
The Need for Better Theories

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The process of public policymaking includes the manner in which problems get conceptualized and brought to government for solution; governmental institutions formulate alternatives and select policy solutions; and those solutions get implemented, evaluated, and revised.

SIMPLIFYING A COMPLEX WORLD

For a variety of reasons, the policy process involves an extremely complex set of interacting elements over time:

1. There are normally hundreds of actors from interest groups and from governmental agencies and legislatures at different levels of government, researchers, and journalists involved in one or more aspects of the process. Each of these actors (either individual or corporate) has potentially different values/interests, perceptions of the situation, and policy preferences.
2. This process usually involves time spans of a decade or more, as that is the minimum duration of most policy cycles, from emergence of a problem through sufficient experience with implementation to render a reasonably fair evaluation of program impact (Kirst and Jung, 1982; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). In fact, a number of recent studies suggest that time periods of twenty to forty years may be required to obtain a reasonable understanding of the impact of a variety of socioeconomic conditions and the accumulation of scientific knowledge about a problem (Derthick and Quirk, 1985; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Eisner, 1993).
3. In any given policy domain, such as air pollution control or health policy, there are normally dozens of different programs involving multiple

levels of government that are operating, or being proposed for operation, in any given locale, such as the state of California or the city of Los Angeles. Since these programs deal with interrelated subjects and involve many of the same actors, many scholars would argue that the appropriate unit of analysis should be the policy subsystem or domain, rather than a specific governmental program (Hjern and Porter, 1981; Ostrom, 1983; Sabatier, 1986; Rhodes, 1988; Jordan, 1990).

4. Policy debates among actors in the course of legislative hearings, litigation, and proposed administrative regulations typically involve very technical disputes over the severity of a problem, its causes, and the probable impacts of alternative policy solutions. Understanding the policy process requires attention to the role that such debates play in the overall process.
5. A final complicating factor in the policy process is that most disputes involve deeply held values/interests, large amounts of money, and, at some point, authoritative coercion. Given these stakes, policy disputes seldom resemble polite academic debates. Instead, most actors face enormous temptations to present evidence selectively, to misrepresent the position of their opponents, to coerce and discredit opponents, and generally to distort the situation to their advantage (Riker, 1986; Moe, 1990a,b; Schlager, 1995).

In short, understanding the policy process requires a knowledge of the goals and perceptions of hundreds of actors throughout the country involving possibly very technical scientific and legal issues over periods of a decade or more when most of those actors are actively seeking to propagate their specific "spin" on events.

Given the staggering complexity of the policy process, the analyst *must* find some way of simplifying the situation in order to have any chance of understanding it. One simply cannot look for, and see, everything. Work in the philosophy of science and social psychology has provided persuasive evidence that perceptions are almost always mediated by a set of presuppositions. These perform two critical mediating functions. First, they tell the observer what to look for, that is, what factors are likely to be critically important versus those that can be safely ignored. Second, they define the categories in which phenomena are to be grouped (Kuhn, 1970; Lakatos, 1971; Brown, 1977; Lord, Ross, and Lepper, 1979; Hawkesworth, 1992). In understanding the policy process, for example, most institutional rational choice approaches tell the analyst (1) to focus on the leaders of a few critical institutions with formal decisionmaking authority, (2) to assume that these actors are pursuing their material self-interest (e.g., income, power, security), and (3) to group actors into a few institutional categories, for example, legislatures, administrative agencies, and interest groups (Shepsle, 1989; Scharpf, 1997). In contrast, the advocacy coalition framework tells the analyst to assume (1) that

belief systems are more important than institutional affiliation, (2) that actors may be pursuing a wide variety of objectives, which must be measured empirically, and (3) that one must add researchers and journalists to the set of potentially important policy actors (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Thus analysts from these two different perspectives look at the same situation through quite different lenses and thus are likely to see quite different things—at least initially.

Given that we have little choice but to look at the world through a lens consisting of a set of simplifying presuppositions, at least two quite different strategies exist for developing such a lens. On the one hand, the analyst can approach the world in an implicit, ad hoc fashion, using whatever categories and assumptions have arisen from his or her experience. This is essentially the method of common sense. It may be reasonably accurate for situations important to the analyst's welfare in which she or he has considerable experience. In such situations, the analyst has both the incentive and the experience to eliminate clearly invalid propositions. Beyond that limited scope, the commonsense strategy is likely to be beset by internal inconsistencies, ambiguities, erroneous assumptions, and invalid propositions precisely because the strategy does not contain any explicit methods for error correction. Since its assumptions and propositions remain implicit and largely unknown, they are unlikely to be subjected to serious scrutiny. The analyst simply assumes they are, by and large, correct—insofar as he or she is even cognizant of their content.

