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# Weaving the Fabric of Public Policies: Comparing and Integrating Contemporary Frameworks for the Study of Policy Processes

MICHAEL HOWLETT<sup>\*,\*\*</sup>, ALLAN MCCONNELL<sup>†</sup>, & ANTHONY PERL<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>Department of Political Science, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada, <sup>\*\*</sup>Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore, <sup>†</sup>School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

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**ABSTRACT** For close to three decades multiple frameworks of policy-making have served as competitive characterizations of policy processes. All claim to provide accounts that capture diverse factors such as changing governance norms, actors and ideas which drive programme interventions and policy outputs. Paradoxically, the resilience of different models such as the policy cycle framework and the multiple streams framework has been accompanied by numerous critiques that they are “incomplete” and even divorced from the real world. This article presents an effort to synthesize and reconcile these frameworks in which the appeal and strengths of each can be retained while going some way to overcoming their weaknesses and limitations. It does so through the introduction of an integrative metaphor for policy-making – what Wayne Parsons termed “weaving” – which can be applied to all stages of public policy, and is flexible enough to cope with issues such as power, complexity and critical junctures while reconciling different groupings and sets of actors highlighted as significant policy players in earlier models. It elaborates this framework before applying it by way of illustration to one of the most controversial policy initiatives in modern British history: the 1989–93 poll tax. The article and case study highlight the potential for its general application in policy studies.

**Keywords:** policy cycles; policy streams; Kingdon; multiple streams models

## Introduction: The Use of Frameworks in Policy Process Studies

Analytical frameworks are a means of helping make sense of the complexities, ambiguities and driving forces of multi-faceted phenomena such as public policy-making and policy processes. Frameworks in the social sciences and humanities in particular seek to

**Michael Howlett** is Professor in the Department of Political Science, Simon Fraser University and Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He specializes in public policy analysis, political economy, and resource and environmental policy. Recently, he has published *Canadian Public Policy* (University of Toronto Press, 2013).

**Allan McConnell** is Professor in the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Sydney. His main interests lie in various aspects of public policy-making with particular emphasis on issues of success and failure. Recently, he has published *Understanding Policy Success: Rethinking Public Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

**Anthony Perl** is Professor in the Department of Political Science and Urban Affairs Program, Simon Fraser University. He has advised governments in Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, and the United States on transportation and environmental research and policy development. Perl is a Fellow of the Post-Carbon Institute and Adjunct Professor of Urban Studies at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia.

*Correspondence Address:* Michael Howlett, Department of Political Science, Simon Fraser University. Email: [howlett@sfu.ca](mailto:howlett@sfu.ca)

simplify reality and reveal the foundational structure upon which the phenomena under investigation rests. To be effective, frameworks need to strike a balance between the conceptual clarity provided about structure and their ability to capture the empirical dynamics of investigated phenomena. In the policy sciences, striking such a balance helps contextualize “on the ground” policy phenomena and dynamics in the form of rich metaphors such as “policy streams” or “policy cycles” (Howlett et al. 2009; Cairney 2013).

Outside of basic criteria such as internal logic and respect for the empirics of policy-making, there is no *a priori* reason why any single framework should be adopted over any other, and, to a certain extent, choices can be made between those which focus on factors such as structure or agency in providing different levels of balance between clarity of explanation and fit with empirical detail. However frameworks must meet basic criteria such as the logical interconnection of their parts and their ability to generate testable (falsifiable) theoretical insights and expectations which match actual empirical sequencing of occurrences and events. But their ability to be more revealing of independently verifiable dynamics and processes than their rivals is what draws adherents to them. In many fields this results in a situation of “duelling” frameworks, whereby adherents of one framework debate with those of another in the effort to persuade each other, or third parties, of their superiority in better illuminating and providing more robust explanations for the phenomena under investigation. Unfortunately in these efforts the attempt to generally improve theories, and practice through conjecture and refutation (Popper 2002) is often set aside in the pursuit of discursive supremacy, leading to ossified and sterile debates between adherents of different models.

This is the case in the contemporary policy sciences, whereby at least four current frameworks developed in the 1970s and 1980s continue to struggle for supremacy in helping understand and explain policy processes. These include the policy cycle model, the advocacy coalition framework, the multiple streams framework and the punctuated equilibrium model (Araral et al. 2013; Cairney 2013). One of these, the policy cycle model, dates from the 1960s and 1970s in the works of Harold Lasswell, Charles Jones and James Anderson, among others, while the latter three emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in key books and writings by figures such as John Kingdon, Paul Sabatier, Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones. Although over three decades have passed, the duelling nature of these frameworks shows little sign of abating.

