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Channelling expert-knowledge? How do political actors refer to expertise in parliamentary debates?

Paper for the Conference: Making parliaments speak. Methods and Issues in the Analysis of Debates within Political Assemblies, Paris, 13-14 October 2010

Introduction

In the field of public policy analysis, the role of ideas for policy-change has been neglected for long time. Only in the 1980s public policy analysts have started to consider changing ideas and policy learning as important explanations for policy transformation (Hecló 1974; Muller/Jobert 1987; Hall 1989; 1993; Cox 2001; Kingdon 2003). Theories of ideational change and policy learning and a growing number of empirical studies in this field have been considerably enriching our understanding of processes of policy making.

Analysing parliamentary debates in France in the field of social policy with regard to references to expertise, the paper deals with ideas inside the parliamentary arena. The study connects to research interested in the influence of programmatic actors, i.e. ‘welfare elites’ in the field of social policy. The paper offers a different perspective on the diffusion of ideas through a systematic analysis of parliamentary debates. This allows to trace the influence of experts in the process of political decision-making. In fact, the results show that, in parliamentary debates, political actors in France refer mainly to expertise from institutions close to the state or the administration. References to scientific expertise from independent research institutions are very marginal.

The first part of the article addresses the question of social policy change in France and the role of changing ideas, epistemic communities and expertise. The influence of programmatic actors which become ‘agents of change’ in times of institutional stability has been recently studied for the French case (Genieys/Smyrl 2008; Genieys/Hassenteufel 2001). The authors argue that programmatic actors claiming for legitimate authority over a policy sector are driving forces of policy change. In the second chapter, we will turn this argument around asking for claims of legitimacy of political actors in parliamentary debates. Connecting to studies interested in processes of legitimation and political deliberation¹, we will build a framework for the analysis of ‘justifications’ on the level of policy through references to (knowledge-) authority. The third part presents the case study. Two parliamentary debates in the field of social policy in France (around

¹ The paper connects to a research project at the Collaborative Research Centre 597 ‘Transformation of the State’ in Bremen: ‘Legitimationswandel durch Internationalisierung und Deparlamentarisierung: Auf dem Weg zu postnationaler und postdemokratischer Legitimation?’ and the project ‘Micro-policy Analysis and Deliberation’ at the Centre for Social Policy Research in Bremen.

the *Réforme Juppé 1995*) are studied in a systematic way looking at how and how often political actors refer to external sources of ideas and to which actors and institutions they refer to in order to justify a certain policy. The identification of references to expertise in parliamentary debates is based on a systematic approach to text analysis with the use of computer-aided tools. The tools allow taking into account a large corpus of text. The paper presents the overall framework for the study and the results of the first step of analysis dealing with the construction of expertise through explicit references.

I. Social policy change in France: common agreements through expertise?

As many other conservative corporatist welfare states, the French 'Etat providence' has been considered long time as a 'frozen landscape', incapable of undergoing deep institutional transformations in times of growing financial constraints (Palier/Martin 2007). Only recently, the literature in the field of social policy and public policy analysis in general has started to break with the classical institutional concepts of 'continuity' and 'path-dependency' (Pierson 1996) and has opened for a more dynamic view of change allowing for a differentiated and sequential analysis of the development of public policies (Streeck/Thelen 2005).

Seen from this perspective, the French welfare state appears more dynamic and adaptive: As shown by Palier (2005), a shared diagnosis of policy failure in times of high deficits in the social security sector has led to a process of incremental change in the domain of social policy since the 1980s. The cumulative effects of different reforms have provoked paradigmatic changes (Hall 1989, 1993) which have induced a transformation of the French welfare state.² Overall, the French welfare state has transformed into a 'dualized world of welfare' with a separation between the sphere of contributory social insurance and the sphere of means-tested or universal and tax-financed benefits (Palier 2005: 141; Palier 2010). Changes appear to be particularly strong in the field of health care where a universal and tax-financed insurance has been introduced and co-payments by the insured have been considerably strengthened (Bonoli/ Palier 1996:252).