An alternative strategy is that of science. Its fundamental ontological assumption is that a smaller set of critical relationships underlies the bewildering complexity of phenomena. For example, a century ago Darwin provided a relatively simple explanation—summarized under the processes of natural selection—for the thousands of species he encountered on his voyages. The critical characteristics of science are that (1) its methods of data acquisition and analysis should be presented in a sufficiently public manner that they can be replicated by others; (2) its concepts and propositions should be clearly defined and logically consistent and should give rise to empirically falsifiable propositions; (3) those propositions should be as general as possible and should explicitly address relevant uncertainties; and (4) both the methods and concepts should be self-consciously subjected to criticism and evaluation by experts in that field (Nagel, 1961; Lave and March, 1975; King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994). The overriding strategy can be summarized in the injunction: "Be clear enough to be proven wrong." Unlike "common sense," science is designed to be self-consciously, error seeking, and thus self-correcting.

A critical component of that strategy—derived from Principles 2–4 above—is that scientists should develop clear and logically interrelated sets of propositions, some of them empirically falsifiable, to explain fairly general sets of phenomena. Such coherent sets of propositions have traditionally been termed *theories*.

In several recent papers (including Chapter 3 of this volume and Ostrom et al., 1994), Elinor Ostrom has developed some very useful distinctions among three different sets of propositions. In her view, a *conceptual framework* identifies a set

of variables and the relationships among them that presumably account for a set of phenomena. The framework can provide anything from a modest set of variables to something as extensive as a paradigm. It need not identify directions among relationships, although more developed frameworks will certainly specify some hypotheses. A *theory* provides a “denser” and more logically coherent set of relationships. It applies values to some of the variables and usually specifies how relationships may vary depending upon the values of critical variables. Numerous theories may be consistent with the same conceptual framework. A *model* is a representation of a specific situation. It is usually much narrower in scope, and more precise in its assumptions, than the underlying theory. Ideally, it is mathematical. Thus frameworks, theories, and models can be conceptualized as operating along a continuum involving increasing logical interconnectedness and specificity, but decreasing scope.

One final point: Scientists should be aware of, and capable of applying, several different theoretical perspectives—not just a single one (Stinchcomb, 1968). Knowledge of several different perspectives forces the analyst to clarify differences in assumptions across frameworks, rather than implicitly assuming a given set. Second, multiple perspectives encourage the development of competing hypotheses that should lead ideally to “strong inference” (Platt, 1964)—or at least to the accumulation of evidence in favor of one perspective more than another. Finally, knowledge and application of multiple perspectives should gradually clarify the conditions under which one perspective is more useful than another.

Consistent with this multiple-lens strategy, this volume discusses seven conceptual frameworks. A few of them—notably, institutional rational choice—have given rise to one or more theories, and virtually all have spawned a variety of models seeking to explain specific situations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF THE POLICY PROCESS

The Stages Heuristic

Until recently, the most influential framework for understanding the policy process—particularly among American scholars—has been the “stages heuristic,” or what Nakamura (1987) termed the “textbook approach.” As developed by Jones (1970), Anderson (1975), and Brewer and deLeon (1983), it divided the policy process into a series of stages—usually agenda setting, policy formulation and legitimation, implementation, and evaluation—and discussed some of the factors affecting the process within each stage. The stages heuristic served a useful purpose in the 1970s and early 1980s by dividing the very complex policy process into discrete stages and by stimulating some excellent research within specific stages—particularly agenda setting (Cobb, Ross, and Ross, 1976; Kingdon, 1984; Nelson, 1984) and policy implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Hjern and Hull, 1982; Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983).

In the past decade, however, the stages heuristic has been subjected to some rather devastating criticisms (Nakamura, 1987; Sabatier, 1991; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993):

1. It is not really a causal theory since it never identifies a set of causal drivers that govern the process within and across stages. Instead, work within each stage has tended to develop on its own, almost totally without reference to research in other stages. In addition, without causal drivers there can be no coherent set of hypotheses within and across stages.
2. The proposed sequence of stages is often descriptively inaccurate. For example, evaluations of existing programs affect agenda setting, and policy formulation/legitimation occurs as bureaucrats attempt to implement vague legislation (Nakamura, 1987).
3. The stages heuristic has a very legalistic, top-down bias in which the focus is typically on the passage and implementation of a major piece of legislation. This focus neglects the interaction of the implementation and evaluation of numerous pieces of legislation—none of them preeminent—within a given policy domain (Hjern and Hull, 1982; Sabatier, 1986).
4. The assumption that there is a single policy cycle focused on a major piece of legislation oversimplifies the usual process of *multiple, interacting cycles* involving numerous policy proposals and statutes at multiple levels of government. For example, abortion activists are currently involved in litigation in the federal courts and most state courts, in new policy proposals in Washington and most states, in the implementation of other proposals at the federal and state levels, and in the evaluation of all sorts of programs and proposed programs. They’re also continually trying to affect the conceptualization of the problem. In such a situation—which is common—focusing on “a policy cycle” makes very little sense.

