

Chapter 5

The Politics of Higher Education Governance: Comparative Perspectives



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Abstract This chapter offers a comparative perspective on the three proceeding papers that focus on the politics of higher education in Western Europe, the United States and Canada. Common themes include the importance of understanding the political context in the analysis of higher education reforms, as well as the multi-level, and frequently multi-sector, nature of higher education governance. The three chapters point towards elements of both convergence and divergence in the politics of higher education governance reform, though there is little evidence that these very different systems are heading towards some common model, though some comment elements may be emerging. The politics of higher education governance reform continues to be grounded in the distinctive histories, political structures, and contextual features of each jurisdiction. More systematic forms of comparative analysis might provide us with new ways of understanding or exploring the distinctive contextual elements underscoring these complex political processes.

Introduction

Public issue salience is an extremely important and commonly used concept in political science. While the term is frequently underspecified, the basic notion that there are differences in the importance assigned to policy issues within a democratic political system underscores much of the analysis of political activity (Dennison, 2019). The concept may be simple, but it is extraordinarily challenging to study empirically, in part because there are both demand and supply elements operating within a dynamic, highly complex political environment. On the supply side of the equation, a variety of political actors, for example political parties, attempt to influence the relative importance assigned to policy issues in an attempt to shift public opinion (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). The objective, of course, is to influence and

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J. Jungblut et al. (eds.), *Comparative Higher Education Politics*, Higher Education Dynamics 60, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25867-1_5

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address the demands of voters, and the relative salience of issues that are assumed to effect voting (Dennison, 2019).

Those who study the politics of higher education governance recognize the tremendous importance of understanding the complex issues of power and authority that underscore the governance of higher education as a public policy issue, but they also recognize that the mechanisms of this governance, the structures and approaches that steer or regulate the sector, have modest if any public issue salience. There are certainly public issues associated with the higher education sector that may influence voting (a point strongly reinforced by Junglut and Dobbins', [this volume](#) analysis), such as student access, research, tuition and student financial assistance, though it is frequently assumed that these issues are less important to the electorate than employment, health care, schooling, immigration and climate change; few would ever argue that the governance of higher education itself is an issue of salience when voters head to the polls. Instead, the politics of higher education governance is about the complex and frequently multi-level intersections of structures and actors, of networks and stakeholders, operating within quite distinct social and historical contexts; it is frequently influenced by, but generally off the radar of, public issue salience.

The objective of this chapter is to offer a comparative perspective on the three proceeding papers, each of which provides masterful reviews of the literature, and presents research and findings, on the politics of higher education governance in Western Europe, the United States and Canada. Each paper offers a highly original contribution to the literature, but what can we learn by looking across these studies in terms of identifying similarities and differences, elements of convergence or divergence, or key questions that might move the study of the politics of higher education governance forward?

In the Beginning: National, Regional and Temporal Starting Points

Western Europe is a region, while the United States and Canada are countries. The basic fact that the unit of analysis differs so dramatically between the three papers is not a sampling error, but rather reflects key differences and influences in the politics of higher education governance, the story of higher education governance reform and the focus of scholarship in these three quite different jurisdictions.

The history of higher education in Europe is, of course, longer, deeper and richer than the history of higher education in North America. The history of the university in Europe is extraordinarily complex and multi-faceted and involves unique national histories and institutional models, the evolution of quite distinct notions of the role of higher education within society, and quite different assumptions underscoring the relationship between universities and the state. These distinctive histories, models and social contexts continue to play a significant role in the politics of higher education governance.

