

Politics and Bureaucracy in the European State

A Comparative Study into the Changing Relations Between Political and Bureaucratic Institutions

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1. Introduction

In Europe the national state as an entity of government is changing. In itself this process of change is hardly a new phenomenon, since from the earliest stages of national statehood in Europe adjustments to new circumstances have been common practice. In this sense the nation state is a historical phenomenon that is securely rooted yet subject to change. The adaptability of the nation state is of crucial importance in the context of European integration. In recent decades, this process has been one of the most powerful causes for change of the national state in Europe, in terms of its scale, intensity and wide range.¹

As a result of European cooperation and integration, both the domain of power of the state and the distribution of power within the national state appear to have changed. Yet, most research relating to Europeanization shows that the effects of European integration on the political-administrative structures of the national level vary in nature and intensity from country to country.² Precisely, these differences enable the construction of an internationally comparative framework for research. This framework will help to identify possible underlying causes of the cross-national divergences regarding the impact of European integration, such as administrative traditions or historically established institutional structures.

This paper presents a preliminary research design. The proposed set-up is far from complete, and there are a number of important questions I still have to deal with. Nonetheless, this essay captures broadly the *what*, *why* and *how* of the project. Thus, I will first expound the purposes of the project, then the conceptual context within which I am planning to operate. Next, a discussion of the proposed research questions will be given. Methodological considerations, in so far as they are worked out at this point, will be discussed after that. Lastly, concerns regarding the validity of this research will be addressed. All in all, the idea behind this paper is to make my thoughts and plans as explicit as possible, so that its strengths, limitations and implications can be clearly understood.

2. Purposes

In its most general formulation, this project aims at understanding the ways in which national political-administrative constellations respond to changes in the overall system of

¹ Cf. amongst others Kersbergen (1999).

² Cf. amongst others H ritier (2001).

governance. More specifically, its goal is to identify and explain the changes in political-bureaucratic systems in Western European states as a result of European integration. With a better understanding of these processes and newly gained insights, I hope to make a contribution to the theoretical debate on “political authority vs. bureaucratic power” in the first place and in the second place to existing theoretical work on the Europeanization³ of national systems of government. This means that the research is primarily focussed on politics-bureaucracy relations at the national level, and that developments at the European level play a role in so far that they are a possible explanation for changes in these relations. My project will thus be more directly embedded in the academic tradition of politics and bureaucracy than within the Europeanization literature.

The two key conceptual elements of this study, the constellation of political and bureaucratic institutions and Europeanization of national systems are both crucial notions in the study of present-day Public Administration. The interaction between politics and bureaucracy has inspired political thinkers, sociologists and philosophers of law for many centuries. In many ancient empires political rulers and their civil servants often operated in a potentially antagonistic relationship, over expertise, skills, authority and ultimately over power.⁴ Interestingly, in the contemporary Western European national state the relation between elected politicians and appointed bureaucrats is still one of delicate balance, ambiguity, interdependence, cooperation and conflict. The significance of this relationship lies in the fact that this balance touches the heart of the democratic process in any *Rechtsstaat*. ‘Good governance’ can be understood in terms of lawful administration, an adequate system of accountability and a proper equilibrium between democratically elected politicians and professionally trained permanent civil servants, granting crucial importance to the debate over political authority and bureaucratic power.

Similarly, Europeanization of national systems is an essential feature of Public Administration studies today. As an unprecedented endeavour in international cooperation, Europeanization sparks much debate among scholars and practitioners, and has created a good deal of ambiguity in the theoretical claims concerning its implications. An often-heard

³ In this study the term Europeanization is understood as central penetration of national and sub-national systems of governance. In this understanding, “Europeanization involves the division of responsibilities and powers between different levels of governance. (...) Europeanization, then implies adapting national and sub-national systems of governance to a European political centre and European-wide norms.” Olson, *Europeanization - a fashionable term, but is it useful?*

⁴ See Mann (1986) and Doyle (1986)

assertion is that the sovereignty of the national state is being eroded, while others maintain that the European integration has been a smart but indispensable trick so rescue the national state in Europe. In an attempt to contribute to the creation of a clearer picture of both the politics-bureaucracy dichotomy and the debate on Europeanization, this research intends to discover what has changed in the relationship between politics and bureaucracy and what – if any – part of these changes can be attributed to developments at the European level..

