

*Jörg Dräger, Christina Tillmann, Frank Frick*

# Wie politische Ideen Wirklichkeit werden

Der ReformKompass

Ein Lehr- und Praxisbuch

## Abstract

Political reforms are complex. Though aware of this fact, we were still disappointed when we confronted political realities and failed – yet again – with a reform proposal. Of course, we had thoroughly analyzed the existing problems, factored in all the current scholarly findings, taken into account the most recent judgment of Germany’s constitutional court and even given thought to issues of financing and administration. But then came the terse response: “That’s not implementable.” Our first thought was “Excuse me?” We wanted to ask: “Wait a minute! Aren’t you and your party in power? Haven’t you repeated – whenever and wherever you could – that things just can’t stay this way, that there must be a reform? And what does ‘not implementable’ mean, anyway? And by whom?”

The response that followed surprised us – especially because it had absolutely nothing to do with the content of our proposal: If we took the issue on now, they told us, we’d give our political rivals a chance to score points and boost their standing. The reform would be hard to communicate to people, they added, so there’s no laurels to be won. On top of that, they said, we’ve already asked too much of a certain group within the party in recent years, and the war chest has been exhausted.

So what happened? Did we maybe have the right idea – but just at the wrong time? Or was our concept missing some key element? Besides scientific evidence, what else do you have to take into consideration to give a good solution a good shot at being implemented? Which “political logic” must be heeded with reform proposals? Simply put, why do some reforms succeed and others fail?

Political reforms clearly don’t follow any simple, inherent logic. The “how” of the reform – in other words, the process – is at least as important as the content, the “what.”

In 2006, these questions and experiences were the starting point for a series of studies, workshops and discussions that would later spawn books, brochures, lectures and seminars. We wanted to understand what made reform policies work as well as the logic and elements that successful political reforms share in common, as well as how they fit together. During this exploration, we were confronted with skepticism across the board. People working in the fields of politics and public administration felt that reforms could hardly be planned. But due to our personal experience in developing reform concepts, whether as political consultants or in government office, we respectfully disagree: In our view, it is precisely the complexity of political reform projects that makes it necessary to adopt a structured, meticulously planned and strategic approach. We have developed a model for doing so: the ReformCompass. It helps by providing guidance in complex reform contexts as well as with planning and implementing concrete measures.

We are convinced that the methods and tools necessary for successful reforms can be taught and studied at universities – and, more importantly, *should* be taught and studied. Our textbook “How Political Ideas Become Reality” provides a basis for just that. In it, we present case studies drawn from real-world practice to show how – with the aid of the ReformCompass – one can better understand past political reforms and better plan future reforms.

*Chapter 1* explains how processes of change in the political realm differ from those in world of private business as well as why this makes it necessary to have models specifically designed for the public sector. It then discusses how the ReformCompass takes into account not only the logic of political communication and power, but also the need to continually adapt reforms to changing framework conditions. Since such processes of change are not linear, they need to be managed in a flexible way. The ReformCompass keeps this in mind as a strategic model that is systematic as well as in step with real-world practice.

*Chapter 2* focuses on the three decisive criteria for success: competence, communication and capability to implement. Key examples demonstrate which pitfalls – whether in terms of content, communication or power politics – reformers must be able to navigate as well as what they should bear in mind in order to succeed. Using

the example of the introduction of parental benefits (*Elterngeld*), Chapter 2.1 shows how important the success criterion competence – in essence, having the necessary knowledge related to the specialized subject matter and processes – is for the success of reforms. Chapter 2.2 then takes the example of the Agenda 2010 and Hartz labor and welfare-benefit reforms to illustrate how important communication and dialogue are in a process of change. Lastly, Chapter 2.3 examines the introduction of a gender quota in Germany to demonstrate how one can use the appropriate capability to implement to score a (partial) victory even in a difficult reform environment.

In *Chapter 3*, we want to understand who manages a good reform. Doing so requires individuals who can ensure the professional management of reform content, communication and power politics. They make up the core strategic group, in which the key tasks of planning, managing and implementing are being handled. Who will contribute the necessary specialized knowledge? Who is needed to put an issue on the political agenda? And who can assist in winning over important backers of the reform? These are the key questions concerning the make-up of the core strategic group. Still, a reform will rarely succeed if citizens aren't involved in the reform process. Thus, at the end of this chapter, we examine how the core group and citizens should work together.

Of course, as the saying goes, one is always wiser in hindsight. Thus, we don't want to limit ourselves to understanding the failures or successes of concluded or ongoing reforms. If you (and we) want to see our proposed reforms succeed, we must be able to deliver realistic implementation proposals along with good ideas. For this reason, in *Chapter 4*, our closing section, we shift our focus forward and use the ReformCompass to plan a future reform. Using the example of the National Education Council, which could provide for more comparability and quality in Germany's federalist education system, we run through the entire process of the ReformCompass, with all of its phases and success criteria – an ideal exercise for “testing” all of the relevant concepts.

In addition to interested university students, the target group of this book also includes individuals active in political parties, associations and administration. Accordingly, we have opted to use a style that is

more application-oriented than academic in nature, in that it uses descriptive case studies, figures and overviews. With this in mind, we have refrained from conveying our approach in the manner that is customary for scholarship and would thereby make it part of the scholarly debate. Instead, we make reference to further reading as well as more in-depth treatments at the appropriate places in the text.

Lastly, one small note: Our book is written in a way that allows readers to “jump” into it at various points. However, we do recommend that readers first familiarize themselves with the model by reading Chapter 1 and taking a close look at the overview illustration provided in the cover flap. But readers can let their interests guide them in determining which of the subsequent chapters to read and in what order. In our view, this kind of structuring satisfies our goals of making this book something that can provide not only support in the classroom, but also easily accessible and self-explanatory suggestions for real-world practitioners.