

Factors contributing to the use of foresight reports in parliament – the German case

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Abstract:

This study investigates the factors influencing the effective use of public sector foresight reports in political decision-making, with a particular focus on the German parliamentary context. Utilizing the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as a theoretical framework, the research examines the perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEOU), attitude towards using (ATU), and behavioral intention to use (BIU) of foresight reports among German parliamentarians. The study extends TAM by incorporating specific contextual factors relevant to foresight in policymaking, such as participative foresight, the organizational setup of foresight units, and the actionability of insights. Through a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) approach, the paper aims to unravel the complex interplay between these factors and their impact on parliamentarians' willingness to integrate foresight reports into their legislative work.

The current hypotheses suggest that participative foresight, perceived actionability of reports, and alignment with political ideologies significantly influence the acceptance and use of foresight in policy formulation. However, the data collection is still to be done. This research will contribute to the literature on public management and foresight studies by providing nuanced insights into the success factors and challenges associated with incorporating foresight reports into political decision-making processes. Additionally, the study will offer practical implications for enhancing the impact of foresight activities within the public sector, particularly in terms of report design, dissemination strategies, and stakeholder engagement.

1 Introduction

“There is an adage that politicians use science the way a drunk uses a lamppost – more for support than for illumination.” (King & Thomas, 2007, p. 1702) Even though this critical notion of political decision-makers makes a stark contrast, the use of foresight as a method to understand complexity has increased in the decision environment of politics in recent years.

Scholars argue that foresight is a method which deals with plausible futures and aims to foster the understanding of potential resulting opportunities and threats (Fuerth & Faber, 2012, p. 7). Thereby, the method focuses on shaping and influencing policies and strategies (Guston, 2014, p. 232). Also, as foresight exercises lacked concrete impact on the policy-making process, a requirement for more concrete relation to the political agenda was introduced to reduce decoupling and enhance direct relevance (Andersen & Rasmussen, 2014).

On the other side, there has not been a lot of research focusing on the recipients of said foresight outputs, namely the policymakers themselves. This, despite the high relevance of understanding the link between the existence of foresight reports from the public administration and the receptiveness of decision-makers within the political structures. Understanding this link helps understanding the success factors and potential pitfalls of foresight activities and reports of the public administration.

By researching the proposed question, the research will contribute to the field of public management by focusing on what the “consumers” of public sector foresight reports need in those reports for them to actively consider them in their political decision-making process (Konrad & Böhle, 2019). This is especially important as one of the central aims of foresight is the contribution to political decisions by providing the decision-makers with an understanding of the uncertainties which are included in the specific political decisions. Furthermore, certain governments have already started either engaging in foresight themselves via committees focusing on futures (see, e.g., Pouru-Mikkola et al., 2023) or collaborating with scientific institutions to gain insights (see, e.g., Weber et al., 2019).

Especially given that the process of foresight is distinctively not during the decision-making process but before and after it, understanding success factors influencing the consideration in the decision-making is the central contribution to the field. The paper is distinct in approaching the question by analyzing combinations of factors and how they individually or in combination influence politicians' willingness to consider foresight reports.

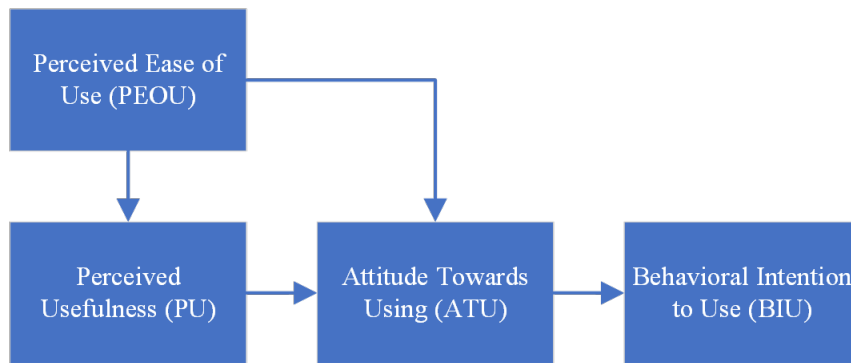
Therefore, the research question for the present paper is the following:

RQ: What configuration of factors contribute to an effective use of public sector foresight reports in political decisions?

