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Specialists and generalists in executive politics

Werner Jann (jann@rz.uni-potsdam.de), Kai Wegrich (wegrich@hertie-school.org)

DRAFT - please do not quote

*'Without specialisation there is no knowledge,
and without knowledge there is no power.'*
(Aaron Wildavsky 1984: 225)

Abstract

This paper makes a contribution to the politics of innovation and reform in executive government. It introduces the analytical distinction of specialists and generalists as antagonistic players in executive politics and develops the claim that (policy) specialists are in a structurally advantaged position to fend-off attempts by the generalists for influencing policy choices, adopting cross-cutting reform measures or innovations. We combine established approaches from public policy, political economy and organization theory to substantiate that claim and to define the dilemma that generalists face when developing cross-government reform policies. On this basis, the paper develops some criteria for smart institutional design of reform policies.

Introduction¹

The literature on innovation in the public sector has identified organizational fragmentation and 'silo mentality' as one of the major barriers to innovation. New ideas have to come from somewhere, and other policy sectors ought to be sources of inspiration and learning. But organizations are not 'naturally' interested in other sectors. Overcoming these barriers and setting-up collaboration across organizational and sectoral boundaries is hence regarded as a key leverage for increasing the innovation capacity of the public sector. The notion of 'collaborative innovation' has hence gained traction within debates about public sector innovation (Sørensen & Torfing 2011), not least because of the trends towards co-production or co-creation as ways to span sectoral boundaries in innovation processes (Voorberg, Bekkers & Tummers 2014). However, these debates have mainly focused on public services and policy implementation and have not been similarly influential for the analysis of reforms and innovation at the executive government level, i.e. in ministries and central government agencies. Here, reform capacity is mostly conceptualized as the ability to change the institutional

¹ The basic idea presented in this paper has been developed in a study evaluating the effectiveness of sunset clauses as a tool for cutting red tape (Wegrich, Jann, van Stolk & Shergold 2005), and has been further developed in an article published in German (Jann & Wegrich 2008) and in a paper presented at the ECPR conference in 2009.

status quo, and hence governmental systems with few veto points and low levels of constitutional hard-wiring of the status quo are considered to have a high innovation capacity (Knill 1999). Very often there is an inbuilt bias for hierarchy in these assumptions. While such approaches could account for broad national patterns of 'reform trajectories', limited attention has been paid to the problem of cross-boundary collaboration, coordination and learning.

This paper contributes to debates about innovation in the context of executive government, in particular concerning the opportunities and limits to cross-boundary (or collaborative) innovation. It suggests that in order to understand the opportunities of and limits to innovation and change in executive government, one has to systematically explore the politics of coordination within and across organizational boundaries, such as ministerial departments. We introduce the relation between generalists and specialists as a theoretical perspective for the analysis of executive policy making that is particularly relevant for exploring innovations in executive government.

In doing so, we draw on two literatures and debates in Public Administration and Public Policy that are rarely connected. Our main starting point is the view - widely spread in organizational theory and public policy research - that policy making is the business of specialists. Without (organizational) specialization there is no policy making. At the same time the 'membership' of different specialist actor groups cuts across organizational and institutional boundaries; it includes politicians and societal actors (interest organizations etc.). While the role of specialists in routine policy making (or 'subsystem politics') is well-known, the role of their counterparts in government - the 'generalists' - is seldom discussed. Generalists are those actors in policy making concerned with issues and objectives which cut across different policy fields, i.e. 'fiscal responsibility', 'cutting red tape', 'avoiding overlap' or, the newest addition, 'nudging' actors towards desired behaviour. If we take innovation and collaboration as policy objectives, they can be seen as typical generalist concerns which have to be enhanced through some kind of 'meta policy'. Somebody has to push these concerns in all kinds of different fields populated by probably reluctant actors. These organizational actors we call generalists, they do not belong to any specialized policy field. The conjecture of this paper is that the antagonism between specialists and generalists - and how this relation is managed - is a critical aspect for the success and failure of innovation in executive government.

To capture the role of 'generalists' as counterparts to the specialists we depart from two classic assumptions in Public Administration. One is the traditional distinction between generalists and specialists, which refers to the educational background of civil servants. We are not interested in training and professions, but in organizational positions and framings. We therefore introduce a task-related understanding of generalists and specialists. And we also depart from the 'instinctive' attention of Public Administration scholars towards the vertical, 'principal agent' relations between politicians and bureaucrats. Without denying the significance of this perspective, we argue that it has distracted attention from another critical relation (or divide), namely the one between the actors and institutions representing different sectors within and outside government, as well as between those specialists' networks and the generalists representing some crosscutting or general interest within government.