These incremental reforms have involved processes of policy learning and a diffusion of ideas not only at the international level. Policy learning has also taken place at the national level in form of a progressive elaboration of solutions. Especially in the 1990s, experts and expert reports played an important role in the elaboration of new policies in the field of health care (Hassenteufel 2001)³ Mainly prepared by state experts (civil servants), they represented a "repertory of solutions" (ibid.) which helped to build common agreements and to quickly introduce reforms. For example, the reforms of the financing of social protection in France were accompanied by different expert-debates which preceded the introduction of a specific contribution on all incomes for French citizens (CSG) (Palier 2005: 136).

These studies seem to confirm, also for the French case, the analysis by Hecló (1974) showing the consistent influence of civil servants and administrators on social policy development in Britain and Sweden. Policy making implies political learning, "a form of collective puzzlement" which "entails both deciding and knowing"(ibid.: 305). Policy-making

² Following Palier (2010), the welfare reform trajectory in France comprises four sequences: 1) the 'before retrenchment phase' of the 1970s with a focus on cost-containment policies ('plans de sauvetage') 2) the first wave of retrenchment in the 1990s introducing stricter rules for contribution 3) institutional reforms in the mid-1990s with new benefits and new modes of financing and more power for the state. 4) path-breaking paradigmatic changes in the 2000s.

³ Hassenteufel (2001:91) cites a series of reports which were at the basis of the Juppé Plan: the Moreau report on European health systems (1990), the Lazar report on ambulatory care (1991), the Health report 2010 (1992), the 'White paper' on the health system (1994), the Dewulder report on hospitals (1995)

understood as a process of learning leads us to consider the role of ideas and the diffusion of ideas, but also to ask questions about interest and power behind ideas and the role of different actors in the process of learning.

Linking the concept of political learning to an epistemic community approach, Genieys and Smyrl (2010) explain policy change in times of institutional stability through the presence of programmatic actors in a specific policy sector. In this study, the authors bring in a dynamic element of change by considering interests as well as ideas. They analyse different kinds of actors and show how these can become agents of change (programmatic elites) or, to the contrary, prevent change (veto players) (ibid.: 10). In their study, the authors find elite actors struggling for legitimate authority over a sector. This struggle is translated into a battle of ideas and different rationalities during the policy process (ibid.: 11-12). They observe competing coalitions of policy professionals which sometimes form coherent programmatic actors and drive policy change.

Genieys and Smyrl empirically support their argument by combining the sociology of actors (interviews with specific group of actors) with the analysis of ideas (analysis of the results of policy reforms). In a case study about programmatic elites in the reform of French Health Policy (Genieys/Smyrl 2008), they describe the impact of a specific cohesive group of “state policy managers” which, at the turn to the 1990s, became key actors of social policy change in France (ibid.: 77). What seems particularly interesting about the French case is the specific professional trajectory in the social policy sector these actors share, occupying mostly positions in the ‘social chamber’ of the *Cour des comptes* and the *Inspection Générale des Affaires sociales* (IGAS) (ibid.: 80). This coherent group of high civil servants formed a highly autonomous ‘Welfare elite’ acting as experts and diffusers of specific cognitive concepts and political instruments in French social policy making (Genieys/Hassenteufel 2001). The driving force of their influence was the competition for legitimate authority in this sector, against other programmatic elites, on the basis of shared beliefs and professional knowledge.

II. Repertoires of justification: explicit references to expertise in parliaments

Seen from another perspective, with a focus on the parliamentary arena, we can turn this argument around: If programmatic actors are claiming legitimate authority over a sector, members of parliament are claiming legitimacy for their political actions. They do so in different ways - in part through references to external authorities and ideas - in order to justify a certain policy.

Following Nullmeier/Rüb (1993), policy making involves a double problem of legitimation: not only a legitimation of the aims and normative basis of political action (normative knowledge) but also a legitimation of the cognitive basis of action (descriptive-cognitive knowledge). A consensus in the political process can be reached on a cognitive or a normative basis (Nullmeier/ Rüb 1993). In the tradition of the older sociology of knowledge (Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim) Nullmeier and Rüb argue that the social reality is changing within the dynamics of production of knowledge and appropriation of knowledge. They describe ‘markets of knowledge’ in which the acceptance or refusal of certain interpretations occur (Nullmeier 2001:114). Markets of knowledge appear, when different interpretations are competing for acceptance. The dominance of certain ideas results from battles of interpretations between actors (ibid.). References to external knowledge-authorities are part of these battles which involve questions of power in processes of problem definition, approval, acceptance and refusal at the heart of policy elaboration (ibid.) Policy making, thus, is the result of dynamic constructions.