To answer the question, the present paper first presents the technology acceptance model as the theoretical framework. In a next step, the contextual factors of foresight in the policy making process, including the specific focus on the German case, are elaborated. Following this, the chosen method of Qualitative Comparative Analysis is further analyzed. Finally, preliminary results and conclusions are presented.

2 Theoretical framework

The technology acceptance model (TAM) has been widely adapted since its creating in 1989 (Davis, 1989). It works under the assumption that the full effectivity of e measure, i.e. the technology, can only be achieved when it is accepted by the respective users (Davis & Venkatesh, 1996). Present study focuses on what has been described as the “core functions” of the model, being the perceived usefulness (PU), perceived ease of use (PEOU), attitude towards using (ATU) and behavioral intention to use (BIU) (Erasmus et al., 2015, p. 2). The model identifies the perceptions of both the PU and the PEOU as the independent variables and ATU and BIU as the dependent variables.



In the current translation of the TAM into the relevant context, the following assumptions are made.

In the context of foresight reports, PU is defined as the extent to which parliamentarians believe that using these reports will enhance their decision-making capabilities and policy formulation. This can be related to the anticipatory intelligence and understanding of alternative courses of action provided by foresight processes.

PEOU would involve assessing how parliamentarians perceive the complexity or ease of understanding and integrating foresight reports into their work. Factors influencing this could include the accessibility of the information presented and the extent to which the reports are deemed actionable and directly applicable to political decisions. The “ease of use”, thus, is focusing on the use of foresight in the policy making.

ATU can be seen as the parliamentarians' overall affective reaction to the use of foresight reports in policymaking. This could include their personal views on the value of foresight in public administration, their openness to using anticipatory intelligence in decision-making, and their perceptions of the legitimacy and credibility of the foresight process, including participative foresight.

BIU measures the stated likelihood that parliamentarians will use foresight reports in their policymaking processes. This could be influenced by their PU and PEOU, as well as external factors such as party lines, committee memberships, and the political context (e.g., coalition vs. opposition dynamics in the German parliamentary system).

3 Conceptualizing foresight in policy making in TAM

3.1 Foresight and foresight outputs

Research describes foresight as a distinct process using selected methods with the final aim of developing an understanding of alternative courses of action and anticipatory intelligence (Fuerth & Faber, 2012; Gavigan et al., 2001; Piirainen & Gonzalez, 2015). Distinctively, foresight has the aim to actively influence policies and strategies in both the public and the private sector (Heo & Seo, 2021, p. 2).

Foresight in the public sector most frequently focuses on supporting the decision-making of the respective country and positively influence the future path of the state (Schmidt, 2015, p. 494). Thereby, they follow what research describes as a scenario frame, presenting alternatives to politicians that would then allow them to make better decisions (Minkkinen et al., 2019; Rijkens-Klomp & Van Der Duin, 2014). Despite this, there has been little accumulation of what research considers futures knowledge (Dufva & Ahlqvist, 2015).

Most foresight engagements communicate their findings in the form of a foresight report, either public or to a limited audience (Jütersonke & Munro, 2024). Foresight reports, in day-to-day decision-making and the policy cycle, are frequently criticized as a far removed from the actual problems (SOIF, 2021). Research shows that the trust in the foresight report increases that the trust in the published results is increased when the people had the possibility to participate and enhance their understanding of the complexities that ought to be tackled in the foresight project (Cairns et al., 2016; Havas et al., 2010). This is also referred to as participative foresight. Following this, the first hypothesis is:

H₁: Parliamentarians show higher willingness to use the results of the foresight report when they had the possibility to participate in the process of the foresight project.

