

Data and Methodology

The research group fashioned its own specific research tool. In a collaborative effort involving many contributors from different countries an original data set concerning the "Study of the Parliamentary Passage of Legislation (SPPL)" was built under the auspices of the present incumbent of the Chair of Comparative Politics at the University of Potsdam (Herbert Döring).

Creation of this machine-readable data set with 130 variables for 650 bills proceeded in three steps:

- (1) Taking up issues raised in the first volume, members of the research group agreed upon a theoretically inspired set of questions for each the 650 particular bills.

This joint "questionnaire" outlined organisational features and procedural steps in the procedure for passing legislation. This questionnaire is accessible at Döring's homepage at <http://www.uni-potsdam.de/u/lv/vergleich> in the form of a codebook summarizing structural and procedural information on the parliamentary passage of altogether 650 bills from 18 countries during the 1980s. With publication of this book, the SPPL data set will also be available for download. The questionnaire also appears as an Appendix to the book.

- (2) The research group conducted a stratified random sample of 650 bills in two steps.

In a first step, a random sample of bills was chosen from the sum total of all bills, limited to two specific and narrow policy fields, in each of the 18 countries. A basis for sampling was provided by the huge, and easily online accessible, International Labour Organisation's (ILO) NATLEX database (<http://www.ilo.org/>).

The NATLEX database contains information for each country, with abstracts in one of the three ILO languages of English, Spanish or French, which amounts to an almost exhaustive inventory of legislative instruments. With some early gaps, but with high reliability from 1981, it provides a comprehensive index of all legislative instruments in labour legislation and social security benefits across its member states.¹ In a second step, the research group also included a sub-sample of bills that failed to get legislative enactment. This additional sampling allows the researchers to avoid a bias due to looking only at successful bills. It also makes it possible to examine hypotheses using

event-history analysis, where the dependent variables are (a) the success rate of a bill and (b) the number of time units the bill remains in the “risk set”. Thus, over and above, the bills sampled for the period between 1981 and 1991 from the ILO’s NATLEX database, country specialists responsible for each of the 18 Western European countries (see the Appendix) randomly selected a number of unsuccessful bills for the policy area of flexibilisation of working time and working contracts from their national sources.

For reasons to be explained, we deliberately did not select bills across the total legislation of countries in a specific periods. We rather limited ourselves to two policy fields during the 1980s: (a) deregulation of working time and working contracts and (b) social security benefits. The NATLEX database allowed us to target with cross-national reliability bills from these two policy fields. Three substantive reasons of policy making in the 1980s also contributed to the research group focusing on these policy areas.

First, it is imperative for cross-national analysis covering several countries to focus comparison on only one policy area at a given time. Even within in a parliament of one country, patterns of parliamentary activity may widely diverge at the same time if different policy areas are taken into account. For example, Richard Rose showed the proportion of bills approved unanimously with the consent of the parliamentary opposition even in a country like Britain, the “nominal home of adversary politics”, to be very high in foreign policy matters (Rose 1980). Other policy areas were bitterly contested as usual. Such discrepancies between policy areas might become uncontrollable if many countries are included in a study such as ours. Had we sampled bills from the sum total of all bills per country rather than concentrating on a specifically targeted policy area, such within-country variations might have severely distorted cross-national variations we wanted to discover.

Second, deregulation of working time and work contracts became a salient, and heavily contested, burning political issue from 1980 onwards (Birk 1987; OECD-report edited by Dahrendorf et al. 1986; OECD report on flexible working time, collective bargaining and government intervention 1995). Rising oil prices, stagnating or declining rates of economic growth and rising inflation combined to form the new spectre of what was called „stagflation“. An exogenous shock, the sudden trebling of oil prices, constituted a comparable challenge to quite different political systems (Scharpf 1997). At this time, the flexibilization of working contracts became an important issue. Governments in many countries set about the task of arriving at greater flexibilization within their

¹ For a detailed description of this data base see, in the research group’s first volume, the contribution by Scholz and Trantas 1995.

respective labour markets. Yet, in spite of a common effort, the results were indeed widely divergent. This is a situation that should be appealing to any comparativist.

Thus, deregulation of working time does appear to be, at least for the period we chose, a unique field for comparative analysis. However, we do not want to study material changes of policy but rather take bills sampled from this field as a means to put most general rational-choice theories to an empirical test. Additionally, NATLEX provides the chance to include social benefits bills because they keep a register on that field, too. Much of the rational-choice literature discusses the likelihood of the production of particularistic-benefits bills instead of general-benefits legislation (Cox/McCubbins 1993: 90-94). Such particular benefits serve a narrow clientele but are financed from the "common pool" of total tax receipts. Particular benefits are, if geared to regional or local interests, also discussed under the heading of "pork- barrel politics" (for an extension of this American research tradition into a Western European political setting, see Lancaster/Patterson 1990).

Over and above the preceding reasons for concentrating on the policy fields singled out for analysis, there is a third, more technical reason. Selecting bills from the ILO's Natlex database adds to cross-national comparability and validity in spite of different legal systems and diverging methods for legislative crafting.² All bills recorded in Natlex have undergone expert assessment by the ILO's staff before being registered and translated into either of the three ILO languages, English, French, or Spanish. Sampling the "successful" bills from NATLEX, we can be reasonably certain we are not comparing apples and oranges of legislative instruments by picking them at random from disparate country sources, but rather relying on a systematic account.

A word of caution, finally, must be added. The time period selected for study is the 1980s only (precisely from 1981-1991). This decade gives a snapshot of a still ongoing process of deregulation of labour-market legislation. The year where the sample begins is justified by the political issue having become salient right then. But the end of the period chosen, i.e., 1991 is a somewhat arbitrary cutting point. In some countries important legislative enactment in the specific area of deregulating working time and working contracts did follow after 1991.³ Hence, readers will be aware this research study does not provide an exhaustive account of changes in a policy field but takes only one decade of changes as a means for empirically putting flesh onto the bones of rational-choice assumptions about the possible policy effects of legislative institutions.

² For an overview of legal styles between nations see, in the first volume, the contribution by Trantas 1995.

³ For detailed accounts see the online accessible Natlex database at <http://natlex.ilo.org/scripts/natlexcgi.exe?lang=E>.

There is one unavoidable pitfall of the sampling procedure to which readers and analysts must be alerted to from the outset. Due to the existence of real differences in number of legislative instruments among countries (ranging from only 29 in Greece to 525 in Sweden), bills included into the SPPL data set amount for some countries to the sum total of all enactments, with no selective sampling having taken place at all, whereas in other countries a random selection had to be conducted. This particularity of selecting bills for study should be kept in mind when assessing tests of significance in subsequent chapters of this book.

(3) Supplied with both the "questionnaire" (as from above 1) and the names of the bills to be scrutinized (as from above 2), country specialists went into the libraries and archives of the 18 Western European parliaments to fill in the questionnaires.

Contributors were requested to answer the theoretically interesting questions about the parliamentary passage of the 650 bills sampled for 18 countries⁴

The SPPL data set was immediately made available to researchers who had devised the questionnaire in the first place. We also invited scholars who had already left their mark in a theoretically inspired neo-institutional empirical analysis of parliaments to use the data set. Deploying this novel data set, the book is able to consider the extent to which parliamentary procedures contributed to shaping legislative enactments.

⁴ Work was supported by a grant from *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* to Herbert Döring under research grant number Do 204/6-1. Names of country contributors answering questionnaires from the primary information kept in parliamentary archives, are gratefully acknowledged in the cover of the codebook of the SPPL data set. Student research assistants assisting to this task are gratefully acknowledged in the cover to the codebook.