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Boekbespreking van: Parliamentary Party Groups: Political Parties behind Closed Doors

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Knut Heidar and Ruud Koole (eds.), *Parliamentary Party Groups: Political Parties Behind Closed Doors*. London & New York: Routledge 2000. ISBN/ISSN 0-415-22336-9, £ 60.00.

This book moves from a simple point of departure: the lack of a real empirical literature, in comparative perspective, about the role, the nature, and the structure of parliamentary party groups (PPGs). This need is certainly not unknown among scholars, and has been reflected on by many authors, from Bryce to Epstein to Von Beyme. Nonetheless, the costs of consolidating in-depth research in this field, as well as the diffusion during the last decades of 'too simple' arguments such as the *decline of parliament* and the *crisis of parties*, have probably frustrated the development of serious analyses for a considerable time.

Starting from this argument, Heidar and Koole are concerned with the creation of a comprehensive comparative framework, which could be used both to organize the data collection and to produce a systematic discussion of each single country. In an extensive introductory chapter, they provide a coherent theoretical frame, including an exhaustive account of the nature of the problem, a working definition of what a PPG is, and, finally, a detailed discussion of the most important dimensions when measuring variations among PPGs. More generally, Heidar and Koole show three general perspectives that can be used to analyse the PPGs from a comparative approach. First, looking at their own structure and organization as well as the degree of internal institutionalization and cohesion. Second, looking at them from the perspective of the *party-as-a-whole*, that is, shedding a light on their relationship with the external party organizations (EPOs). Third, looking at them from the perspective of the *parliament-as-a-whole*, or discovering what kinds of links can be distinguished between the institutional development of the legislature and the existence of different PPGs. This allows the editors to provide their country experts with a set of possible typologies that can be used to capture the main differences among parties, among countries and over time.

All country chapters almost perfectly fit this theoretical and empirical framework, providing a large amount of information. The chapters cover twelve countries: Austria (Wolfgang Müller and Barbara Steiniger), Belgium (Lieven De Winter and Patrik Dumont), the Czech Republic (Petr Kopecky), Denmark (Lard Bille), Finland (Matti Wiberg), France (Jean Louis Thiebault and Bernard Dolez), Hungary (Gabriella Ilonszki), the Netherlands (Rudy Andeweg), Slovakia (Darina Malova and Kevin Deegan Krause), Sweden (Magnus Hagevi) and the United Kingdom (Philip Norton). The chapters about the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, show the importance of the development of PPGs, discussing a number of problems still unsolved by these institutions in the context of democratic consolidation. On the other hand, all the other chapters clarify, with the help of very good and fresh datasets, many important variations at the level of the organization of and in the roles of PPGs. In some cases the results of the comparison are quite striking. Consider the different roles of PPGs in two democracies that have usually been considered similar, such as

the contrast between a case of *fractiocracy* as in the Dutch system and a clear case of *particracy* in Belgium.

Another chapter, written by Tapio Raunio, covers the institutionalization of the party groups within the European parliament. Here we want to underline the quality of the data and, above all, the interesting results of the long-term analysis. The author finds, among other things, a development of the internal organization of the European PPGs as well as an incremental increase of their role. Nevertheless, the introduction of such a chapter in the context of a country-by-country analysis is, from a purely methodological point of view, a more problematic aspect of the book. In fact, it forces the authors to adopt a very broad definition of PPG, which is clearly different from what some contributors have in mind. Moreover, some concepts used in this chapter (for instance, *group cohesion*) can be too easily confused with those that are traditionally used in the context of a country-by-country comparison (for instance, *party discipline*) bringing the reader to some misleading impressions.

The final chapter reports the results of the country-by-country comparison, exploring some interesting findings. First, there has been a considerable increase of autonomy among most of the PPGs in most of the countries, seen from the dimension of the *party-as-a-whole*. Second, there is an obvious gap between the *giant parliamentary party complexes* (for instance, the CSU/CDU and the SPD in Germany) and the weaker PPGs. This distance, which is often historically grounded, seems to remain even today, marking the gap between countries and, to a lesser extent, between different parties within the same country. Third, and perhaps more interestingly, the transformation of the PPG system all along European political systems has to do with the recent changes at the level of political system, in particular the increase of electoral volatility and the growing impact of the media.

On the basis of these considerations, the authors conclude with some useful implications for comparative theory. First of all, the findings from this book invite reflection on the dynamics of delegation within the democratic context. Political parties have traditionally been the first link in the delegation chain between voters and parliaments. However, the recent consolidation of full-time politicians in many parliaments combined with the organizational decline of EPOs has strengthened *parliamentary party complexes*, and their role as intermediary (between voters and the government institutions) has grown considerably in importance. This also implies that we need to redefine the concept and the foundations of our research, correcting some recent absolute judgements (for instance, those about the *crisis of party democracy*) and including new actors, such as the PPGs, and new variables, such as the amount of organizational resources in the hands of the PPGs, in our research agenda.

