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Democracy models in non-profit and economic interest groups involved in rural-environmental policy: a quantitative analysis

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Abstract

Education level influences the participation of the members of an organization in the decision-making process. Non-profit groups have more members with university degrees than economic groups. In former, the members participate more extensively in the General Assembly but less in the Agenda-setting, while the inverted behavior is observed in the latter organizations. The former present characteristics of developmental democracy and protective/ competitive elitist democracy in General Assembly and Agenda-setting respectively, while the latter competitive elitist democracy and participative/ developmental democracy respectively.

1 Introduction: Aim, theory and new findings

The following article aims at a deeper understanding of the democracy function in interest groups and the role of the qualification of members in the organization. We are going to argue that the hypothesis of the organizational theory that educated members are more willing to participate in decision-making (Girschner 1990, Jordan & Maloney 1997) is true at the level of the ordinary General Assembly. However, according to our findings this is not applicable at the level of the Agenda-setting. Certain democracy models (s. Held 1996) arise through this participation difference, which induce different challenges and chances. These democracy models depend on the percentage of the qualified members which in turn depends on the orientation of the organization they belong to (non-profit-making or economic). The interest groups analyzed in this study are non-profit-making groups with environmental and social focus (developmental, environmental and cultural organizations) and economic groups (federations of enterprises, associations of land owners and entrepreneurs, and syndicates of employees). The former groups formally aim at improving the common welfare (cultural values, "quality of life" etc) of the public and not only of their members. The latter groups formally aim at servicing the specific interests of their members (e.g. extensive exploitation rights for forest owners).

2 Methodology

A network sampling took place in 2002 regarding twelve environmental issue networks in eight European countries (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Spain, Sweden, and United Kingdom); these networks included 91 interest groups. Afterwards, the collected data was processed through cross-sectional analysis. The twelve policy networks cover a wide range of policy areas (e.g. environmental policy, marketing, lawmaking, regional development). The initial interviewed interest group of each network, which has defined the policy was randomly selected.

3 Results

For reasons of discretion we will only mention the organization's country and orientation. In general, the greatest share of the qualified members appears in non-profit-making groups (21%-40%), while in the economic organizations this share is much lower (0%-20%). The highest percentage of qualified members appears in the organizations of Greece (gr), at least in the particular policy network: environmental constitution revision (41-60%). The lowest percentage has been measured in the two German (de) networks concerning eco-account and biotopes mapping (0-20%). The average share of qualified members of the interest groups in the EU countries is between 30% and 40%.

3.1 Participation in the General Assembly

The lowest participation of members in the General Assembly appears in the networks of Sweden, while the highest one in the networks of Spain. The average participation in the European networks has proved relatively low, round 9%. This can be attributed to the lack of willingness or of authorization to participate. In non-profit-making organizations an extremely low participation can be observed, round 3%. In economic organizations the participation is approximately 17% because the members have much more specific expectations related to their economic interests and so they are more reluctant to wave their decision competence and to fully trust small Boards and working groups. Apart from that, their number is normally much smaller than in non-profit-groups and so the contribution (time or money) of every single member to the organization is more distinct and they form a sharper organizational consciousness. The following Olson's hypotheses (1965) are supported by this fact: (a) The common welfare is such a general aim, that the members expect to profit by possible positive impacts of the organization's policy, even if they do not contribute to this policy (*free-rider* effect), (b) The members of non-profit-making organizations are so many, that each single person believes that its own contribution will be "insignificant". So they do not participate in the General Assembly. Because of the indifference of most members to participate in the decision making, the non-profit-making organizations present very highly centralized decision making process: plenty of resources (like member contributions and staff time, volunteers and sponsorships) are coordinated by the Board or small working groups. The multitude of members regards this centralization as legitimate (even if they do not have a formal authority to participate), because the non-profit-making groups are based on generally acceptable and abstracts values (acceptance of empty formulas like this of "sustainable development", Krott 2001). The structure of many non-profit-making groups resembles to the structure of a top-down developed enterprise rather than to a bottom-up developed organization. They are also called "protest business" (Jordan & Maloney 1997:80). However, both in non-profit-making and in the economic organizations, the education level of the members seems to be a significant factor for their participation in the General Assembly; A higher relative participation (RELPART) in the General Assembly tends to occur in a organizations with higher share of qualified members (MEMQUAL) (formula 1).