3.2 Influencing Factors

The public administration is assumed to be one if not the key provider of information for politicians, thus wielding influence on the decision-making process in politics by acting as agenda “manipulators” (Blom-Hansen et al., 2021, p. 659). This is in accordance with the tasks of the administration, as they should provide the necessary resources and information. Thereby, the administration can improve the quality of the decisions made with specifically tailored information for the relevant issues in the policy cycle (Schedler & Eicher, 2013, p. 379). Therefore, the reports published by public administrations are assumed to have an impact on politicians’ decisions.

An additional factor that is critically analyzed in research is the proximity of administrations’ foresight projects to decision-makers, talking about the organizational setup. This can either be argued to have a negative impact by increasing the potential short-termism of decisions and more politicization of the matters, or positively enhance the relevance of the topics and the willingness of politicians to actually use the insights (Jütersonke & Munro, 2024, p. 7).

Furthermore, the organizational setup of how the foresight unit is located within the structures of the public administration plays a central role. This was identified in paper 1, with the second pillar of the framework mainly being concerned with different approaches to this aspect. This setup influences both the ability to use cross-departmental information and questions of the proximity to the political decision-makers, both in the executive and the legislative branch of government.

As a second point, Schmertzing (2021) has identified an additional gap between the foresight producers and political decision makers. He outlines the challenge of a too strong focus on theoretical arguments, meaning too few directly applicable contents, denying a simple route between the foresight report having an influence on the political decisions (Schmertzing, 2021, p. 14). The second hypothesis, thus, is the following.

H₂: Members of parliament show higher willingness to use foresight report if they perceive the report's results as easily politically actionable.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 focus on procedural questions. The following three hypotheses focus on political questions.

One key hypothesis is that when choosing whether to incorporate the insights from a foresight report, decision-makers would often consider whether it aligns with their ideological positions, or publicly stated commitments more broadly. In a parliamentary system with strong parties, this would often be the “party line” (Baumann et al., 2015, p. 201; Martin et al., 2011, p. 89). Therefore, the third hypothesis is:

H₃: Parliamentarians in the same party show little discrepancies in their willingness to use foresight reports in decision-making.

3.3 Foresight in German public administration

The German political system is based on a federal structure and a parliamentary democracy. The administration is located in the executive branch of the government. The executive in Germany is most frequently considered to be a coalition government, meaning that there is a governing party-combination and an opposition consisting of one or more parties (German Federal Foreign Office, 2024).

When looking at a coalition government, there is the tendency that more oversight is requested by the committees in parliament (Ban et al., 2023; MacDonald & McGrath, 2016). When interpreted as a heightened caution towards the outputs of the public administration by the opposition, maybe driven by the desirability bias, the following fourth hypothesis is derived.

H₄: In the German case, members of the governing parties (“coalition parties”) show higher willingness to consider the results of a specific foresight report than members of a party in the opposition.

Last, a well-established link in legislative is the membership in a committee, independent from the personal interests of a member of parliament (Miler, 2017). The membership in a relevant committee tasked with considering the implications of the concrete topic of a relevant foresight report, would therefore be

an important determinant for the potential use of the results presented in a concrete report. Thus, the fourth hypothesis is derived.

H₅: Members of a committee that focuses on the topic present in the specific report show higher willingness to use the report's results.

4 Method

In the following, the methodological foundation for the present paper is developed. To do this, first, the case selection is explained and the relevance of understanding the concrete case is analyzed. Second, the data collection approach is further expanded on. In a third step, the method of analysis is explained in the context of the research question.

4.1 Case selection

Germany has recently started to put an enhanced focus on anticipatory capacities within their administration. In the staff of the German Chancellery, the "Abteilung 6" has a special sub-group focusing on political planning and strategic foresight. This was initiated with the "Organisationsentscheidung vom 23. April 2018", and it brings together a total of eight people working on foresight per December 2020 (Hoppenstedt, 2021).

