer advocates
NCL	1899	–	US	Consumer organization
PC	1971	80,000 members	US	Consumer rights group, non-profit organization
US PIRG	1970	26 state PIRGS	US	Federation of state public interest research groups

Source: Assembled by the author

### Leverage politics and public entrepreneurs

Keck and Sikkink (1998) proposed the concept of “leverage politics” to describe the capacity of civil society groups to call upon far more powerful allies, so-called “target actors” who can influence policy-making directly. Annual meetings of the Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue (TACD), for example, were an important forum for information

sharing. One representative remarked: “At these meetings high level political representatives are present, [Commissioner] Barnier for example. So it is an opportunity to put forward common recommendations and build a momentum.”<sup>13</sup> Another important stakeholder meeting was the Financial Forum in Ljubljana in May 2010. Consumer groups interpreted the Conference as “a milestone to raise the issue of consumer protection on the political level, to make the link between work at the national level and at the international front,” as one NGO member put it.<sup>14</sup> Also, campaigns organized after the meeting drew heavily on the common principles laid down in Ljubljana. Hence, these conferences served networking purposes in two respects: first, civil society could use them as a platform to find common ground in order to speak with a cohesive voice. Second, the groups could use the forums to convince “target actors” of their agendas.

Soon after the crisis, and in contrast to the US case, civil society in Europe found a powerful political ally in the European Parliament (EP). Contrary to AFR, which was a coalition made up exclusively of civil society groups, the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Greens organized the EFFR campaign in tandem with trade unions and NGOs. Moreover, in an effort to create an environment favorable to civil society input, MEP Pascal Canfin (Green Party) initiated the creation of an NGO named “Finance-Watch” in 2009 as a counter-lobby to the financial industry. Not least, the new NGO serves as an example of MEPs as public entrepreneurs who have built a strong pro-reform alliance with civil society. Not only MEPs but also the Commission became more receptive to demands for better consumer protection after the financial crisis and with the change in leadership at the Commission DG, from McGreevy to Barnier. “It made it as different as day and night,” said a consumer representative.<sup>15</sup>

On both sides of the Atlantic, well-positioned allies played a central role. In the US, the AFR coalition found a strong political ally in Harvard law professor Elizabeth Warren. In her position as Special Advisor to the Treasury at the CFPB, she was an important public entrepreneur on the political stage who defended the new consumer agency in congressional hearings and various sub-committee meetings of the House of Representatives.<sup>16</sup> The Obama administration itself became a strong advocate of consumer protection in the reform process. In his Wall Street speech in April 2010, the President made clear that he regarded consumer protection as an essential element of the financial reform, thereby risking “increasingly fractious relations” with the financial industry (Cooper 2010). Had it not been for this support from powerful entrepreneurs receptive to civil society demands, consumer protection would most likely not have seen the light

---

13 Interview with a representative of a consumer association, Paris (July 2011).

14 Ibid.

15 Interview with a representative of an NGO, Brussels (June 2011).

16 Warren gave testimony about the CFPB to Congress in May 2011 and to the House Financial Services Committee in June 2009 and in March 2011.

of day. Or, as a representative of an NGO put it, “because the President and Elizabeth Warren are providing Washington with the moral leadership it often lacks, do we have a chance to enact meaningful Wall Street reform” (Mierzwinski 2010: 585).

However, why did public entrepreneurs listen this time to civil society calls that had been issued long before the crisis? In the following section, I argue that this was due to fierce lobbying efforts combined with the use of a dominant rhetoric that resonated well with the wider public and decision-makers in the aftermath of the crisis.

### Direct lobbying

Civil society promoted the issue of consumer protection early on in the reform process and sought to impact the political agenda through direct lobbying to influence powerful actors. In the US, civil society picked up Warren’s idea and put its weight behind it. One of the first actions was the release of a joint statement by the leaders of seven of the country’s leading public-interest groups in December 2008, giving clear instructions for the reinstatement of an Office of Consumer Affairs in the White House, about one year before the idea was formally introduced into Congress (CU 2008). The reform agenda was then sent to President-elect Barack Obama and strongly supported in testimony before the US House of Representatives in July 2009. The call was also joined by the AFR coalition (2009). A consumer representative notes, “The Obama administration was receptive to our demands. It started with the new credit card reform. The administration was more receptive due to what had happened. They received many, many complaints.”<sup>17</sup>