The core argument of the paper is that in order to understand and explain reforms/innovations in executive government, the relation between generalists and specialists needs to be taken into account, i.e. the lines of conflict between them and the resources actors have at their disposal. We develop this argument in four steps. The next section introduces our understanding of generalists and specialists. This is followed by exploring the mechanisms that put specialists in a strong position vis-à-

vis generalists in executive politics – despite the potential of generalists to draw on hierarchical powers to enforce decisions. The three mechanisms are related to political mobilisation, organizational strength, and activation of expertise and information. On this basis, we discuss the difficulty – or dilemma – generalists face and explore potential strategies for strengthening generalists.

Introducing a task-related understanding of generalists and specialists

Our understanding of generalists and specialists as categories for governmental actors is *task-related* and *positional*. By this we imply that what makes a generalist/specialist is not primarily defined by characteristics of the individual, such as the educational background, but by his/her position and role within the institutional system of executive government. We understand *specialists as those actors working within competences defined by a particular policy issue or domain*. Their role and perception of the world, what is relevant and what not, is shaped by their responsibility for a particular policy issue. In contrast, we call *'generalists' those actors with responsibility for non-policy specific themes, but who are responsible for some 'general interest' of executive government*, such as the coordination of its various branches, its overall efficiency or the implementation of government-wide reform programmes.

As mentioned above, such a perspective on generalists and specialists differs from the traditional usage of the concept, which was based on the professional background of civil servants (cf. Ridley 1968). Specialists were defined as those civil servants with an educational background in a clearly defined profession, such as engineers, medical doctors, teachers, or scientists. The debate focussed on the pros and cons of different educational backgrounds in the recruitment of civil servants, with some countries traditionally tending towards a more generalist educational background of civil servants (UK) and others valuing specialist competences higher (US). While the particular knowledge and expertise of specialists was considered a merit, the specialization was also considered as limiting the flexibility and transferability of personnel across different positions and fields. A more generalist education was considered more suitable for leadership-oriented career tracks. This debate is continued today in the context of reforms to the civil service career systems and trends towards the establishment of 'management tracks' and related educational reforms. While the debate takes into account the institutional position of civil servants, it still retains some attention to the match between educational background, individual skill set and the respective position.

However, what is widely ignored in this debate about the professional background and skills set of civil servants is the reverse direction of influence, i.e. how the institutional position and tasks of civil servants shapes their ways of thinking and values. Germany is an exemplary case to highlight this relation: While the educational background of the majority of civil servants is a law degree, in other words a generalist educational background, the specialist *Fachkompetenz* (subject matter specific expertise) is regarded as the key strength of German civil servants – and more general managerial (leadership) skills are considered less developed. For various institutional reasons (such as the high autonomy of ministries' HR policies), career paths are usually contained within a single ministry or at least one policy domain. Long tenures at individual ministries, often within individual units, lead to an accumulation of specialist knowledge in this particular issue area. It is this task-oriented specialization we are interested in. As is known from classic organization theory, such specialization leads to selective perception of reality as a key strategy for the reduction of complexity under conditions of

bounded rationality. For example, the head of a unit in government responsible for wind power will develop policy proposals from only one perspective: what is useful for and what are the implications for wind power. Internal reward and incentive structures reinforce such selective perception since someone responsible for wind power would not primarily be assessed against criteria not directly related to this particular field (such as the enthusiastic adoption of government-wide innovations, or exceptional fiscal prudence).

Important for our discussion is that the formal structure and institutionalisation of tasks is critical in shaping the perception and role understandings of 'specialists' (and also generalists). Expectations, knowledge, and world views of those holding positions in an organisation become impersonal, i.e. they become decoupled from the educational/professional background of the individual civil servant and are shaped by the (specific) logic of the task environment. 'Where you stand depends on where you sit'. Not only do norms for practices exist independently of the personal characteristics of individuals holding a position at a given time, but those individuals will adopt such norms and world views if they intend to be successful and 'fit in'. At least after some time in office, the position and task more strongly shapes preferences and attitudes than the individual professional background. After some years in the Ministry of Agriculture not only lawyers, but also economists or political scientists are as much specialists in agricultural policies as agricultural engineers or farmers.

