

Example of a model Research Proposal

New Forms of Governance in the European Union's Regional Policy: Theory and Practice

Introduction

This research will investigate and analyse how new and proposed policy tools will affect governance in European Union (EU) regions and regional policy. In particular it considers the post-Amsterdam reforms of Agenda 2000, the European Commission's 2001 *White Paper on European Governance* ('the White Paper') and the work of the Convention on the Future of Europe ('the Convention'). It is a comparative project, using cross-national analysis, as part of a multi-strand methodology. This research is directly relevant to the ESRC's '*Thematic Priority*' 3: *Citizenship and Governance*.

Regions

The issue of Europe's regions and regional policy are intrinsically important, and pose fundamental questions that go right to the heart of the European project, including democracy, sovereignty, and the idea of what constitutes 'Europe'. Enlargement will intensify the diversity of Europe's regions and make key questions of redistribution more salient and more contentious. The Convention will 'propose ways of adapting and renovating Europe's institutional and political framework' (EU Convention 2003) affecting the Regions and policy directly.

More specifically, regional policy lends itself to an investigation of governance and the future of Europe. The White Paper identifies a need for 'stronger interaction with local and regional governments and civil society' and proposes 'opening up the policy-making process to get more people and organisations involved in shaping and delivering EU policy' (Commission 2001:3). The existence of multiple actors is already a defining feature of the EU's regional policy. However, the White Paper also suggests that 'the Union must renew the Community Method' of decision-making. This may prove difficult in the case of regional policy, dealing as it does most fundamentally with difference. A more flexible alternative, the Open Method of Co-ordination (Hodson & Maher 2001: 720), which was identified at the Lisbon European Council (European Council 2000), may prove more suitable.

Theory

The research is informed by several theoretical assumptions:

1. The EU no longer resembles the structure that neofunctionalists (Haas 1958) and intergovernmentalists (Hoffman 1966) sought to explain. It has developed an 'internal political arena' (Hix 1994:1) like that of national political systems, which must be analysed alongside integration issues in order to reach a satisfactory explanation of EU politics. Regional policy is a case in point where recent theorising has focussed on 'multi-level governance' (Marks 1996).
2. If, as Hix argues, the EU is 'politics like any other' (2001: 664-5) it follows that the tools used to analyse national political systems will be directly applicable to the EU. There is a wealth of public policy literature (Jones 1983, Kingdon 1995) which could contribute to a better understanding of EU regional policy processes. And there are features unique to the EU policy process, namely multiple access points, large numbers of policy advocates, wide range of policy options tried and tested in the member states, that would test the efficacy of theoretical approaches in areas beyond those for which they were originally developed.
3. There have been attempts to analyse features of the EU's unique policy-making process. Peterson (1995) distinguishes between different levels of decision-making, an example of the highest being the deliberations of the Convention. This and other frameworks developed to analyse EU policy processes are extremely useful but even taken together, they represent an incremental and patchy attempt to characterise the EU's internal political arena. There are still theoretical gaps to be filled.

4. Public policy models often divide the policy-making process into stages (John 1998). Stages models are useful analytical tools which enable us to identify the varying processes and actors at different points in the policy-making process and also help us realise that this process is not unitary. In addition, in studying EU regional policy, they help us recognise the importance of the implementation stage which is crucial to eventual outcomes but which has often been overlooked in favour of the more glamorous agenda-setting stage.

Research questions

1. The asymmetrical nature of the EU policy process across sectors is well documented (Wallace & Wallace 2000). But even within the regional policy sector there is significant variation owing to the different political, economic and social features of the individual regions (Marks 1996). Do the new and proposed policy tools amount to a new policy style for regional policy?
2. What does the Commission's favoured model of EU governance based upon the Community Method of policy-making outlined in the White Paper entail for regional policy? Is its implementation here achievable, or even desirable? Is the alternative model of governance based upon the Open Method of Co-ordination likely to be more suited to the unique multi-level features of regional policy governance?
3. Can the theoretical approach of multi-level governance contribute to an explanation of the increased importance of the subsidiarity principle conferred by the Treaty of Amsterdam? Are sub-national regional policy actors empowered by the renewed commitment to the subsidiarity principle, or are they disadvantaged due to co-ordination problems of horizontal environmental programming, another policy tool introduced by Amsterdam?
4. Each of the new and proposed policy tools suggest implications for the implementation of regional policy. What are these implications? Will the subsidiarity principle lead to more effective implementation and bring improvements to an area that has often been ignored, practically and theoretically?

