

Sovereignty, Intergovernmentalism and Supranationalism

This extract discusses three fundamental and interrelated concepts; sovereignty, intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. These three notions are essential to understanding the theorisation of the EU and will be discussed much throughout the rest of this module. This extract first highlights the concept of sovereignty and the notion of “pooling sovereignty” and then goes on to discuss the distinction between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism in the EU.

Defining sovereignty

Sovereignty is *the* defining concept of the inter-state system. Indeed, without the concept of sovereignty there would be not states and there would be no interstate system. Sovereignty is thus an important concept in the context of European politics and it lies at the heart of many debates about European integration.

Sovereignty is composed of (at least) three important and distinct factors however. Firstly, sovereignty entails the *right* in a (legal or legitimate sense) to be the ultimate authority with a defined territorial space (*de jure* sovereignty). Secondly, it entails the ability to actually control what happens within that defined territory (*de facto* sovereignty). Thirdly, sovereignty entails recognition of a government’s right (and to a certain extent ability) to be the ultimate authority within a given space *by other states* (external recognition). Diminishing any one of these factors reduces the extent to which a government can be held to be sovereign. The interstate system comes in to being because firstly, there are governments that meet the first and second criteria above (*de facto* and *de jure* sovereignty) and secondly, these states (for the main part) recognise each other.

A very good discussion of the concept of sovereignty can be found [here](#).

Pooling sovereignty

The European Union however presents a number of interesting questions in relation to the sovereignty of its member states. Indeed, it is frequently asserted that the joining the EU involves a loss or the ‘giving up’ of sovereignty to the EU.

Have states 'lost' sovereignty in the EU? Undoubtedly mechanisms exist whereby the EU can (and does) make rules that override the rules and laws of member states. However, states have to give permission to the EU to do this in the first place (via treaties) and, in theory at least, they could withdraw from the EU at any time. Indeed, states in the EU have "pooled sovereignty", meaning that they have decided to collectively make decisions with each one agreeing that the EU can make certain decisions in certain policy areas. Secondly, as some scholars such as Nugent (2003, p.478) argue, the concepts of *de facto* and *de jure* sovereignty can sometimes be in tension. As was discussed previously, major international trends associated with globalisation have undermined states' abilities to control what happens within their territories. While states possess *de jure* sovereignty, the ability to put this into practice in a *de facto* sense is increasingly difficult. Indeed, by giving up some *de jure* sovereignty and pooling sovereignty at the EU level, European states are able to (collectively) use the weight of the EU to increase their *de facto* control over what happens in their countries (but doing so involves agreeing what to do in the first place and agreeing to pool decision making at the EU level).

Intergovernmentalism and supranationalism in the EU

The concepts of intergovernmentalism and supranationalism are fundamental to understanding discussions surrounding sovereignty in the European Union and thus essential so as to be able to obtain a thorough grasp of EU integration theory.

As Nugent suggests (2003, p.475), *intergovernmentalism* refers to arrangements "whereby nation states, in situations and conditions they can control, cooperate with one another on matters of common interest". Under such circumstances states are free to cooperate (or not) and are able to set the level of cooperation. Normally, this is ensured through a **veto**, where a state, when so choosing, can block any proposal presented by any other parties. Such circumstances involve no loss (or pooling) of sovereignty. States cooperate when they want and don't cooperate when they don't want to.

However, supranationalism refers to governance arrangements where states decide to delegate some responsibility for decision making to a body or decision-making forum that stands above the nation state. Here states lose the right to veto and agree to be bound by majority decisions of cooperating states and thus lose some control (but they still have to agree to do this, i.e. to pool

sovereignty, in the first place). In these circumstances states may have to go along with a policy that contravenes their particular preferences in a given instance. As Nugent (2003, p475) notes “supranationalism takes inter-state relations beyond cooperation into integration, and involves some loss of national sovereignty”.

Supranationalism and intergovernmentalism are different ends of a continuum. No structure in the EU is perfectly intergovernmental or supranational and different institutions can be more or less intergovernmental/supranational at different times. The Commission, for example, (normally thought of as a supranational entity) sometimes follows the lead of member states (in some external matters for example) while at other times the Commission is the driver of European policy, taking the lead ahead of national capitals. Furthermore, while the EU has become more supranational in general as time as gone on, states still try to reach a unanimous consensus in supranational forums, even when technically speaking they don't have to (Nugent, 2003, p.476).

The fact that supranationalism entails a loss of sovereignty raises the question of why states would agree to enter in to such governance arrangements. Indeed, this is the question that animates a very large part of the theoretical literature on EU integration. There is no short answer (as will be seen throughout the rest of this unit), but at this stage we can posit three areas to look at that are worth keeping in mind as you read about the different theories of integration - 1) The benefits to be gained from pooling sovereignty (often thought of in terms of efficiency and increased 'agency' or the capacity to act), 2) the costs involved in not pooling sovereignty (are states worse off going it alone?) and 3) what is considered normatively or ethically the 'right' or most 'appropriate' thing to do.

Further reading:

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