Most European civil society groups also stepped up their lobbying efforts after the Larosière High Level Group published its report in February 2009, which they criticized for a lack of focus on consumer protection. In various letters to Commission President Barroso, FIN-USE (2009b) denounced a “lack of direct public interest representation.” BEUC (2009) also put pressure on the Commission, saying that the communication on “European Financial Supervision” was leaving out the conduct-of-business side. The EFRF (2009b) coalition joined these calls, saying that the EU needed “a financial system at the service of people’s interests.” The groups continued to draw up several drafts and published position papers as well as responses to Commission consultations. A closer look at the Commission’s roadmap to enhance consumer protection in EU financial system reform (DG Internal Market and Services 2010) reveals that all four key measures to enhance consumer protection had appeared earlier in the position papers published by BEUC and FIN-USE.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the Commission’s roadmap recognized

17 Interview with a representative of a consumer association, Washington, DC (August 2011).

18 See, for example, online documents: BEUC “Facing Up to the Financial Crisis – BEUC’s concrete suggestions to protect consumers in the short and long term” (2009) and FIN-USE’s pub-

that “consumers and other end-users of financial services need to be closely involved in and consulted on policy developments” in financial markets, thereby addressing the demand for fairer interest representation (FIN-USE 2009a). Finally, TACD members had been lobbying intensively to get consumer protection into the mandate of the three authorities. The European Green Party strongly supported civil society efforts, and several MEPs called for a strong consumer protection mandate for the new institutions.<sup>19</sup> Civil action also included organizing protests against Wall Street, press conferences, demonstrations and petitions.

These findings suggest that a network of civil society groups was a primary mover in generating concern about consumer protection in financial services. A closer look at how civil society framed the reform debate will help us understand why these lobbying efforts ended up influencing decision-makers after the crisis.

### Symbolic politics

The financial crisis that preceded the reform debate provided a symbolic event, which in turn became a catalyst for policy change. Keck and Sikkink (1998: 22) coined the phrase “symbolic politics” to describe a strategy to create awareness by providing an interpretation for such an event. The crisis had generated a situation of uncertainty, and as a result of the shaken confidence in traditional sources of expertise, policy-makers turned to civil society as new source of advice as well as moral authority. When they advised policy-makers, civil society actors were careful to frame the issue in a way that linked unfair consumer practices to the collapse of the economy.<sup>20</sup>

The argument that a lack of consumer protection led to the financial crisis and that greater consumer protection must be a reform priority was reoccurring in documents issued by members of civil society early on in the reform debate. On several occasions, the CU together with other groups clearly marked a lack of consumer protection as a root cause of the crisis – for example, in a testimony to the US House of Representatives: “The current crisis illustrates the high costs of a failure to provide effective consumer protection” (CU 2009). Similarly, for most European consumer associations and pro-reform groups, the linkage between financial crisis and consumer protection became official rhetoric and campaign strategy.<sup>21</sup> In a document published for an EU High Level Conference, FIN-USE (2009a) identified a “lack of consumer voice and representation” as one of the causes of the crisis. The TACD (2009b) stated: “If our governments

---

lication “Summary report on EU financial markets: Putting financial users at the heart of the financial market reform” (2010).

19 Interview with a representative of an NGO, London (July 2011).

20 Interview with a representative of an NGO, Brussels (August 2011).

21 Interview with a representative of a consumer association, Paris (July 2011).

had provided effective consumer protections . . . , much of our current economic disaster could have been averted.” CI also based its G20 campaign on the premise that weak financial consumer protection had caused the crisis.

The same rhetoric used by civil society was then also used by administrations in Europe and the US. A document released in 2010 by the US Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs (2010) identified “across-the-board failure to protect consumers” as one of the root causes of the financial crisis. One can find similar wording in documents issued by the DG Internal Market and Services (2010: 5), basing the necessity for reform on the premise that financial regulations “often disregarded consumer interests.” Both of these explanations, by the Senate Committee and by the Commission, testify to the role of civil society as an issue generator and provide evidence that civil society succeeded in influencing the discursive position of the US government and the European Commission.

However, for leverage and symbolic politics to be successful, another essential partner for civil society which had to be mobilized via broad media publicity was the wider public. The following section will provide evidence as to how consumer groups could “generate information and place it where it has most influence” (Keck/Sikkink 1998: 16).