However, the starting-point for contemporary reforms in higher education governance appears to be far more related to patterns of massification; this multi-dimensional expansion of higher education, in enrolment, missions, institutional types and functions, was largely supported by the public purse, leading to renewed interest in governance approaches, structures and mechanisms. This transition took place earlier in the United States than any country within Europe. New policy discussions and governance mechanisms emerged with the development and evolution of American state “systems” of public higher education, and researchers began to study and categorize these governance or coordination mechanisms (for example, Berdahl, 1971). Canada’s postwar expansion of higher education led to the emergence of “provincial” systems during the 1960s, and almost every province created a “buffer” or intermediary body designed to provide at least some level of system-level coordination (Jones, 1996), and scholarship on these provincial systems and their coordinating mechanisms began to gradually emerge in the 1970s (Sheffield, 1978). The transition to mass higher education in Western Europe occurred more gradually, with significant national differences, but as Jungblut and Dobbins note in their paper, higher education governance reforms had become an important feature of Western European higher education since the 1980s.

It is important not to lose sight of the very different starting points of governance arrangements in the United States, Canada and Western Europe during this time period. The constitutions of both the United States and Canada created federations where higher education is the responsibility of state/province. The federal government plays a role in higher education in both countries, especially related to research funding and student financial assistance, and so multi-level governance elements are embedded in both political systems; however it is the state or provincial government that has primary responsibility for governing higher education, and protecting these rights against threats of federal government intervention has been a recurring theme. The Canadian political context for higher education policy may be seen as even more decentralized than the American, since, as Shanahan notes, there is no national minister or department of education or higher education with authority over the sector. In both countries, decentralization of authority within a federal political context led to the emergence of very different state/provincial systems of higher education.

A second key starting-point for understanding the politics of higher education governance in the United States and Canada is the historical importance placed on institutional autonomy. As Rubin ([this volume](#)) notes, governance reforms in the United States have largely focused on coordination or governance board arrangements which emerged as buffer agencies designed to somewhat distance universities from the political vagaries of governors and state legislatures. McLendon (2003) noted more than 100 proposals for governance reform between 1985 and 2000, including proposals to increase the oversight responsibility of governance structures, increase accountability, or increase institutional authority or discretion. Given the constitutional separation of authority between the executive and legislative branches of state government, and the development of distinct state coordinating or governing board arrangements, the political focal point becomes the reform of these

state-level governance arrangements and structures, in some cases moving to centralize authority, in others to decentralize decision-making to separate institutional governing bodies.

Relatively high levels of institutional autonomy is also the starting point for the discussion of governance reforms in Canada, and, as in the United States, an early focus of attention was on the development of intermediary or buffer bodies to play coordinating roles within the new provincial systems and protect institutions from direct political interference. With the exception of a rather unique regional coordinating body that emerged in eastern Canada, the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, these bodies were gradually abandoned in favour of more direct relationships between governments and institutions (Jones, 1996). As Shanahan ([this volume](#)) describes in detail, the relationships between governments and universities, as distinct, not-for-profit corporations, were largely premised on supporting, or at the very least tolerating, high levels of autonomy over many areas of decision-making, with governments focusing on issues of funding and the regulation of tuition. The relative level of institutional autonomy may have changed over time, and shifted in different ways within different provincial contexts (Eastman et al., 2022), but notions of institutional autonomy underscored post-war governance reforms.

In sharp contrast, the starting point for contemporary governance reforms in Western Europe involved a plethora of nation-specific arrangements and mechanisms, grounded in diverse histories and institutional models. Putting aside the United Kingdom as an outlier, higher education governance in many of these systems involved differing levels of state authority and control (ranging from the top-down Napoleonic traditions, to Humboldtian models of academic self-governance within state administered institutions). The phrase “steering-from-a-distance” captured a major shift in approach from what had been, in many systems, state-centered governance, and yet one might observe that distant steering had characterized higher education governance in the United States and Canada throughout the last half of the twentieth century. These different starting points become quite important in exploring the politics of higher education governance from a comparative perspective (Austin & Jones, 2016).

