

The relevance of the academic study of public policy

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Introduction: linking policy research to policy practice

The field of policy studies is an interdisciplinary one that has evolved out of political science, public administration, economics, law and sociology, among other fields. As the primary academic discipline involved in the study of the exercise of power in society, political science has much to contribute to policy studies, and many policy theories and concepts owe their origin or substance to inquiry in political science. Policy-making is a central activity of governments and the study of policy processes, tools and outcomes, and the forces and variables which determine and affect them, and is an essential part of political science.

But policy-making is also an exercise in the application of knowledge about policy problems and solutions to their resolution, and how to integrate knowledge and power successfully in policy-making processes is and has been an ongoing concern in the discipline. This is an issue and subject of much research in itself in the policy sciences, going back well over 50 years (see, for example, Caplan and Weiss 1977; Wildavsky 1979). Policy studies as a whole is very much concerned with the relevance of its research and theorization since, as Harold Lasswell (1956; 1963) pointed out in his pioneering works in the field, policy scholars want to generate knowledge which is useful to practitioners and helps to improve public policy outcomes.

Although political science has been less involved in the study of knowledge processes in society and other fields have contributed extensively to empirical studies and conceptual development in this area, its focus on governmental decision-making and its exploration of the politics of public policy-making has made a major contribution to the policy sciences and to its desire to remain relevant.

The contribution of political science: reconciling knowledge and power in public policy-making

In his foundational work on the 'policy science', Harold Lasswell (1970; 1971) derived several key precepts for policy studies which he expected would help it remain relevant. These included adopting an explicitly multi-disciplinary orientation, a clear focus on policy problems and possible solutions, and the need to consider both normative and empirical aspects of problems and solutions in proposing and enacting alternative policy measures.

For Lasswell, being multi-disciplinary meant breaking away from narrow study legal institutions and structures of government and embracing the work and findings of such fields as sociology and economics, law and politics. Being 'problem-solving' meant adhering strictly to the canon of relevance, with the field orienting itself towards the solution of real-world problems rather than engaging in purely the theoretical or philosophical debates that, for example, often characterized the interpretation of classical texts on government. Finally, by being explicitly normative, Lasswell meant a policy science should also not be cloaked in the guise of 'scientific objectivity', but should recognize the impossibility of separating goals and means, or values and techniques, in the study of government actions (Torgerson 1985). He expected policy analysts to say clearly which solution would be better than others when two options were compared, and to be able to communicate this to decision-makers.

This general orientation towards the policy sciences remains with us along with the desire that policy science must remain relevant in the sense of providing insights and solutions to real-world problems. Although some efforts to create a new policy discipline altogether or to restrict the study of public policy to single fields such as economics or political science, or the desire on the part of some analysts to avoid normative discussions occasionally chal-

lenge aspects of these foundational canons, for the most part they have been upheld in the half century since Lasswell set them down.

Researchers interested in policy-making and the work of governmental and non-governmental actors in such processes were thus, from the outset of the field, very much concerned with the activities of knowledge generation, transfer and utilization, and how these activities informed the content of the various levels or elements (regime, programme and mechanism) which comprise a policy (Howlett et al. 2009). These activities typically involve the effort to promote better knowledge use or 'policy learning' in order to avoid policy failures. This involves the attempt to integrate better policy knowledge with political calculations and ideas about both the desirability of certain goals and means, and their feasibility (Howlett 2012). Each stage of policy activity, from agenda-setting to policy evaluation – entails different constellations of policy researchers, advisers and actors interacting with each other, using their knowledge and power to create policies. Understanding how these knowledge mobilization efforts operate at different stages of the policy-making process – agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation – has been a central concern of policy scholars, and political science has contributed in many ways to this endeavour.

Studies of activities such as policy formulation and decision-making undertaken by political scientists and others have shown, for example, that attaining and communicating policy knowledge which is 'relevant' to practice does not occur naturally or on its own in policy-making but rather requires dedicated effort on the part of policy researchers and policy-makers if it is to happen (Grimshaw et al. 2012). As Carol Weiss (1995) pointed out in her studies of efforts to better systematize policy evaluations in government, if evaluation is to fulfil its potential for driving policy learning, it must be fully integrated into the ongoing discourse and help policy-makers think 'more intelligently' about the domain in which they work.