It is the thesis of this article, that these internecine debates have exaggerated differences between the frameworks. With relatively minor exceptions, they all attempt to explain the nature of policy-making through the use of various permutations of either subsystem or network theory (McCool 1998) and this overall similarity allows them to be viewed as “variations on a theme” rather than as entirely separate, stand-alone, compositions. While their adherents tend to castigate each other and inflate their differences, here it will be shown, principally through an examination of the policy cycle and multiple streams frameworks, how the similarities outweigh these differences and how a synthesis of the elements of each provides a superior (more logical, robust and exhaustive) framework than any taken alone. We argue that policy theory would benefit more from adopting a perspective weaving together these frameworks and moving forward, rather than wasting additional time and effort in debates between rival framework adherents or their single-minded pursuit of minor elucidations and applications of existing models. Building on earlier reflections by the authors (Howlett et al. 2015), we suggest the differences between

these frameworks are not worth fighting over and that it is their common elements which are more significant to policy scholarship.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First it examines the different origins and development of two key frameworks – the policy cycle and multiple streams frameworks – which predate the others and are often viewed as mutually exclusive. The discussion notes both have proved remarkably resilient but nevertheless exhibit limitations when they are stretched beyond their core strengths. Second it examines previous and key attempts to build on these respective strengths by synthesizing and integrating the frameworks. It argues such attempts have struggled to offer a solid and credible balance between parsimony and richness due to their unwillingness to engage in model building combining aspects of these frameworks, instead forcing “procrustean” syntheses. Third, it outlines the main elements of a five “thread” (stream) framework of policy-making, based on the metaphor of “weaving” proposed by Wayne Parsons (2004) which allows a new model to extend the spirit of the Kingdon approach towards agenda-setting into other stages of the policy process highlighted by the policy cycle model (Parsons 2004). Rather than force one model into the other, however, the new framework is adapted in such a way as to capture the political and power dynamics of public policy which are highlighted in the multiple streams model but downplayed in the policy cycle model. By way of illustration, it then applies this new framework to the most controversial fiscal policy initiative in modern British history, the 1989–1993 poll tax, which was a per-capita tax and in essence a tax on the right to vote which ultimately brought down the long-serving Thatcher government. The article concludes with reflections on the broader value of this new framework for policy studies as a whole and the possibility of usefully extending it to other contemporary policy studies frameworks.

### **The Origins, Resilience and Limits of the Policy Cycle and Multiple Streams Frameworks**

Ostrom (2007) proposes a conceptual hierarchy in which frameworks offer the broadest scope for interpreting the universe of public policy. Frameworks are then followed by theories which apply these structures and dynamics to explaining particular aspects of how policy-making works. Theories in turn become operationalized through models which seek to test specific causal relationships in ways that could predict future policy dynamics. Thus, while alternative theories and models of how policy occurs can co-exist within a common framework, “duelling” frameworks – individually subject to considerable critique – do not provide a solid analytical foundation for understanding public policy and policy processes. Analytical pluralism is welcome but there comes a point when a degree of unity on key concepts, variables and vocabulary is needed in order to move forward.

Two of the most enduring frameworks within the study of policy processes are the multiple streams and policy cycle models. As is set out in more detail below, both have generated a large corpus of empirical studies and a large number of adherents in academe and elsewhere but, paradoxically, both have also come under continual fire for being divorced from much of the real world of public policy (e.g. Colebatch 2006; Althaus et al. 2008). We will explore this point shortly in more detail, but it is our contention that something is amiss in the field of policy studies when its key frameworks struggle to keep pace with policy realities.

*The Policy Cycle Framework*

The idea of illuminating the complex work of public policy-making by developing metaphorical tools to account for its fundamental nature as an endless cycle of tasks began with the early post-war scholarship of Harold Lasswell (1956, 1971). Based on his own observations of policy-making processes in the mid-twentieth century environment of the United States, Lasswell broke down the policy-making process into seven discrete activities or “stages” which had to be completed for a policy to emerge – intelligence gathering, promotion, prescription, invocation, application termination, and appraisal.

Lasswell’s model corresponded with what he saw as the sequence of tasks involved in conceptualizing and creating the expansive policy outputs in areas such as housing, education and social services that were being put into place to meet post-war US aspirations. His far-reaching framework for illuminating policy development fit well with the policy aspirations of this post-war period of consensus that more and better policy decisions formed the basis for efficient and effective government actions in the pursuit of material prosperity.

Lasswell’s stages framework created the foundation for subsequent theory building that elaborated the logic and elements of the stages framework in greater detail (e.g. Lyden et al. 1968; Simmons et al. 1974; Brewer 1974). These later studies attempted to retain the parsimony and explanatory power of the concept of a multi-staged policy development process while refining its function into only five or six distinct stages with slightly different names – such as, in Brewer’s case, invention/initiation, estimation, selection, implementation, evaluation, termination (Brewer 1974). Importantly, this theorizing and the models it gave rise to also introduced a new dynamic component to the stages framework by incorporating feedback processes: thus presenting policy-making not just as a “staged process” but as an ongoing iterative “policy cycle”. This insight inspired several new articulations of the stages framework in the 1970s and 1980s, the most well-known of which were set out in popular textbooks by Charles O. Jones (1984) and James Anderson (1975). Each of these contained slightly different interpretations of the names, number and order of stages in the cycle but retained the same basic staged-feedback-cycle construction.