### Information politics

“Information politics” refers to the capability of civil society networks to gain influence by generating politically usable information and to serve as alternate sources of expertise (Keck/Sikkink 1998). In the cases at hand, the transnational network tried to disseminate information such as statistics, reports or press releases to bring the issue of consumer protection onto the political agenda. The dominant tactic was to discredit the financial industry as a source of expertise by holding the industry’s behavior up to public scrutiny (“mobilization of shame”).

Several NGOs started to systematically review the asymmetry of interest representation among industry and consumers in the policy process; as a result, numerous studies appeared which would eventually become news in major newspapers. The New York Times (2010) cited a report published by the Center for Responsive Politics showing that the financial sector’s spending on lobbying since January 2009 mounted up to \$600 billion. CNN Money released an article citing PIRG’s statistics as well as a Public Citizen’s report about financial institutions hiring some 1,000 lobbyists since 2009 (Liberto 2010). In addition, in 2009, the non-profit Wall Street Watch project attracted public attention with a critical report on the financial sector’s political influence called “Sold Out.” The non-profit public broadcasting service PBS portrayed a similar message in a documentary it released called “The Warning,” which was but one of a whole series on industry malpractices that PBS showed throughout 2009.

In Europe, ATTAC launched a YouTube video about malpractices in the banking sector which was viewed over 100,000 times within less than a month in 2008. NGOs published a number of reports – for example, on the one-sided composition of expert groups in favor of the financial business sector (Haar 2009) or on the political influence of Goldman Sachs (Spinwatch 2011). And engaging in the “shaming,” in a publicly appealing event, some NGOs awarded the “Worst Lobby Awards” to the lobby groups (i.a., Goldman Sachs) that had been lobbying to promote profits for the financial industry at the expense of the public interest.

In order to generate politically usable information, civil society also provided stories told by people affected – so-called “testimony” (Keck/Sikkink 1998). By dramatizing the issue, NGOs create information that often has more influence on policy-makers than the advice of technical experts. The Consumers’ Union’s webpage, for instance, provided a forum for dialogue among citizens and consumer organizations where victims of abusive lending practices were invited to share their story. In a similar campaign, the federation of State Public Interest Research Groups submitted 160 stories to Congress about how the financial meltdown affected consumers.

This combination of dramatic testimonial information along with technical and statistical information generated by the various campaigns together, with personal testimony, publicly discredited the industry. By focusing their campaigns on the misbehavior of target actors, NGOs gained moral leverage over industry and policy-makers, thereby generating politically usable information. The next section will show that, in order to achieve their aims, civil society also explicitly targeted international conferences.

### Boomerang politics

One way for civil society to influence policy-making on the international level is through coalitions with international organizations or actors, thus pressuring states “from above” and “from below” (Risse 2008: 265). CI, for instance, submitted their demands for better consumer protection to the UN Conference on the World Financial Crisis that took place in New York in June 2009, and provided ongoing contributions to the newly set up UN Commission of Experts on Financial Reforms as well as to the OECD (CI 2009). Keck and Sikkink (1998: 13) famously described a “boomerang pattern,” where NGOs bypass the national state and directly seek out allies to try to put pressure on their states from the outside. International consumer associations pursued a variation on the boomerang mechanism to exert pressure on relevant actors such as the G20 and other international organizations.

The G20 was an important site of contestation. While during the first G20 meetings consumer protection had largely been neglected, leaders at the Pittsburgh Summit in September 2009 agreed that “far more needs to be done to protect consumers;” in June



2010, at the G20 in Toronto, a key principle put forth was to “encourage a comprehensive approach to consumer protection.” Yet, consumer protection was far from being regarded as a policy priority. Against this background, CI launched a global “Consumers for Fair Financial Services” campaign. As part of the campaign, 30 groups signed an open letter to the G20 in Seoul in November 2010, calling “for the needs of everyday consumers of financial services to be pushed to the top of the agenda” (CI 2010). Various NGOs started to lobby and even had face-to-face contact with important decision-makers: for instance, German consumer associations spent one hour with Chancellor Merkel, and French organizations met briefly with their finance minister, Christine Lagarde. Both politicians were very receptive to the consumer groups. The French G20 presidency had made consumer financial protection one of its priorities, and so Lagarde was particularly eager to take consumer views into account.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, in November, the G20 published a final declaration of the Seoul Summit, saying that they had agreed to enhance consumer protection – to the astonishment of civil society groups.<sup>23</sup> In February 2011, the G20 Finance Ministers called on an OECD task force to provide options to enhance financial consumer protection. Initially, the OECD had no plans to publicly consult with civil society, and so the French finance minister’s advocacy turned out to be instrumental in spurring a public consultation process that included consumer groups. As one consumer representative reports:

That first meeting I had with the [OECD] officials concerned, I just had a feeling that they didn’t regard us as very significant at all ... but then, what happened was very important. I went with our French colleagues to see Madame Lagarde’s office. Within a couple of days, she wrote to the Secretary General of the OECD, saying that consumer organizations had to be involved in the G20 mandate. From that point the OECD started to take us very seriously indeed.<sup>24</sup>

Between April and October 2011, the task force held multiple rounds of consultations before a final version of the draft was agreed upon. CI, which had published a detailed 40-page report outlining recommendations to enhance consumer protection, was invited to address the panel, while at the same time, industry groups were very slow to react and did not even attend consultation meetings.<sup>25</sup> In October 2011, the OECD published a list of non-binding cross-sectorial international standards, the “High-level Principles on Financial Consumer Protection,” which were subsequently endorsed by the G20. Members of the task force described the consultation process as consensual, “a collective construction, to which everyone contributed”<sup>26</sup> and celebrated the endorsement as a major improvement.

---

22 Interview with a representative of an international NGO (August 2011).

23 Ibid.

24 Interview with a representative of a consumer association (August 2011).

25 Interview with an OECD official, Paris (November 2012).

26 Interview with a central banker, Paris (January 2013).

However, besides the fact that the principles remain non-binding, the language of the final draft uses relatively weak wording such as “where appropriate,” “voluntary,” or “as appropriate.” Several of the principles were watered down. The proposal for guarantees on consumer deposits in banks that had appeared in an early draft was removed. Key factors to enhance transparency (such as the display of costs, and accurate information) were banned from the main text and appear only in footnotes. The creation of a new international organization to share best practices, an idea brought forward by CI, was not taken on board. “We think that sends a message about how banks have lobbied the committee,” notes a consumer representative. “[It’s] ‘motherhood and apple pie,’ things that everyone agrees on anyway. When such proposals [on consumer protection] are made by national governments, the banks are for them line by line; only just to do everything they can to undermine it.”<sup>27</sup>

Taken together, and despite substantial changes that were made to dilute the final draft, the common principles represent an unprecedented international agreement to enhance consumer financial protection as well as an example of how consumer associations and NGOs, in tandem with powerful policy entrepreneurs, can successfully push for an agenda. Most of all, in the future, the existence of an international standard will allow watchdog groups to refer to the G20 commitments made by heads of governments in order to put pressure on the implementation of these commitments on the national level.

## Conclusions

Decision-makers in the US and the EU have undertaken unprecedented measures in the field of consumer protection as part of the financial reforms in response to the global financial crisis. In July 2010, the Obama administration signed the Dodd-Frank Act into law, thereby establishing the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Simultaneously, the European Commission brought forward several reform proposals to improve consumer and investor protection. The European Parliament subsequently passed a resolution on basic banking services; legislation on stronger deposit guarantees and investor protection schemes, as well as on stricter regulations of packaged retail investment products and with responsible lending underway. Not least, decision-makers at the G20 agreed to international standards to enhance consumer protection on a global scale. Taken together, these measures mark a shift away from a focus on market efficiency to a focus on consumer protection. However, a look behind the scenes of the “all motherhood and apple pie” rhetoric of policy-makers, industry and consumer groups alike reveals that the actual regulatory reform falls somewhat short of the initial pro-reform statements. Industry groups in the EU and the US successfully diluted individ-

---

27 Interview with a representative of a consumer organisation (August 2011).

ual measures during the implementation phase. As a result, financial consumer protection reforms across the Atlantic have not redesigned the regulatory framework, but they still go beyond business as usual.

The puzzle is that this regulatory change largely runs counter to the interests of the most influential and resourceful actors in financial regulation: the banks and industry associations. This calls Olson's logic of collective action into question, which departs from the assumptions that consumers are at a huge disadvantage in the face of well-organized business interests. Reform legislation after the crisis diverges from theories that explain regulatory policy-making by concentrated interest-group pressure or expert knowledge of transnational epistemic communities. Indeed, the regulatory outcome of financial reforms turns on its head the prevalent prediction from capture theories: that the regulatory outcome in international finance corresponds to the preferences of the private sector. In this case, policy-makers aligned with consumer associations and other civil society groups to bring forward a consumer-friendly agenda.