The conclusion seems inescapable: The stages heuristic has outlived its usefulness and needs to be replaced with better theoretical frameworks.

More Promising Theoretical Frameworks

Fortunately, over the past fifteen years a number of new theoretical frameworks of the policy process have been either developed or extensively modified. This book seeks to present some of the more promising ones and to assess the strengths and limitations of each.¹

Following are the criteria utilized in selecting the frameworks to be discussed. They strike me as relatively straightforward, although reasonable people may certainly disagree with my application of them:

1. Each framework must do a reasonably good job of meeting the criteria of a scientific theory; that is, its concepts and propositions must be relatively clear and internally consistent, it must identify clear causal drivers, it must give rise to falsifiable hypotheses, and it must be fairly broad in scope (i.e., apply to most of the policy process in a variety of political systems).
2. Each framework must be the subject of a fair amount of recent conceptual development and/or empirical testing. A number of currently active policy scholars must view it as a viable way of understanding the policy process.
3. Each framework must be a positive theory seeking to explain much of the policy process. The theoretical framework may also contain some explicitly normative elements, but these are not required.
4. Each framework must address the broad sets of factors that political scientists looking at different aspects of public policymaking have traditionally deemed important: conflicting values and interests, information flows, institutional arrangements, and variation in the socioeconomic environment.

By means of these criteria, seven frameworks have been selected for analysis. Following is a brief description and justification for each selection.

The Stages Heuristic. Although I have doubts that the stages heuristic meets Criteria 1 and 2 above, there is certainly room for disagreement on the second. In particular, implementation studies may be undergoing a revival (Lester and Goggin, 1998). Even were that not the case, I have spent so much time criticizing the stages heuristic that simple fairness requires me to provide a forum for its defense. Peter deLeon, one of the earliest proponents of the heuristic, has volunteered to be the spokesperson.

Institutional Rational Choice. Institutional rational choice is a family of frameworks focusing on how institutional rules alter the behavior of intendedly rational individuals motivated by material self-interest. Although much of the literature on institutional rational choice focuses on rather specific sets of institutions, such as the relationships between Congress and administrative agencies in the United States (Moe, 1984; Shepsle, 1989; Miller, 1992), the general framework is extremely broad in scope and has been applied to important policy problems in the United States and other countries (Ostrom, 1986, 1990; Ostrom et al., 1993, 1994; Scholz, Twombly, and Headrick, 1991; Schneider, Larason, and Ingram, 1995; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Dowding, 1995; Scharpf, 1997). It is clearly the most developed of all the frameworks in this volume and is arguably the most utilized in the United States and perhaps in Germany. Elinor Ostrom has agreed to write the chapter for this volume.

The Multiple-Streams Framework. The multiple-streams framework was developed by John Kingdon (1984) based upon the “garbage can” model of organizational behavior (Cohen, March, and Olsen, 1972). It views the policy process as composed of three streams of actors and processes: a problem stream consisting of data about various problems and the proponents of various problem definitions; a policy stream involving the proponents of solutions to policy problems; and a politics stream consisting of elections and elected officials. In Kingdon’s view, the streams normally operate independently of each other, except when a “window of opportunity” permits policy entrepreneurs to couple the various streams. If the entrepreneurs are successful, the result is major policy change. Although the multiple-streams framework is not always as clear and internally consistent as one might like, it appears to be applicable to a wide variety of policy arenas and is cited about eighty times annually in the Social Science Citation Index. John Kingdon is the obvious author for this chapter. He declined, however, and I then selected Nikolaos Zahariadis, who has utilized the multiple-streams framework extensively in his own research (Zahariadis, 1992, 1995).

