The organization of influence on the EC’s common agricultural policy: A network approach

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Abstract. The common agricultural policy of the EC with its market regulations is decided at EC level by a multilevel system of government, in which the Commission and the parliamentary parties of the European Parliament play the supranational role and the national ministries of agriculture act as parts of the intergovernmental system of the Council of Ministers. National interest groups have thereby three major access routes to the EC system, first through their national governments, or second indirectly, transmitted by their European peak organizations, or third directly to the supranational EC actors. The network approach is applied to study empirically the densities of access through these various routes. The links between actors in the agricultural policy domain are conceptualized as links for the exchange of resources, the most important resource of a policy domain being the final control of policy decisions. The political actors of the governance system originally hold full control of this valuable resource which they exchange for influence resources possessed by the interest groups, as public support or expert knowledge. Empirically, answers to the network questions depend on the type of resource and the viewpoint of the interviewed actors. An index is developed which indicates the resource flows between actors and the distribution of equilibrium control of policy decisions. It is shown that the national ministers of agriculture depend very much on the support and expertise of their national farmers’ lobby, whereas the Commission relies more on contacts within the political sector itself. Multilevel systems need a lot of political coordination, so that the political actors within such systems, especially at the supranational level, seem to deal first of all with each other and not so much with the demand side of politics, compared to the national ministers of agriculture.

Introduction

In the heydays of neofunctional integration theory in the 1960s, European peak organizations of interest groups were seen as an important force strengthening the supranational institutions of the European Communities, first of all the Commission (Lindberg 1963). And agricultural interest groups served as the major examples of numerous case studies of lobbying activities (Kohler-Koch 1996: 193). But the empirical evidence of case studies did not ‘add up to a coherent picture of the nature of interest organization in the EC’ (Kohler-Koch 1994: 166). In this paper, we aim at a quantitative, valid de-
scription of the organization of influence on EC’s common agricultural policy, thereby complementing the findings of case studies with a reliable representative data base on interest intermediation within this important European policy domain in the 1990’s. And since we do not only study access to the Commission, but to all political actors at the EC level, our findings should also be relevant for integration theories beyond neofunctionalism which focus on both the supranational and the intergovernmental aspect of EC institutions.

The governmental institutions of the European Union and their jurisdictions are complex enough to warrant a comparative overview in Section 1. As everybody else, the freshman lobbyist must first make her- or himself familiar with the governmental authorities and their collective decision making powers before he or she can target most promising entry points into this system, given her or his clientele’s interests at home. Once the overall design of the system is known, we are able to describe the actual access relations which we have observed for the policy domain of the common agricultural policy. Only then does it make sense to study the mechanisms of influence wielding which are based, in our opinion, on exchange processes. The governmental actors are supposed to demand public support and expert knowledge, offering control of policy decisions and monitoring information. The interest groups, on the other hand, are the suppliers of support and expert knowledge which they exchange for control of those policies in which their members are most interested, and for monitoring information.

The common agricultural policy is a perfect example when one wants to study operative EC policy making on the basis of constitutional agreements already reached. And it is not a trivial example, since at least half of the EC budget is spent for this purpose. The interest groups active in this domain are first of all national farmer associations and peak organizations of agricultural cooperatives, but also agricultural trade and food industry associations as well as unions and consumer associations. All these branches of national organizations form their own peak associations at the European level, the most important of which is the Comité des Organisations Professionelles Agricoles, abbreviated COPA. The supranational actors on the governmental side are the Commission, or more correctly, its General Department of Agriculture, and the party groups within the European parliament. The intergovernmental part consists of the member governments, i.e., the national ministries of agriculture, and the national permanent representatives (COREPER).

Our approach has been labelled sociological policy network studies in the literature (see Dowding 1995; Héritier et al. 1996), in order to distinguish it from the metaphorical use of the network concept in descriptive political science studies of policy or issue networks or policy communities (Jordan