3. Conceptual context

In his book *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Max Weber pointed out that the developmental trend towards what may be termed bureaucratic government poses problems which are similar for all polities; that increasing bureaucratization diminishes the chances for the exercise of democratic public control of government, which leads to a potential weakening of the power of the publicly accountable politician.⁵ Weber sets out the characteristics of bureaucracy as a means to organise social and political life. Also, he discusses the types of historical conditions that led to the emergence of bureaucratic government. He describes the potential challenges of bureaucratic government to the exercise of political leadership and elaborates on the types of institutions that could limit the potential for officials to dominate policy-making in a bureaucratic system.

Weber sees political leadership in a bureaucratic system as an important problem in the modern state. Some interpretations of Weber maintain that in a bureaucratic system it is unavoidable that administrators will take over all important policy decisions.⁶ However, this assertion neglects the fact that Weber introduces the idea of *Beambtenherrschaft* (dominance of officials) which is by no means synonymous with the ideal type construct of bureaucracy. This means that there is a possibility of bureaucratic government in which politicians preserve their decision-making powers. Weber regards the power distribution between politicians and bureaucrats not as a zero-sum game, but as a more complex dynamic. However, within this dynamic it is of great importance how and to what extent politicians are capable of controlling the bureaucracy, in other words: “what scope there is for political leadership within a bureaucratic system”.⁷

⁵ See Weber (1972, p. 308).

⁶ Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981, p 1.

⁷ Page, p. 5

This theoretical dynamic is the starting point of my investigation. What can we see if we apply these conceptual considerations to the Europeanization of national systems of governance?

In line with Weber's argument, this study connects the themes of politician-bureaucrat relations with the process of Europeanization of national governmental systems, in a comparative manner. Whereas the abovementioned model provides us with possible endogenous explanations (i.e. what forces and mechanisms from within the model lead to change?) of the changing relations between politicians and bureaucrats, Europeanization theory gives an exogenous perspective (i.e. what factors from outside the model cause change?) on the dynamics between these two. Inspired by the various conceptions of Europeanization as formulated by Olsen, I treat European-level institutions, identities and policies as the explanatory factor for changes in the domestic systems of governance (i.e. the dependent variable). In the adaptive process, institutions change on the basis of experiences with, and interpretation of, how relevant actors in the environment respond to alternative forms of domestic organization and governance. Olsen calls this frame for analyzing Europeanization *experiential learning*.⁸

4. Research Questions

As Adrienne Héritier put forward, “[European] Community legislation is unquestionably a factor to be reckoned with in member-state policy making. But the extent and mode of its impact on domestic policies and *administrative structures* will depend on the existing policy practices and the political and institutional structure of the country in question.”⁹ In other words, the interaction between two levels of governance (the EU-level and the national level) leads to differentiated effects on the various national administrative structures.

It could be argued that European integration reallocates domestic political power in favour of the political actors and institutions. After all, European integration alters decision-making procedures and creates informational asymmetries. These changes represent opportunities for the political executive to formulate new justifications for domestic policies.

⁸ Olsen (2004)

⁹ Héritier (2001), p. 44, italicization added.

Therefore, national executives are increasingly able to loosen the constraints imposed by non-political domestic actors, such as their senior civil servants and interest groups.¹⁰

Conversely, it can be claimed that the advent of an influential European level of governance above the national level, eroded the role of the political executive and enhanced the role of the bureaucracy. In this scenario, the bureaucracy might have been able to take advantage of the increasing size and complexity of government.¹¹ The installation of permanently appointed civil servants by national ministerial departments at the EU institutions might point at an attempt by bureaucrats to politically by-pass their publicly accountable minister. These two rivalling views of what European integration brings about on the national level together roughly form the ‘empirical puzzle’ of this research.

The unit of analysis is the relationship between political and bureaucratic institutions at the national level. As a means of analysing this relationship I employ a number of indicators (i.e. categories of analysis), such as ‘the degree to which the job of the official is bureaucratic in the Weberian sense’, ‘the nature of hierarchical relationships between the bureaucratic system and political institutions’, ‘the degree to which bureaucratic institutions have clearly demarcated responsibilities’, ‘the role of parliament as a means of exercising political control over the bureaucratic system’, ‘the limitations on the power of officials through the use of advisers and personal staffs by the politician to counter the expertise of permanent officials’.¹² These facets together will present a realistic image of the relationship between political and bureaucratic institutions at the national level.

