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Политические науки и регионоведение

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How can political student organizations in Tübingen influence local policy-making?

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Аннотация. In the following article I will discuss political student organizations and their possibilities for local policy-making and participation. The case of Tübingen serves as an example, as it is a smaller municipality in Germany, creating an excellent environment for political participation. The theoretical approach is derived from the concept of democratic innovation designed by Brigitte Geissel, focusing on new ways to make democracy accessible to everyone. This project is explorative, and the empirical material used was collected by me. I conducted several expert interviews with political student organizations that are active in Tübingen, asking them about their own perceived possibilities for political participation on the local level. These interviews were then transcribed and I hermeneutically analyzed the results from these interviews, concluding on three main categories, each with their own suggestions. This approach resulted in several new inputs when it comes to future research, and will be expanded upon.

Ключевые слова: democratic innovation, local politics, student organizations, political participation, youth participation

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INTRODUCTION

The municipality of Tübingen is heavily influenced by the Eberhard-Karls University and its 27.000 students, with students making up about a third of the population. An important part of university life is the *Hochschulgruppen* (university groups), which come in different forms, with different views and objectives, but who share the similar goal of wanting to engage with each other and the community. Among these are a fair share of political student organizations. They are raising issues that might not always have a local focus but could arguably be of importance to the local context of the municipality, like human rights awareness, feminism and political engagement. And of course, they are trying to promote their individual political agendas as well as to have an influence on the community. However, in Tübingen, local policy-making and political student organizations do not seem to have any points of connection, which is puzzling if we take into account that well educated young people are driving forces behind social and political innovation [Bastien and Holmarsdottir 2017].

It is well known that the city and the university in Tübingen are disconnected from one another, with the city not necessarily responding positively to input from students, which is in line with the tradition of ignoring young people's political opinions and actions. With this research project I aim to find out how these political student organizations themselves perceive their opportunities for participation in local policy-making.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Germany as a federal state divides its political competencies onto different levels of the state. This creates a specific kind of interdependence in all matters political and financial, which in

turn can cause confusion and obstacles, but also grants importance to lower-ranking institutions. At the lowest level of the federal state, of which there are 16 in Germany, is the municipality. My case, Tübingen, is a municipality in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg. Even though municipalities do not wield a great deal of political power, they are the closest to the citizens and their needs, and thus have a direct link to the public. These connections are vital when it comes to German democracy and strengthening it from below. Thus, the local level of German politics is an important space for policy-makers and citizens alike. It is the ideal scale on which to try newer tactics for democracy and participation [Geissel 2009].

This project tackles the question of self-perceived opportunities to participate in local politics by drawing on a democratic innovation approach, because there seems to be a gap between wants and needs of students on the one hand and opportunities offered by local government arrangements. If that is the case, democratic innovation could offer solutions for the disengagement of political student organizations in local politics.

Democratic innovation is defined by Brigitte Geissel [2009] as “new practices consciously and purposefully introduced in order to improve the quality of democracy, independent of whether the innovation in question has already been tried out in another system” [Geissel 2009: 53].

Much of the theoretical framework for this research is derived from Geissel's article *How to Improve the Quality of Democracy?* [Geissel 2009]. Democratic or participatory innovations often have a normative claim, framing the increase of participation or the deepening of democracy as favorable and a common goal [Geissel, Joas 2013]. However, democratic innovations are important in that they often aim to promote political equality and participatory inclusion. Research has shown that political participation is not always accessible for everyone, which is exactly why democratic innovations are so important [Arriagada, Tesch-Römer 2021]. This paper will focus on consultative procedures and co- and network governance as types of democratic innovations, which can be redefined as cooperative governance and deliberative procedures [Geissel, Joas 2013].