It is well-known from research on bureaucratic politics that selective perception leads to a strong emphasis on turf-protection and autonomy-seeking behaviour of bureaucratic actors. From the perspective of an individual organizational unit, a high degree of autonomy in the exercise of its task is desirable because it increases the likelihood of achieving the specific goals of this unit – and also limits organizational maintenance internally (Wilson 1989). In pursuing their goals, executive actors form network and exchange relations with politicians and societal actors. As a result, policy making is dominated by policy communities, it is a fragmented activity driven by specialized actor networks. According to Scharpf (1986: 181), policies 'are produced by specialized organizations, ministerial departments, divisions and subdivisions, parliamentary committees and subcommittees, political parties in coalition or opposition and their specialized groupings, interest organizations and specialized segments in the media.'

Specialized actors in government form enduring relations with societal actors, such as interest organizations based on mutual or complementary interests. Clients of political programmes and regulations develop self-interest in these programmes, if they have not been adopted on their demand. Thus specialized interests and their organized representatives form coalitions with specialist politicians (*Fachpolitiker* in fields such as agriculture, social policy, environmental policy) and the organizations and agencies responsible for policy formation and delivery. Such coalitions have the capacity to mobilize political support and expertise in a variety of policies, for example in regulatory decision making processes, i.e. when it comes to the termination of a favourable regulation or programme (cf. Geva-May 2004). And, while the reference point of such relations is the issue area and not the organizational boundary, such boundaries play a crucial role in giving weight and power to some issues over others in governmental policy making, i.e. by providing access points to societal interests and assigning relative importance to topics and issues within government.

So far, so normal. Policy-making is primarily in the hands of specialists. Governmental and non-governmental actors form enduring policy networks on the basis of mutual or at least complementary interests. Expertise and political influence are primarily directed at the maintenance of domain-specific, specialist interests. These are routine features of interest intermediation and policy making in

high-modernist and highly differentiated societies, which create an abundance of coordination problems in government that are notoriously difficult to manage (Wegrich and Stimac 2014). But such coordination problems are particularly difficult to manage when it comes to cross-cutting, new issues and ‘general interests’, which lack the representation by an established network of specialists. The generalists, who are responsible for such cross-cutting, non-issue specific and perhaps innovative issues, find themselves in a structurally disadvantaged position with regards to three dimensions of executive politics, namely the *external mobilization of interests*, the *internal organizational* and the joint activation of *expertise*. This structural disadvantage exists despite the hierarchical powers that generalists might have at their disposal. Those organizational units within government that are responsible for the cross-cutting, general issues - such as budget, personnel, management, ‘better regulation’ or more recently ‘Nudge’ and ‘innovation units’ – are often directly attached to the core executive departments, such as the Prime Minister’s office or the finance ministry, or within ministries close to the political leadership. However, hierarchical powers vis-à-vis line ministries and divisions are limited, making the adoption and implementation of government-wide innovations inherently problematic.

The central elements of this actor constellation of specialists and generalists as antagonistic players in executive politics are summarized in Table 1. The following section explores further the 3 mechanisms leading to the structural advantage of specialists over generalists.

Table 1: Generalists and specialists

	Specialists	Generalists
Administrative actors - Bureaucracies - Regulators - Enforcement agencies	Specialized (line) - ministries - agencies - divisions - sections	Coordinating organizations - centre of government - ministry of finance - budget units - innovation units
Political actors - Promoters - Representatives - Political entrepreneurs	- Sector politicians (<i>Fachpolitiker</i>) - Specialized committees	- Cross-section politicians (<i>Querschnittspolitiker</i>) - Budgetary committees
Societal actors - Producers - Consumers - Clients - Target populations - Consultants	Representing specific - sectors - interests - regions	Representing - ‘general interests’ - cross-cutting concerns (i.e. efficiency, ‘cutting red tape’, innovation)
Support of interests - articulation - mobilization - representation	- concentrated - well organized - highly mobilised - low transaction costs - low collective action problems	- diffuse - hardly organized - difficult to mobilise - high transaction costs - collective action problems
Expertise	- high - detailed - policy area specific	- broad - general - cross policy area

Backing the ‘specialists-generalists claim’: mobilization, organization and expertise

Our claim so far is that the institutionalization of tasks within executive government comes with an inherent bias in favour of sectoral interests, i.e. specific sectoral policies, more or more detailed regulation, higher spending, less central performance control and steering and so on; this bias results from the advantages of specialists vis-à-vis generalists. This ‘specialists-generalists bias’ can be substantiated with well-established theories from political economy, public policy and organization theory. We argue that these theories offer causal mechanisms that are mutually reinforcing the structural advantage of specialists over generalists. Specialists are more powerful and successful than generalists within executive politics because (1) it is easier for them to mobilize external support, (2) to organize their concerns within bureaucracies, and (3) to develop and defend highly specialized information and expertise.