The conceptual suppleness of the policy cycle idea allowed theorizing about policy processes to create linkages with conceptual advances in other fields such as paleobiology (“punctuated equilibrium”) and systems thinking (“path dependency”) which aimed at better explaining the path that policy-making adopted over time. Models that were created to operationalize these interdependent dynamics highlighted the significance of feedback mechanisms in explaining nonlinear “staged” dynamics and the impact that positive and negative feedback influences could exert upon the mode and tempo of policy-making and policy change over multiple cycles of policy-making (Pierson 1992, 1993, 2000; Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

As these models evolved, the policy cycle was strengthened by application to it of factors such as the nature of the ideas held by key subsystem actors and the nature of their interactions as mediated by the institutionalization and routinization of policy processes, and by the feedback of policy on political activity (Freeman and Stevens 1987; McCool 1998). These models proved the utility of the stages-cycle framework as an analytical

template, allowing a Cartesian-style deconstruction of policy-making to occur while retaining a rich image of policy formation and development (Howlett et al. 2009).

In sum, the policy cycle has been one of the most enduring conceptual constructs in the policy sciences (deLeon 1999; Burton 2006; Weible et al. 2012). It continues to add value to policy studies, as evidenced by the fact that the framework remains a touchstone for many textbooks and classes; is used by practitioners as an elementary template for “how to” think about public policy-making; and is the framework which most closely mirrors the language of political and policy elites who articulate policy discourses and ambitions in the public arena, including the need for impartial, careful and systematic examination of problems and potential solutions.

Despite such resilience and utility, however, the cycle framework has been roundly criticized for presenting an idealized image of policy-making rarely encountered in practice (e.g. Sabatier 1991; Colebatch 2006). There is no room of any significance to accommodate activities or tasks limited by factors such as the exercise of political power (e.g. the power to define a policy problem in such a way that it contains the seeds of a solution) or being conducted in a different order (e.g. a pre-determined policy solution preceding agenda-setting), or what motivates policy actors other than the desire to seek an optimal solution to an evidence-based problem (e.g. self-interest or inherited political values). And the approach tells us very little about the timing of cycle stages and sequences and why any particular task begins and ends when it does. Indeed, the stages/cycle approach has been criticized as being in essence a taxonomy of tasks, rather than a framework that captures realworld policy dynamics and variables (Sabatier 1991).

### *Multiple Streams*

A second well-used framework in policy studies at the opposite end of the theoretical spectrum is the “multiple streams” model first put forward by John Kingdon in his 1984 work *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, albeit with roots in earlier work from the 1970s by Cohen et al. (1972). This framework builds on a very different metaphor of policy-making than the careful construction of policy solutions envisioned by Lasswell: that of multiple policy “streams” or multiple tributaries of events, actors and decision-making opportunities conjoining to generate a flow of policy activity.

This framework was first deployed by Kingdon in his 1984 work on agenda-setting dynamics in the US Congress (1984, 2011), influenced in part by Herbert Simon and James March’s focus on the organizational dynamics behind decision-making (Cohen et al. 1972).

From Simon’s work (1991), Kingdon (1995, pp. 2–3) introduced policy-making as a “set of processes, including at least (1) the setting of an agenda, (2) the specification of alternatives from which a choice is to be made, (3) an authoritative choice among those specified alternatives ... and (4) the implementation of the decision”. Kingdon was well aware, therefore, of the stages/cycle approach but confined his analysis principally to the earliest stages of policy-making; agenda-setting and a quest to understand the timing of agenda activity. He was concerned with understanding why phenomena such as “an idea whose time has come” existed, and in particular to answer the question of “what makes people in and around government attend, at any given time, to some subject and not to others?” (Kingdon 2011, p. 1). In addressing such issues, he drew on and acknowledged the idea of “multiple streams” originating in the so-called “garbage can” organizational choice theory – by Cohen et al. (1972; March and Olsen 1979) – which modelled highly



contingent administrative decision-making processes in ambiguous and unstable environments as dependent on the actions of unpredictable sets of actors moving in and out of policy-making arenas, bringing their ideas and interests with them.

In Kingdon's framework, policy emerges as the result of the interaction of three independent but interlinked "streams" of actor-events. The *problem* stream refers to changing public and elite perceptions of problems as public problems requiring government action and past government efforts to resolve them. The *policy* stream consists of experts and analysts in a policy community examining problems and proposing solutions to them; while the *political* stream consists of factors such as national moods and legislative turnover and events such as elections and legislative timetables which influence and alter policy-maker behaviour. "Couplings" of the streams which occur under specific circumstances are said to explain patterns of policy change and development.

Although Cohen et al. (1972; March and Olsen 1979) had advocated previously for the existence of *four*, not three, streams, adding another dealing with "choice opportunities" or the stream of "occasions when an organization is expected to produce behavior that can be called a decision" (Cohen et al. 1972, p. 33), Kingdon chose to illustrate this latter stream of opportunities with a static metaphor (a "policy window"). This made sense since he was dealing with a single stage of policy-making in which only a single choice opportunity – whether or not to have an item enter an official governmental policy discussion – was relevant. In Kingdon's view, the remaining three streams operated on different paths and pursued courses more or less independent of one another until specific points in time in which their paths intersected, creating moments or "windows" of opportunity which policy actors ("policy entrepreneurs") could take advantage of to move items onto government's agenda. These intersection points, or couplings, could be caused by a variety of circumstances, from "focusing events", which gained the attention of players in multiple streams, to institutionalized routines such as annual budgetary cycles and elections.