In their thoughtful review of the research literature, Jungblut and Dobbins ([this volume](#)) identify two common pressures or themes that underscored governance reforms throughout the Western European region. The first is the influence of New Public Management on governance reforms throughout the region. Seeking greater efficiency, governance reforms frequently involved reducing direct government control and shifting strategic decision-making authority to universities and university leaders. New Public Management (NPM) influenced the politics of governance reform, and NPM and related concepts also became an explanatory tool for scholarly analysis and underscored a considerable body of research during this period. For example, the shift in relationships between governments and institutions, and, in particular, the emerging emphasis on the assessment of sector and institutional outputs provided a foundation for Neave’s (1998) now classic notion of the “evaluative state.” Scholars focused attention on the increasing role of external

stakeholders, competition for students and research funding, and increasing managerialism in a context in which institutions were assigned greater autonomous authority. Once again, there were significant differences in governance reforms between systems, grounded in different national models and histories, but researchers noted common themes underscoring reforms and an increasing body of comparative governance research looking across, or between selected countries, began to play a key role in higher education scholarship.

The second pressure noted by Jungblut and Dobbins ([this volume](#)) was the Bologna process, which emphasized student mobility and internationalization, but also issues of comparability and quality assessment within a European higher education area. They argue that these pressures not only underscored major reforms in governance, but catalyzed an increasing application of theories and concepts drawn from political science to the scholarship of higher education system reform including neo-institutionalism, the “socio-economic school”, the “international hypothesis” and power-resource theory. As a regional project, the Bologna process led to reforms in governance throughout Western Europe, but it also became, as Jungblut and Dobbins ([this volume](#)) note, a “major ice-breaker” for comparative scholarship of governance reform and brought an increasing theoretical depth and sophistication, drawing heavily from political science, to governance research.

This brief review illustrates that starting points for governance reform, and scholarship on the politics of governance reform, in Western Europe, the United States and Canada are quite different. While notions of institutional autonomy underscored key elements in the emergence of system-level governance in the United States and Canada, the foundations of system governance in Europe were remarkably varied, but both the Bologna process and the relatively common elements aligned with the adoption of New Public Management became associated with national governance reforms in which governments pulled back from centralized approaches in favour of steering more autonomous, competitive, managed institutions.

Political Actors in the Context of Low Public Issue Salience

As noted at the outset of this paper, while there are certainly higher education policy issues that may be important to voters, few would argue that higher education governance itself is a public policy issue that might enamor the electorate. In the absence of public demands for governance reform, scholarship on the politics of reform has focused on the role of government bureaucrats, political actors, stakeholders or other key pressures and their influence on governance structures, processes and arrangements. All three papers provide thoughtful reviews of existing research on these political elements, and all three offer new insights based on the analysis of original data.

As Rubin ([this volume](#)) notes, scholarship on governance reform in the United States has focused considerable attention on the political activity and influences underscoring the reform of state-level governance structures. While there are

certainly federal government influences on public higher education (role of accreditation, student financial assistance, research funding), the politics of higher education governance reform is largely local. While state-level governance agencies might have once been understood to be “buffers” separating the sector from political interferences, these agencies themselves have become a form of political battleground; influencing or controlling these agencies (through controlling appointments to agency boards, modifying their roles or scope, etc.) became a mechanism for aligning the sector to the goals and objectives of those in power. Research on governance reform in the United States has led to the development of typologies to categorize state-level governing agencies (for example, McGuinness, 2016), and these typologies have provided a foundation for comparative studies of governance reforms over time, as well as analyses of the roles of various actors, stakeholders, and contextual elements in the politics of state-level governance reform. Case studies of the politics of local, state-level reforms, frequently but not always grounded in principle-agent theory, provide the foundation for multi-state or even national cross-case analyses within this highly complex, decentralized system of higher education. This work illuminates the role and influence of various actors and stakeholders, such as governors, legislative insiders and institutional leaders, but it also highlights the diversity of reforms, from large-scale restructuring of governance, to minor, nuanced, changes seen as politically advantageous.