$$\text{REL.PART} = -0.15 + 5.57 * \text{MEMQUAL} \quad (F = 9,56, p = 0,003) \quad (1)$$

This supports the hypothesis that an "educated" person obviously wants to be influential, and believes that he can use his specific knowledge as an influence potential in the General Assembly (cp. Girschner 1990, p.132, cp. Sonntag 1992, p.147, Hall 1996, 1968).

3.2 Participation in the Agenda-setting

However, the decision-making through General Assemblies maintains a rather situational character. An opportunity of strategic influence is only in the hands of the people who set the Agenda. In spite of this fact, the qualified members are more willing to delegate this task to few

functionaries of their organization and to waive the strategic control. The Agenda-setters may leave out topics that are, according to them, “unfavorable”, and so determine the power relations within the organization (Windhoff-Heritier 1987). It is noticeable that the less qualified members seem to be more active in priority setting, although they show less interest in participating in the General Assembly.

3.3 Democracy Models

Held (1996) suggested various models, which correspond to certain organizational conditions and behavioral patterns. Certainly, these are ideal models which practically do not appear in their pure forms but in a mixed form.

a. Developmental Democracy: In this model the members are interested not only in their formal interests, but also in the development and implementation of their abilities. Extensive participation in the decision-making process, high competition between the participants, opportunities for all, and limited intervention by the leading team characterize this model. The extensive participation of the qualified members in the General Assembly as well as the extensive interest in Agenda-setting which is sustained in groups of few members lie closely to this model. 17 of the 91 organizations tend to practice this model. 14 of these 17 organizations present non-profit-making orientation. An example of such a group is a forestry association in Ireland which includes 90 members. 50% of them actively participate in the General Assembly as well as in the Agenda-setting. The percentage of qualified members in this organization is under 20%.

b. Protective Democracy: The members expect from the Board the satisfaction of external and internal goals. General strategies have already been fixed. Political and financial autonomy is an indispensable condition for this model. The Agenda-setting is a responsibility of few functionaries (as seen, this is the case of groups with a high percent of qualified members). 26 organizations present a tendency to this model. 7 of these are economic ones. The rest 19 are non-profit-making. An example of protective democracy has been found in a Greek organization. It was purely non-profit-making-oriented aiming at improving life quality through environmental protection. It has 500 members of which approx. 70% have a university degree and they leave Agenda-setting either to the Board or to the employees.

c. Competitive Elitist Democracy: This promotes a stable and innovative guidance by qualified, charismatic functionaries. In groups with many qualified members, it is practiced at the Agenda-setting level. This model often assumes the existence of administrative employees and experts. In groups with few qualified members, this model can induce polarization. 28 organizations tend to practice this model. 23 of them are non-profit-making-oriented and 5 are economic ones. An example of competitive elitist democracy with high percentage of qualified members has been found in Scotland. This was a purely non-profit-making-oriented organization aiming at life quality and environmental protection. It included 250.000 members of which approx. 50% had a university degree. 7 different disciplines were employed in the expert team while the European average was 3.500 persons were employed by it on a full time basis, while 900 on a part time basis. The relative participation is very low, around 0,14%, despite the high share of qualified members, these leave the many decision making competences to the employees and to the Board. The multidisciplinary and the professionalization also inspire to the members trust and legitimize this centralization (Hall 1996, 1968). An illustrative example of competitive elitist democracy practiced by an organization with very few qualified members was a regional landowners association in a German federal state. This was a purely economic group with less than 20% qualified members, and only 4,28% relative participation in the General Assembly and multidisciplinary=0. This association has been indeed characterized by relatively many conflicts with other actors (approx. 37,05% of the relationships of this association were conflicts). This organization employed only 1 full time person in management and 1 part time secretary which correspond to human resources=5. Here, there is extremely low professionalization and no multidisciplinary at all, but the centralization and the competitive elitist democracy are tolerable

due to the low qualification level of the members. The consequent manipulation and leading of the organization to extensive external conflicts support the hypothesis of Held on the manipulation susceptibility in this democracy model.