Since the first edition of his book was published in 1984, Kingdon's conceptual framework has become an enticing way to explain change, both within and beyond the dominant cycle framework for interpreting policy-making. His somewhat incongruous mix of streams and windows metaphors has been emulated, copied and adapted by numerous scholars in the years since his work first appeared. His ideas about multiple streams, for example, touched a chord in the policy sciences and were quickly seized upon and used to describe and assess case studies of policy-making processes such as the nature of US foreign policy-making (Woods and Peake 1998); the politics of privatization in Britain, France and Germany (Zahariadis 1995; Zahariadis and Allen 1995); the nature of US domestic anti-drug policy (Sharp 1994); the collaborative behaviour of business and environmental groups in certain anti-pollution initiatives in the US and Europe (Lober 1997); and the overall nature of the reform process in Eastern Europe (Keeler 1993), among many other subjects.

Yet for all the extent to which the multiple streams framework has become firmly entrenched in the armoury of policy researcher research, it too has been criticized on many fronts, particularly in terms of lack of clarity on what constitutes a "stream", and for an overemphasis on serendipity and randomness to explain how "couplings" occur (or do not), rather than being the product of power or societal biases (i.e. race, gender, socio-economic) that privilege certain types of couplings over others (Jann and Wegrich 2007; Guldbrandsson and Fossum 2009).

For all the analytical value to be gained from thinking in terms of multiple streams, it is also important to note that Kingdon's framework is not comprehensive of all the various stages that policy processes and deliberations go through. Do we still have three streams in the implementation process and in the evaluation process? Are they joined together or separate? Such questions are open-ended because Kingdon himself focused his efforts largely upon one stage of the policy process.

This is not to suggest that this model cannot be extended to other tasks, but that its broader application and link to the policy cycle cannot be assumed automatically. It shares with the policy cycle, therefore, the status of being an enlightening and influential policy studies framework, but one which also invites criticism about the horizons and the analytical value it can bring to understanding the entire policy process.

### **Reconciling the Stages/Cycle Framework with the Multiple Streams Idea**

Some scholars working within and beyond cycle and streams thinking have realized that connecting the core concept of each framework – “streams” of actors and events and “cycles” of tasks and activities – has the potential to support a more powerful analytical apparatus for better understanding policy-making than either framework taken alone (See Barzelay 2006). But, as is discussed below, the first such efforts showed that mixing, or integrating and reconciling, these two frameworks is not a simple task. Efforts to date to combine streams and cycles in order to generate an improved understanding of the fundamental nature of policy processes have often clouded matters by simply layering one concept on top of the other. This has led to confusing or contradictory inferences and has done little to help generate a framework which could reconcile the problems existing with either predecessor.<sup>1</sup>

Kingdon did not have to deal with variations in problem definition before and after agenda entrance, for example, since his focus was upon understanding what it took to get issues onto the policy agenda. However those wishing to extend his concepts for interpreting policy dynamics beyond agenda-setting must deal with the recognition that, as discussed above, competing constructs of a problem can co-exist throughout a policy process and these different constructs are significant in influencing the content and contours of both “process sequencing” and policy outcomes (Sabatier et al. 1987; Fischer and Forester 1993; Hajer 2005; Howlett 2009; Daugbjerg 2009, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

A related, but distinct, analytical challenge arises from the influence policy developments subsequently exert on the power and resources available to agents and organizations in the political stream. As Lowi (1972) and Pierson (2000) have convincingly demonstrated, policy influences politics. Thus, an integrated framework that could support the effective examination of stages and streams into later stages of the cycle must account for changes in both dimensions of policy-making over time, and across distinct administrative and political functions.

### *The “Weaving” Metaphor: A New Way of Extending the Logic of Streams into Each Policy Stage*

Both the cycle and multiple streams frameworks have something to offer, otherwise they would have receded from the intellectual horizons of policy-makers and academics. The most valuable attribute of the policy cycle framework is its ability to address multiple stages in the processing of policy while the most valuable attribute of multiple streams is



its ability to deal with timing – that is, the joining together of circumstances at a particular point in time. Bringing the two together, despite problems with prior efforts to reconcile the logic of multiple streams with multiple stages, remains a worthwhile goal, since each framework's strength overcomes a weakness in the other.

While this may seem a deceptively simple point, it is this simplicity which helps make a case for integration – or at least lays the foundation for doing so. It then begs further questions which must be addressed in this effort, such as: (1) can we retain the metaphors of cycles, stages and streams in such a framework? (2) How many “streams” are there post-agenda-setting? (3) What are the critical points in the interaction of streams and tasks over time, demarcating different stages? (4) What factor or factors drive forward these interactions? (5) What analytical value is added by any new understanding of their interrelationships that emerge from such considerations? Below we address each of these questions in turn, before applying them to a case – the UK poll tax – by way of illustration.

First, can we retain the metaphors of cycles, stages and streams in a new synthetic framework? There is always a danger of causing confusion by mixing metaphors. Yet for all the criticisms of the two seminal frameworks that are the centrepiece of this article, there has been very little criticism of the metaphor of stages being mixed with one of cycles, or of streams being mixed with windows. Essentially these mixed metaphorical constructions “work” because they provide simple, identifiable images that we can associate with, and indeed extrapolate from, quasi-intuitively in our analysis of policy-making. So we have no objection, *a priori*, to mixing metaphors as long as the mix enhances rather than impedes our understanding of policy processes and processing. However, while we also have no objection to the mixing of metaphors of cycles, stages and streams, on their own they are not enough to help us address some of the framework weaknesses cited above, namely the capacity to address “agency” in policy processes and hence address issues of power, or to help address the reality that policy processes may vary from one policy sector or subsystem to another. Hence, like Parsons (2004), we propose the addition of a “weaving” metaphor, which – even instinctively – induces curiosity about who/what might be doing the weaving and what they might be producing from joining the various “threads” of policy (Parsons 2004). We will return to these points shortly.