Rubin ([this volume](#)) introduces the concept of “stakeholder salience” as a useful tool in the analysis of governance reform, and, in particular, his analysis of the Nevada case study presented in his paper. Like neo-pluralist notions that not all interests may be equal, stakeholder salience distinguishes between the relative importance or influence of stakeholders as actors within policy networks or policy communities.

Shanahan ([this volume](#)) frames her review of the politics of higher education governance reform in Canada within the unique arrangements of Canadian federalism. She notes that one of the key themes underscoring governance reform has been the increasing role of the federal government in the area of research policy, a dramatic shift in approach at the turn of the twenty-first century beginning with a reduction in federal indirect funding for higher education through national provincial-transfer programs in favour of new, direct investments in research and research infrastructure. Based on the interviews conducted for her study, this shift in policy approach was heavily influenced through the advocacy of a relatively small number of presidents of leading research universities. The success of these political actors in lobbying for change, and the magnitude of new investments, served to reinforce the importance of the federal government not just in funding university research, but as a political arena for advocacy, coalition-building, and stakeholder engagement. While these changes signal important shifts, the provinces continue to be responsible for higher education policy and Shanahan ([this volume](#)) notes that governance reforms have tended to focus on modifications to a relatively limited number of policy approaches or instruments tied directly or indirectly to government funding. Governance reforms are primarily seen as modifications to government funding mechanisms, frequently with increased strings attached, including, in some provinces, the increased use of direct agreements between individual universities and government, and performance

funding. Institutional governance (frequently bicameral with academic senates and boards focusing on administrative and financial oversight) continues to have considerable autonomy, though there are variations by province, with reforms emerging from shifting government regulation (and sometimes legislation) and the complex interactions within policy networks that underscore these shifts.

In their excellent review of the literature, Jungblut and Dobbins ([this volume](#)) note the important and complex role of political actors in the reform of governance within Western European systems of higher education, but they focus particular attention on the role of political parties. The fact that multi-party coalition governments are relatively common within the continental context means that understanding the preferences of political parties has different implications for governance reform in the European context that it does in the United States or Canada. Of course partisan politics plays a role in all three, but there are no coalition governments within what is essentially a two-party system in the United States, and minority parliaments are quite uncommon within Canadian provinces. Understanding the positioning of political parties across the ideological spectrum takes on a distinctive importance when governments are frequently formed by coalition, where small parties can play a vital role in forming a government. Given this context, Jungblut and Dobbins ([this volume](#)) provide a detailed review of the election manifestos of political parties in six European nations in order to explore the implications of party platforms in relation to the centralization (government steering) or decentralization (institutional autonomy involving rule-governed communities of scholars) of higher education governance. With the exception of the United Kingdom, they note that there are significant differences between political parties in each of the five other countries in terms of preferred approaches to governance. The ideological positioning of political parties has direct implications for both the higher education policy issues viewed as important enough to be included in an election manifesto, but also in the approach to governance (such as the role of markets in governing independent institutions, or the view of universities as instruments of national political agendas requiring government steering). In other words, while university governance itself has little public issue salience, they illuminate how parties identify higher education policy platforms that have important implications for governance and university autonomy.

Common Themes

At the heart of all three papers are two rather obvious commonalities. The first is that the political context, the structure of government and the traditions and histories that underscore the ways in which the role of government in relation to the governance or higher education are understood, are key elements in the analysis of the politics of higher education reform. The findings of each of these papers are not generalizable to the others without somehow taking into account the realities of Canadian federalism, the history and evolution of state coordinating mechanism in the United States, or the diversity of higher education systems, the range of