Asking whether political actors channel expertise, we are interested in legitimation of the cognitive-descriptive basis of political action. In accordance with Nonhoff/Nullmeier (2010), we use the notion of legitimacy in a broad sense, different from the Weberian concept of legitimacy based on charismatic, traditional and rational-legal authority (Weber 1922).⁴ Political actors are claiming legitimacy in two ways: democratic legitimacy (legitimation through their authority as elected decision-makers), and legitimacy on the basis of policy making (legitimation of their acts and political deliberation). The second kind of legitimation corresponds to acts of justification of a certain policy by political actors.

We ask whether the cognitive-descriptive ideas which are diffused by programmatic actors searching for legitimate authority over a policy sector can be traced in parliamentary debates. Here, deliberative processes are analysed with regard to justifications used by political actors. In short, we identify the sources of expertise political actors refer to and how often they do so in order to justify a certain policy. We analyse justificatory statements by actors only with regard to a certain policy (not with regard to political structures or processes). Furthermore, we are interested only in justification through references to knowledge-authority (institutions, actors) and not in argumentative forms of justification (for example arguments about the necessity of a certain reform)⁵

We define “justification” as: explicit statement in the foreground of the policy debate (Campbell 1998:386) with regard to 1) a specific source of knowledge (actors, institutions) and implying 2) a specific kind of descriptive-cognitive or normative knowledge which is used by political actors to justify a specific policy. Expertise in the parliamentary sphere consists in the interplay between these two sides of a statement. It evolves out of the dynamic constructions of justifications by the political actors. On the basis of literature about ideas in markets of knowledge and ideas in policy making (e.g. Nullmeier/Rüb 1993; Campbell 1998) as well as a first interpretative analysis of three parliamentary debates, we draw the following repertoire of justifications:

Justifications through references to knowledge-authority in parliamentary debates

Reference	Type of idea
Research institutions, ‘Science’	Expert knowledge
Institutions close to the sphere of state, Administration (Civil servants)	Expert knowledge Technocratic knowledge
Professionals, Social partners, Local Experience	Experimental knowledge (Experience and expertise gained through experience)
Society, “Everyone”	Common sense
Own belief-system, Shared belief-systems	Conviction, normative ideas

⁴ Cf. For a discussion of the concept of legitimacy and the pluralisation of normative criteria of legitimation cf. Nonhoff/ Nullmeier (2010: 16-45).

⁵ For a distinction between forms of knowledge of legitimation (Legitimationswissen) in the argumentative repertoire of political actors, cf. Wrobel (2009)

The construction of expertise occurs mainly within the first and second type of justifications (Reference to science and research institutions; Reference to institutions close to the sphere of state or to administration). A third type of reference can sometimes be constructed as expertise: Reference to professionals (e.g. social partners and local experiences) which have gained expertise through everyday experience. This type of experimental knowledge involves forms of descriptive-cognitive ideas which, sometimes, might play the function of expertise in the debates.

The reference to common sense represents a very powerful form of justification which is constructed, different from expertise, as a kind of ‘evidence’. Conviction can result out of expertise, but represent another form of justification of a policy: justification through the reference to a belief system. This reference implies the diffusion of normative ideas.⁶

III. Case study: Justification of social policy making in parliamentary debates in France

1. Hypotheses for the analysis

We study justifications of social policy reforms in the French National Assembly. Three hypotheses guide the analysis.

