Civil Society And Social Policy Reform: Is There A Discrepancy Between The Political Soapbox And Specific Policy Discourse?

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Care for the elderly is one of the future challenges of developed welfare states in times of ageing societies and public budget constraints. In this context, voluntary action is seen as a promising solution to supplement professional (care) services since civil society has become a popular issue in political speech and a discrete field of policy in many countries. Furthermore, there has been a longstanding academic debate on how to integrate informal resources in the governance and delivery of social services in a "welfare mix" framework (Evers, 2009; Verschuere, 2012; Kehl & Then, 2013). However, it is not quite clear under which circumstances schemes of societal co-production and shared responsibilities effectively find their way on the political agenda and bring about policy change (Anheier, 2010).

The paper starts from the assumption that there is a discrepancy between the political "soapbox" and real policy discourse which is tested in a specific situation of social policy reform in Germany. It analyses the discourse in preparation of the establishment of the so-called Family Care Time Act (Familienpflegezeit) offering employees the possibility to reduce their labour time in favour of informal care and support for a maximum of 2 years as to the practical implications of the "civil society idea" for effective policy formulation. Starting from an advocacy/discourse coalition approach (Sabatier, 1998; Schmidt, 2008), discourse network analysis is applied which combines discourse and social network analysis to transfer qualitative content analysis of relevant documents (official records, media articles, press releases) to a standardized network graph by categorizing claims and frames, identifying actors (agreeing or disagreeing) and building discourse coalitions via cluster analysis and block models based on observable policy aims and preferences (Leifeld & Haunss, 2012; Scott & Carrington, 2011).

Although there had been the aim to address civil society by some actors (e.g. the Greens, the social-democratic party and labour unions), it is shown that a coalition of right-wing parties and economic actors was successful in dominating the discourse and finally reducing the instrument to family members. In the light of institutional factors as well as partisan and power resources theory it is argued that the notion of civil society is suitable as long as it does not conflict with "hand-tight" (material) interests championed by influential societal coalitions. Conversely, this implies that civil society lacked a powerful coalition of public and private actors seriously advocating for policies encouraging pluralist co-production against the intercessors of the traditional welfare state conception.

Thus, from the taken perspective the assumption of a discrepancy between the political "soapbox" and real policy discourse can be supported. Of course, it would be fruitful to compare this specific case with examples from other countries (institutional settings) and policy fields.

References:


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