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Governing by Commission: A Way to More Effective Democratic Governance or a Loss of Democratic Accountability?

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The growing interest for the role of think tanks and other institutions offering political advice can be seen as part of the increasing relevance of governance as opposed to government. The different forms of political advice, its relevance for the decision-making process, and its normative implications have gained widespread academic attention. In Germany, think tanks not being as common and influential as in other countries, the discussion has been focused upon other institutionalized forms of political consultancy. The first and second Red-Green governments led by Gerhard Schröder provide rich empirical data on the functions and effective results of different types of non-permanent commissions which are installed by the government. The empirical findings show that the effect of these commissions goes beyond the provision of political advice. The normative discussion in the light of different theories of democracy leads to the conclusion that the commissions' effects on democratic legitimacy and participation are ambivalent: Possible gains on the side of the output-legitimacy are accompanied by drawbacks on the side of the input-legitimacy. Commissions do widen the chances of participation but they do not meet the demands of political equality and deliberative democracy.

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