Political science is well suited to the study of many of these activities and Lasswell highlighted the role it had played in helping to develop and inform the problem-solving orientation of policy studies (Lasswell 1956; 1963). Political science, he argued, enjoyed a strong tradition of 'distinguished achievement in many areas of problem-solving importance' (Lasswell 1963: 4). As others such as David Webber (1986a) later put it, the contributions of political science to policy-making involved knowledge of problem identification and

especially the consideration of the 'feasibility' of policy alternatives designed to address those problems, along with the improved understanding of the role and practices played by authoritative government institutions and social actors in policy creation and execution.

The study of political science hence has been and remains significant to policy studies and policy practice through the insights it brings to the study of how governments and societal actors interact in the exercise of power and authority. It helps further the understanding of how these actors constantly engage in the activity of defining and redefining socially imperative problems and goals and presenting possible alternatives for addressing them. It also provides detailed insight into how governments decide on policy content and how administrators and the judiciary, among others, implement them. In an excellent example of disciplinary cross-fertilization, policy scholars have also developed detailed models and explanations of policy processes which have helped inform political science research into areas such as public opinion, media studies, and aspects of party and government behaviour (see, for example, Kingdon 1995).

Concerns for relevance and the two-communities metaphor of policy knowledge utilization

The main purpose of policy research in the Lasswellian conceptualization has always been the pursuit of knowledge and its transmission to decision-makers. This is understood as the action of amassing 'intelligence' and scrutinizing the results of policy 'appraisal' in order to further the 'intelligence of government' and promote better policies – that is, those more likely to attain their goals (Lasswell 1975).

It should not be surprising then that the goal of making and ensuring that knowledge gained in the policy sciences remains relevant to policy-makers has itself been a major subject of investigation and analysis in the field. This work has contributed many insights into the impact of policy research on policy practice, and vice versa. These insights have had practical consequences for how policy research is mobilized and used in government – to which political science has also contributed significantly.

Since the 1960s and 1970s this question has been approached in policy studies through the lens of 'knowledge utilization', that

is the study of how policy-makers actually use knowledge of all kinds in their day-to-day practices, including knowledge derived from policy studies (Huberman 1990; Oh 1997; Oh and Rich 1996; Rich 1979). Policy researchers have examined many aspects of knowledge utilization processes in government, including whether or not patterns exist in the use of scientific versus social scientific research (Rich 1981; Weiss 1977a); who utilizes knowledge and in what ways (Landry et al. 2003; Ouimet et al. 2009; Weiss and Bulmer 1987; Whiteman 1985a; 1985b); whether such knowledge serves an enlightenment function or more 'instrumental' or 'strategic' uses (Weiss 1986); what constitutes 'useable evidence' (Nutley et al. 2007; Pawson 2006); and whether more evidence equals better policies (Tenbensen 2004). In addition, many studies have also been conducted into topics such as the sources of knowledge and the kinds of techniques used to measure and evaluate policy knowledge (Howlett and Wellstead 2011); the role of specific knowledge communities and the ideas they hold in policy formulation (Haas 1992); and the mechanics and content of the provision of policy advice (Halligan 1995). Political science and political scientists have contributed to these studies along with researchers in fields such as sociology, education and many others.

Although it was often initially assumed by policy scholars such as Lasswell that policy knowledge would be relevant more or less by definition, a pivotal finding in studies undertaken by researchers in the 1960s and 1970s into the use of policy research by policy-makers was that little of the large volume of output emanating from formal policy analysis and research was in fact being used to inform policy decisions directly (Caplan 1979; Caplan et al. 1975; Weiss 1976). Decision-makers were shown to seldom directly use policy research results, and it was also shown that there was a strong political motivation in the use which did occur. Studies showed how policy-makers deliberately often scoped and used evidence that supported their pre-existing standpoints and strengthened their desired interactions and associations in policy subsystems rather than created or challenged them (Weiss 1986; Whiteman 1985a; 1985b). As Caplan noted very early on in his analysis of information use by senior US policy-makers in the 1970s:

Only rarely is policy formulation guided by concrete, point-by-point reliance on empirically grounded information alone. This

is not to deny that many respondents cited the use of specific social science research studies in discussing important decisions, but such information was usually only one of many sources used. Rather than relying upon any single piece of information, the final policy decision was likely to depend upon an appraisal of scientific (hard) and extra-scientific (soft) knowledge from a variety of sources. Both types of knowledge are combined conceptually, resulting in a judgment or a perspective which is then applied broadly to decisions involving problems at the meta-level range. (1979: 464)

Such results were repeated again and again over the next several decades (see for example, Landry et al. 2003; Shulock 1999). Scientific evidence, for example, was found to be assessed differently by researchers and policy-makers. As Sebba (2013: 395) noted, 'decision makers view evidence colloquially and define it by its relevance', while researchers took a scientific approach and defined evidence by its methodology.

