

# *Introduction: The Scope and Focus of Policy Process Research and Theory*

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The goal of this volume is to advance the science of policy process among a global community of scholars. In advancing science, theories simultaneously serve as reservoirs of knowledge gained from past research and platforms for guiding new research into the future. The inevitable challenge for anyone learning about or contributing to the policy process is that any one theory inherently focuses on a limited set of concepts and relationships. Therefore, a single theory provides only a partial depiction of the complexity of the policy process. The best strategy to overcome this challenge is to explore and utilize multiple theories of the policy process.<sup>1</sup>

This volume offers an anthology of seven of the most established theories in the field of policy processes. The latest interpretations of these theories are authored by scholars who are among the most knowledgeable and experienced in working with them, a number of whom are the original creators of the theories. By featuring these theories in a single collection, this volume facilitates efforts to compare and contrast their goals and aims, to identify their relative strengths and weaknesses, to learn about how and when to apply them, and to discover the insights embodied in them.

In this introduction, the term *theory* is used generically to represent a research tool. These tools specify scope of inquiry, assumptions, and concepts in various relational forms, such as principles, hypotheses, and propositions. Based on what we know and envision, these relational forms specify a limited set of associations among concepts, from the much larger and untamable set. These relational forms also postulate explanations of why and how, under what conditions, by and for whom, and when the concepts might relate (Whetten 1989). Although the meaning of *theory* varies across the field of policy process research, this generic description is consistent with other uses of the term (McCool 1995, 11). It also represents a deliberate mix of frameworks and theories, as described by Ostrom (2005, 27–29).

## A DEFINITION OF POLICY PROCESS RESEARCH

The policy processes emerged as a field of study in the 1950s as part of an endeavor to develop a science that integrates research on politics and government around a policy orientation. Among its early leaders, Lasswell (1951) urged scholars to focus their research on policy formulation and execution toward the realization of human dignity.<sup>2</sup> Another one of the original expositors on the subject was penned by Shipman, who used the term *policy process* to denote a needed area of study that integrates politics, policy, and administration. As Shipman (1959, 545) notes, "When the policy-process approach is used, institutions and mechanisms of political organization, legislative action, executive administration, adjudication, and the rest merge into an intricately interconnected process for seeking satisfaction of societal values." Following the ideas of Lasswell, Shipman, and many others, the phenomenon of policy processes refers to the *interactions that occur over time between public policies and surrounding actors, events, contexts, and outcomes*.<sup>3</sup>

At the center of policy processes lies the elusive concept of public policy. *Public policy* is defined as the deliberate decisions—actions and nonactions—of a government or an equivalent authority toward specific objectives.<sup>4</sup> Examples of public policies include, but are not limited to, statutes, laws, regulations, executive decisions, and government programs (Birkland 2016, 8). Other examples of public policies are the commonly understood rules-in-use that structure behavioral situations in policy processes, such as the sustained practices of street-level bureaucrats in delivering public services (Lipsky 1980; Schneider and Ingram 1997; Ostrom 2005).<sup>5</sup> Public policies can include both means and goals and can range in form from procedural to substantive and from symbolic to instrumental. Alternatively, a public policy can be understood by identifying the institutions that constitute its design and content. For instance, some institutions prescribe specific authority for a given position, and others require exchanges of information under certain conditions (Ostrom 1980). In studying policy processes, researchers sometimes focus on a single public policy (e.g., a particular welfare law) or on many public policies related to a particular issue (e.g., the many types of public policies affecting the issue of welfare in a locale).

Public policy interactions involve actors—individuals or collectives such as organizations, networks, or coalitions—and their attributes, including their knowledge, values, beliefs, interests, strategies, and resources. Individual actors may be part of the general public who occasionally participate politically in a public policy issue. Alternatively, actors may be affiliated with government or nongovernment organizations that regularly seek to influence public policy on a given issue or control the government venues (e.g., a legislature or an executive administration) wherein policy decisions occur.

The context of a public policy is the setting around which the interactions involving public policy happen. Examples of the contextual categories often

studied in policy process research might be socioeconomic conditions, culture, infrastructure, biophysical conditions, and institutions. Sometimes the context lies in the theoretical foreground as the target of public policy, such as economic stimulus programs aimed to stimulate an economy. It can also provide a theoretical background in which actors politically interact to influence public policy. In this regard, context can be relatively stable or susceptible to change over time.