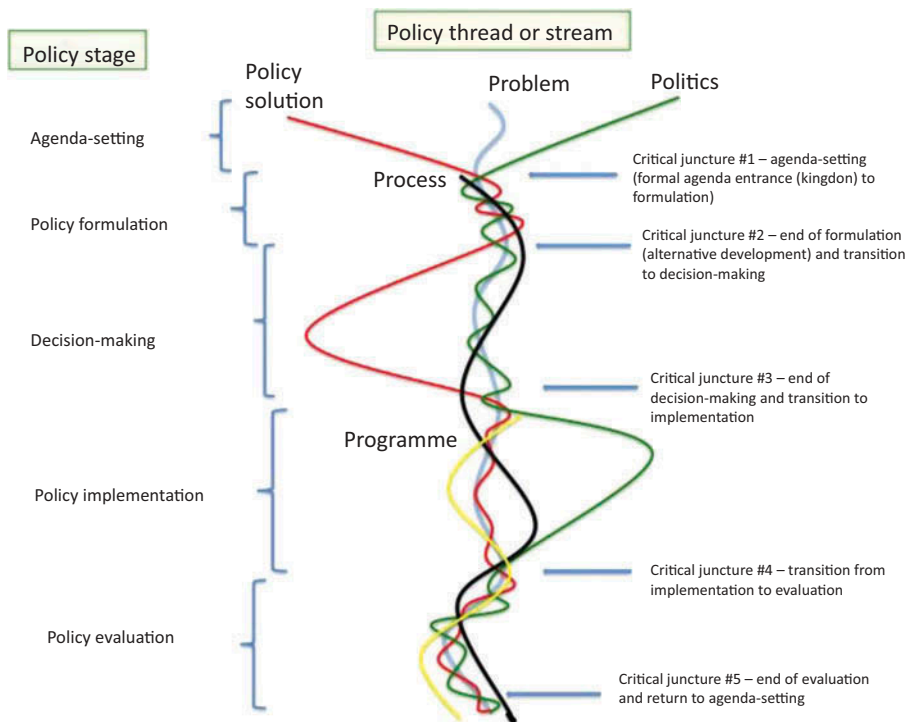
Second, how many streams exist post-agenda-setting? We take as our starting point here that there are indeed three streams (problems, policies, politics) at the agenda-setting stage, as Kingdon correctly noted. The key issue is whether these continue on unimpeded and uninterrupted as the policy process unfolds or whether there are more or different streams which emerge and flow thereafter. We argue, mindful of the fact we are seeking to develop a framework here rather than produce a theory or a model (as per Ostrom 2007), that there are in fact five distinct streams (Howlett et al. 2015). However in order to avoid a conceptual swamp – which is what happens when the ideas embedded within such large numbers of flows intersect – these can more usefully be called “threads”. That is, the three pre-agenda-setting threads remain, but once an item is on the policy agenda there is an additional process thread as well as a programme thread, which emerge and affect how the subsequent process unfolds. The process thread is constituted by the governmental rules, procedures and norms which examine options, facilitate engagement with stakeholders, take decisions and put these into practice. The programme thread is the specific calibration of all the policy instruments (regulations, finance etc.) that make up the broader “policy”.

As we suggest below, their arrival and interactions with each other varies over time, much as Kingdon suggested occurred with the first three, but in a more intricate fashion than suggested by earlier scholars such as Barzelay or Zahariadis.

Third, what are the critical points in their interaction over time, demarcating different stages? We know the number of stages attributed to policy-making often depends on who is writing on the subject. Althaus et al. (2012), for example, conceived of eight stages and Dror (1989) proposed three main stages and as many as 18 sub-stages. Our gauge of the most appropriate number is again what works in allowing us to interpret the world, balancing parsimony of explanation with richness of detail. In this regard, as noted above, five stages (agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation) are the default in the policy sciences. We continue this tradition, with the qualifier that, at times, analysis of a specific process may involve further sub-divisions such as, for example, dividing policy formation into options appraisal and consultation (Thomas 2001). Figure 1 depicts five stages and five threads. Each confluence point or critical juncture brings something new (new actors, new tactics, new resources) to the flow of events and each intersection point represents a “window” in Kingdon’s sense, but with a different configuration of threads passing through each particular juncture, much as “rounds” theories of policy-making have suggested (Klijn and Teisman 1991; Timmermans 2001) (see Figure 1).