This article identified transnational civil society groups, as non-governmental entrepreneurs of regulatory change. Exploiting the momentum of widespread public support and media attention in the aftermath of the crisis, civil society became a "catalyst for politicizing" (Price 1998: 639) consumer financial protection in international finance. The strong citizen base, in turn, allowed civil society to call upon well-positioned public entrepreneurs, such as parliamentarians, EU bureaucrats and key decision-makers, to weigh in on reform decisions. Specific policy entrepreneurs such as French finance minister Lagarde, consumer advocate Warren, Commissioner Barnier and several Members of the European Parliament became directly involved in the reform debate and opened up the policy-making process to new groups. A small window of opportunity opened up where policy-makers turned to civil society as an alternative source of expertise. By reframing the reform debate, generating information and placing it strategically on the national and international level through direct lobbying of key actors and a variation of boomerang politics, the transnational network took advantage of the increased public attention and made consumer protection a prominent reform issue.

This research makes several important contributions. First and foremost, it provides a first detailed description of the actions and campaigns by members of a civil society network in response to the subprime financial crisis, showing that a growing number of civil society organizations have developed capacities to engage in the debate on reforming global finance. However, the article also highlights the limitations in civil society's capacity to influence regulatory change. The findings suggest that the impact of NGO campaigns was largely restricted to the agenda-setting phase of the reform process. By contrast, the crisis-shaken private financial sector was back on its feet not long after the financial meltdown, increasing lobbying efforts and slowly trimming back reform advances, watering down consumer protection measures during reform negotiations in the subsequent implementation phase. Nevertheless, this analysis has provided evidence that transnational NGOs are increasingly involved in standard-setting aspects of

financial regulation – for instance, being involved in consultation processes with the OECD. Furthermore, the case studies confirm the oft-argued thesis among scholars that the perception of a crisis is an important factor in precipitating normative change. The international financial crisis was important for the reform of consumer protection, as it demonstrated the dramatic failures of the regulatory system and mobilized public action and pro-change groups. The crisis, however, was the catalyst, not the cause for provoking policy-makers to turn to civil society as an alternative source of information and expertise. The article is also a contribution to the debate on how financial regulation has changed post-crisis and the role of non-state actors in the ongoing contest over the rules governing the global political economy. This change is too recent for us to say with any certainty whether the new framework marks a substantial consumer-friendly turn in financial regulation. But the legislative action prompted by the crisis in the field of consumer protection remains unprecedented. This suggests that the capture model for explaining financial regulatory policy-making needs to be revised.

To summarize, international financial regulation represents a particularly hard case for demonstrating the role of transnational civil society in global politics. In doing so, this article joins a number of studies that show that civil society matters in global politics: in the field of human rights (Keck/Sikkink 1998), security policy (Pierce 1998) or environmental protection (Florini 2000). The activism in reaction to the financial crisis provides another important example of the potential of civil society actors to influence policy outcomes on a global scale.