- 1) On the basis of the above mentioned studies (Palier 2005; Genieys/Hassenteufel 2001; Genieys/Smyrl 2010), we presume that the influence of programmatic elites formed of high civil servants of the social policy sector on policy change is very high in the field of social policy reforms. As stated above there has been incremental change in times of institutional stability over the last 20 years. Programmatic actors have become agents of change and have gained in influence over this policy-sector, especially in the process of policy elaboration. Explicit references to this group of actors are therefore presumed to be important in the debates.
- 2) The social policy sector can be considered a very technical field of political action. It involves questions of financing and organisation which are highly specialised. We therefore presume that references to sources of cognitive-descriptive ideas (construction of expertise) are predominant in the debates, much more than references to normative ideas (convictions, belief system).
- 3) Welfare elites have been considered as highly independent from political actors and political majorities (Genieys/Hassenteufel 2001). Therefore, we presume that there is no difference between the majority and opposition in parliament with regard to the use of explicit references to these actors.

2. Methodological considerations

The data-base for the analysis is constructed out of parliamentary debates in the French National Assembly in the field of social policy from 1980 until 2004. This paper presents the first step of analysis. We are not interested in changes over time, but aim at understanding the process at work and, eventually, refining the categories for analysis. We therefore chose two parliamentary

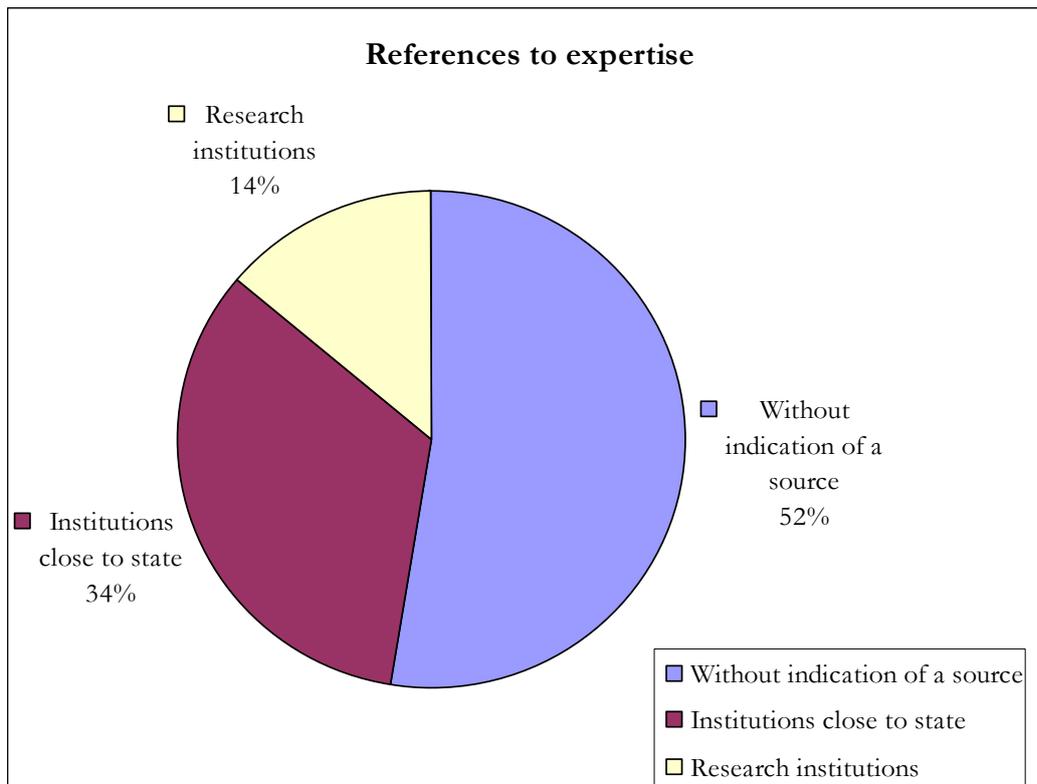
⁶ The different types of ideas are transmitted to the Parliamentary System via channels. References to these channels of ideas have to be distinguished from references to the bearers of ideas, for example: conference, “grenelle”, professional forum, media, hearings, reports.

debates which have been considered decisive in the literature about French social policy development, and which took place at a time when the influence of programmatic actors is presumed to be important: The debates around the Plan Juppé in 1995.⁷ The protocols are studied in two steps: 1) frequency analysis on the basis of concepts derived from the repertoire of justifications 2) interpretative analysis and coding of the statements of justification identified as relevant.