All contexts entail various types of events. Events can be anticipated and unanticipated incidents ranging from elections to scientific discoveries and chronic and acute societal dilemmas and crises. Sometimes actors deliberately create events to affect the policy process, as seen in social movements. Other times, events are unintentional and beyond the control of actors, like an earthquake. Because events can be directly or indirectly related to a given public policy issue, they often provide opportunities for achieving policy objectives. For example, a bureaucracy might release an evaluative report that brings attention to the success or failure of a public policy in addressing an issue. This report, in turn, might shape future legislative agendas. This is but one simple example of the many ways in which the theories in this volume can portray the role of events in shaping policy processes.

The outcomes of policy processes are the short- or long-term consequences or impacts of public policy on a society. These outcomes continue to interact with policy processes over time. Outcomes are essentially changes (or stasis) in the context and actors constituting policy processes. Outcomes are separated as a distinct category because of their importance in assessing the effects on society of the policy processes. Thus, whereas one of the goals of policy process research is the generation of knowledge as embodied in theories, the use of this knowledge must eventually help attain societal values and realize a greater human dignity.

To imagine the policy process as interactions involving public policy over time underscores the permanence of politics and continuity of policy processes where "there is no beginning or end" (Lindblom 1968, 4). Indeed, any given output of the policy process in one study can serve as an input of the policy process in another. The choice of any given output and input in policy process research is not absolute but rather a reflection of the priorities of the researcher, the practicalities of available data, and the foci of a given theory.

These ongoing interactions are also best understood by the various interpretations of the "process" in policy process research. A *process* refers to the continuous points in time (e.g., usually in terms of actors' decisions and actions, events, and outcomes) that constitute policy processes. One of the most common depictions of this process is the *policy cycle*. The policy cycle simplifies the policy process by delineating the stages of decision making through which policy proposals must traverse for their manifestation. These stages typically include agenda setting, policy formulation and adoption, policy implementation, evaluation, and termination.

Many have criticized the policy cycle for its overly simplistic and inaccurate portrayal of the policy process (e.g., Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). But criticisms aside, it remains a useful heuristic archetype. The policy cycle becomes a hindrance when scholars believe the key interactions in the policy process are strictly the policy cycle, force theories into its stages, and ignore important questions that lie outside its scope. Indeed, the problem with the policy cycle is less its simplistic and inaccurate depiction of policy processes and more its overuse by scholars as the sole lens through which to view and organize the field.

The theories in this volume offer additional portrayals of the interactions in policy processes. These interactions might be enduring periods of political conflict and concord observed in the behavior of coalition members or serendipitous circumstances leading to windows of opportunity in changing agendas and policies. In addition, patterns and speed of policy adoption across different units of government, the continuous tinkering with rules by people self-governing a collective action situation, and the various feedback effects on the general public of adopted public policies represent other interactions. Indeed, the theories in this volume depict interactions that vary in what is emphasized or deemphasized. These interactions can reflect the linearity of the policy cycle stages, yet can also portray a policy process that is far more complicated and messy.

### THE CRITERIA FOR INCLUDING THEORIES

This volume features the most established theories of the policy process. Their continued inclusion in the fourth edition of this volume was based on several criteria:

- (1) *A focus on developing scientific theory of policy processes.* Each of the approaches in this volume represents efforts toward developing a scientific theory that focuses on a set of interrelated concepts involving actors, events, contexts, and outcomes that surround public policies over time. As scientific theories, the approaches in this volume specify sets of assumptions and conditions under which they apply and posit interactions that come in various relational forms (hypotheses, propositions, principals, or other). Underlying these relationships are causal drivers—usually anchored at the individual level—that explain why a relationship could exist. No matter the name, these relational forms serve to enable falsification and learning, to communicate explicitly the relationships under investigation, and to summarize what we know about a given phenomenon. When the concepts are defined abstractly, the relational forms promote comparative applications of the theories to tease apart local versus generalizable understandings and explanations.

- (2) *The presence of an active research community.* Science is a “social enterprise” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 8). All theories in this volume must be supported by a community of scholars advancing the science. Such a community might be motivated by a common set of research questions or objectives, a shared vocabulary of concepts, a balanced research effort that interplays theoretical expositions and empirical applications, and common epistemological and ontological assumptions. The composition of these research programs varies, but most involve active and experienced leadership, a regular influx of graduate students, and an expanding base of interested and experienced scholars applying a theory. These scholars often participate on the same research projects and organize and participate on panels at general conferences. In some cases, these communities organize and participate in small workshops or seminars focused on developing their theory.