## References

- Americans for Financial Reform, 2009: *Restoring Oversight and Accountability to the Financial Markets*. Position paper, 10 July 2009. <<http://ourfinancialsecurity.org/2009/07/position-papers/>>
- Baker, A., 2009: Deliberative Equality and the Transgovernmental Politics of the Global Financial Architecture. In: *Global Governance* 15(2), 195–218.
- Barnett, M./K. Sikkink, 2008: From International Relations to Global Society. In: C. Reus-Smit/D. Snidal (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 62–83.
- Barnier, M., 2011: *The Date of 1st January 2011 Marks a Turning Point for the European Financial Sector*. Speech, 1 January 2011. <[http://ec.europa.eu/commission\\_2010-2014/barnier/headlines/speeches/2011/01/20110101\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/barnier/headlines/speeches/2011/01/20110101_en.htm)>
- , 2010: *Forging a New Deal between Finance and Society: Restoring Trust in the Financial Sector*. Speech, 26 April 2010. <[http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-10-178\\_en.htm?locale=fr](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-10-178_en.htm?locale=fr)>
- Batliwala, S./L. D. Brown (eds.), 2006: *Transnational Civil Society: An Introduction*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.
- BEUC (European Consumers' Organisation), 2009: *Financial Supervision in Europe: Consumer Perspective*. <[www.beuc.eu/BEUCNoFrame/Docs/3/HDHDDDBDCNALONPMCKIIEFCANPDB-G9DBWY9DW3571KM/BEUC/docs/DLS/2009-00812-01-E.pdf](http://www.beuc.eu/BEUCNoFrame/Docs/3/HDHDDDBDCNALONPMCKIIEFCANPDB-G9DBWY9DW3571KM/BEUC/docs/DLS/2009-00812-01-E.pdf)>
- Carpenter, D., 2010: Institutional Strangulation: Bureaucratic Politics and Financial Reform in the Obama Administration. In: *Perspectives on Politics* 8(3), 825–846.
- Center for Responsive Politics, 2009: *House Financial Services Committee Considers Regulating Industries that Heavily Fund Members Campaigns*. OpenSecretsblog, 14 October 2009. <[www.opensecrets.org/news/2009/10/house-financial-services-commi.html](http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2009/10/house-financial-services-commi.html)>
- Clark, J. D., 2006: Dot Causes and Protest: Transnational Economic Justice. In: S. Batliwala/L. D. Brown (eds.), *Transnational Civil Society: An Introduction*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 175–203.
- Cohen, Elizabeth, 2010: Colston E. Warne Lecture: It Is Time for Another Round of Consumer Protection? In: *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 44(1), 234–246.
- CU (Consumers Union), 2008: *Economic Security, Health and Safety of Nation: An Agenda to Close Growing Gaps in Marketplace Protections*. Press Release, 11 December 2008. <<http://consumersunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Safety-of-Nation-Platform.pdf>>
- , 2009: *Testimony of Gail Hillebrand before the Committee on Energy and Commerce*. Hearing, 8 July 2009. <[http://democrats.energycommerce.house.gov/Press\\_111/20090708/testimony\\_hillebrand.pdf](http://democrats.energycommerce.house.gov/Press_111/20090708/testimony_hillebrand.pdf)>
- Cooper, H., 2010: Obama Signs Overhaul of Financial System. In: *The New York Times*, 21 July 2010. <[www.nytimes.com/2010/07/22/business/22regulate.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/22/business/22regulate.html?_r=0)>
- Directorate General for Internal Market and Services, 2010: *Towards More Responsibility and Competitiveness in the European Financial Sector*. Brussels: European Union. <[http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/finances/docs/leaflet/financial\\_services\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/finances/docs/leaflet/financial_services_en.pdf)>
- Dunkerley, D./S. Fudge, 2004: The Role of Civil Society In European Integration. In: *European Societies*, 6(2), 237–254.
- Engelen, E./I. Ertürk/J. Froud, 2011: *After the Great Complacency: Financial Crisis and the Politics of Reform* Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- EC (European Commission), 2010a: *Commission Proposes Package to Boost Consumer Protection and Confidence in Financial Services*. Press release, 12 July 2010. <[http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-10-918\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-10-918_en.htm)>
- , 2010b: *Communication from the Commission: Regulating Financial Services for Sustainable Growth*. Brussels: European Union.
- , 2011: *Regulating Financial Services for Sustainable Growth: A Progress Report*. Brussels: European Union.
- , 2012: *Special Eurobarometer 373: Retail Financial Services*. Report. Brussels: European Union.