3. Presentation of the results

Our analysis confirms in part the first hypotheses formulated above. Justificatory statements of political actors in the debates refer often to expertise from institutions which are close to the sphere of the state (34 statements coded out of 101 references to expertise). Within the institutions and actors mentioned the *Cour des Comptes* (audit court) plays a dominant role (10 references coded). References to this institution are strongly linked with the construction of expertise within parliamentary debates: ideas take the form of numbers, statistics ('hard facts') transmitted via reports:

« De la même manière, l'autre réalité du déficit se retrouve dans un chiffre : 90 milliards de dettes patronales non recouvrées - il s'agit évidemment de dettes cumulées puisque telle est la mode. Ce chiffre, je ne l'in-vente pas, il émane de la Cour des comptes, institution intègre s'il en est. »
(13.11.1995, 2^e séance, Julien Dray)



⁷ Déclaration du Gouvernement sur l'évolution de la protection sociale et le débat sur cette déclaration, le 13 et 14 novembre 1995, Déclaration politique générale sur la réforme de la protection sociale et débat, le 15 novembre 1995.

References to Civil servants in a stricter sense (e.g. *Direction de la sécurité sociale*, Ministries) are in comparison rare (1/3 of references to institutions close to state). Although, we could imagine that an analysis of implicit references would offer different results as these institutions are very much involved in the preparation of legislative work. Therefore, ideas transmitted by administration could eventually be found implicitly within discourses of the government or in the debates of the Commissions.

Science and independent research institutions are less referred to in the debates (14 references), in most cases, statements refer to them without naming the institutions (“Experts of a famous economic research institute have recently shown...”). Very often, statements referring to the sphere of science cite single scientists (“Professeur xy”). Expertise is here constructed in the name of the authority of the researcher and not of a specific research institute.

Very interestingly, many of the statements coded refer to descriptive-cognitive ideas (statistics etc) without a concrete reference to authority (53 references to expertise without indication of the source). Here, knowledge involves a claim of ‘universal validity’. The number of references to common sense (“Everyone knows the facts”, “We all know the numbers”) is in general very high (40 statements coded). Justification through reference to evidence is more important than the construction of expertise (with indication of a knowledge authority) in justificatory statements. This appears even more true, if we interpret the references to expertise without indication of a source as being part of this kind of ‘evidence knowledge’. Another finding points into the same direction. Political actors refer very often to a type of ‘self-produced knowledge’ (“As the analysis of our investigation committee has proven...”) (40 references coded). Here, the justification of a certain policy is pursued on the basis of ideas within the political arena. Knowledge-authority is constructed internally by political actors themselves. The origin of ideas is blinded out: ideas appear as filtered knowledge floating inside the parliamentary sphere.

Reference to experimental knowledge of professionals or social partners are very frequent (50 references). Here, especially conferences and professional discussion fora (*forum professionnel*) are often referred to as channels of transmission of this type of knowledge. Although, this justificatory statements do not often imply an explicit reference to expertise. Knowledge coming from these actors are constructed in the debates in most cases as pure ‘experience’ (“As experiences of professionals in this domain show”; “As I have experienced in my electoral district”). Sometimes they are even constructed in opposition to expertise:

« Lorsque j'évoque la crise de la protection sociale, je ne vois pas une suite de chiffres ou bien une pile de rapports, d'études complexes et abstraits. Non, nous voyons tous, les uns et les autres, les milliers de RMistes dans nos villes et dans la vôtre aussi, monsieur le Premier ministre, leur souci quotidien d'économiser sur la santé un jour, sur la nourriture parfois, trop souvent. »
(15.11.1995, 2^e séance, Gilles de Robien)

Our second hypothesis was specific on social policy: We supposed that references to expertise (cognitive-descriptive) would prevail over references to conviction (normative ideas) because of the technical nature of social policy issues. We can in part confirm this hypothesis: Overall, explicit references to conviction and normative ideas seem less important in the debates than references to expertise (35 references to conviction against 101 to expertise). Even though, this might depend very much on the specific reform issue and context. Also, if we count only the references to expertise with indication of a source of knowledge the difference is smaller (35 against 48). Moreover, references to conviction might be less explicit in the data and take the form of argumentative references to general principles and values. Deeper interpretative analysis

of the debates, as well as comparative analysis of other policy fields would be necessary in order to confirm these findings.