The idea of a sizable gap existing between policy researchers and policy-makers, and between policy research and use, soon became a well entrenched one in the field: the so-called 'two communities' model of policy research utilization. Although the questions they examined were different, the central problematic in all of the studies mentioned above was concern for a gap in the supply and demand for information in the policy process, or between knowledge generation and utilization, which undermined notions in the policy sciences of the relevance of policy research to decision-making and other policy practices.

Given these findings, researchers quickly assumed the stance that policy-making shared many similar knowledge utilization characteristics as the situation which existed between scientific researchers and those involved in the humanities within university settings. This was a relationship which C. P. Snow (1959) had referred to as involving 'two cultures' which spoke to each other but rarely if ever understood what each other said. By analogy policy-makers and analysts were also considered to be divided into 'two communities' of knowledge producers and consumers whose relationship was fraught with the potential for misunderstandings and missed opportunities (Caplan 1979; Dunn 1980; Glaser and Taylor 1973; Havelock 1971; Tenbensen 2004). This was soon seen as a fundamental, structural problem built into policy-making in the situation

in which different sets of actors produced knowledge and consumed it.

In the 'pure' two-communities argument, modelled on Snow's (1959) insights into science communication patterns, the concern was always that communications were infrequent or non-existent; that the information communicated and/or received was poor or inaccurate; and that the impact of these communications was either weak or, in the event of poor information, ineffective. These circumstances could exist either as a general pattern across government, or in specific areas or agencies.

This work was updated in the 1980s and applied to the policy sphere by political scientists such as William Dunn (1980). Like Snow, Dunn argued policy-making was an activity characterized by a 'community' of producers located in places such as universities, think tanks and research institutes, statistical agencies and elsewhere, and a group of consumers located in political institutions such as parliaments and legislatures as well as administrators and managers in government agencies. Given their separate locations, a significant issue was always the extent to which the two communicated, what they communicated and the impact these communications had.

Knowledge utilization, and the attainment of the goal of policy relevance, thus came to be seen as a much more complex subject than initially assumed and one which required specific dedicated study and action in order to be overcome. But it also suggested that conscious action on the part of either community could contribute to overcoming these gaps in knowledge utilization. As shall be discussed below, the desire to ensure that the research generated by policy scholars remains relevant – that is, incorporated into policy-making – has led to the development of more complex knowledge mobilization ecosystems including the creation of 'third' and 'fourth communities' of policy brokers and specialized bodies and agencies whose sole purpose is to facilitate better exchange of knowledge between these two principal sets of knowledge producers and consumers (Knight and Lyall 2013; Lindquist 1990; Lomas 2007; Oliver et al. 2013). This area remains one of ongoing research interest and one the analysis of which political scientists have and are contributing their expertise and knowledge. In the process they ensure the continual relevance of policy research to policy practice and political science research to public policy studies.

Moving beyond the two-communities model: knowledge brokerage

The two-communities model represented a significant advance on earlier thinking about the 'naturalness' or 'automaticity' of policy advice. However, many observers argued that a pure 'two community' structure either had never actually existed in policy-making circumstances or, that if it had once accurately characterized policy-making. This was no longer accurate precisely because of significant and dedicated efforts made on the part of both communities to bridge any gaps which might exist.

The political scientist David Webber, for example, noted 'if left to policymakers and policy researchers, there is little reason to expect the use of policy research to increase in the future' (Webber 1983: 558). However, he also noted a lack of homogeneity within the two communities in a policy context and that, in order to foster more use of policy research, policy researchers often assumed multiple roles as advisers, lobbyists and brokers in the policy process (Webber 1983; 1986a; 1986b; 1991).