In sum, this book singles out a very relevant problem, develops an accurate methodological frame, and discusses it in a fruitful way, by virtue of an uncommon amount of empirical evidence. Of course, the work could be completed and improved in the future, both by enlarging the number of cases and by fine-tuning the standardization of the empirical analyses. In particular, an effort towards the

development of a systematic comparative presentation (see, Table 15.2, p. 254) could be interesting, by creating more complex indicators for describing the crucial dimensions of variation (for instance, the degree of organizational consolidation of PPGs). Nevertheless, given the little information currently available on the PPGs, and given the enormous costs of such an extensive comparison, the book by Heidar and Koole is destined to provoke very favourable reactions among political scientists both for its findings and as a good example of comparative research.

Luca Verzichelli

Klaartje Peters, *Verdeelde Macht. Een onderzoek naar invloed op rijksbesluitvorming in Nederland [Diffused Power. A study of the influence on political decision-making in the Netherlands]*. Amsterdam: Boom 1999. ISBN 90-5352-559-9, f 52,-.

Peters' book, for which she received the 2000 Dutch Political Science Dissertation Award, deals with the question, which actors succeed in influencing political decision-making in the Netherlands. Three cases are analysed over the period 1985-1995. The first one deals with childcare policies and the need for state subsidies, which has been a fiercely disputed issue in the Netherlands. The second case concerns the reorganization of the entire Dutch police system, which, because of bureaucratic strife, turned out to be a very sensitive issue. And the third case deals with rural area policies and the 'distribution of space' between agriculture, housing, infrastructure, tourism and nature, each sector having its own claims. In analysing these three cases, the book tests several mainstream theories on the distribution of power in Dutch politics.

The resulting book is very readable and interesting. It is readable because, in the first part of the book, Peters describes 30 years of Dutch research on political power in a very comprehensive and transparent way. A fine text, I would say, for both students and seniors interested in power studies. Moreover, her analysis of the three cases in the second part of the book is accessible without becoming superficial. The book is also interesting, because Peters confronts her own conclusions on the way power is divided in the three cases of Dutch political decision-making with eleven hypotheses, which she deduces from the overview of Dutch research on political power. In doing so, she is able to verify some hypotheses on power, falsify others, and formulate some new ones. This approach enables Peters to put her research into broader perspective, and to transcend the status of merely a collection of case studies, although some methodological risks are involved here.

In her overview of Dutch research on political power, Peters discusses several classical views on power structures in the Netherlands. These include the weakness of Dutch parliament vis-à-vis the power of government, the power of civil departments (the so-called *fourth* power), the power of interest groups (the so-called *iron ring*), and the

corporatist power structure in agriculture (the so-called *iron triangle*). In the final part of her study, Peters confronts these views with the conclusions of her own study, and consequently falsifies most of them. According to her, Dutch parliament is generally not a weak institution. Moreover, neither an iron ring nor an iron triangle can be said to exist. On the other hand, the hypotheses concerning the power of government, especially of individual ministers, and concerning the 'fourth power' are confirmed. However, because these conclusions are based on a generalization of the findings in only three case studies, Peters has become vulnerable to criticism. Some accuse her of violating the rules of external validity. She wrongly extrapolates her conclusions, derived from a few cases, to the entire Dutch political arena. Yet this criticism is, in my opinion, not entirely justified, all the more so since Peters carefully deals with this problem in the methodological part of her study (pp. 90-91). Following Yin and others, she makes the distinction between statistical and theoretical generalizations. The former refers to quantitative research, the latter to case studies. In most case studies, a complex pattern of a phenomenon is studied, not a few variables of a large population. Therefore, the problem of generalization is different. The premise of theoretical generalization is that as long as a specific pattern of a phenomenon is reproduced in any new case, or in a number of new cases, theoretical generalization is valid. This means that the underlying hypothesis can be maintained *for the time being*. However, as soon as a pattern is not found, generalization is not possible, and the hypothesis concerned should be dismissed, or at least put into perspective. The problem with Peters' analysis is that she is aware of this validity issue, but does not deal with it properly in the second part of her book. The care she employs in the methodological chapter, is lacking in the concluding chapters.

In my opinion, the *internal* validity of Peters' study is a greater problem than the external validity. To measure power, she uses the so-called *intensive process analysis*, developed by Huberts, which heavily draws upon Dahl's decision-making method. Essentially, the intensive process analysis is a detailed reconstruction of decision-making in terms of relevant authorities, relevant participants, their preferences, their interventions, and the eventual decision itself. Its aim is to reconstruct causal linkages between preferences and acts of participants on the one hand and the contents of the decision taken by the authorities on the other. If such linkages are found, the actors concerned are considered powerful. A tool to make such causal analyses is the *timetable*, in which the change of preferences of the several actors over time is reconstructed. On the basis of such a table, actors can be 'eliminated', because they appear not to be influential. For example, if decision-maker X's preference remains different from participant Y's preference during the entire period of decision-making, then Y should not be considered influential. Finally, of those who last, a score on political influence is determined.

Although the intensive process analysis is a well-elaborated tool, as I have experienced myself, in my opinion, Peters does not fully acknowledge problems with regard to internal validity. Firstly, a basic precondition for a successful analysis is knowledge of the 'true' preferences of actors, as Peters herself suggests (p. 77).