We find a first confirmation of our third hypotheses in the data. Overall, all speakers, independent from their party affiliation or role in parliament (majority or opposition) use the same repertoire of justification. This finding has to be verified on a larger data-set. Overall, the justificatory statements reveal the battle of ideas between political actors through different references to expertise:

« Disant cela, j'arrive à la question clef, celle du financement. Pendant le court délai offert par la suspension de séance - une petite demi-heure - , nous avons fait procéder à une évaluation par des experts, certainement excellents ; peut-être, d'ailleurs, étaient-ce les mêmes que les vôtres. (*Sourires.*) Nous n'avançons donc pas n'importe quels chiffres. »

(14.11.1995, 2^e séance, Laurent Fabius)

This battle involves very frequently challenges and questioning of the expertise as referred to by other actors. Sometimes political actors also justify opposition to a policy on the basis of complaints of information failure or lack of expertise (40 statements coded).

IV. Conclusion and Perspectives

Overall, the first step of the empirical case study has confirmed the influence of institutions close to the sphere of the state within the construction of expertise in parliamentary debates. In comparison, expertise from independent research institutions is marginal within the justificatory statements of political actors. This is a first interesting finding which supports the arguments made by Genieys/Hassenteufel (2001) and others about the role of Welfare elites in the French social policy sphere. The impact of a specific type of programmatic actors is, in part, visible and explicit.

Nonetheless, one finding is striking: in general, political actors refer more to (what they construct as) common sense and evidence than to expertise. If we interpret these references as counter-players of expertise, we are at the heart of the battles of interpretations between actors within markets of knowledge as described above. This shows, on the one hand, the limits of a study which cannot get closer to motivations and strategies of actors and does not take argumentative forms of legitimacy claims into consideration. The real impact of expertise remains part of the 'hidden side of the debate'. On the other hand, the case study is a first step towards a range of interesting follow-up studies: Drawing a picture of the visible and explicit references to knowledge authority in the justifications of political actors, we can get closer to the question of how expertise is constructed in the parliamentary arena, which role it explicitly plays in processes of policy debating, i.e. which role it is given by political actors claiming legitimacy on the level of policy-making.

For the next step of analysis, we propose three hypotheses:

- 1) References to expertise differ over time and across policy fields.
- 2) Political cultures imply different cultures of 'repertoires of justification'. A comparison between different parliamentary systems might bring out different cultures of justification.

3) Justificatory statements with regard to expertise differ also within a political system depending on the place of deliberation and the degree of publicity of a deliberative arena (parliamentary debate or debate within commissions (huis clos)).

Justification through evidence

As we have seen, political actors refer to expertise in the process of political deliberation in order to justify policy-making. Justifications can take different forms. Overall, the reference to expertise is not as visible in the debates as we could have expected on the basis of literature about the influence of programmatic actors on social policy-making in France. This leads to the more general question about the role of expertise in parliamentary debates. In fact, it seems as if knowledge is presented by political actors mostly as common sense or evidence in order to justify a certain policy. Political actors do channel expertise, but they do not very often refer to specific knowledge-authorities. Moreover, it seems as if actors transform expertise into evidence in order to explicitly justify policy-making. The importance of references to self-produced knowledge by political actors supports this argument. The real impact of expertise remains hidden in parliamentary debates.

The fight between different spheres of legitimacy is at the heart of the political game and of democratic deliberation. The ‘imperative of justification’ (Boltanski/Thévenot 1991) applies also to the parliamentary arena. But it pursues its own logic within specific spheres of justification. Justification is constructed by political actors as an interplay between expertise, experience, conviction and common sense. Evidence-o-cratie is what we explicitly find in parliamentary debates much more than evidence of Expertocratie or Technocratie. In fact, our analysis shows that the battle of ideas takes mostly the form of a battle between different constructions of evidence. Here, the reference to normative ideas and conviction might become the last resort of justification for political actors. Even though, in the repertoire of justification, transforming ideas into evidence appears to be the most powerful weapon.

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