The first causal mechanism is the *external mobilization* of political support for the interests of specialists. It is a well-known, received wisdom of political economy research that smaller groups with more homogeneous interests have an easier time to overcome collective action problems than larger groups with more diverse interests. For regulatory politics, this claim is known as the ‘regulatory capture’ theory. In its original outfit the claim suggested that in general, regulations are designed and adopted to serve the interest of the regulated industry, in particular limiting exposure to competition and the control of prizes. The regulated industry is able to mobilize political support efficiently through activities such as campaign support, since its members exhibit a homogenous structure of interests; the small group size keeps collective action at a minimum. In his early contribution, Bernstein (1955) argued that regulators that have been established with a strong political mandate will over time give in to industry pressure once public and political support has moved to other issues. Stigler (1971), in contrast, assumed that the initial regulatory design process already would be ‘captured’ by industry. Since this strong claim was falsified by a boom of regulatory measures adopted in the 1970s for environmental and consumer protection causes, various adjustments to the theory have been proposed.²

James Q. Wilson (1980) took the economic theory of regulation as a starting point for his concept of the politics of regulation that seeks to account for variation in regulatory choices. He suggests that the distribution of costs and benefits is critical for the type of politics emerging around a regulatory issue. If both, costs and benefits of a regulatory proposal could be either highly ‘concentrated’ or widely ‘diffused’, four combinations are possible, which come with contrasting expectations regarding the chances that some groups are able to mobilize support and avoid resistance from others:

- A strong mobilization of interests in favour of regulation and against deregulation is most likely when benefits of regulation are concentrated and costs widely distributed. Collective action problems for mobilising support will be minimal but very high for activating resistance against regulation. Wilson called this dynamic ‘client politics’, which basically conforms to the regulatory capture claim. Typical examples are regulations that protect professional groups or industries from market competition.
- The odds for the adoption of regulation are reversed when costs are concentrated and benefits are widely spread. This is the case in areas of so-called social regulation, such as environmental and consumer protection. Here, industry has to carry the costs of a regulation

² Peltzman (1976) is a key contribution. One major adjustment was to take into account intra-industrial competition, which would explain the preference of larger companies for tougher social regulations in order to drive out smaller competitors’ with limited compliance capacities.

that benefits a high number of consumers and citizens. According to Wilson, we would expect strong resistance from the industry against regulation as it has to pay the regulatory bill, and it takes some 'political entrepreneur' to overcome this resistance.³

- When costs are concentrated with one group and benefits with another, we can expect a fierce battle between rival special interest groups ('interest group politics'). The regulation of renewable energy in Germany – with cleavages running between energy industry primarily relying on fossil fuels or nuclear power on the one hand and renewable energy companies on the other.
- If costs and benefits are both widely distributed, interest groups would likely play a minor role and the politics of regulation is shaped by broader political moods and tides, party ideologies and media attention ('majoritarian politics').

Wilson's typology has been contested many times, for example concerning the question whether costs and benefits can really be allocated to polar distributional categories. However, what his scheme convincingly highlights is the incentive structure for the mobilization of interests: Special interests will be highly mobilised when either benefits or costs are concentrated (or both), but general interests will have a hard time mobilizing external support (we usually don't take to the streets for lower electricity prices or higher food safety standards). This conclusion is arguably in contrast to the general, widely-spread popularity for issues such as cutting red tape, reduction of bureaucracy or fiscal costs. But, such commitments turn out to be lip-service only when matters become specific.

The mechanisms of external mobilization, however, do not account for the *internal organization* of executive politics. Societal interests do not directly translate into government decisions, and the way tasks are organized within government matters. Organization is the mobilization of bias (Schattschneider 1960), i.e. involves prioritization between competing issues and creates selective perception, as argued before. However, also the logic of how tasks are organized in bureaucratic organizations such as executive government favours policy specialists. Within a complex organisation policy making requires the parallel processing of a high number of issues, and the organisation of a task by issue or sector is the easiest way to permanently establish attention to the issue (i.e. its institutionalization). Empirically, we can observe that the growth of state activity in the 20th century, and in particular in the 1950s to 80s, has been organizationally dealt with by 'spin-offs' of specialized divisions, bureaus and finally ministries from already existing organizations. In Germany, for example, the agenda expansion towards new policy issues was reflected in the set-up of divisions within the ministry of the interior and then separate ministries that were hived-off from this ministry (education, welfare and work, transport, urban renewal, environment). Such a pattern limits disruption, since it does not directly affect other tasks and avoids a complex reorganization when only one policy domain at a time should be upgraded. The more specialized – narrowly defined with clear boundaries – the easier it is to apply this mode of 'bureaucratic specialization' to the institutionalization of new tasks.