This suggestion that other communities of knowledge-relevant actors existed beyond the two initially posited by Caplan (1979) implied that the boundaries between the knowledge suppliers and producers were more open and flexible than in the case of the university-based knowledge communities first examined by Snow (1959). And, more importantly, it also implied that the mechanisms which could be employed to overcome the gaps between the communities could extend well beyond simply improving communications. Recommendations for bridging this perceived gap, or what Weiss (1977a) calls the 'great divide', initially involved largely suggestions for the deliberate design of collaborative arrangements between the two communities (Caplan 1979), improved communication and better dissemination of innovative ideas (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Rogers and Schumacher 1971).

As Caplan had noted as early as 1979 (461), however, more specialized mechanisms are also available to fill the gaps between knowledge users and producers in the policy area. He argued simple solutions such as increasing contacts between the two groups were unlikely to be sufficient in bridging the two communities:

It does not follow from our data, however, that an alliance of social scientists and policy makers is the panacea which will

produce relevant research and allow translation of the results of scholarly analysis into terms of practical politics. The notion that more and better contact may result in improved understanding and greater utilization may be true, but there are also conditions where familiarity might well breed contempt rather than admiration. The need for reciprocal relations between knowledge producers and knowledge users in policy-making positions is clear, but the problem of achieving effective interaction of this sort necessarily involves value and ideological dimensions as well as technical ones.

Contemporary research and empirical studies by political scientists into knowledge creation and use for policy-making have pursued this line of thinking over the past three decades and have moved well beyond the two-communities metaphor. Knowledge utilization in policy contexts, for example, is now typically discussed in terms of the interactions between at least three communities – of consumers, producers and knowledge 'brokers' arranged in complex 'policy advisory systems' (Halligan 1995; Lindquist 1990). These systems represent 'interlocking sets of actors, with a unique configuration in each sector and jurisdiction, who provide information, knowledge and recommendations for action to policymakers' (Craft and Howlett 2012: 80). Their function, to a very great extent, is to overcome the two-communities problem and ensure policy-making remains relevant by ensuring accurate and up-to-date knowledge of real world events and activities serves as the basis for policy deliberations and the formulation, adoption, implementation and evaluation of policy actions.

Brokerage mechanisms to facilitate the activities of these different kinds of policy advisers and knowledge brokers create multiple alternative paths in which information can flow (James 1993; Knight and Lyall 2013; Phipps and Morton 2013). Several mechanisms exist which are used to encourage or facilitate brokerage. The main characteristic of such mechanisms is their position in-between the worlds of research and policy-making (Lightowler and Knight 2013; Ward et al. 2009). Or, as Meyer (2010) puts it, as 'bridging' the gap between the research and policy communities (Lightowler and Knight 2013; Nutley et al. 2007). The term 'mediation' is sometimes used to highlight the translation function played by these mechanisms and acknowledges the facilitative role that policy brokers play, both of which can contribute to greater research use

in policy-making (Ward et al. 2009). Overall, brokerage involves all the activities that bring together decision-makers and researchers, facilitating their interaction and ultimately influencing each other's work as well as promoting the use of research-based evidence in policy (Lightowler and Knight 2013; Lomas 2007). Brokers engage in three kinds of activities which help translate research into applicable lessons for policy-makers. The first includes diffusion of knowledge, which is essentially passive and unplanned, leaving the user to seek out information. The second activity is knowledge dissemination, which is a more active process of communication of findings that involves customizing evidence for a particular target audience. The third is knowledge implementation, which is an active process that 'involves systematic efforts to encourage adoption of the evidence' (Sebba 2013: 396). These activities can also be framed as 'push' and 'pull' efforts, where brokers disseminate or push information out in the hope of its usage by other stakeholders, or where stakeholders pull and a demand is created for such information as filled by brokers.

These knowledge brokers serve as 'intermediaries between the knowledge generators and proximate decision-makers, repackaging data and information into usable form' (Howlett 2011: 33). And the tasks which knowledge brokers typically perform include knowledge management or finding, packaging and disseminating information; linkage and exchange or facilitating discussions between researchers and decision-makers; and capacity building, or developing capacity for future knowledge exchange (Lightowler and Knight 2013: 319). As Kammen et al. (2006) point out, this means brokerage is not just about the direct transfer of results of research, but also about organizing the interactive processes of knowledge and exchange. In fact, Sebba (2013) argues that often knowledge brokers not only link researchers and decision-makers, but are in many situations also able to enhance communication among policy-makers and therefore become in themselves integral parts of the decision-making process (Kirst 2000; Sebba 2013).