METHODOLOGY

Since the focus of this project lies on political student organizations in Tübingen, I started by looking at the official political student organizations as listed on the homepage of the university of Tübingen. I contacted those organizations asking them if they had time to conduct a short interview (between 10 and 20 minutes) with me and described my topic and aim in a few short sentences. In the end, interviews were conducted with four organizations. Since I was also interested in an input from the city officials, especially those in charge of citizen participation, I contacted the *Bürgerengagement* (citizen participation) office in Tübingen but have thus far not received a reply from them. This turnout is not bad, but not large enough to draw any representative conclusions from it. The interviews were conducted in German, since these groups organize themselves largely in German. The transcribed interviews are thus also in German, the results of analysis were translated to English.

The interviews that were conducted in the context of this project are expert interviews according to the definition provided by Meuser and Nagel, who define experts as people who are part of the research subject, or who play a decisive role in the situation that is being researched [Meuser, Nagel 1991]. Analyzing the expert interviews, I follow a design that is adjacent to that of Meuser and Nagel, but that modifies specifically for the analysis of *explorative* expert interviews. This specific type of analysis skips the step of paraphrasing and instead goes straight into coding and/or headlining, followed by a comparison and a conceptualization, of which the results can then be analyzed and presented [Ullrich 2006].

FINDINGS

Since the interviews are short and only contain three to four questions, the transcriptions have been sorted by codes that closely relate to the questions asked. The first code is (1) *local relevance*, the second one is (2) *interest in participating in local politics* and the

third one is (3) *space in local politics*. I will be analyzing the results according to these three codes.

(1) Local Relevance

The first concept that was discerned from the text fragments about the local relevance of student organizations' topics is that global topics always have an influence on local realities. They point out that even though these are large-scale discussions, every single person is affected by changes on these specific scales, both due to regulations that are enforced on a local level and due to the fact, that organizing and activism often take place on a local level. Secondly, those groups who believed their topics to not necessarily be locally relevant often argued that because they were working closely together with the university, their work often ended up being locally relevant nonetheless. All interviewees also emphasized the importance of local connection, not just with the community but with other student organizations as well, to gain local importance and notoriety.

(2) Interest in participating in Local Politics

When it came to the question of whether or not the organizations or their representatives would be interested in participating in local politics, it was hard to pin down the answers, since they varied in some aspects and were similar in others. One prevalent concept was that for topics to be inserted on a local level, you would need a more specific or stronger focus on one certain problem. When the goal of an organization is to connect and give broader perspectives, their input can be relevant but not always specific enough, even when the interest in participating exists. All in all, an interest in participating definitely seemed to exist, but accompanying this interest was, in almost all interviews, a doubt as to whether or not the input they could offer would be locally relevant.

(3) Space in Local Politics

When it came to the last question, results once again varied but they all carried one important piece of information. All interviewees suggested that a representative in the city should be specifically appointed to listen to students' concerns and questions and should be communicating with student organizations. This representative would be able to bring up issues in the municipal council, or the students would be able to do that themselves. Some students also mentioned that Tübingen might be a somewhat singular case because of its size and the percentage of students that make up part of the population. They also mentioned that communication by the local government with young people in general (not just students) would be a step in the right direction. It is remarkable that all interviewees unknowingly agreed on the suggestion that Tübingen should have a permanent representative for student organizations and student interests, and that student organizations should be consulted more frequently by local decision-makers. The results also show that they do not deem the situation to be as dire when it comes to their input in Tübingen, and they agree that it could definitely be worse, drawing comparisons to other, bigger cities, where student organizations might not have a voice at all.

CONCLUSION

The assumption that was made at the beginning of this paper concerning the relevance of global topics for local politics seems to be shared by those student organizations I have interviewed. They are interested in bettering the community around them and feel like they could have important input on the issues at hand. From the gathered data one can conclude that most organizations are not sure where they (would) fit in on the local level and the politics that happen on the local level. However, they do all feel that their interests could be better represented, by them having either a consultative or a cooperative governing role. From the interviews so far, it can be concluded that there is a wish for democratic innovation amongst students to increase their access to local politics. Further research will expand on these results, aiming to create a more representative picture of the situation.

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Political science and regional studies

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