Fourth, in terms of what factors drive this process forward, the metaphorical possibilities of ‘weaving’ are extensive, but a few aspects can be highlighted for the present purposes. Importantly, a five-stage weaving metaphor takes us beyond the agenda-setting stage (knowing the problem is a legitimate one to address), and recognizes that options need to be explored, designs examined, decisions made, products put together and then reflected upon. It recognizes that a production process following after agenda-setting, is the core thread around which policy-making winds. It also recognizes that a programme thread is added after a decision has been made to proceed, where particular instruments are selected and deployed. We can then conceive, for example, of an entire process of policy production from ‘beginning’ to end’, while recognizing crucial moments as well as times where events may not be as expected and critical decisions have to be undertaken – e.g. to choose between different designs, to figure out how to translate an idea into a workable product, and how to cope when expected materials or resources are not available (Parsons 2004).

At the *agenda-setting stage* we adapt the basic Kingdonian assumption of three streams – problem, policy and political – into threads that are woven into public policy-making. Critical juncture #1 occurs in agenda-setting much as Kingdon suggested, when the three threads interconnect in the typical “policy window” fashion he described. After this critical agenda-setting process, at the *policy formulation stage* a new policy process is created in order to support discovery of which policy solutions are most suited to addressing the problem at hand. All the other strands wind and separate as specific sets of subsystem actors such as policy analysts and stakeholders pursue deliberations on policy alternatives (Craft and Howlett 2013). The end of policy formulation marks critical juncture #2, when all threads are relatively tightly woven to produce recommendations and/or clear alternative choices. At the start of the *decision-making stage* the policy solution thread typically gets unravelled from the others and is held up for close examination. Discussions lead towards reintroduction of the policy solution thread at critical juncture #3, when a decision is made and all the threads are pulled together tightly, with the intent of neatly joining together problem, policy, politics and process. In order to

**Figure 1.** Five-thread (Stream) model of policy process

put a policy decision into practice, a new programme thread then emerges in the *implementation stage* to integrate with the other threads. The policy thread may again separate here if implementation of the core policy and its aims remain highly contested, but at the conclusion of implementation – or at least at a point when the threads have become part of political/policy life – we find critical juncture #4, paving the way for evaluation. During the evaluation stage, any and all the various threads may unravel as they are held up for scrutiny and examined. During a formal evaluation they will wind around the process thread, even though it may come under scrutiny. Critical juncture #5 marks the end of evaluation, when there is an attempt to connect all the threads back together in a meaningful fashion. This juncture may lead to some form of policy termination (the threads being cut), or a recognition that the combination of threads continue as it is (based on the view that the policy is working). This juncture, however, may bring disagreement, disillusionment and practical problems, lead to a further unravelling and a loop into a new agenda-setting phase.

The weaving metaphor has the advantage of conveying agency (“policy entrepreneurial activity”), in each stream (Muhkerjee and Howlett 2015) in terms of what is working with the threads. This is not to suggest that there is an invisible force which stitches together all aspects of policy and policy processes, but it does suggest that there is a strong guidance, which typically comes, as Kingdon noted, from state policy-making authorities once an issue is on the agenda (by virtue of the authority and powers of the state), and later by

other forces such as opposition parties and lobby groups that seek to shape the “tailoring” of policy (Parsons 2004). The metaphor can also cope with differing motivations. For example we might imagine the development of austerity measures where government is motivated by financial pressures and argues that we need to “cut the cloth”, and terminate policies while opponents motivated by issues of fairness argue that doing so will leave vulnerable elements of society (e.g. the poor) exposed (Wilder and Howlett 2014).

Fifth, what analytical value is added by any new understanding that emerges from this new five thread/five stages framework? This is a crucial question. It retains the factors contributing to the appeal and durability of the two existing frameworks, but it also needs to provide analytical value in areas where the two frameworks do not. It retains the policy cycle appeal of simplicity, stages, movement, while overcoming its inability to address issues of power, policy-making complexity and agency. Equally, it retains the metaphorical appeal of the multiple streams approach in highlighting the policy importance of different aspects of society converging (or not) at specific points in time, while overcoming an emphasis on randomness, a neglect of biases and – importantly – a lack of any extensive discussion of what happens after “agenda-setting” which are features of contemporary stream theorizing.

Closely linked with the issue of agency, the metaphor can also accommodate issues of power and biases within public policy. It can accommodate varying access to the materials such as cloths, threads, machinery and patterns needed to create the fabric of policy, as well as differential powers to achieve visions of what the (policy) fabric design would eventually look like. Indeed, it is possible to conceive different core threads, which particular policy designs rely upon. For instance, a solution-driven garbage can style of policy-making would have “politics” and “policy” threads woven together to form a single major thread, with everything else such as the nature of the problem and the process being woven around this core. The corollary is that any such biases limit the freedom of movement for any thread seeking to depart from the policy design, but it would not stop someone trying to unravel it. Groups may seek to cut out the process thread, arguing that it is little more than a convenient means of legitimizing and producing a desired end.

The metaphor of weaving can also accommodate many forms of complexity (Parsons 2004). This includes but is not limited to multiple “hands” being involved in layers and levels of government, attempts to skip stages and getting “tied in knots”, for example, when lack of consultation leads to threads that need to be unravelled in order to refashion policy design (Teisman 2000). The metaphor can also cope with complexity in the sense that it helps us understand when “things go wrong” and do not work out as intended. This might include threads being removed, broken or cut when, for example, a government is no longer able to muster a legislative majority to proceed further (Jordan et al. 2013); materials are not available to achieve goals and when external shocks (such as flooding, financial crisis, deliberate attack) lead to programme reassessment or termination. The metaphor can also cope with sub-critical junctures and micro decisions along the way. Designing and building any policy requires fine-tuning and recalibration of the fabric over time.