Methodology

Following Rose's definition of the comparative method, the research will involve the 'presentation of empirical evidence of some kind in an attempt to compare systematically and explicitly political phenomena' (1991:439) Within the UK, the example of Scotland will be used. The devolved nature of governance, along with the wealth of information available on the World Wide Web, the large number of actors and access points, and my personal contacts within the Scottish Executive, make it an interesting and accessible option. A comparison with regions within Germany or Austria is suggested for several reasons. The existence of federal systems in both countries makes for increased comparability, the accessibility of resources in English plus my German language skills are practical issues. It also allows comparison between different administrative styles and regional requirements. A number of methods will be used to address the research questions:

- Method 1: Extensive investigation of archival and academic materials

Wallace argues that, more than any other political system, the development of the EU has been evolutionary, 'since its very fabric rests on a form of co-existence with established politics in the Member States' (2001:583). The first part of the research will therefore involve an analysis of the evolution of regional policy since the commitment in the treaty of Rome to reduce differences between the regions, up to the reforms of Agenda 2000. This will utilise key texts on the history of the EU, and resources from the EU website (www.europa.eu.int) particularly the EUR-Lex database and search facilities. A visit to observe a plenary session Convention will also be necessary. There will also be an analysis of the state of regional policy theorising, starting with early debates between neofunctionalists and intergovernmentalists. More recently, the work of Marks (1996), Garmise (1997), Smyrl (1997) and Bache (1998) will be considered with the aim of identifying remaining gaps in knowledge. Research question 1 is hereby addressed.

- Method 2: Application of theoretical approaches to Regional policy

If the Commission's vision of a new more flexible and open approach to the development of EU policy is realised (Wincott 2001), new methods of understanding and analysis will be needed. Although there is increasingly more focus on the public policy process of the EU, this is often incremental and patchy. There are, however, well-established models of different aspects of the policy process that have been developed with reference to national political systems. Starting from Hix's premise of the EU as 'politics like any other' these models will be applied to the EU with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of regional policy-making. This will also enable me to comment on the comparability of national political systems and the EU. This method relates directly to research questions 3 and 4, setting a regional policy analytical framework upon which subsequent parts of the project can draw.

- Method 3: Internet survey

The above methods will provide the basis for the empirical aspect of the project. In order to fully understand the mode of governance in regional policy at lower levels of decision-making it will be necessary to go directly to the actors involved. The survey will involve widespread targeting of regional, national and EU actors identified in method 2 using the Internet as a means of data collection (see Schaefer & Dillman 1998, Sill & Song 2002, Stanton 1998). It will involve sending an email containing the questionnaire as a Word attachment which can be completed electronically and returned by reply. The email will also contain a live link to a website where, as an alternative, the questionnaire may be completed online. Here my work as RA at the Survey Unit on all aspects of the social survey process, from question design through production, sending and collection of data, will be invaluable. This exercise will provide evidence relevant to all the research questions, particularly 2.

- Method 4: Follow-up interviews

The questionnaires will be followed up with a number of in-depth interviews. These will be designed to elicit information from respondents 'in their own words' rather than in the terminology of the organisation. Methods 3 and 4 will involve the construction and maintenance of a detailed and up-to-date database containing information and contact details for the respondents. The highly qualitative nature of this method will provide insights relevant to answering research questions 2 and 4.

Research Contribution and Relevance

This research will provide a much needed analysis of how new policy tools will affect regional policy-making. Its relevance, however, will extend beyond regions and regional policy-making, providing conclusions interesting to those studying any aspect of EU policy-making in other sectors. It will also be of interest to researchers in the field of public policy, allowing comparison between EU and other political systems, and to those studying regions and regional governance outside the EU. As well as academics, practitioners, particularly the European Commission, and regional actors may find the application of theoretical approaches to issues such as implementation and subsidiarity useful.

Timetable of research

The first year of the project will involve identification and gathering of relevant primary and secondary materials. Analysis of documentation will take place at this early stage and by the end of the first year, methods 1 and 2 will be complete. During the second year of the project, the focus will switch to the fieldwork, part of which will be conducted outside the UK. Initially the priorities will be designing the questionnaire and building the respondent database. Upon completion, the questionnaire will be administered and the data processed. Questionnaire findings will be used to inform the interview framework, and the latter part of the second year will be taken up by the scheduling and conducting of interviews. The interviews will be completed by early in the third year, the majority of which will be spent analysing and writing up the research findings.

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