The option to establish a new organizational unit is – in general – also available for generalist, cross-cutting tasks. The set-up of units with responsibility for 'general interest' tasks – such as cutting red tape, improving regulatory and programme design, promoting innovation and efficiency etc. – is an increasingly wide-spread phenomenon since the late 20th century. However, the role of such units is fundamentally different from those of units with responsibility for specific policy issues. Important for our discussion are the differences in programme autonomy and the target population. The rationale

³ Again, this is based on the dynamics of social regulation in the 1970s in the US, where the activist Ralph Nader supposedly played an important role in promoting the case for social regulation.

for establishing an organizational unit responsible for a particular policy issue or area is to concentrate the responsibility for this policy issue within one organizational entity. This allows coordination between different aspects of this task area within the unit – coordination problems could be solved through hierarchical means. Moreover, *if* the character of the policy task allows the concentration of all, or the most relevant aspects of this task within one unit, the programme autonomy of this unit will be high. By this we mean the capacity to develop policy proposals/programmes independently from other units. We do not imply that no coordination with other units is necessary or that a 100% programme autonomy is possible (and we return to the coordination problem below); at the same time we stress that it is easier to approximate higher programme autonomy the more specialized – narrowly confined - the topic is.

The more policy development requires the active collaboration of other units the lower the programme autonomy of this unit. Cross-cutting policy issues, by definition, display low programme autonomy because they depend on active contribution of other units/ministries for policy development. In the case of non-policy specific ‘general interest tasks’ – such as cutting red tape, fiscal efficiency and innovation – not only input from other units is required, but those other units become the target population of the activities of these organizational units. The selective perception of each unit then becomes a particular daunting challenge for cross-cutting units. Each unit will prioritize the achievement of their core task and consider the demands from other units as potentially disturbing, usually not very helpful, but burdensome and in the end autonomy undermining. Agency heads for fire prevention or conservation of monuments are not praised within their agency for radical initiatives to cut red tape or save money – rather, they are regarded as successful when they manage to strengthen their specific task and defend the task, turf and the identity of their unit from ‘external’ intervention. Selective perception – and the so-called ‘silo mentality’ – of specialist units is further reinforced by their integration in vertical relations spanning levels of government. Officials responsible for similar policy issue at different levels of government develop mutual supportive relationships not only because of the functional requirement to cooperate, but also because of shared worldviews shaped by the character of the respective task. Of course, politicians and administrators in the finance ministry or those responsible for cutting red tape also display ‘selective perception’ and attention – since their job is to keep finances under control or reduce bureaucracy, and not to preserve monuments or engage in fire prevention. However, generalists are dependent on the cooperation (or at least ‘compliance’) of all other ministries or units within the governmental machinery. Selective perception creates coordination problems that all policy making units/organizations have to face – even the most specialized – but it is multiplied in the case of the generalist.

Internally, special topics are thus easier institutionalized than cross-cutting, general interest issues. The institutionalization of a narrowly confined task is easier, i.e. creates less disturbance than the separate institutionalization of a cross-cutting issue – which is left with low programme autonomy and hence needs to interfere heavily with other sectors (with downstream effects on programme autonomy in these fields and their organizations - hence resistance can be expected). The separate institutionalization of general interest tasks is, of course, possible, but such units will have to overcome low programme autonomy issues.

Our key point is that external mobilization and internal organization are mutually reinforcing mechanisms that jointly put specialists in an advantage position when it comes to mobilizing (political) support and, in particular, activating information, knowledge and expertise. This *joint activation of expertise is the third mechanism* constituting the structural advantage of specialist in the politics of

policy making. Our argument draws on the policy network literature. Two key theoretical approaches within the broader policy network literature highlight the key role that the management of information and argumentation plays for the success of policy networks. Both Sabatier (1991, Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993) in his advocacy coalition framework and Baumgartner and Jones (2010, Jones & Baumgartner 2005) in their work on agenda setting and policy change stress that the capability of a policy network to shape the perception of problems and respective solutions is a critical success factor for influencing policy outputs, i.e. decisions about programmes, regulations etc. Sabatier stresses the ability of an advocacy group to consistently integrate new evidence (that might be created outside the advocacy group). Baumgartner and Jones have elaborated on the disproportionate way in which information is processed: New information about problems is often ignored when it challenges an existing policy image (monopoly). Network actors, who self-regulate the policy domain under conditions of limited public or top-level political attention, are interested in preserving this particular policy image, while actors without a voice in this network seek to challenge this image and seek promising 'policy venues' to do so.