### **An Illustration and Application: The Poll Tax in the UK**

A brief example of the 1985 Poll Tax case in the UK can help illustrate the applicability and utility of using the synthesized “weaving” framework in the analysis and exploration of a complex policy process.

This policy initiative is well over two decades old, but it is quite possibly the most controversial policy in modern British history. It was in essence a new and exceptionally regressive flat-rate tax for local government services, paid by rich and poor alike. A millionaire, for example, would pay the same as a low-paid hospitality worker. The tax provoked riots and demonstrations from hundreds of thousands up and down the country; non-payment was in the region of 15–20 per cent, while administration and collection systems were on the point of collapse – especially in the major cities with large, vulnerable and transient populations where the costs of collection often exceeded the revenue raised. The Poll Tax, combined with Margaret Thatcher being at odds with key Europhile ministers and MPs within the Conservative Party, were the key reasons that led to a leadership challenge and ultimately her resignation (Butler et al. 1994).

The study of the Poll Tax history is still mired in debate over how such an apparently undemocratic policy – a per capita tax, in effect on the right to vote – could have been advanced in the “Mother of Parliaments”. Previous explanations have ranged from the Thatcher government seeking to shift the tax burden from the middle classes to the working class, to a weak system of checks and balances within the Westminster system and the evolution of ideas on local finance that have a mind of their own (Butler et al. 1994; McConnell 1995; John 1999). These explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive but application of the five-thread weaving model helps us understand the “political will” to design a particular fabric better than would either the cycle or multiple streams frameworks. The case is based around three main works of authority on the subject (Crick and Van Klaveren 1991; Butler et al. 1994; McConnell 1995).

At this point, as Kingdon would have it, in March 1985 the agenda-setting stage occurred, leading to critical juncture #1. Three threads (streams) joined together – i.e. a problem thread (crisis of property valuations in Scotland with rises in bills well in excess of inflation and hitting in particular many Conservative-dominated constituencies), a policy thread (many longstanding options to the existing property tax, including poll tax, local sales tax and local income tax) and a political thread (Conservative government with low levels of political support in Scotland). At this critical point, the government stated that the status quo (existing fabric design) was not an option.

Critical juncture #1 led immediately in April 1985 to the start of the policy formulation stage. It began with the addition of a new process thread, specifically an internal appraisal which produced an unequivocal commitment to abandon the existing design of property taxation, despite no clear alternative. The process thread was then strengthened and the government took charge of the policy formation process by setting up an internal task force to examine the issue. During this new and strengthened process, we can apply the weaving metaphor to aid our understanding of how the new design emerged.

The “agency” of government and its political ideas steered the entire exercise over the next few months. Politics was the dominant thread, with all other threads woven around it. The problem thread was styled as the existing local property tax (“the rates”), which was considered as an unfair burden on the middle classes and did not hold local councils to account. The process thread wound tightly towards examination of tax alternatives that could best address this problem. The policy thread contained several options but could only insert itself into a poll tax design, given that it was the only form of local tax that could meet the prescription laid out in the political thread. In August/September 1985, a

further period of internal appraisal reinforced the importance of continuing along the course already charted and upholding the threads' new design.

Critical juncture #2 marked the start of the decision-making phase, leading to the issuing of a consultation paper in January 1986 which had only one design option (the Poll Tax, now formally called the Community Charge). Despite overwhelming opposition in formal responses, the government, led by Margaret Thatcher (a significant "policy entrepreneur"), was of the view the public would grow to like the tax once it became operational. Hence, all threads wound tightly around a policy solution that was considered the only solution to the problem of an unfair and unaccountable system of property taxation. There were no further significant junctures and the decision to introduce a poll tax was taken in August 1986 to proceed with the requisite legislation – initially in Scotland, with England and Wales to follow. Such were the narrow design parameters initially set out shortly after critical juncture #2 that a poll tax was the only option that could be fit into the proposed design.

Implementation commenced in April 1989 in Scotland, critical juncture #3, where a programme thread was added to deploy all the resources needed to make the tax a reality, such as the legal resources of the state to collect the tax, and information resources to determine who should pay and how much they should pay. Implementation was tightened further in April 1990 when the tax was introduced in England and Wales. It was shortly afterwards, critical juncture #3a, when all the threads in this policy design began to unravel in dramatic fashion. Demonstrations, riots and internal government dissent led to the government losing control of the political thread; the policy thread was under the microscope with a civil society horrified at what it saw: the tax itself became the "problem"; and the programme and process threads were fraying in the face of innumerable problems of administration and collection. By November of that year, critical juncture #4, the threads of the poll tax were tangled and the policy fabric was in tatters. This disarray and its association with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who had made the tax her "flagship" policy, coupled with a withdrawal of support from many on the pro-European wing of her party, was a major factor contributing to her resignation.

Critical juncture #4 (evaluation) followed immediately thereafter, when all candidates for the premiership concluded the tax was unworkable and a new system of local taxation was needed. In essence, all the threads had been cut and three new threads had emerged in a new round of agenda-setting. There was now a new Kingdon-style convergence of problem (unworkable tax), politics (universal commitment to replace it) and policy (debates about what would be the best alternative to replace).