Knowledge about brokers and brokerage activities has gained importance in response to the increased complexity of policy-making, as the amount of information policy-makers must absorb and master increases and as the fast pace of problems and public demands has heightened. Another development which has enhanced their role is 'the decentralization of much delivery and decision-making, and the pressure to devolve delivery and/or

decision-making to local and regional government and to the not-for-profit sector' (Eichbaum 2007: 465). This takes direct leverage out of the hands of policy-makers and enhances the role brokers play in policy-making as their connecting role becomes more vital. Research has recently highlighted this aspect of knowledge brokerage after analyses from many countries, such as Australia, UK, the US and Canada, revealed that decision-makers are often still not efficiently using research evidence in domains like education, health, criminal justice and social care (Lomas et al. 2005; Nutley et al. 2007; Sebba 2013; Stevens et al. 2009). Policy mediators tackle this low uptake by moving beyond mere access to information and towards: helping define the problem; challenging existing programmes; expanding the public debate based on, for example, public outreach; innovating through policy research; and collaborating with various stakeholders (McNutt and Marchildon 2009; Sebba 2013). Research mediators 'build on existing networks of users in research designs, improve clarity of communication, gain key contacts including funders, and develop media "savvy" timeliness which anticipates future policy interests' (Sebba 2013: 405), which ultimately makes them valuable assets in the policy-making process.

Details on some of the more prominent and well-known specific techniques or mechanisms identified by policy researchers to enhance the interactions between policy knowledge producers and consumers are set out below. These include specialized advisory boards and commissions (Brown 1955; 1972; Howlett et al. 2009; B. Smith 1977; T. Smith 1977) and think tanks and research institutes (Haas 2007; McNutt and Marchildon 2009; Towne et al. 2005; Wilson 2008). Much of this research has been pioneered by political scientists.

Specialized advisers and advisory boards and commissions

Policy-makers often follows the advice provided by 'civil servants and others whom they trust or rely upon to consolidate policy alternatives into more or less coherent designs and provide them with expert opinion on the merits and demerits of the proposal' (Howlett 2011: 32). Policy advisers in particular can be part of government or non-governmental organizations or current or former colleagues (Dobuzinskis et al. 2007; Eichbaum and Shaw 2008; Howlett 2011; Maley 2000; Peled 2002).

This is true for individual advisers, while advisory committees mostly involve officially selected representatives that sit on temporary or permanent bodies. Howlett et al. (2009) list the characteristics of this type of knowledge broker as:

- advisory bodies that are closer to societal actors than to the formal government;
- they are working with a specific focus;
- they engage in dialogues that seek to build consensus;
- they are not created to develop new knowledge, but are a venue for different interests and framing issues.

Ideally, a good advice system contains all of these elements by combining in-house advisory service with specialized political units and third-opinion options (Halligan 1995; Howlett and Newman 2010). Policy advisers, for example, take on a brokering position beyond the minister–department relationship to address policy overlap or conflict and resolve differences (Dunn 1997; Maley 2000). Complex issues which span multiple levels of government require customized advice structures to cope with the mass of information and localized expectations (Howlett and Newman 2010).

Think tanks and research institutes

As a subset of knowledge brokers, think tanks are defined as ‘organizations that have significant autonomy from governmental interests and that synthesize, create, or disseminate information, research, ideas or advice to the public, policy makers, other organizations (both private and governmental), and the press’ (Haas 2007: 68; see also Sebba 2013).

Think tanks are intellectually independent from government, but their output is geared towards government needs (James 1993). This implies that researchers in think tanks strategize about the timing of their advice and who the recipient is. Second, they undertake public interest and strategic research. Thus, they focus on pressing issues in the public realm, but also take on projects that are financed by other groups. And finally, most think tanks are politically partisan. This characteristic is common, but manifests itself in varying degrees depending on the political system and the issue at hand (James 1993). Based on these elements of their work, think

tanks also serve as ‘mediators’ between research and policy (McGann and Johnson 2005; Smith et al. 2013; Taylor 2011; Worpole 1998).

