

Introduction

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The contributions to the third volume of the European University Institute's *The Future of Party Government* series focus on the comparative analysis of public policy in Western nations. The subjects covered range from the economic functions of government, such as fiscal policy, monetary policy and labour market policy, to areas of social policy, and to the traditional functions of the state, such as defence policy. However, the primary emphasis is on policies that are designed to manage the mixed economies of the industrialised democratic nations.

The topics that are addressed in this volume include the following questions: Which countries have been relatively successful in weathering periods of economic recession? Why is it that some nations have managed to cope with economic challenges, while others have failed to do so? Why is it that some industrialised Western nations maintained full employment, or at least, low rates of unemployment over an extended period of the 1970's and the early 1980's, while others were confronted with high and increasing levels of unemployment? To what extent has public spending in Western countries been characterised by trade-offs or, alternatively, pay-offs between spending on social purposes and on defence? To what extent do policies mirror the impact of a wide variety of political configurations such as political institutions, modes of conflict resolution and interest intermediation, political ideology and collective political actors, and to what extent do they reflect the impact of structural, non-political factors?

The contributions to this volume are essentially of a comparative nature. The focus of analysis is on democratic and economically developed member nations of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). Thus, for the most part, analysis centres on public policy-making in countries which are governed by democratic party government regimes.

Within the context of party government, parties take on a central role in the processes of interest articulation, interest aggregation and recruitment of political personnel. Moreover, parties influence the process of policy formation, albeit to a degree which differs from country to country, from period to period and from one policy area to the other. Lastly, party competition is of

considerable importance in the process of adjusting public policy to citizens' preferences. However, this is not to say that parties necessarily represent the most important, or ultimately decisive, determinant of public policy-making in a regime of party government. The contributions to this volume demonstrate that rival organisations of party government, such as interest groups, bureaucracies and powerful institutions, such as central banks or constitutional courts, are often more directly involved in the management of policy than are parties. If we look at it this way, party government is a concept that is related to the control of political power rather than one of the management of public policy. Within this frame of reference, the role that is played by political parties is by no means a minor one. Bureaucracies and interest groups may strongly determine the content of public policy, but in the end, governing parties are, to a considerable extent, at least, politically responsible for the substance of policy.

The existence of party government as a mechanism of political control does not necessarily involve any strong impact of parties on the daily management of public policy. It is sufficient that party competition functions as a mechanism of last resort in the control of policy-making and government activity.

In the past, much of policy-analysis was directly concerned with the impact of parties on public policy. According to the findings of these studies, the impact of parties has often been rather limited. This is not surprising if we understand the way party competition works. As party competition often merely imposes a limited degree of guidance and constraint on policy-making, we should not expect that parties will strongly influence all major aspects of policy-making. Rather, we might expect a strong direct impact of parties only on policies concerning issues that are vital to party competition.

If we accept that party competition is basically a last resort imposed on those structures and processes that are involved in the daily management of public policy, we do not need to assume that under conditions of party government parties determine policy. On the contrary, we may accept the parties' limited role and the often competitive influence of rival organisations. This is precisely one of the assumptions that is common to all chapters in this volume.

It is partly for this reason that the contributions to this volume are not primarily concerned with the older debate on the "do parties matter?" question. Rather, they aim to analyse the relationships that exist between public policy on the one hand and structural, non-political determinants and a wide range of genuinely political determinants on the other. In a general sense, the contributions to this volume are concerned with the impact that structures, processes and conscious choices have on policy, and with the outcomes of these policies, defined in terms of criteria of economic and social performance.

The chapters composing this volume can thus be regarded as contributions to the study of politics and policy within the context of the regime of party

government, although they are not primarily concerned with the impact of parties as such. The authors of the papers in this volume investigate important aspects of political decision-making structures of which party government is one important part. They do so from different perspectives and with a wide variety of methodological and theoretical approaches.

Methodologically, the contributions of Keman and Lehner represent cross-national studies based on highly aggregated quantitative indicators, while the chapters of Schubert on the one hand, and Dorff and Steiner on the other, rest on a qualitative analysis of disaggregated data. In contrast to these approaches, the research design that is utilised in Schmidt's contribution emphasises a comparative historiographic perspective, which focuses attention on broad cross-national generalisations and country-specific characteristics.

Theoretically, Lehner and Schubert premise their respective contributions on modern political economy and on a public choice approach, while Schmidt and Keman follow the traditions of a political-institutionalist approach to the comparative study of public policy. Steiner and Dorff deviate from both approaches and basically opt for an analysis of decision processes at a highly disaggregated level.

The contributions to this volume are concerned with quite diverse questions. Schmidt focuses on an explanation of differences in the capacities of nations effectively to cope with unemployment. Lehner concentrates attention on the management of distributive conflicts and its impact on economic performance. Keman analyses choices between social policy and defence policy. Steiner and Dorff's essay explores the impacts that are associated with variations in the mode of decision-making, and Schubert investigates the problems of political regulation in mixed economies. Finally, Castles' contribution focuses on a number of the methodological problems which have beset comparative public policy research and suggests a variety of strategies by which such research might more fruitfully proceed in future.

Altogether, the contributions to the third volume of *The Future of Party Government* series represent a variety of approaches to the study of public policy. Nevertheless, an interest in the understanding of complex policy-making structures is common to each.