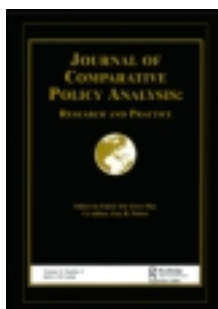


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### Introduction: The Determinants of Policy Change: Advancing the Debate

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# Introduction: The Determinants of Policy Change: Advancing the Debate

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**ABSTRACT** *The issue of policy dynamics is a key one in policy studies and one which is particularly amenable to comparative policy research. Understanding how policies change and the conditions which facilitate or constrain such changes is required if policy managers are to effectively manage policy dynamics and, as such, is a key subject of interest to policy analysts. However, before comparative research can generate valid results, several key issues with respect to the definition, conceptualization and operationalization of policy change must be addressed.*

Many studies of policy change continue to show a remarkable blindness when it comes to understanding their epistemological and methodological premises, resulting in an equally remarkable variety of unnecessary theories and frameworks. Such unwarranted theoretical diversity often encourages the compartmentalization of perspectives which fail to enrich each other, and too often results in the production of isolated, incompatible, and non-cumulative research results.

Many theoretical problems in the study of policy change need to be assessed and resolved if empirical and conceptual progress is to be made in this area of study.

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For example, there is considerable debate over the revolutionary or evolutionary nature of policy change, over which levels of abstraction are best suited to the analysis of policy change, and over the classification of types of policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 2002). Then there is the unresolved dilemma of the scope and timing of change: when can any given change be considered fundamental or marginal? How does time influence the scope of change? And over what time period must a study be conducted in order to discern actual policy dynamics? There are also a number of substantially different views regarding the drivers of change (ideas, interests, political institutions, political and policy actors, networks, socio-economic conditions, etc.) and their forms of interaction (can they be ordered in a sequence or a causal chain capable of substantiating a general theory of change, or does the theoretical framework have to be adjusted to the specific type of change and level of abstraction?).

The different conceptualizations of change found in the policy literature can be reduced to four general theoretical perspectives on historical sequencing which appear alone or in combination in various contemporary models and frameworks of policy dynamics. These are the “cyclical” (in which change occurs but returns to the status quo), “dialectic” (in which change occurs through a process of negation and synthesis), “linear” (in which change occurs in an evolutionary fashion without any clear endpoint) and “teleological” (in which change occurs in the direction of a final identifiable goal-state) patterns (Hernes 1976, Van de Ven and Poole 1995). Policy scholars, however, very often endorse a specific perspective without being aware of the consequences of this adoption for research design, operationalization of variables, choice of methodology (Abbott 1988, 1990) and, unfortunately, research results.

For example, as political science and public policy studies show:

- a. the emphasis placed on *structure vs. agency* in explaining patterns of policy change affects the nature of the variables sought and the models constructed to explain change. Cyclical and teleological models promote structural factors to the foreground in explaining outcomes. On the other hand, if agency prevails, as it does in the dialectical and linear models which have no pre-established trajectory, policy processes are often conceived of as so open to alteration that it is very difficult to design convincing *ex ante* hypotheses (Knill and Lenschow 2001);
- b. the choice of a focus upon *endogenous vs. exogenous variables* in the search for causal factors is also heavily influenced by the model of change adopted or endorsed. Cyclical, linear and teleological models tend to focus on continuities which prevent internal factors from altering homeostatic equilibria and thus turn to exogenous variables in order to account for change. By contrast, dialectical models tend to focus on endogenous variables which are deemed, *a priori*, as capable of stimulating large-scale change (La Porte 1975, Sabatier 1988);
- c. the general dichotomy of ‘*revolution vs. evolution*’ underlies change processes in the models – with dialectical and cyclical models expected to be revolutionary and teleological and linear models evolutionary – informing assumptions about the likelihood of incrementality vs. the possibility of large-scale change occurring in specific instances. Such assumptions affect choices of methods and time periods

- used to analyze change, among other things (Kuhn 1962, Lindblom 1977, Lustick 1980, Hayes 1992, Gersick 1991, Eldridge and Gould 1972).
- d. a focus on *output* (linear, teleological) *vs process* (cyclical, dialectical) as the dependent variable to be analyzed also affects all aspects of the study to be undertaken such as whether quantitative or qualitative data or the pursuit of a-historical or historical modes of inquiry will be used (Birkland 2001).

The papers in this special issue outline some of the major existing and unresolved issues in the conceptualization of policy dynamics, critique existing models and assumptions concerning change processes and suggest ways through which the limits of existing concepts and theories can be overcome. Collectively they further the understanding of change processes which policy analysts implicitly or explicitly use in crafting their analyses.