Both approaches point in a similar direction: Network resources of information management are used to defend the autonomy of networks against external intervention. External demands and problem perceptions will be neglected or deflected and the communication channels within networks will be activated easily when collective network interests are at risk. Reputation within a policy network of specialists is not nurtured by acting as a bridge head for external demands, such as those coming from other networks or generalists. Within the executive, a minister or director general is considered successful and strong when he/she manages to defend the relative budget size compared to other departments or directorates but also the core beliefs, norms and values of a policy area.

In comparison, 'generalists' responsible for meta-policies are in a position of comparative disadvantage, lacking a policy network that will mobilize targeted expertise in situations of policy conflicts – or at least such a network will not emerge 'naturally' but needs to be designed and nurtured. To be sure, most OECD countries are endowed with a range of institutions that could support generalists' policies – from courts of audit to research organizations and consultancies. However, this type of crosscutting expertise is inferior to the specialized knowledge and expertise in conflicts over specific issues. While domain-specific networks are systematically 'trained' in accumulating and deploying specialized knowledge and norms into policy processes, such mechanisms of accumulation and deployment of expertise is much more problematic and limited in the case of generalists. Moreover, generalists are dealing with a high number of different specific subject areas and are confronted with an expert bureaucracy (*Fachbürokratie*) that has accumulated expertise in a bureaucratic or policy network ranging from the local to the transnational level. When making proposals for financial cut-backs or cutting red tape (or demanding such proposals from organizational units), generalists are confronted with the cumulative expertise of the expert bureaucracy and will always be 'dilettantes' in this domain. Max Weber's problem of the asymmetry of expertise between the 'dilettantes' at the top and technocrats in the bureaucracy resurfaces in a different form in the relation between generalists and specialists. And, this asymmetry is reinforced by the mechanism of joint deployment of expertise via policy networks, in which executive bureaucracies are embedded. In the classical area of budgeting these problems have been known for a long time, leaving the finance ministry in a weak position arguing against well founded specialist claims. The typical reaction of budget bureaucrats in Germany is therefore 'only ignorance helps against authorization' (*'nur Dummheit hilft gegen Bewilligung'*), which is, of course, the typical argument of power, the privilege of not having to learn.

The three mechanisms providing 'specialists' with a comparative advantage over 'generalists' – external mobilization, internal organization, and joint deployment of expertise – are mutually reinforcing. The internal strength of a specialized unit or sub-unit is strongly influenced by the power of external interest organizations – a mechanism that leads governmental actors to 'nurture' external counterpart organizations in the nongovernmental realm in order to strengthen its position within government. For example, in the case of environmental policy in Germany the specialist unit in the Ministry of the Interior went as far as fund the establishing of the by now most important environmental organization BUND, because it was lacking adequate societal partners in policy making. This specialized unit that developed into the nucleus of a new federal ministry for the environment, which was established when a window of opportunity - the meltdown of the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl - allowed that (Müller 1986). Generating, accumulating and exchanging knowledge and expertise is the raw material from which such 'iron triangles', policy networks and such like are built.

The Generalists' governance dilemma

If specialists are in an advantageous position concerning the institutionalisation of an issue, the mobilisation of interests and the proliferation of expertise, then generalists could at least rely on the hierarchical power that comes with the attachment of generalist tasks to the centre of government. Cutting red tape, fiscal consolidation and other meta-policies have to be defined as a priority of the government if not the head of government or ministry in person in order to get things moving. Conflicts between different governmental units and rationalities could then be resolved by hierarchical intervention of the top leader. And indeed recommendations such as that crosscutting reform policies need 'the support from the top' and need to be institutionalised as closely as possible to the top in order to sustain such a backing are abound in OECD reports on 'high quality regulation'.

However, the classic studies from Renate Mayntz and Fritz Scharpf (1975) on inter-ministerial policy-coordination in Germany's federal government have shown the limitations of such a strategy of hierarchical intervention. The complexity of government activities and the large number of policy issues processed simultaneously does not allow resolving a high number of issues by hierarchical means. And under conditions of constantly changing agendas, generalist policies can hardly be expected to remain a priority at the top. The 'solution' governments have developed to minimize the coordination problem that comes with the complexity and specialization of governmental systems is to rely on sectoral (or intersectoral) self-coordination on the one hand and limit intervention from the top to critical issues on the other hand (Scharpf 1993).