- Finnemore, M., 1996: *National Interests in International Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Florini, A. (ed.), 2000: *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society*. Washington, DC: Japan Center for International Exchange and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- FIN-USE, 2009a: *The View of the Consumers*. Presentation at High Level Conference “Towards a New Supervisory Architecture in Europe.” Brussels, 7 May 2009.  
<[http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/finances/docs/committees/supervision/zunzunegui\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/finances/docs/committees/supervision/zunzunegui_en.pdf)>
- , 2009b: *De Larosière Group: User Representation*. Letter to José Manuel Barroso, 9 February 2009. <[http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/fin-use\\_forum/docs/de\\_larosiere\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/fin-use_forum/docs/de_larosiere_en.pdf)>
- Friesen, E., 2012: *Challenging Global Finance: Civil Society and Transnational Networks*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frangakis, M., 2009: EU Financial Market Integration Policy. In: J. Grahl (ed.), *Global Finance and Social Europe*. Northampton: Edward Elgar, 91–114.
- G20, 2010: *The G20 Seoul Summit Leaders' Declaration, 11–12 November 2010*.  
<<http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/G20COMMUN1110.pdf>>
- Haar, K., et al., 2009: *A Captive Commission: The Role of Financial Industry in Shaping EU Regulation*. Brussels: Corporate European Observatory.
- Haas, P. M., 1992: Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination. In: *International Organization* 46(1), 1–35.
- Hacker, J. S./ P. Pierson, 2010: Winner-take-all Politics: Public Policy, Political Organization, and the Precipitous Rise of Top Incomes in the United States. In: *Politics & Society* 38(2), 152–204.
- Helleiner, E./ S. Pagliari, 2010: The End of an Era in International Financial Regulation? A Postcrisis Research Agenda. In: *International Organization* 65, 169–200.
- Hoedeman, O., 2009: *Parliament Inquiry into Financial Crisis Should Address Role of Lobbying*. In: *NewEurope online*, 11 October 2009. <[www.neweurope.eu/article/parliament-inquiry-financial-crisis-should-address-role-lobbying](http://www.neweurope.eu/article/parliament-inquiry-financial-crisis-should-address-role-lobbying)>
- Johnson, S./ J. Kwak, 2010: *13 Bankers: The Wall Street Takeover and the Next Financial Meltdown*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Josseline D./W. Wallace, 2001: *Non-state Actors in World Politics*. London: Palgrave.
- Keck, M./ K. Sikkink, 1998: *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kroszner, R., et al., 2011: *Reforming U.S. Financial Markets: Reflections Before and Beyond Dodd-Frank*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Liberto, J., 2010: Wall Street Reform: On to Obama. In: *CNN Money*, 21 July 2010. <[http://money.cnn.com/2010/07/21/news/economy/Whats\\_next\\_financial\\_reform/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2010/07/21/news/economy/Whats_next_financial_reform/index.htm)>
- Limbach, J., 2009: *Survey: Americans Want Consumer Agency For Financial Products And Services*. ConsumerAffairs.com, 11 September 2009.  
<[www.consumeraffairs.com/news04/2009/09/consumer\\_agency.html](http://www.consumeraffairs.com/news04/2009/09/consumer_agency.html)>
- Mierzwinski, E., 2010: Colston E. Warne Lecture: Consumer Protection 2.0 – Protecting Consumers in the 21st Century. In: *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* 44(3), 578–597.
- Mattli, W./N. Woods, 2009: *The Politics of Global Regulation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mosley, L., 2009: Private Governance for the Public Good? Exploring Private Sector Participation in Global Financial Markets. In: H. V. Milner/A. Moravcsik (eds.), *Power, Interdependence and Non-state Actors in World Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 126–146.
- New York Times, 2010: *Congress Passes Financial Reform*, 16 July 2010.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/16/opinion/16fri1.html>>
- Obama, B., 2010: *Remarks by the President at Signing of Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act*. Press release, 21 July 2010. <[www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-signing-dodd-frank-wall-street-reform-and-consumer-protection-act](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-signing-dodd-frank-wall-street-reform-and-consumer-protection-act)>
- OECD, 2011: *G20 High-level Principles on Financial Consumer Protection*. Paris: OECD.
- Olson, M., 1965: *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- O'Brien, R., et al., 2000: *Contesting Global Governance: Multilateral Economic Institutions and Global Social Movements*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