- (3) *A comparative research approach.* To gain knowledge about the policy process, a theory’s research community must apply the theory in a comparative approach.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes this is done implicitly, as when one theory is applied in a single country. In this situation, a follow-up study could aggregate the results in a meta-analysis from a number of similarly executed applications of the theory across many countries. Other times this is done explicitly. For example, some research teams might apply a given theory to answer the same question across countries in a single research design; here, the underlying goal of the research might be to ascertain effects of the contextual setting on the results. The comparative approach need not be restricted to country comparisons but may involve comparisons of a variety of different actors, contexts, events, outcomes, or times. The challenge in comparative research agendas is creating and using a shared research platform to foster generalizable knowledge across policy processes while, at the same time, offering enough flexibility to portray a given policy process in a valid way.

- (4) *An effort toward making research as public as possible.* The quality of policy process research is only as good as the transparency of its procedures for collecting and analyzing data. Sabatier (1999, 5) made famous the phrase “be clear enough to be proven wrong.” The point is that obscure procedures produce results immune to criticism. There will always be some ambiguous steps in a research project, and pure replication is usually impractical or impossible. However, given human fallibility, there is no better way to learn from our mistakes than to be as clear as we can in all aspects of our science.

- (5) *Continual growth in knowledge about policy processes.* Theories offer a number of important academic and practical contributions, from teaching to conducting community-based research. Of all these contributions, probably

the most important is advancing the reservoir of localized and generalized knowledge. Given that some of the theories in this volume have been around for decades, we must eventually ask: What new insights have each of these theories produced since its creation? Our understanding of the policy process is, and always will be, incomplete. Yet, if our theories stagnate, then so does progress in reaching higher plateaus of knowledge.

The extent to which the theories in this volume meet the above criteria varies and, in some situations, is debatable. Of these criteria, the most important is an engaged group of scholars advancing the science under a given approach. Indeed, one of the main lessons from decades of developing theory is that it takes teams of scholars working together over extended periods of time to create shared methods and analytical techniques, to conduct their research comparatively, and to aggregate those results into lessons learned. No theory is perfect, and assessing the accumulation of knowledge for a given theory is exceedingly difficult. Thus, the best short-term indicator of future progress is the presence of a large group of scholars working together to advance a theory toward the enrichment of knowledge.

## THEORIES INCLUDED IN THIS VOLUME

This volume offers seven different theories of policy process research that meet, to various extents and ways, the criteria outlined above for their inclusion in the discussion.

The first chapter, coauthored by Nicole Herweg, Nikoilos Zahariadis, and Reinmut Zohlnhöfer (2017), covers the Multiple Streams Framework. The Multiple Streams Framework depicts a process that emphasizes timing in the merging of problem, political, and policy streams in the creation of windows of opportunity for both agenda setting and decision making. Among the strengths of the Multiple Streams Framework are its accessibility, vibrant research community, and constant evolution.

Chapter 2, by Frank R. Baumgartner, Bryan D. Jones, and Peter B. Mortensen (2017), is on the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. Under this theory, scarce attention drives incremental and punctuated patterns of policy change over time. Of all the theories in this volume, the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory offers perhaps the best current example of a coordinated policy community leveraging a comparative approach.

The third chapter on the Policy Feedback Theory, coauthored by Suzanne Mettler and Mallory SoRelle (2017), takes a different perspective. Drawing on the notion that policies shape politics, the Policy Feedback Theory seeks to understand what happens after a policy is adopted, with an emphasis on resource and interpretive effects on mass publics. Policy Feedback Theory represents another vibrant research community that continues to develop this theory.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework is the fourth theory, coauthored by Hank C. Jenkins-Smith, Daniel Nohrstedt, Christopher M. Weible, and Karin Ingold (2017). The Advocacy Coalition Framework deals with ongoing patterns of conflict and concord as reflections of different beliefs, situations fostering belief change and learning, and rationales for major and minor policy change. The literature under the Advocacy Coalition Framework features a strong comparative agenda with applications spanning the globe.