d. Participatory Democracy: This model is characterized by extensive participation in the General Assembly in organizations with many qualified members, ensuring higher acceptance and transparency. Experimentation with new policies is difficult to be accepted, because this decentralized model is not very open to innovations. Participatory democracy is carried out only at the level of the Agenda-setting in organizations with few qualified members. It can produce a stable organizational identity. The basic difference from the developmental democracy is this conservatism. 14 organizations have presented a strong tendency to participatory democracy. 4 of them were economic groups. An example of participatory democracy with few qualified members has been found in Spain. It was an economic group of 25.000 members of which only 10% had a university degree. The relative participation in General Assembly was about 1% and the Agenda was set by the members. The reluctance for innovations was obvious, as the number of new policies in the last 2 years was only 10 while the European average was 27. An illustrative example of participatory democracy practiced in an organization with many qualified members has been observed in Spain. This was a non-profit-making organization of 1000 members, 90% of which had a university degree. 40% of them have been participating in the General Assembly and the Agenda was set by employees and Board. The number of innovative policies in the last 2 years was again very restricted (about 10).

4 Conclusions

As shown, the members of the interest groups present different organizational behavior, depending on the level of their qualifications. Interest groups with higher percentage of qualified members, as is the case of non-profit-making groups, show an extensive participation in the General Assembly and decision making centralization at the level of Agenda-setting. At each of these two levels, an organization may be characterized by features of the *development democracy* and a mixture of *competitive elitist/ protective democracy*. This model combination requires a strong expressive power, self-confidence, and dynamic organizational identity on the side of the members who invest their personal potential (knowledge) in the activities of the organization. Apart from that, certain self-regulation of the organization and adequate personnel are often necessary. On the one hand, this model combination is characterized by limited intervention of the Board and opportunities for all members to influence the decision-making. On the other hand, liberal competition, conflicting individual aims and various interpretations of the organization goals can induce frictions and coordination deficits. This may prove crucial for the survivability of the organization in possible crises.

Economic interest groups that characterize themselves as having a low share of qualified members, show a limited participation in the General Assembly. However, they present a strong participation in Agenda-setting. They can be characterized, therefore, by *competitive democracy* and *participative/ development democracy*¹.

Apart from the lack of authority to participate (as the case is in certain big non-profit-oriented organizations), the limited participation in the General Assembly mostly lie either in ignorance or indifference of their members. Possible indifference within an economic interest group can be explained through Olson's hypotheses.

On the one hand, in this model combination a more intensive and pluralist Agenda-setting is practiced, higher acceptance of the priorities is achieved and a more reliable identity of the organization is established. On the other hand, an organization that bases its Agenda-setting on restricted groups of members is more susceptible to manipulation by these groups (these may use the organization for their own profit or for third actors). Table 1 summarizes the results and conclusion here exposed.

Decision-making Share of University graduates	Participation in the Decision-making process through the General Assembly	Participation in the Agenda-setting	Expected organizational conditions
High (in non-profit groups)	High (development democracy)	Low (competitive elitist democracy and protective democracy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expressive power - Liberal behavior of the members - Strong competition - Weak cohesion in crises - Restricted intervention by the Board - Chances for all the members (also for disadvantaged) - Autonomy - Possible professionalization
Low (in economic groups)	Low (competitive elitist democracy)	High (participative and developmental democracy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Active participation of members in Agenda-setting - Higher acceptance of the priorities - More reliable identity - Chances for all the members in Agenda-setting - Susceptibility to manipulation and external conflicts - Ignorance/indifference

Table 1: Member qualification, group orientation and Democracy Models

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