

Another look at government elites

Discussion with William Genieys

My two books are the result of 20 years of research into health insurance reforms in France and the United States. They have enabled me to open the black box of the “**unelected governmental elites**” in these two countries. A black box that had remained closed since Gaetano Mosca's pioneering work in the early 20th century on the “ruling class”.

Why did you focus on the case of non-elected elites?

Basically, in France, I mainly studied high-ranking officials in the *Sécurité sociale* and health insurance sectors. In the United States, I replicated this type of research by studying congressional staffers and “political appointees” at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the White House to explain the reforms. Why health insurance and why this comparison? Because these are two countries that have seen contrasting developments in their health insurance protection systems, with the United States having failed to establish a National Health Insurance (NHI) system since Roosevelt; whereas in France, with *Sécurité sociale*, we have universal coverage. Secondly, because today it has become the biggest budget in terms of public spending in both countries. And finally, I've always been interested in combining the sociology of elites with state reconfiguration.

What was your approach?

My approach follows a Tocquevillian perspective, meaning that I first studied the unelected governmental elites in the French case, then imported my research issue into the American case, and then I came back in my last book to reinterrogate the French case. The method used in these two books, so-called “*Programmatic Elite Framework*”, consists in correlating the “social background” and career paths of the elites with the policy change and reforms.

What do you show?

The careers and sociological portraits have enabled me to refute, with the US case study, the classic issue of the “Government of strangers” (Heclo) and the prevalence of interest groups in reform processes. In France, they have also enabled me to refute the thesis of the dominance of neo-liberal ideas on policies in the health insurance sector. How did I do this? In the US, by tracing the sociological portraits of the Clinton Plan veterans, i.e. the policy advisers who participated in the failure of the major reform sought by President Clinton in 1994. After this political defeat, those policy advisers developed long-term careers inside and outside the administration, and set out to rethink a new reform project that succeeded, which they then carried forward under the Obama administration.

As for the French case, what I have shown is of a slightly different nature: it is the decline in the power of the “*Grand Corps*” among the *Sécurité sociale* elites. Firstly, the decline of the *Conseillers d'Etat* who were supplanted in the 1990s by elites from the *Cour des comptes*. And more recently, a new generation of “welfare” elites shaped internally within the directorate of social security administration.

What does the France/United States comparison reveal?

Rather like Tocqueville, I found something invariable, namely the presence and important role in the representative democracy of the “unelected governmental elites”. But there are elements that vary. In France, we have “unelected governmental elites” who stay inside the

state, so “insiders” who stay inside the state for a long time, moving between the directorates of central administration, health insurance funds and the highest sectoral authorities. In the US, however, when there is a democratic changeover, the “long-term insiders” go into the private sector, the private non-profit sector in the case of the Democrats. Lastly, what I have been able to show is how unelected governmental elites reconfigure the state, how the strong French state has been recomposed by the welfare elites around the health insurance sector, and more particularly the *Sécurité sociale*, and how in the United States what is known as the “policy state” has been strengthened by the elite who made the reform of the “Affordable Care Act” possible.

And for the future?

Having shown the key role played by the unelected governmental elites in reconfiguring the state, it might be interesting to look at what these elites think and how they imagine the future of representative democracy.

Interview by Véronique Etienne, October 2023