However, there is an ongoing discussion in the literature in terms of their independence and usefulness for policy-making. As Smith et al. (2013) point out, that there is no accepted definition of precisely what think tanks do or should be doing. Another issue which is a subject of current research is related to how independent these brokers are. There is also a lack of empirical studies that assess the extent to which think tanks have been successful in influencing policy (Sherrington 2000; Smith et al. 2013). Think tank reports have to be treated with caution as they are often not as independent as they are sometimes portrayed (Evans and Lewis 1993; Smith et al. 2013). Clients of think tanks can play a role in shaping the outputs – this is true for political parties and industry funding alike. Ultimately, the discussion has led to a distinction between independent research-based think tanks and advocacy-based think tanks with vested interests – defining varying degrees of independence from sponsors and government (McNutt and Marchildon 2009).

The influence of knowledge brokers, such as think tanks, on policy-making and their ability to cross over community boundaries and enhance the relevance of policy research and results is clear. However, it is difficult to measure this influence accurately. Researchers point out that ‘the boundary between university or research institute and think tanks’ in many countries has become blurred, making the ‘bridge’ analogy somewhat misleading (Sebba 2013: 400). Also some brokers create policy ideas that provide apparent solutions and store them until a window of opportunity opens up for them to be retrieved and used reminiscent of Kingdon’s (1995) work in which ‘policy entrepreneurs’ seize a window of opportunity. This situation makes it harder to evaluate the contribution of this knowledge during specific time periods (Sebba 2013) and confuses roles as ‘brokers’ and ‘entrepreneurs’. The same applies to research mediators and policy advisers. Looking at the relationships existing between expert ideas and policy decisions, Lindvall (2009) point out the literature has rarely distinguished between the effects of knowledge brokerage on policy objectives and its effect on policy content or output.

Conclusion: research relevance in policy studies – an ongoing research agenda in political science

Constant attention is required to ensure the academic study of public policy led by policy scholars, political scientists and others remains relevant to policy-making through its influence on the creation and mobilization of knowledge used in, and about, the policy process and policy outcomes. Much research into these questions by political scientists has shown that 'eternal vigilance' and dedicated institutional engineering is required to overcome a problem built into the nature of policy-making, which can feature a sharp division of labour between different communities of knowledge producers and consumers.

The two-communities view of the problem of translating research into policy has often depicted the world of researchers and policy decision-makers as a disconnected one. This stems from an assumption that policy researchers work outside of the policy-making process and that policy-makers occupy the policy-making core within it (Caplan 1979; Caplan et al. 1975; Weiss 1977a). However, policy studies have seen a revitalized interest in better understanding the role of policy analysis and re-exploring the relevance of policy research in policy-making, and in moving beyond the two-communities metaphor as the borders between these two groups have blurred.

Specific techniques are now used in policy-making in the effort to overcome gaps between theory and practice and to promote better policies and policy outcomes (Meadowcroft and Steurer 2014), such as think tanks and research institutions. However, not all techniques are used by all governments and the question of what kind, and how many mechanisms are required to overcome gaps between theory and practice, and knowledge and power, are ongoing ones with which policy scholars continue to grapple in their work.

Just as they have in the past, political scientists are contributing to these inquiries and helping to provide answers to these questions. For example, as Sanderson (2002) noted, the relationship between evaluative techniques in government and their effects on outcomes is not straightforward and such mechanisms need 'to be conceived as instances of practical reason rather than solely technical exercises'. And political scientists have developed a wide spectrum of concepts and definitions of policy behaviour in the effort to address the political aspects of these questions (Bennett and Howlett 1992;

Dunlop and Radaelli 2011; Radaelli 2007). Recent forays into explaining scientific expertise and the formation of learning relations using network analysis, for example, have confirmed that ties forming between policy actors based on substantive instrument-level learning need not be the same as those that form based on political knowledge (Bernstein 2001; Cashore et al. 2013; Delmas and Young 2009; Leifeld and Schneider 2012; May 1992). Such findings underline the significant role continuing to be played by political scientists in furthering the understanding of knowledge processes in government and hence in continuing to augment the relevance of policy research to practitioners and to the public.



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Individual chapters in order © Gerry Stoker; John Gerring; Colin Hay; Matthew Flinders; Bo Rothstein; Graham Wilson; Sarah Giest; Michael Howlett and Ishani Mukherjee; Thom Brookes; Craig Parsons; B. Guy Peters; Jon Pierre; Helen Margetts 2015

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First published 2015 by
PALGRAVE

Palgrave in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of 4 Crinan Street, London N1 9XW

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-0-230-20108-8 hardback
ISBN 978-0-230-20109-5 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Cambrian Typesetters, Camberley, Surrey, England, UK

Printed in China

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