Additionally, there was an in-depth analysis of how the German government could benefit even more from practicing foresight. This study was ordered by the government itself and conducted by the Fraunhofer-Institut für System- und Innovationsforschung ISI. In short, they found that the German government has multiple points for further connections, yet still lack integration (Warnke et al., 2022, p. 5). Nevertheless, the German government has experience in applying combinations of foresight methods (Cuhls et al., 2009).

Further foresight endeavors can be found in several sub-divisions of the federal structures in the German administration. First, the Federal Academy for Security Policy, who combine additional research with concrete practical advancements. The academy even has introduced a specialized competence center for the practice of foresight methods (Federal Academy for Security Policy, 2023a). Furthermore, they have the task to connect the foresight practicing community. Also, they conduct and publish analyses of methods of foresight (Federal Academy for Security Policy, 2023b).

Second, the Federal Ministry for Economic Collaboration and Development also has applied tools of foresight in their work. The method most frequently applied in the work of the Ministry is the Delphi technique, bringing together experts and stakeholders in a concrete subject and understand potential future developments in their work (Federal Ministry for Economic Collaboration and Development, 2023). Thereby, they aim to understand potential future developments in the field of economic development and collaboration in the face of the interaction effects of global economic trends.

With an increasing focus on the institutionalization of foresight processes (Warnke et al., 2022) and an increasing number of concrete projects within the ministries, the case of Germany has the conditions

necessary to study the subject at hand. Furthermore, it has a clear organizational approach to foresight which allows for an application of the framework developed in the first paper. It is not the main aim to create generalizable results, but by applying the framework developed in the first paper, potential contextual factors may be identified allowing for a transfer of the results in Germany. Lastly, the German parliament is described in research as having a strong focus on expertise and a well-organized dissemination of information through the party structures (Holzhacker, 2005), creating a promising case for foresight.

4.2 Data Collection

The data collection is yet to be conducted. Nevertheless, the currently proposed data collection process follows the logic of first, understanding the selection criteria, then second identifying the correct sample size, and third following through and conduct the collection.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the willingness of parliamentarians to use foresight reports in decision-making, all members of the German Bundestag will be members of the sample of interest. However, further information must be sampled. These additional criteria for participants in this study will include:

1. **Party Affiliation:** Including members from both coalition and opposition parties to assess variations in willingness to use foresight reports, addressing hypothesis H₃.
2. **Committee Membership:** Prioritizing members who are part of committees relevant to the topics of available foresight reports, in line with hypothesis H₄. This criterion aims to explore the link between committee involvement and the propensity to utilize foresight in policy-making.
3. **Participation in Foresight Activities:** Identifying members who have had direct involvement in foresight projects or those who have been part of the audience for foresight presentations, to test hypothesis H₁ regarding the impact of participative foresight.
4. **Ideological Stance and Public Commitments:** Considering members' public statements and ideological positions to examine the alignment with foresight report insights, which corresponds with hypothesis H₂.

Given the specific focus on the German Bundestag and the need for a manageable yet representative sample, the following considerations will guide the determination of sample size:

1. **Representativeness:** Aiming for a sample that includes members from all major political parties in the Bundestag to ensure diverse ideological perspectives are represented.
2. **Feasibility:** Taking into account the practical constraints of conducting in-depth interviews or surveys with busy parliamentarians, a target sample size of 30-50 members is proposed. This range allows for a balance between depth of insight and breadth of representation across different parties and committees.
3. **Stratified Sampling:** Employing a stratified sampling technique to ensure that each subgroup (e.g., party affiliation, committee membership) is proportionally represented in the sample, enhancing the study's validity.

This structured approach will ensure a systematic and rigorous data collection process, enabling a thorough investigation of the role of foresight in the decision-making processes of members of the German Bundestag.