political/societal assumptions underscoring the relationships between universities and the state, and the realities of political coalitions and partisan politics within Western Europe. Context, including histories, structures, and political systems, clearly matters, in part because these contextual elements underscore the pathway and the related path dependencies that all three papers explicitly or implicitly allude to. These contextual factors also mean that there are important differences in the foci of political activity, for example the actions of governors, legislators and other stakeholders in reform initiatives that commonly focus on the role and activities of coordinating boards in the American states, the policy networks seeking to influence the ministries responsible for higher education within Canadian provinces, and the various actors, including political parties, government bureaucrats, and other stakeholders, who play a role in the reform of governance within European systems. Partisan politics is important in terms of understanding the complex implications of the two-party American system on higher education governance in the United States, the shifts in higher education policy direction in Canadian provinces, such as Alberta and Quebec (Bégin-Caouette et al., 2018; Eastman et al., 2022), and the realities of coalition governments within many European jurisdictions. Political actors are central to all three studies, but the focus of their attention differs dramatically given key differences in the political context in which they are functioning.

The second is that all three papers point towards bodies of scholarship that are comparative, but the jurisdictional foci for these comparative analyses differs dramatically. As Jungblut and Dobbins ([this volume](#)) note, there has been an increasing international comparative focus to studies of the politics of governance reform in Europe. Common pressures, such as NPM and Bologna, have led to a considerable body of scholarship that looks across national systems in order to understand governance reforms from a comparative perspective, but they also note the important role of transnational pressures, and transnational policy conversations influencing these reforms. The comparative elements within the higher education governance scholarship focusing on Canada and the United States have largely focused on province/state governance arrangements within the federal context of these systems. Shanahan ([this volume](#)) notes the work that she and others have done to compare provincial systems and governance reforms (Eastman et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2014). Rubin ([this volume](#)) points towards a robust body of scholarship comparing the politics of governance reforms between states. While scholarship in this area has become increasingly international and comparative in Europe, research in the United States and Canada continues to focus primarily on comparative studies within the jurisdiction, and international studies or perspectives are relatively uncommon. Comparative studies focusing on federal systems may be the important exception here, as scholars try to understand the commonalities and differences associated with higher education governance and governance reform within federations (Capano, 2015; Carnoy et al., 2018). One might, however, observe that the scholarship on higher education governance in the United States and Canada has been somewhat more insular than the scholarship within Europe.

The third is the importance of considering the multi-level nature of governance in research on the politics of governance reform. This theme is dealt with quite

explicitly by Shanahan ([this volume](#)) who documents the impact of federal government decisions to modify federal transfers to the provinces and markedly increase federal investments in research and innovation. Lobbying the federal government on research policy has become increasingly important given the magnitude of new investments. Changes in federal policy and strategy have had both direct and indirect implications for governance at both the provincial and institutional levels (Eastman et al., 2019). High levels of institutional autonomy implies that institutions have the capacity for self-governance, and so the politics of governance reform focuses both at the institutional level (involving leaders, internal and external constituencies and stakeholders), as well as provincial governance reforms, frequently involving increasing demands of accountability, new direct agreements between governance and institutions, and regulatory and funding shifts. Rubin ([this volume](#)) notes that the very emergence of state-level coordination was, at least in part, a response to a post-war federal government mandate. The newly elected Biden administration announced national plans for increasing access through some form of student funding arrangement to support tuition-free community college enrolment, changes that, if they had been enacted, would have had enormous implications for the politics of governance reform at the federal, state and institutional levels. The federal government's role in student financial assistance means that it has assumed a key role as "banker" within American higher education, and different governments have used this positioning to further national accountability and regulation mechanisms, especially for the large for-profit private higher education sector (Antonio et al., 2018). Rubin's case study focusing on Nevada, as well as many of the research studies that he reviews, point towards the shifts in governance at state and institutional levels, frequently involving transitions between levels of decentralization and centralization. The fact that Nevada's state coordinating board has been elected reinforces both the realities of multi-level governance, but also the distinctiveness of this political context. Jungblut and Dobbins ([this volume](#)) note the shifting relationships between universities and government within Western Europe as a response to both common, frequently transnational, challenges, but also within unique political context.