Efficient coordination of governmental policy-making is mostly and ordinarily achieved through (sectoral) self-coordination in the shadow of hierarchy. While the routine running of the machinery of government is left to self-coordination between ministries (in the mode of so-called 'negative coordination' – policy proposals are developed by one unit and sequentially checked for violation of turf by other departments), only major conflicts are solved by hierarchical intervention from the top. 'Positive coordination' – the joint development of policies by pooling of proposals from various ministries or units that are then scanned for the best possible solution – remains an exceptional mode of coordination because of its high demands in terms of time, resources and trust required from the actors involved. The strategy of 'self-coordination in the shadow of hierarchy' (Scharpf 1993: 145-7) takes into account that any centre can easily be overloaded in terms of its capacity to process information and solve conflicts. A policy based on the assumption that it needs to be enforced within

all units simultaneously against resistance or at least lack of enthusiasm is therefore at high risk of failing – either because of initial resistance or ‘agency slippage’ when it comes to implementation.

However, as we discussed above, there is no natural support from sectoral policy departments and units in backing cross-cutting issues, and hierarchical intervention might therefore be needed to implement such policies. The generalist’s governance dilemma is therefore that ‘negative coordination’ is particularly unfitting for such a type of policy, because generalists would have to be involved and intervene in basically all issues and units, and hierarchical intervention can only be used selectively. This easily overwhelms the information processing and conflict resolution capacities of generalist units. While a head of government or a department could define ‘cutting red tape’ as a personal priority, she risks to be drawn into frequent conflicts with units or ministries, in which neither the head of the organization nor its unit for ‘cutting red tape’ is sufficiently equipped with expertise and knowledge to win arguments against the specialists, i.e. why a particular regulation in the field of occupational health and safety, building permits, or in supervising prisons cannot be terminated. Top politicians have an excellent ‘hunch’ for these risks and therefore frequently shy away from claiming ownership of meta-policies.

Empirical examples of initiatives on cutting red tape doomed to fail because ‘negative coordination’ was unfit for the policy, and hierarchical intervention remained necessarily selective, are abound. In the early 2000s, the German federal government initiated a large scale project on ‘de-bureaucratization’ and collected more than 2000 proposals from regional authorities and business associations. A fraction of some more than 20 proposals were finally adopted after several waves of ‘cleaning up’ of proposals in inter-ministerial coordination. The minister responsible for the project remarked that cutting red-tape is reminiscent to urban warfare that required fighting for each paragraph individually (DER SPIEGEL 11/2005, p. 42, 14.03.2005). How could the minister and his department (for economics and labour at that time) assess if opposition to proposals from the other policy departments were well-founded or simple turf protection? Echoing Wildavsky’s quote at the outset of this paper, he lacked the specialized expertise that allowed him to win the high number of individual conflicts, making him rather powerless despite the overall support (including expert advice from high-level consultants) for the ‘de-bureaucratization’ initiative.

How to strengthen the generalists?

The baseline of the argumentation presented so far, is that without contrived institutional design to strengthen generalists, meta-policies are bound to fail. They would fail due to the inbuilt advantages of specialists, sectoral policy units in policy making, and their resistance against interference from ‘outside’ (units with more general and abstract concerns) during the adoption and implementation of meta-policies. At the same time we have argued, that a simple hierarchy will not work. But how could generalists be strengthened? While in this paper we have argued that the advantageous position of specialists is ‘naturally’ emerging from the complexity of modern governance, we have also argued that the power basis of one specialist interest over others is strongly influenced by organization and policy making in our societies, institutional arrangements, and thus institutional policies.

But how could this kind of institutional design, strengthening generalists and restricting specialists, look like? One of the most widely voiced proposals is that of creating generalist units (policy units,

better regulation units, administrative reform units and so on) and providing these units with more resources, i.e. adequate staffing and money, for consulting, public relations and so on. And while nobody would deny that human and other resources are needed to strengthen organizational concerns, the following quote may illustrate that size and resources alone do not matter, or that growth in size might even be counterproductive: 'Most units start as the flavour of the month, get steadily bigger and become permanent – and at the same time their influence fades and they become marginal' (Barber 2007: 63). Michael Barber used the Regulatory Impact Unit of the UK government as an example for such a unit suffering the life cycle from establishment to growth and, eventually, to irrelevance. The establishment of some kind of cross-cutting unit alone thus will not suffice to let the meta-policy 'fly', because the balance between specialists and generalists in policy making is not automatically altered with rising numbers of staff and resources in such units – especially if the staff lacks the expertise allowing them to intervene in departmental affairs, as Barber complains.

