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Reactive, Slow and...Innovative?
Decision-making Structures and Policy Outputs

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Introduction

Consensus democracies like Switzerland are generally known to have a low innovation capacity (Lijphart 1999). This is due to the high number of veto points such as perfect bicameralism or the popular referendum. These institutions provide actors opposing a policy with several opportunities to block potential policy change (Immergut 1990; Tsebelis 2002). In order to avoid a failure of a process because opposing actors activate veto points, decision-making processes in Switzerland tend to integrate a large number of actors with different – and often diverging – preferences (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). Including a variety of actors in a decision-making process and taking into account their preferences implies important trade-offs. Integrating a large number of actors and accommodating their preferences takes time and carries the risk of resulting in lowest common denominator solutions. On the contrary, major innovative reforms usually fail or come only as a result of strong external pressures from either the international environment, economic turmoil or the public (Kriesi 1980: 635f.; Kriesi and Trechsel 2008; Sciarini 1994). Standard decision-making processes are therefore characterized as reactive, slow and capable of only marginal adjustments (Kriesi 1980; Kriesi and Trechsel 2008; Linder 2009; Sciarini 2006). This, in turn, may be at odds with the rapid developments of international politics, the flexibility of the private sector, or the speed of technological development.

The purpose of the present chapter is to offer an up-to-date view of the innovation capacity of political decision-making in Switzerland.
Following the main argument of this book, the chapter questions the pessimistic conception mentioned above. On the one hand, the literature focusing on formal institutions and veto points may not be appropriate to evaluate the actual reform capacity of the Swiss political system. Policy outputs are not directly the result of formal institutions, but of negotiations and interactions among collective political actors during a decision-making process. On the other hand, the view that the Swiss political system has a low reform capacity mainly takes its cue from Kriesi’s (1980) study, and is thus possibly outdated. In addition, a finer-grained assessment of the innovation capacity of Swiss political decision-making requires a more differentiated analysis that takes into account the variations across policy domains and decision-making processes. Accordingly, I compare the innovativeness of policy outputs across the 11 most important decision-making processes of the early 2000s. As the empirical analysis will show, these processes indeed vary strongly in terms of innovation. While some processes resulted in solutions close to the status quo, others led to highly innovative outputs. Going one step further, I attempt to account for the variations in innovativeness across cases by checking whether and to what extent decision-making structures influence the innovativeness of policy outputs. By so doing, the chapter helps to identify under which conditions of decision-making structures innovation is possible in the Swiss political system.

The study in this chapter is hence premised on the assumption that studying different aspects of decision-making structures helps to understand policy outputs (Adam and Kriesi 2007; Bressers and O’Toole 1998; Howlett and Ramesh 1998; Knoke et al. 1996; Marsh 1998). To be sure, results from the existing literature are somewhat inconclusive with respect to the relationships between decision-making structures and policy outputs (Börzel 1998; Sandström and Carlsson 2008; Schneider et al. 2003; Thatcher 1998). There are several reasons for this. First, there are many different aspects of policy outputs, and the effects of decision-making structures may differ, depending on which specific aspect is examined (Adam and Kriesi 2007; Howlett and Cashore 2009; Klijn et al. 2010). This chapter focuses on a crucial characteristic of policy outputs, namely their degree of innovation. Second, decision-making structures comprise several dimensions that are likely to influence policy outputs, and this in interaction with each other. I investigate the effects of the two dimensions of decision-making structures presented in Chapters 4 and 5: namely power distribution between coalitions and the type of interaction between coalitions. I additionally include a third condition that may also play a role: namely the number of actors participating