Punctuated-Equilibrium Framework. Originally developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993), the punctuated-equilibrium (PE) framework argues that policymaking in the United States is characterized by long periods of incremental change punctuated by brief periods of major policy change. The latter come about when opponents manage to fashion new “policy images” and exploit the multiple policy venues characteristic of the United States. Originally developed to explain changes in legislation, this framework has recently been expanded to include some very sophisticated analyses of long-term changes in the budgets of the federal government (Jones, Baumgartner, and True, 1998). The PE framework clearly meets all four criteria, at least for systems with multiple policy venues. The chapter for this volume is coauthored by its original proponents, Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, together with James L. True.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework. Developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1988, 1993), the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) focuses on the interaction of advocacy coalitions—each consisting of actors from a variety of institutions who share a set of policy beliefs—within a policy subsystem. Policy change is a function of both competition within the subsystem and events outside the subsystem. The framework spends a lot of time mapping the belief systems of policy elites and analyzing the conditions under which policy-oriented learning across coalitions can occur. It has stimulated considerable interest throughout the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—including some very constructive criticism (Schlager, 1995). Paul Sabatier and Hank C. Jenkins-Smith are clearly qualified to assess the implications of these recent applications.

The frameworks discussed thus far have all focused on explaining policy change within a given political system or set of institutional arrangements (including efforts to change those arrangements). The next two frameworks seek to provide explanations of variation across a large number of political systems.

Policy Diffusion Framework. The policy diffusion framework was developed by Berry and Berry (1990, 1992) to explain variation in the adoption of specific policy innovations, such as a lottery, across a large number of states (or localities). It argues that adoption is a function of both the characteristics of the specific political systems and a variety of diffusion processes. Recently, Mintrom and Vergari (1998) integrated it with the literature on policy networks. The diffusion framework has thus far been utilized almost exclusively in the United States. It should, however, apply to variation among countries or regions within the European Union, the OECD, or any other set of political systems. The authors of the chapter in this volume are Frances Stokes Berry and William D. Berry.

The Funnel of Causality and Other Frameworks in Large-N Comparative Studies. Finally, we turn to a variety of frameworks that were extremely important in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s in explaining variation in policy outcomes (usually, budgetary expenditures) across large numbers of states and localities (Dye, 1966; 1991; Sharkansky, 1970; Hofferbert, 1974). These began as very simple frameworks seeking to apportion the variance among background socioeconomic conditions, public opinion, and political institutions—although they became somewhat more sophisticated over time (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1981; Hofferbert and Urice, 1985). Although interest in this approach has declined somewhat in the United States, it is still popular in OECD countries, particularly to explain variation in social welfare programs (Flora, 1986; Klingeman, Hofferbert, and Budge, 1994; Schmidt, 1996). The author for this chapter is William Blomquist. Although he has contributed to this literature (Blomquist, 1991), he is not a major proponent—and thus differs from all the other chapter authors. He was selected because I expected him to be critical of the “black box” features of this framework and to seek to integrate it with other literatures, particularly institutional rational choice. Although those expectations were never communicated to him, he wound up doing a superb job of fulfilling them.

Omitted Frameworks

Although this volume contains chapters on seven different frameworks of public policymaking, several other frameworks have been omitted. Following are a few, as well as brief explanations of my reasons for judging them to be less promising than those selected.

Arenas of Power. Originally developed by Lowi (1964, 1972), the arenas-of-power framework posits a set of three or four different types of policy—for ex-

ample, regulatory, distributive, and redistributive—and argues that each is characterized by quite different processes. The original formulation was rife with ambiguous concepts and causal relationships. Although these were clarified during the 1970s (Mann, 1975; Ripley and Franklin, 1976, 1982), my perception is that the arenas-of-power framework has aroused very little interest over the past fifteen years (except for Kellow, 1988). In short, it does not appear to be a “progressive” research program (Lakatos, 1971).

Cultural Theory. Originally developed by Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), cultural theory views policy as essentially dominated by four different general ideologies (what the ACF would refer to as “deep core”): individualism, hierarchicalism, egalitarianism, and fatalism. It has generated a fair amount of empirical research (Coyle and Wildavsky, 1987; Hoppe and Peterse, 1993), but many of the critical concepts remain ambiguous, and the links to institutional arrangements and to socioeconomic conditions are still relatively undeveloped. In my view, then, it is too incomplete and unclear to be included.

Constructivist Frameworks. The constructivist frameworks all focus on the “social construction” of policy problems, policy belief systems, and/or frames of reference (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Papadopoulos, 1995; Faure, Pollet, and Warin, 1995; Schneider and Ingram, 1997). These tend to be more popular in Europe, particularly in France and the Netherlands, than in the United States. Although it is clear that much of social “reality” is “socially constructed,” these frameworks generally (a) leave ideas unconnected to socioeconomic conditions or institutions and (b) conceive of ideas as free-floating, that is, unconnected to specific individuals and thus largely nonfalsifiable. Having said that, I am struck that Pierre Muller’s (1995) conception of a “referentiel” (a belief system or frame of reference) within a policy sector is worth pursuing if it can be rendered more empirically concrete.