This brings us to important questions that directly address the central issue of this research:

- How (if at all) have relations between political and bureaucratic institutions in various Western European states changed over the past two decades?
- To what extent can these changes be attributed to European level developments?
- Why do political-administrative structures in different countries respond differently to Europeanization differently?

The dependent variable is ‘politics-bureaucracy relations’ in West European states. In other words, how and to what extent can politicians contain the potential for bureaucratic

¹⁰ This argument is found in Moravcsik, (1994)

¹¹ This point is made among others by Raadschelders and Van der Meer, (1998)

¹² Compare Page (1992), p. 11-12

dominance? Various factors determine the degree of this ability for containment, such as historical conditions; the model of administration, political systems, and the nature of political leadership. These factors constitute the independent variables. Also, Europeanization is one of the independent variables in this model, since it is one of the factors that influence the relations between politics and bureaucracy.

A crucial question is: What is the best way to isolate the Europeanization factor from other factors that influence the relative position of ministers and top civil servants? Complete isolation of variables is impossible to attain in an empirical reality that is as complex as this one. Nonetheless, using existing research which poses similar questions and focussed on the same unit of analysis at a point in time when Europeanization of national political-administrative structures did not appear evident may be a satisfactory solution for part of this problem. Such research can be used as a theoretical 't0' observation and thus serve as a basis for comparison with the present situation. Research that fits these criteria is the work of Edward C. Page, titled *Political Authority and Bureaucratic Power*. A first edition of this book was published in 1985, followed by a second edition in 1992. In these books, Europeanization of the national state is not identified as a separate variable that influences political-administrative relations. In my view, a contemporary analysis of these relations can not be credibly conducted without including European level developments as a variable of significance. Therefore it may be revealing to use Page's analysis of the (overly simply put) pre-Europeanized as a starting point for comparison.

5. Methods

5.1 Selection of cases

One of the essential aims of this research is to understand whether the particular features of the relationship between bureaucrats and politicians in one country are part of a general trend found among all states run by a bureaucratic government, or whether these features are specific to that country. This is why an internationally comparative approach is needed. Given problems of conceptualization, the availability of reliable and comparable data, and

the (sometimes subtle) differences between political-administrative systems, a *focused comparison* has the best chances of being completed satisfactorily.¹³

Selection is a common and necessary feature of scientific research. With regard to this project, selection involves making choices as to *which countries*, *which specific policy areas* (if any), *what times*, and *what individuals/institutions* to use as sources of information. In qualitative research with a relatively limited number of case studies, probability selection and convenience selection are not the most enriching ways to select your objects of study.¹⁴ Therefore, this project employs purposeful selection, i.e. a strategy in which “particular setting, persons or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices”.¹⁵ The benefits of this type of selection for this project are threefold. First, although it is not my aim to make explicit claims about the generalizability of my findings, I am convinced that a small selection that has been systematically chosen for typicality provides far more confidence that the conclusions adequately represent the “average” member of the population than does a selection of the same size that incorporates substantial random or accidental variation. Secondly, systematic selection of cases enables capturing effectively the heterogeneity in the population, which will both facilitate the accomplishment of my research aims and enhance the validity of my conclusions. Moreover, purposeful selection allows me to select those cases that I identify as critical for the theoretical model of this project.

It will not be feasible to involve all European national states in my research. Therefore, a selection needs to be made. This section explains the grounds and outcome of the chosen selection.

Assuming that European level developments cause change in the systems of governance of EU member states, one of the fundamental questions is: Why do some states and institutions undergo more profound change than others? It is my hypothesis that an important part of the answer lies in the *model of administration* on which a country's governance system is built. Therefore, a nation's administrative model is used as the dependent variable on the basis of which cases are selected. Inspired by various authors on administrative history, I identified four main categories of administrative models in Europe.¹⁶

¹³ See Hague, e.a. (1992)

¹⁴ Patton, (1990, p. 169)

¹⁵ Maxwell, (p. 87)

¹⁶ Cf. Raadschelders (1998), Wunder (1995) and Toonen and Van der Meer (2004)

It goes without saying that each country has developed an administrative system of its own that is more or less distinct from any other, but it is nonetheless useful to order these models into a limited number of broad categories. These are: the Anglo-Saxon or Westminster model, the Latin or Napoleonic model, the German *Rechtsstaat* model and the Consensus or Nordic model.