4.3 Data Analysis

The methodological approach of choice is a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), as presented in Kahwati and Kane (2020). QCA is helpful as it maintains cases as a holistic unit but allow for can also generate findings across cases as it incorporates qualitative and quantitative data and allows for an analysis (Kahwati & Kane, 2020, p. 8). Additionally, it is the appropriate method to understand combinations of factors leading to a given outcome – or its potential non-appearance.

This method is mainly applicable for complex and multidimensional problems that do not allow for one-dimensional answers (Hancké, 2009, p. 80). According to a search on Web of Science and Google Scholar, there has not been an application of the QCA method in the field of foresight yet. In my opinion, this is a missed chance, as both the field and the method focus on complex and systemic challenges and aim to tackle them in a structured way. Hence, I would like to aim with my second paper to understand reasons or combinations of them which lead to policymakers using foresight reports published by their respective national public administration. This is in accordance with the theoretical argument that foresight should provide information and options for policymakers in their decision-making (Jones, 2017).

The research objects of the QCA, the “cases”, will be the participants in the survey. As of now, these will be members of parliament in the German Bundestag, ranging over all parties represented in the legislative branch. It is important to find an alignment between the hypotheses laid out above and the cases, so that the hypotheses are actually applicable on the same level. The study is taking inspiration from previous QCA applications in the field of public management and political science (see, for example, Haesebrouck & Van Immerseel, 2020; Krook, 2010; Kurz & Ettensperger, 2023; Schimmelfennig et al., 2006).

5 Results

As mentioned before, the data collection has not yet happened. Thus, there are no results that could currently be reported. Hence, the following will focus on expected contributions. The expected contributions are mainly dependent on the assumptions and the conditions defined in the survey. Nevertheless, there are certain preliminary expected contributions that the study aims to work towards.

Firstly, the study aims to work with prior research in the field of legislative behavior and the role of the public administration as an information provider. Additionally, it highlights possible approaches people collaborating in foresight projects should take to actively target and have the highest influence possible.

Secondly, by understanding necessary and sufficient conditions of how foresight reports wield an influence on the political decision-makers. These conditions will be determined by the hypotheses, and therefore require further examination. Based on the current preliminary hypotheses, factors such as belonging

to a party and active targeting of commission members within parliament would be assumed to be suitable conditions for inclusion in the decision-making process. Further additional factors and combinations must be found and tested with the QCA method.

The research aims to empirically contribute to prior research on the influence of foresight on policy making. Concretely, open questions such as the possibility to connect the structures of foresight with the policy cycle and the learning effects from foresight projects could be targeted (van der Steen & van Twist, 2012). Furthermore, it adds to the string of theory of anticipatory knowledge in policy making, accompanying the relevant research done by van der Steen and van Twist (2013) on the Dutch case.

6 Conclusion

The relevance of the proposed research is twofold, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the understanding of the inclusion of foresight reports in actual decision-making contributes to the literature on success factors for public sector foresight activities. Furthermore, it aims to foster the understanding of the process between the creation of and the use of public sector foresight reports. Practically, it allows the public sector to learn from the results and proactively gain the interest of the relevant decision-makers. Both contributions aim to emphasize the importance of foresight activities within the public administration.

Despite not yet providing results, there are certain important limitations to consider. An important limitation set by the methodological choice is the minimum number of cases that should be used in the analysis to avoid what is called “logical reminders” (Kahwati & Kane, 2020, p. 106). If a set of six conditions was to be tested, each condition having the variables 0 and 1 (so either “membership” or “non-membership”, also known as crisp-set QCA), the number of cases should be 6^2 , 36 to be concrete. This means that the minimum number of participants in the survey should not be below this set number to avoid that a combination of factors cannot be evaluated by definition. Therefore, a careful definition of the conditions is necessary. This is all working under the assumption that a crisp-set QCA approach would be feasible, meaning that the cases would either be full members of a set or fully non-members, and part-membership can be ruled out.

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