We would argue that the most promising, if not the only available strategy for generalists is to imitate the strategy of successful specialist units and sectors. And indeed, this seemingly paradoxical strategy can be observed in practice. Generalist concerns within executive organizations have followed all three strategies of successful institutionalization sketched above. If we take the general issues of 'red tape' or 'nudging' as examples, it is obvious that these concerns have been very active in establishing national and especially international policy networks. 'Specialists' for these areas meet regularly in international conferences with like-minded bureaucrats, politicians, non-governmental actors and especially academics and 'think tanks'. At the same time they have established organizational units within governments, trying to shed the image of 'egg heads' and 'oddballs' and to integrate these units as much as possible into routine policy making procedures. And finally they have developed their own language and theoretical knowledge base, if possible with their own professionalized and quantitative methodology (as in the case of the 'standard cost model' in the area of cutting red-tape and the usage of randomized controlled trials in the Nudge context). So the way forward for generalists is to learn from specialists, and to copy their successful modes of institutionalization. This, of course, goes beyond formal rules and regulations, and includes conscious efforts of framing, of new forms of 'appropriate behaviour' and finally even 'taken for granted-ness' in executive politics.

When assessing these strategies and their outcomes, we would argue that the aim of reforms should not be to overrule or side-step specialists. Instead the aim should be to confront them with generalist demands and criteria of good policy and administration that 'naturally' would fall outside their selective perception (such as financial sustainability, administrative burden, performance orientation). Reform actors should search for tools – and deploy them in a way – that allows the generalist to confront the specialists with information and expertise that cannot be simply ignored or '*weggewischt*' with recurrence to issue specific information. Tools should not simply be complied with by specialists, but they should lead to an engagement with the rationale of that particular instrument.

Conclusion

Action oriented debates about innovation in executive government have long focused on the skill set of civil servants and have considered the reform of training and further education as the main lever. In contrast, organizational explanations did concentrate on the pressures on and opportunities for reforms, and innovation capacity was conceptualized as the ability to introduce institutional change, and in particular to overcome resistance and veto players. Debates on collaborative innovation have

mainly focused on the service delivery side. Neither was the accumulated knowledge about the logic of inter-organizational coordination in executive government fully integrated into these debates, nor have the insights from decades of policy process research been reflected. Executive politics research on the other hand remained fixated on the relation between politics and administration as a vertical relation.

We introduce the relation between specialists and generalists in executive politics as an analytical perspectives that links the traditions and analytical perspectives of organizational theory and policy making to issues of public sector innovation and collaboration. The aim of the paper is therefore also to bridge traditional debates about personnel/HR aspects and institutional dimensions of organizational reforms. We argue that there is a structural imbalance in favour of specialists that makes the adoption and effective implementation of generalist meta-policies and innovations problematic. In executive politics specialists are usually much more effective than generalists. We identify three mechanisms providing 'specialists' with this comparative advantage over 'generalists' – external mobilization, internal organization, and joint deployment of expertise - and we show that these are mutually reinforcing. Our perspective highlights the challenge of generalist reform policies, which interfere with the turf and interests of a high number of specialist organizations at the same time – and thereby are confronted with different specialist networks that can activate internal and external resources to deploy expertise in order to defend the autonomy of their domain. We have also shown that hierarchy can only be used with care and selectively, because the limited conflict resolution and information processing capacity of the organizational units of generalists (even if they are attached to powerful actors of the core executive). Moreover, the standard way of dealing with this situation – combining horizontal self-coordination with the shadow of hierarchy – is problematic in the case of government wide reform policies, because the mode of 'negative coordination' has limited value for such type of policies.

While we have proposed a departure from the traditional understanding of specialists and generalists in public administration, focusing on the professional background and skill set of civil servants, our argument is not that there is no relation at all between educational and positional dimensions of both specialists and generalists. Our main argument directed at debates in public administration is the influence the organizational position and task has on the preferences, values and worlds views of the individual. That implies that civil service career paths do have an impact on 'departmental specialisation', and we consider the empirical analysis of the effects of different national career trajectories on 'specialism' a fruitful research perspective. Moreover, we have also not further discussed the role and function of specialist technical skills (of the 'nerd' type, as Lodge & Wegrich 2012 called them) for support functions and legitimacy in generalist units. Technical skills related to data analysis and economic policy analysis might be an important skill set for strengthening generalist causes in executive government. And finally, we have only briefly touched the issue of the right balance between specialist and generalists.

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