It is also interesting to note the sometimes multi-sector nature of multi-level governance, which adds further complexity to our understanding of the politics of higher education governance. While one might argue that the higher education "sector" that defined the boundaries of governance emerging through processes of massification (policies related to system expansion, educational quality, access, student financial assistance, etc.) is now complemented by government policies and funding arrangements focusing on research and innovation. Shanahan's analysis suggests that these policy sectors (one focusing on higher education, one focusing primarily on research) are operating almost in parallel and, within the Canadian federal system, assumed to be the primary responsibility of different levels of government. Somewhat similar sector distinctions can be found within the United States, where statewide governance arrangements focus primarily on addressing the higher education needs of the state, while the federal government continues to play a major role in research funding. One could argue that there are parallels in Europe given the growing importance of the European Research Council (and relevant European

Research Area initiatives), though in some countries national governments have also devoted considerable attention to the research and innovation policy sector, such as the Excellence Initiative in Germany (Götze, 2021). From the perspective of institution-level governance, the political processes and governance arrangements associated with both of these policy sectors are extremely important, especially since both may have steering effects, the two policy streams may sometimes be in tension, or increasing government investments in one sphere may serve to decrease the level of resource dependency on the second. Of course, the politics of research and development is influenced by the relative role of higher education within the national research and innovation system; roughly 42% of all research in Canada was performed by the higher education sector in 2018, compared with 13% in the United States or 18% in Germany (Bégin-Caouette et al., 2021; Finkelstein et al., 2021; Götze, 2021; Jung et al., 2021).

Given these common themes, the three papers point towards elements of both convergence and divergence in the politics of higher education governance reform. One might argue that there are clear elements of convergence associated with governance reforms emphasizing elements of institutional autonomy within the context of state steering and the increasing use of market mechanisms, and the “politics” of these reforms points towards the increasing importance of a wide range of political actors, including key stakeholders, within reform processes. All of these elements have implications for university administrators and institution-level governance. In advocating for the best interests of the university, administrators must carefully navigate within an increasingly complex web of stakeholder interests, while avoiding perceptions of partisanship. Perhaps the greatest defence of institutional autonomy is sound institutional governance, therefore demonstrating the strategic, decision-making capacity of the institution, and countering political perceptions of the need for reform or policy intervention.

Despite these broad elements of convergence, there continue to be very different structures and approaches to higher education governance both between and within the United States, Canada and Western Europe. There is little evidence that these very different systems are heading towards some common model, even though some common elements may be emerging. The politics of higher education governance reform continues to be grounded in the distinctive histories, political structures, and contextual features of each jurisdiction.

Looking across these three papers, there are few signs of convergence in terms of the scholarship on the politics of higher education governance reform. Each of the three papers points towards quite different theoretical foundations and bodies of prior research. There are few common elements, in fact one might conclude that each of the three papers is contributing to a quite distinct scholarly conversation on a relatively common theme.

The Possibilities of Comparative Scholarship

Each of these three chapters contributes to our understanding of the politics of governance reform, and how the study of these political processes and elements have been taken up in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. Each illuminates the distinctive political elements underscoring higher education governance reform in these unique contexts, and of course the review of literature on the increasing comparative nature of scholarship on governance in Western Europe, catalysed in part by common pressures and transnational conversations, illuminates the increasing recognition of distinctive national histories and political contexts within jurisdictions in the region, but also the possibilities associated with drawing from the scholarship of political science to add to the theoretical sophistication of research in this area.

One is left with a clear sense of the possibilities of further comparative scholarship in the analysis of the politics of higher education governance reform across these jurisdictions. What might we learn from a comparative conversation framed by a common conceptual vocabulary and relatively common theoretical foundation? In what ways might more systematic forms of comparative analysis provide us with new ways of understanding or exploring the distinctive contextual elements underscoring these complex political processes? In what ways might further comparative studies in this important areas raise questions or lead to insights that might not have arisen within bodies of scholarship that have focused on the local, national, or regional dimensions?

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