Giliberto Capano in his article “Understanding Policy Change as an Epistemological and Theoretical Problem” follows up on this discussion and examines the presuppositions and assumptions found in over 20 different contemporary models of policy change. He argues that policy scholars should be more aware of the epistemological choices they make and must clearly define what they mean in the field of policy research if we are to avoid the dangers inherent in their metaphorical usage. He also notes that stability and change should be clearly connected at the theoretical and empirical levels. Too often, these two elements of policy development are dealt with separately but, since policy is an ongoing phenomenon, stability and change constantly co-exist. He also argues that the object of analysis has to be better defined. Too often, policy means too many things to different people. Similarly, the type and content of change to be explained has to be clearer. Changes in the process; changes in the policy actors’ relationships; changes in the basic policy values and goals; changes in policy strategies; changes in policy instruments; changes in policy definitions; changes in the institutional arrangements of a policy field: all these changes are different from each other, and as such may imply different causal mechanisms and a different impact on reality.

Michael Howlett and Benjamin Cashore in their article “The Dependent Variable Problem in the Study of Policy Change: Understanding Policy Change as a Methodological Problem” take a closer look at the problem identified by Capano whereby different levels or orders of policy making are incorrectly juxtaposed, providing a parsimonious, but sometimes empirically incorrect view of policy change. They argue that revising existing taxonomies of policy elements provides a superior identification of the levels and processes of change and reveals more than one mechanism through which significant policy change can occur.

Philippe Zittoun, in “Understanding Policy Change as a Discursive Problem”, argues that an important dimension of the problem of understanding policy arises from the social construction of its definition by different actors in the policy process. If we want to understand what is at stake for the participants, he argues, it is necessary to take into account the work which they do to produce sense, define problems, make publics, and experiment with links between problems and solutions.

In “Understanding Policy Change as a Hermeneutic Problem” Adrian Kay continues this discussion and argues that the increasing advocacy of an interpretive

approach in the social sciences as an alternative to positivism has recently begun to influence policy studies and the analysis of policy change. Of the many issues raised by post-positivist public policy analysis, he focuses on two: first, the role of rationality in interpreting policy development and, second, the part ideas play in interpreting policy change. He develops the argument that in providing a refuge from positivism, structuralism and naturalism, interpretive approaches require general assumptions about the rationality of agents in order to be able to understand and explain actions. Yet the importance and consequences of rationality to any interpretive approach to policy change, he notes, has seldom been acknowledged explicitly.

In his article “Understanding Policy Change as a Historical Problem” Jeremy Rayner notes that bringing history back into policy analysis has sparked a lively methodological debate about how best to capture the idea of sequential change. To post-positivists it has led to a restatement of a preference for the use of narrative methods of policy discourse analysis. For others more focused on rationality, it has provided a welcome opportunity to build bridges between political science and economics, emphasizing the relationship between phenomena such as path dependencies and the theory of decision making under conditions of imperfect information that has proved so productive in contemporary economic-inspired policy analysis. For yet others, however, he notes that it has opened up the possibility of restoring a connection that dominated so much nineteenth century social science, that between the methods of the social sciences and those of evolutionary biology in the form of the development of the “punctuated equilibrium” approach to the study of policy dynamics.

In “How Politics Matter When Policies Change: Understanding Policy Change as a Political Problem” Reimut Zohlnhöfer examines the role played by political structures in policy change. He argues that although all different kinds of actors or events may trigger reforms, formally they need to be adopted by governments and parliaments. Therefore, he argues that theoretical considerations should begin with the analysis of those actors whose agreement is formally required for a change in the status quo, i.e. veto players in George Tsebelis’ terminology. He argues that the most important variable of veto player theory is the congruence of different veto players, i.e. their ideological distance. It will be more difficult to change the status quo as the congruence of the veto players decreases, i.e. as their ideological distance increases, a fact theories of policy dynamics must take into account.

Finally José Real-Dato in “Mechanisms of Policy Change: A Proposal for a Synthetic Explanatory Framework” examines how explaining policy change has been a major interest for policy students during recent decades and how existing models of policy change processes deal with this dynamic and complex phenomenon. This complexity is revealed by aspects like the multiple causal paths that can be identified, the multidimensionality of the *explanandum* (what actually changes), the usually high number of participants involved, the different sources of motivation they have (interests, norms), or the multiple institutional settings which frame and influence participants’ actions. In addition, complexity increases because of the interactions among these explanatory factors. Considering all these circumstances, theoretical frameworks dealing with policy change, he argues, should, at least, try to reduce this complexity to a number of manageable dimensions in order to elaborate comprehensive yet useful accounts of policy dynamics.

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