Elizabeth A. Shanahan, Michael D. Jones, Mark K. McBeth, and Claudio M. Radaelli (2017) coauthored Chapter 5 on the Narrative Policy Framework. This relatively new theory focuses on the politics of storytelling and the impacts on public policy. The Narrative Policy Framework is quickly evolving, with an increasing number of applications, a common methodological approach that spurs applications across contexts, and constant refinement to its concepts and posited interactions.

The sixth chapter, coauthored by Edella Schlager and Michael Cox (2017), summarizes the Institutional Analysis and Development framework and its offspring, the Social-Ecological Systems framework. Both frameworks are extremely versatile, with an exceptionally large number of applications in a variety of contexts. Based, in part, on the idea of self-governance and the constant tinkering with institutional rules, these frameworks continue to flourish in describing and explaining a variety of collective action situations.

Chapter 7, the last theoretical chapter, directs scholars to approach policy change by looking at the reasons, speed, and patterns of adoption or rejection of policy proposals across government units, as found in Berry and Berry's (2017) summary of innovation and diffusion models. This chapter provides the latest summary of this long-standing research area in the study of policy processes.

## STRATEGIES FOR USING THIS VOLUME

The chapters are organized in a way that facilitates reading the volume from beginning to end, though some instructors and readers will prefer a different order of the theories.<sup>7</sup> Part I encompasses the theory chapters, beginning with the Multiple Streams Framework and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, given their traditional emphases on agenda setting and policy change. Policy Feedback Theory comes next, with its focus on the impacts of policy design on society. Encompassing a range of phenomena, the next three chapters include the Advocacy Coalition Framework, Narrative Policy Framework, and the Institutional Analysis and Development framework. The last of the theory-based chapters is on innovation and diffusion models, with its emphasis on the adoption and rejection of policy output across space and time.

Part II of this volume includes three summary chapters. The first (Chapter 8), by Tanya Heikkilä and Paul Cairney (2017), provides a comparison and critique of the theories in this anthology. Given the importance of the

comparative approach in advancing policy process theory, in Chapter 9 Jale Tosun and Samuel Workman (2017) provide tips and strategies for using the theories to conduct comparative research. The final chapter, by Christopher M. Weible (2017), offers an overview of the status of the field and general strategies for moving forward and climbing upward.

Each of the theory chapters should be considered a thorough yet brief summary of a theory. To develop a deeper understanding of any of these theories, readers are encouraged to read the chapter in this volume along with some combination of the foundational pieces of a given theory, previous theoretical depictions of the theory, and empirical applications. For example, advanced graduate students exploring the Multiple Streams Framework could read Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) "A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice," Kingdon's (1984) *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, Chapter 1 by Herweg and colleagues in this volume, and one or two empirical applications. For intermediate graduate or undergraduate students, the theoretical chapters in this volume could be combined with one or two empirical applications.

*Theories of the Policy Process* is not intended to provide comprehensive coverage of policy process research. Readers are encouraged to supplement this volume with articles or books that cover other topics or theories. Among those deserving attention are the policy cycle (deLeon 1999), policy success and failure (McConnell, 2010), policy styles (Richardson 1982), power (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Lukes 1974), policy instruments and design (Howlett 2011), policy entrepreneurs (Mintrom and Norman 2009), social capital (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1994), implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Mouton and Sandfort, 2016), causal stories (Stone 1989), the postpositivist literature (Fischer and Forester 1993; Fischer 2003), and the social construction framework (Schneider and Ingram, 1993; Schneider, Ingram, and deLeon, 2014). Additionally, there has been another burst of innovation in the formation of new and emerging theories of the policy process. In 2013, *Policy Studies Journal* published a collection of these new theories, including the Ecology of Games (Lubell 2013), the Policy Regime Perspective (May and Jochim 2013), the Institutional Collective Action Framework (Feiock 2013), and the Collective Learning Framework (Heikkilä and Gerlak 2013).

As mentioned earlier, readers should avoid forcing the theories into a stage of the policy cycle—the result would be an incomplete, and quite possibly an inaccurate, portrayal of them. Although some theories may fit into one or more of the stages, most incorporate the entire policy cycle in one way or another or depict the policy process in an entirely different way.<sup>8</sup> The best strategy is to interpret how the different theories provide insight into policy process rather than to impose an artificial categorization on them.