- Risse, T., 2008: Transnational Actors and World Politics. In: W. Carlsnaes/T. Risse/B. A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations*. London: Sage, 255–274.
- Scholte, J. A./A. Schnabel (eds.), 2002: *Civil Society and Global Finance*. London: Routledge.
- Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, 2010: *Summary: Restoring American Financial Stability*. Summary of the Senate Provisions in the Wall Street Reform Conference Base Text, 28 May 2010.  
<[www.banking.senate.gov/public/\\_files/RAFSASummary\\_UpdateMay28revised.pdf](http://www.banking.senate.gov/public/_files/RAFSASummary_UpdateMay28revised.pdf)>
- Spinwatch, 2011: *Doing God's Work: How Goldman Sachs Rigs the Game*.  
<[www.spinwatch.org/images/stories/SpinWatch\\_Goldman%20Sachs\\_March2011.pdf](http://www.spinwatch.org/images/stories/SpinWatch_Goldman%20Sachs_March2011.pdf)>
- State Street, 2011: *Vision Focus: The Changing Shape of European Investment Management*. Vol. 2: *Regulatory Change*. Boston: State Street Corporation.  
<[www.statestreet.com/vision/complexity/documents/Volume2.pdf](http://www.statestreet.com/vision/complexity/documents/Volume2.pdf)>
- TACD (Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue), 2009: *Resolution on Financial Services Regulation*.  
<[http://tacd.org/index2.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_view&gid=214&Itemid=](http://tacd.org/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=214&Itemid=)>
- The World Bank, 2012: *Good Practices for Financial Consumer Protection*. Washington, DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. <[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTFINANCIALSECTOR/Resources/Good\\_Practices\\_for\\_Financial\\_CP.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTFINANCIALSECTOR/Resources/Good_Practices_for_Financial_CP.pdf)>
- Tsingou, E., 2010: Regulatory Reactions to the Global Credit Crisis: Analyzing a Policy Community under Stress. In: E. Helleiner et al. (eds.), *Global Finance in Crisis: The Politics of International Regulatory Change*. London: Routledge, 21–36.
- Underhill, G./X. Zhang (eds.), 2003: *International Financial Governance Under Stress: Global Structures versus National Imperatives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Underhill, G./X. Zhang, 2008: Setting the Rules: Private Power, Political Underpinnings, and Legitimacy in Global Monetary and Financial Governance. In: *International Affairs* 84(3), 535–554.
- , 2010: Public Interest, National Diversity and Global Financial Governance. In: G. Underhill/J. Blom/ D. Muegge (eds.), *Global Financial Integration Thirty Years On: From Reform to Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 287–303.
- US Chamber of Commerce, 2009: *Joint Trade Letter on H.R. 3126, the “Consumer Financial Protection Agency (CFPA) Act.”* Letter to Congress, 18 December 2009. <[www.uschamber.com/issues/letters/2009/joint-trade-letter-hr-3126-consumer-financial-protection-agency-cfpa-act](http://www.uschamber.com/issues/letters/2009/joint-trade-letter-hr-3126-consumer-financial-protection-agency-cfpa-act)>
- Warren, E., 2011: *The Daily Show with John Stewart*. Interview, 26 April 2012.  
<[www.thedailyshow-q.mtvi.com/watch/tue-april-26-2011/elizabeth-warren](http://www.thedailyshow-q.mtvi.com/watch/tue-april-26-2011/elizabeth-warren)>
- Woolley, J. T./J. N. Ziegler, 2011: *The Two-tiered Politics of Financial Reform in the United States*. Working Paper. Berkeley, CA: University of California–Berkeley, Institute for Research on Labour and Employment. <[www.escholarship.org/uc/item/2k3219pt](http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/2k3219pt)>
- Yingling, E., 2009: *Testimony of Edward L. Yingling on Behalf of the American Bankers Association before the Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, United States Senate, 14 July 2009*. <[www.aba.com/Issues/Documents/ac85552939434361b8af54b13c7ae483FINALJuly14EdYinglingSenateBankingCommitteeConsume.pdf](http://www.aba.com/Issues/Documents/ac85552939434361b8af54b13c7ae483FINALJuly14EdYinglingSenateBankingCommitteeConsume.pdf)>

## **MaxPo Discussion Paper Series**

13/1

M. Fourcade, P. Steiner,  
W. Streeck, C. Woll  
**Moral Categories in the  
Financial Crisis**

### **Ordering information**

#### **MaxPo Discussion Papers**

Order printed copies from MaxPo (at a charge) or download PDF files from the MaxPo website (free of charge).

[www.maxpo.eu](http://www.maxpo.eu)  
Go to *Publications*.

### **New Titles**

Consult our website for the most complete and up-to-date information on MaxPo publications and publications by MaxPo researchers. To sign up for our newsletter, please go to *News > Newsletter* on the MaxPo website.



The Max Planck Sciences Po Center on Coping with Instability in Market Societies (MaxPo) is a Franco-German research center which was jointly founded by the Max Planck Society and Sciences Po. Researchers at MaxPo investigate how individuals, organizations, and nation-states are coping with the new forms of economic and social instability that have developed in Western societies as a result of policy shifts, the expansion of markets, technological advances, and cultural changes. Located at Sciences Po Paris and cooperating closely with the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG) in Cologne, the Center aims to contribute substantially to the social sciences in Europe and enrich academic and political dialogue between France and Germany.

The MaxPo Discussion Paper Series presents research in economic sociology, political economy, economic history, and related fields conducted at MaxPo and its partner institutions, in joint research projects, and in projects by visiting scholars.



MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

MAX-PLANCK-INSTITUT FÜR GESELLSCHAFTSFORSCHUNG  
MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIETIES



SciencesPo.