

Book Review

Thomas Christiansen & Torbjörn Larsson (2007)

The Role of Committees in the Policy-Process of the European Union

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This edited volume aims to guide the reader through the institutional 'jungle' of committees that 'prepare, shape, and implement the decisions that are taken by the European institutions' (p. 1). The book focuses on the established committees within the 'community method' and the second pillar. Although the individual chapters dedicate a great deal to explaining how these committees are involved in the EU policy-process (agenda setting, decision-making and policy-implementation), the editors make clear in the introduction that the underlying goal of the volume is to examine the implications of the normative and empirical analyses of committees. In particular, they are interested in two different issues. Firstly, they ask whether the workings of the committees are characterised by deliberation, persuasion or strategic bargaining. Secondly, they investigate the degree of formalisation of the EU decision-making. The two subsequent chapters provide much of the theoretical discussion on these two issues.

Torbjörn Larsson provides a theoretical discussion on the deliberative supranationalism of the EU level of governance and on the role of the committees within (Chapter 2), whereas B. Guy Peters looks at different forms of informal governance in the EU and investigates the implications for efficiency and democracy (Chapter 3). In the former, the author's main conclusion is that 'the committees and groups of the EU are there to compensate for the lack of the existence of a people and to promote output legitimacy that satisfies different kinds of minorities' (p. 37). Peters on the other hand, indicates that the effect of informality on the level of democratisation of governance largely depends on the particular form of governance adopted.

The following chapters are for the most part empirical, with the evidence usually consisting of interviews and documents. In Chapter 4, Torbjörn Larsson and Jan Murk focus on the committees of the European Commission. Firstly, they differentiate between the 'comitology' committees and various other expert groups. The latter, on which the authors focus, can be found under different names in the literature: advisory committees, expert committees, consultative committees. Yet the authors prefer the term 'expert groups' in accordance with the Commission's internal statistics. Larsson and Murk find that there are approximately 1545 such expert groups, which could be further distinguished between regular versus sub-groups, permanent versus *ad hoc* and active versus passive.

Consequently, the authors use this typology to study the expert groups' role in the EU policy-making. Finally, the authors go back to the main issues that were set for comparison in the introduction and find that expert groups open up the otherwise closed deliberation of the Commission.

In Chapter 5, Eve Fouilleux, Jacques de Maillard and Andy Smith focus on the 175 working groups in the Council of Ministers. As these groups are part of the intergovernmental compromises, the authors explore their relationship with well established conflict dimensions: northern versus southern and small versus big countries. They find that Council working groups do not often make distinctions between technical and political issues and conclude, on a normative note, that the problem with Council working groups does not concern their transparency but the lack of ability of the outsiders to make sense of the available information on the negotiations.

In Chapter 6, Simon Duke looks at the role of the, often ignored, committees and working groups in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The emphasis here is on the 'high' committees such as the Political and Security Committee. Duke concludes that in the CFSP context, committees are less about strategic bargaining as they focus on trying to build a consensus. His findings regarding formalisation are rather inconclusive, however. This can be regarded as a 'sensitive' area and any attempt to formalisation may bring a tension between the intergovernmental and *communautaire* aspects of CFSP. Similarly, the author finds difficulties in addressing the criterion of legitimacy due to the intergovernmental nature of CFSP.

In Chapter 7, Christine Neuhold and Pierpaolo Settembri look at the 20 standing committees of the European Parliament (EP). They explore their historical evolution, their dynamics and their relationship with party groups in the EP. One of their main conclusions is that EP committees are largely open deliberative arenas, with a potential for 'opening up' the legislative process of the EU.

The following three chapters focus on the so-called comitology committees. Guenther F. Schaefer and Alexander Türk (Chapter 8) provide a detailed discussion of how comitology committees work in practice. The authors dismiss the usual critique of comitology as 'an opaque and intransparent mode of decision-making' (p. 195) and argue that the unique nature of the EU level of governance leaves much to be discussed about what should be required for the committees to be considered legitimate and accountable. Pamela Lintner and Beatrice Vaccari (Chapter 9) use six case studies to further elaborate on the issue of legitimacy and accountability of the comitology committees by concentrating on the EP's 'right of scrutiny'. Finally, Alexander Türk (Chapter 10) looks at the case-law of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in order to investigate how it has influenced comitology. Türk concludes that the ECJ has strongly influenced the committee system by supporting and enhancing the deliberative aspect of comitology. In the area of transparency, the author maintains that the ECJ has been attempting to strike a balance 'between efficiency of the comitology process with a protection of individuals' interests' (p. 245).

In the concluding chapter, Christiansen, Larsson and Schaefer offer a rejoinder to the two questions posed in the introduction by drawing comparisons between different types of committees and between committees of the same type operating in different areas. In general, the book provides an excellent overview of the different committees that operate in the EU system of governance. The comparative observations in the concluding chapter further enhance the utility of the book, especially for those who are interested in investigating the EU committee system in conjunction with issues such as deliberative supranationalism, accountability and legitimacy.