German <i>Rechtsstaat</i>	Consensus/ Nordic	Latin/ Napoleonic	Anglo-Saxon/ Westminster
Germany	The Netherlands	France	United Kingdom
Austria	Denmark	Spain	Ireland
Poland	Sweden	Italy	
Czech Republic	Finland		
Hungary			

Along the lines of this classification, one country from each category is selected. In picking these cases practical aspects such as accessibility of data and language skills were taken into consideration. This resulted in the selection of Germany, the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom. This selection guarantees a maximal variation on the dependent variable that is assumed one of the crucial ones in this research. Nevertheless, a qualification needs to be made that this selection is not aimed at creating possibilities for direct generalizations to other countries that have the same broad type of administrative model.

Therefore, this research aims to create opportunities to validly transfer (parts of) my conclusions onto other Western European national states that belong to the same broad category. The strength of this research is thus not in its generalizability, but rather in gaining new insights on the basis of empirical findings and how these empirical findings correspond with existing theoretical models.

A number of four cases strikes the right balance between on the one hand the restrictions in terms of time and resources of this project and on the other hand the concern for drawing reliable conclusions and to create some “transferability” of these conclusions for the group of West-European national states as a whole. A smaller number of cases would impair the reliability, whereas a larger number would make it problematic to develop case studies sufficiently thorough to derive solid conclusions within the given time.

5.2 Mixed sources of evidence

In order to find satisfactory answers to the main questions this research poses, I will employ a number of sources of evidence. Thus, I plan to integrate data from a variety of methods and sources of information (mixed method approach). I choose this approach in order to reduce the risk that my conclusions will reflect only the systematic biases of a specific manner of data collection.

1. – *Secondary literature review*: The relative distribution of power between political and bureaucratic institutions has inspired scholars and other writers for centuries and has produced an impressive amount of academic literature. This research will draw on research projects that have been carried out before. This is especially useful, given the fact that this study covers the period from the mid-1980s up to the present day. The longitudinal character of this project makes employment of previous studies extremely valuable. Most of these studies are single-country analyses however, or they focus on other aspects of the politician-bureaucrat debate, for instance recruitment or professionalization. A comparative study into the effects of *European integration* on the politics-bureaucracy relationship at the national level has not been realized yet. Nevertheless, many existing analyses are of great use to this project, since they relate to one or more facets of the central problematic of my research.

2 – *Semi-structured interviews*: In addition to the desk study, I will generate an important part of my information by conducting semi-structured interviews. In creating an adequate sample, three types of interviewees will be approached: (a) (Former) politicians; (b) (Former) senior civil servants (respectively *secretarissen-generaal* (NL), *permanent secretaries* (GB), and *secrétaires généraux* (F)) and (c) other observers, such as academics and journalists. The accounts of members of all three groups of respondents will be essential in analyzing the changing nature of the power relationship between minister and top civil servant over a longer lapse of time.

3. – *Content analysis*: Newspaper and journal articles can provide a wealth of information on the relationship between politics and bureaucracy in each of the three countries that this research focuses on. They will reveal when and how conflicts between the political executives and the bureaucrat occurred and over what topics. Moreover, press-articles on reforms of various institutions and structures may be of good value. In view of the longitudinal character of this study, media publications will serve as an important source of information in constructing a longer-term picture of the concepts under study.

4. – *Complementary quantitative methods*: Quantitative data on the policy making process, such as records of policy initiatives by either executive politicians or senior civil servants, percentages of passed legislation from the executive and parliament, and the success rate of executive proposed legislative initiatives will be useful in analyzing changes in the relative scope for political action of both types of office-holders. They may be indicative for an increase or decrease of the power position of either party with regard to policy development.

6. Validity

6.1 Bias and reactivity

Researcher bias and reactivity are key threats that undermine the strength of one's conclusions. Especially reactivity will be important to be alert on, since my research will to a considerable extent draw on information gathered through interviews. As Briggs notes, what the interviewee says is as always a function of the interviewer and the interview situation.¹⁷ A number of precautions to increase the validity of my potential conclusions need to be taken. Triangulation in my data collecting methods is one of these. Another is the search for discrepant evidence and negative cases, in order not to overlook data that can point out flaws in my reasoning or conclusions. Thirdly I intend to rely on feedback on the way my analysis progresses, both from peers, and from senior individuals in the discipline as well as in the field. Finally, I will try to enhance the validity of my project by generating feedback from the respondents in my study. This type of feedback – member checks – helps to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of the information they have provided you with. Naturally, caution is required here too, because nothing the participants say is necessarily valid.

¹⁷ Briggs (1986).

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