Readers should also adopt a broad definition of public policy, as previously described, that includes both formal elements of public policy, such as laws and regulations, and public policies as rules-in-use that govern, for example,

traditional venues of government, from city councils to legislatures, as well as various associations charged with the provision and production of public goods and services. This strategy is most useful for relating the Institutional Analysis and Development framework to the other theories covered in this volume. The point is that the interactions involving public policies encompass not just the formal structures of government as written down and adopted by officials and other authorities but also the actual rules-in-use that structure the day-to-day behaviors of actors engaged in policy process situations. Any definition of public policy must include both because so much of government activities is informed by what is written down and by the informal rules of a given situation. Arguably, such a broad definition of public policy may inhibit comparison if we do not take into account the type of public policy under study.

The goal of this volume is to provide in a single outlet the latest versions of the major theories of the policy process, to compare and contrast these theories, to offer strategies for strengthening the international community engaged in comparative policy process research, and to help propel policy process research to higher levels of excellence. Whether this book serves as an introduction to the field or as a sturdy reference guide, the hope is that readers will test and develop policy process theories to provide for a better understanding and explanation of policy processes.

## NOTES

1. The complexity of the policy process emerges from interactions among a large number of diverse people seeking political influence, periodic as well as unexpected events, a complicated mix of policies that span levels of government, and contextual settings characterized by a range of conditions from geographical to socioeconomic. In studying such complexity, people are innately restrained by cognitive presuppositions that cause them to recognize some aspects of the process and ignore others. Using one or more theories is one strategy to help mitigate the effects of such presuppositions by highlighting the most important items for study and specifying relationships between them. By requiring conscientious rigor in choosing what to study in analyzing the policy process, theories increase the likelihood that errors will be recognized and, thus, they facilitate lesson learning over time. Such benefits are magnified when theories are applied with transparent data collection and analysis methods, especially when compared to research based on unspecified and implicit observations. Ideally, scholars become versed in the use of more than one theory, which is one of the best ways to guard against both theory tenacity and confirmation bias. Theory tenacity is the tendency to maintain commitment to a theoretical argument even in response to disconfirming evidence. Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek out evidence that confirms a theoretical argument. See Loehle (1987) for discussion of both theory tenacity and confirmation bias.
2. For Lasswell (1951), the policy process was a key intellectual pillar of the "policy science." The field of policy analysis and evaluation encapsulates the other key pillar.

3. This definition matches that found in Weible and Carter (2016).
4. The definition of public policy offered in the text seeks to capture common elements found across the literature, most notably in Weible and Carter (2016, 3), Birkland (2016, 8), McCool (1995, 8–9), Parson (1995, 2–16), Cairney (2012, 23–26), Howlett (2011, 15–17), Heick (1972, 84–88), and Ranney (1968, 6–7).
5. *Rules-in-use* refers to the definitions and logic of the Institutional Analysis and Design Framework (Ostrom 2005, 2010). Ostrom (2010, 647) defines the rules-in-use as rules that “specify common understandings of those involved related to who must, must not, or may take which actions affecting others subject to sanctions.” The point is that the content of public policy as formally written may or may not reflect the in-use rules structuring the regular practices and behaviors of government officials or the equivalent. The inclusion of in-use rules as part of the definition of public policies is somewhat atypical compared to most definitions, but it is consistent with a few others (Schneider and Ingram 1997, 2) and necessary in understanding and explaining policy processes, especially when considering the roles of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980).
6. See the excellent book by Dodds (2013) for some of the inspiration of the ideas underlying this criterion.
7. Of course, some instructors and readers might want to adopt a “machete order” by rearranging the sequence in which the chapters are read. Some instructors, for example, start with the introduction and concluding chapters and then read the theory chapters in a different order than presented.
8. For example, the Advocacy Coalition Framework and Institutional Analysis and Development Framework could be applied to any of the stages of the policy cycle. Consider policy change: (1) analysts could use the Advocacy Coalition Framework to discover how policy change is the result of conflict between adversarial coalitions conditioned by events, learning, and negotiations; (2) analysts could use the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework to understand an instance of policy change as institutional adaptation among actors continuously tinkering with the rules governing a particular situation. Consider implementation: (1) analysts could use the Advocacy Coalition Framework to study implementation and find a continuation of coalition conflict and the absence of learning in rulemaking in yet another political game; (2) analysts could use the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework to study implementation as the behaviors associated with the patterns of enforcement and monitoring of rules governing a particular resource.

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