

# Multi-level Governance: Theory or a Useful Conceptualisation?

It is probably incorrect to describe multi-level governance (MLG) as a fully-fledged *theory* of integration like (neo-functionalism for example) as MLG provides a conceptualisation of the EU rather than a theory *per se*. MLG does make assumptions about the European polity that can be tested but MLG is perhaps best thought of as offering a midway conceptualisation between different supranational and intergovernmental theories. Rather than focus on one theory or another, MLG is conceptually flexible as a framework for understanding the EU in that it allows one to use different approaches and mid-range theories to explain outcomes in different aspects of the EU.

## *Multi-level Governance*

The concept of multi-level governance is built on a number of foundations.

1. Firstly, European integration means that decision making capacity in the EU rests at a number of different levels. The most important of these being the supranational level of EU institutions, the national level of governments and the sub-national (and thus transnational levels) of sub-state actors such as local governments and interest groups (Nugent, 2003, p.473).
2. Secondly, European integration has meant a loss of sovereignty for states (or more accurately national governments). Conversely however, European integration has *increased* the capacity of supranational bodies and sub-national actors who now operate across national boundaries (Nugent, 2003, p.474). Generally speaking, the intergovernmentalist view of states as the sole important actors of European politics is

rejected, or downplayed at least, by those who advocate MLG (Nugent, 2003, p.473).

3. The supranational, national and sub-national levels of government are seen to be *interconnected* with political developments at one level impacting on the other levels (Nugent, 2003, p.474). Again, the state-centric model that sees states as the sole arbiters of European politics and the channels through which actors engage in the European sphere is thus challenged by the MLG. Within this framework, developments at the sub-national level, for example, can have a profound impact on other levels and consequently impact on the speed and shape of integration (Nugent, 2003, p.474).

### *Criticism and benefits of MLG*

However, despite providing an interesting model of the EU polity, multi-level governance has faced a number of criticisms. MLG has been criticised, for example, for its lack of explanatory ability. It has been asserted that, while a useful tool of analysis that captures the complexity of the EU, MLG lacks theoretical focus and offers little in the way of explanatory power. Some have questioned how much MLG has to offer beyond drawing attention to the fact that the EU is complex. MLG is also criticised for not attributing enough influence to the international level and its effects on EU politics (Nugent, 2003, p.474). Indeed, intergovernmentalists continue to argue that states still dominate the supranational and local sub-national levels of government and that MLG offers nothing profoundly new.

However, as a conceptual framework, MLG does also present a number of benefits. Primarily, it allows for the utilisation of different theories to explain different parts of the EU integration process and different aspects of EU politics. While this raises the question of the interoperability between these

theories (technically known as their 'commensurability' i.e. do they contradict each other) MLG facilitates a more theoretically pragmatic approach to thinking conceptually about the EU.

Multi-level governance is thus a framework of analysis and a way of conceptualising the European Union that allows for scholars to draw on different theories to explain developments. However, MLG in of itself is not really a 'theory' as it does not really analyse the causes of EU integration or EU political developments and thus does not offer explanations *per se*.

### ***Further Reading***

Nugent, N. (2003). *The Government and Politics of the European Union*. Palgrave: Basingstoke