Policy Domain Framework. Developed by David Knoke and his colleagues over the past decade (Laumann and Knoke, 1987; Knoke, 1990; Knoke et al., 1996), the policy domain framework is a rather complex set of concepts for guiding network analysis. It argues that, within a given policy domain/subsystem, organizations with an interest in a given policy area develop patterns of resource exchange and seek to influence policy events. In many respects, this framework is a more empirical version of institutional rational choice (IRC). Like IRC, it assumes that organizations can be treated as unitary individuals that behave in an instrumentally rational fashion. Its model of the actor is less clear than in IRC, but the policy domain framework involves many more organizations. Although I find much of the conceptualization to be difficult to understand—one is tempted to say, “Teutonic”—in retrospect this framework probably should have been included because it meets the criteria fairly well, and much of the empirical work is quite impressive.²

None of these evaluations as “relatively less promising” is written in stone. In fact, the major flaws in all four frameworks are some combination of (a) incompleteness (i.e., omission of critical categories of variables) and/or (b) scientific clarity and falsifiability. These flaws are correctable. In fact, I hope to add one or more of these frameworks to the set of those discussed in future editions of this book.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

With respect to each of the seven theoretical frameworks selected for discussion, I have asked one of its principal proponents to present a brief history, to discuss its underlying principles and propositions, to analyze recent empirical evidence and revisions, to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the framework, and to suggest directions for future development.

The introductory section of the book contains Peter deLeon’s review of the literature on the stages heuristic.

The next section contains analyses of two frameworks that differ substantially concerning their assumptions of individual and collective rationality. Institutional rational choice frameworks assume that policy actors are “intendedly rational”; that is, they seek to realize a few goals efficiently but must overcome some obstacles (including imperfect information) to do so. The assumption is that policy problems and options are relatively well defined, but ascertaining the probable consequences of those alternatives is problematic. In contrast, Kingdon’s multiple-streams model assumes that most policy situations are cloaked in “ambiguity,” that is, lacking clear problem definitions and goals. In addition, serendipity and chance play a major role in the multiple-streams framework.

The next section presents two frameworks that seek to explain policy change over fairly long periods of time within a policy subsystem/domain: the punctuated-equilibrium framework of Jones et al. and the advocacy coalition framework of Sabatier et al. Although these two frameworks have similar dependent variables, they differ in several respects—most notably, in the relative importance of the general public versus policy elites.

The fourth section contains two frameworks that typically seek to explain variation in policy decisions across large numbers of political systems. I had considered combining these into a single chapter but decided against it for two reasons. First, the diffusion models discussed by Berry and Berry are really a significant addition to the traditional set of state/local system variables discussed by Sharkansky/Dye/Hofferbert. Second, I very much wanted to have a critique of the “black box” character of the Sharkansky et al. models on the record, and Berry and Berry would probably not have given me such a critique.

The final section contains two concluding chapters. The first is a comparison of the various theoretical frameworks, including comparisons of their dependent

variables, the critical independent variables, the strengths and weaknesses of each, and some speculations about how they might be integrated and/or more clearly differentiated. The author is Edella Schlager, who has already revealed herself to be extremely talented at this sort of comparative analysis (Schlager, 1995; Schlager and Blomquist, 1996). In the last chapter, I suggest several strategies for advancing the state of policy theory.

The goal of this book is to advance the state of policy theory by presenting several of the more promising frameworks and by inviting the reader to compare the strengths and limitations of each. At the end of the day, the reader will hopefully have a “repertoire” of two or three frameworks that she or he is familiar with and adept at employing.

NOTES

1. Just to show that my tastes are not totally idiosyncratic, the list of “synthetic theories” developed by Peter John (1998) includes the advocacy coalition framework, punctuated equilibrium, and multiple streams. Earlier in the book, he includes socioeconomic approaches, institutions, rational choice, and ideas. I have grouped most of the last into a constructivist paradigm in the next section. My list also overlaps considerably those of Parsons (1996) and Muller and Surel (1998).

2. For example, in Knoke et al. (1996), *interest* is used for both a “topic of concern” and a “goal” (p. 13), and the critical discussion of organizational interests in specific events (pp. 21–22) is quite confusing. The basic reason for exclusion, however, is that I was simply not sufficiently aware of Knoke’s work when putting together this symposium in the spring of 1996.

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