Ultimately, under new Prime Minister John Major, the solution was the Council Tax, which was in essence a modified version of the old property tax. The old property tax was tailored to the individual needs/resources of property owners, but the per capita poll tax was at heart a "one size fits all". Virtually all corners of British society judged in retrospect that the poll tax was a bad idea, leading to a bad design that in retrospect was never going to work. It was driven through by sheer political will, seeking to weave together all the policy-making capacities of the state, but it ended up producing a policy that was so ill-fitting on the British body politic that it needed to be discarded, along with its principal designer. The policy cycle model alone would be unable to explain such a politically driven and skewed policy-making process with narrow parameters that could lead logically to only one solution (a poll tax). Similarly, the multiple streams model alone



would be unable to explain why “an idea whose time had come” in the view of political leadership, would be so at odds with the views of the body politic.

### **Conclusion: Moving Policy Process Thinking Beyond Disparate Stages and Streams**

Current policy theory, as Peter John (2012) has noted, is mired in debates between adherents of works created in the late 1980s and early 1990s, if not earlier, and despite much case study and comparative research which has questioned or challenged the assumptions and predictions of these models, has not moved very far beyond the original ideas encapsulated in the writings of that era. As both John (2013) and Cairney (2013) have argued, one way out of this conundrum is to stop viewing these frameworks as mutually exclusive or competing constructs and create a logic that can integrate their most effective elements. This article engages in this process of conceptual development and reconciliation between two overarching frameworks of policy-making processes: the multiple streams model developed by John Kingdon and the multiple stage model introduced by Harold Lasswell and advanced by others.

As the discussion outlines, although many authors have called for the supersession of the stages model and several authors have tried to accomplish this through the adoption or incorporation of elements of a multiple streams model, Kingdon's originality cannot simply be applied *en bloc* to other stages of policy-making beyond agenda-setting. His original model is too parsimonious and does not take into account the emergence of other activities or “streams” that are needed to translate agenda issues into policies that can be put into practice. The policy cycle framework, on the other hand, by its very nature, is more capable of capturing how society moves policy deliberations through different phases beyond agenda-setting, but is found wanting when it comes to engaging with some of the fundamental issues of politics, such as political agency/will, power biases and complexity (Sabatier 1991).

The five-stream weaving framework proposed here integrates the essence of Kingdon's “fluid” framework within the critical boundaries and thresholds of the Lasswellian “cycle” or “stages” framework. It retains the basic thrust and vocabulary developed by Kingdon while offering a more comprehensive and relevant conceptualization for capturing the full range of dynamics which affect public policy-making set out by Lasswell, including issues of power and the various twists and turns that can occur along the way as policy develops. As the case study of the Poll Tax set out above shows, reconciling the streams and stages frameworks in this way helps us to more fully understand the manner in which complex and controversial public policy processes develop than occurs when either framework is used on its own to inform theory and model building.

We have concentrated in this article on reconciling the policy cycle and multiple streams frameworks, but we consider our five-thread, five-stages “weaving” framework to have the capacity for extension into other policy studies frameworks. For example, we can envisage how core beliefs driving advocacy coalition frameworks (Sabatier 1988; Weible et al. 2009) into action (or reaction), shape basic policy design templates (preferred types of policy programmes) as well as styles (processes) for translating core values into concrete outputs. These beliefs can also inspire action to unravel or cut threads in designs and styles that are viewed as problematic and/or inconsistent with core beliefs. The framework, with its recognition of critical junctures, can also help extend the punctuated equilibrium model (Robinson 2007; Baumgartner et al. 2009).

Critical junctures are pivotal moments when there are opportunities for reflection before moving on, and/or turning points when current pathways are recalibrated or altered through threads being modified, added, subtracted or woven together in new ways leading towards new designs and new styles. Further research and thinking in this direction, we argue, will help to overcome the boundaries and limits imposed on these frameworks in the same fashion as has been done here with two other “rival” frameworks.

## Notes

1. Barzelay (2006), for example, advocated a straightforward merger of the multiple streams and cycle frameworks, stating that agenda-setting events informed and constrained subsequent formulation ones which, in turn, did the same for decision-making and so on. In other words, for Barzelay it was not necessary to extend the streams of events present at the agenda-setting stage of policy-making through the entire policy-making process because of the overpowering structuring effect that initial agenda determination had on subsequent policy-making activity. Multiple streams thinking and contingency could explain agenda-setting, after which the standard staged policy process would unroll.
2. A more subtle effort to reconcile cycle and streams frameworks follows from the vision of Zahariadis (2007). This involves a two-phase structure somewhat like Barzelay’s in which Kingdon’s original three streams exist for agenda-setting but afterwards shift into a new configuration during a second phase of policy-making. However, rather than disappear, following agenda entrance the “problem” stream is channelled into a new “process” stream with its own choice opportunity dynamics and structure. This new stream combines elements of Cohen, March and Olsen’s earlier thinking about a fourth “choice” stream with Kingdon’s three streams of events. However, the assumption here, as with Barzelay, is that the essence of a policy problem is crystallized upon agenda entrance such that it no longer has the potential to change materially as the policy process unfolds, but will instead blend into that new policy process stream.

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