Abstract

Although local governments play a crucial role in policy-making in modern democracies, they have no formal rights of participation in higher level politics. To bridge this gap, local government associations (LGAs) have been established in many countries in order to represent local interests and to lobby higher level policy-making. As collective actors, those associations face typical collective action problems of gaining and sustaining membership, of arriving at joint decisions and successfully implementing them. Comparative evidence indicates concomitantly that LGAs vary in their internal organizational structure as well as in their position and lobbying success in a country's institutional environment.

In our paper, we investigate two interrelated questions. First, linked to collective action theory, we investigate how they solve those problems, or, more specifically, under which conditions LGAs are successfully established in the first place and how they develop capacity to act effectively. Second, linked to comparative institutional analysis, we investigate how varying institutional framework conditions influence the way in which LGAs emerge and develop. This research interest is based on the basic assumption of historical institutionalism that functional needs or drivers provide uniform pressures for institutions to emerge or evolve. Their specific institutional, cultural or historical environment shapes them, however, into clearly distinct forms of organizations. We focus empirically on six LGAs in Germany and the US. When observing present day LGAs, it is hard to discover those conditions or processes, because they are institutions with a long history, embodying past experiences, decisions or developments. We therefore go back in history to reconstruct their foundational moments as well as shaping events in their development.

The historical comparative analysis along the case studies reveals that indeed functional drivers impacted uniformly on the establishment and development of LGAs in Germany and the US. Yet, the different institutional orders, political culture and historical path-dependency moulded similar institutions into clearly distinct forms.