
4 Theories of the Policy Cycle

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From its origins in the 1950s, the field of policy analysis has been tightly connected with a perspective that considers the policy process as evolving through a sequence of discrete stages or phases. The policy cycle framework or perspective has served as a basic template that allows to systematize and compare the diverse debates, approaches, and models in the field and to assess the individual contribution of the respective approaches to the discipline. At the same time, the framework has regularly been criticized in terms of its theoretical construction as well as in terms of its empirical validity. We are therefore confronted with an almost paradoxical situation: on the one hand of the policy research continues to rely on the stages or cycle perspective or is linked to one of its stages and research questions. On the other hand, the very concept of the stages perspective has become discredited by a variety of criticisms, including attacks on the theoretical status of the policy cycle as a *framework*, *model* or *heuristic* (we use the terms *framework* and *perspective* interchangeably, but return to a discussion of this issue in this chapter's conclusion).

This chapter seeks to assess the limitations and utility of the policy cycle perspective by surveying the literature that analyses particular stages or phases of the policy cycle. Following an initial account of the development of the policy cycle framework, the chapter offers an overview of the different stages or phases of the policy process, highlighting analytical perspectives and major research results. Then we turn to the burgeoning critique of the policy cycle framework in the wider policy research literature. The chapter concludes with a brief overall assessment of the framework, considering, in particular, its status as an analytical tool for public policy research.

THE POLICY CYCLE—A SIMPLIFIED MODEL OF THE POLICY PROCESS

The idea of modeling the policy process in terms of stages was first put forward by Lasswell. As part of his attempt to establish a multidisciplinary and prescriptive policy science, Lasswell introduced (in 1956) a model of the policy process comprised of seven stages: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination, and appraisal. While this sequence of stages has been contested (in particular that termination comes before appraisal), the model itself has been highly successful as a basic framework for the field of policy studies and became the starting point of a variety of typologies of the policy process. Based on the growth of the field of policy studies during the 1960s and 1970s, the stages models served the basic need to organize and systemize a growing body of literature and research. Subsequently, a number of different variations of the stages typology have been put forward, usually offering further differentiations of (sub-)stages. The versions developed by Brewer and deLeon (1983), May and Wildavsky (1978), Anderson (1975), and Jenkins (1978) are among the most widely adopted ones. Today, the differentiation between *agenda-setting*, *policy formulation*, *decision making*, *implementation*, and *evaluation* (eventually leading to termination) has become the conventional way to describe the chronology of a policy process.

Arguably, Lasswell's understanding of the model of the policy process was more prescriptive and normative rather than descriptive and analytical. His linear sequence of the different stages had been designed like a problem-solving model and accords with other prescriptive rational models of

planning and decision-making developed in organization theory and public administration. While empirical studies of decision-making and planning in organizations, known as the behavioral theory of decision making (Simon 1947), have repeatedly pointed out that real world decision-making usually does not follow this sequence of discrete stages, the stages perspective still counts as an ideal-type of rational planning and decision-making. According to such a rational model, any decision-making should be based on a comprehensive analysis of problems and goals, followed by an inclusive collection and analysis of information and a search for the best alternative to achieve these goals. This includes the analysis of costs and benefits of the different options and the final selection of the course of action. Measures have to be carried out (implemented) and results appraised against the objectives and adjusted if needed. One of the major reasons of the success and durability of the stages typology is therefore its appeal as a normative model for ideal-type, rational, evidence-based policy making. In addition, the notion is congruent with a basic democratic understanding of elected politicians taking decisions which are then carried out by a neutral public service. The rational model therefore also shows some tacit concurrence with the traditional dichotomy of politics and administration, which was so powerful in public administration theory until after World War II.

Lasswell was, of course, highly critical of this politics/administration dichotomy, so his stages perspective moves beyond the formal analysis of single institutions that dominated the field of traditional public administration research by focusing on the contributions and interaction of different actors and institutions in the policy process. Furthermore, the stages perspective helped to overcome the bias of political science on the input-side (political behavior, attitudes, interest organizations) of the political system. Framing the political process as a continuous process of policy-making allowed to assess the cumulative effects of the various actors, forces, and institutions that interact in the policy process and therefore shape its outcome(s). In particular, the contribution of administrative and bureaucratic factors across the various stages of the policy process provided an innovative analytical perspective compared to the traditional analysis of formal structures (Scharpf 1973).

Still, the stages of policy-making were originally conceived as evolving in a (chrono)logical order—first, problems are defined and put on the agenda, next, policies are developed, adopted and implemented; and, finally these policies will be assessed against their effectiveness and efficiency and either terminated or restarted. Combined with Easton's input-output model this stages perspective was then transformed into a cyclical model, the so-called policy cycle. The cyclical perspective emphasizes feed-back (loop) processes between outputs and inputs of policy-making, leading to the continual perpetuation of the policy process. Outputs of policy processes at t_1 have an impact on the wider society and will be transformed into an input (demands and support) to a succeeding policy process at t_2 . The integration of Easton's input-output model also contributed to the further differentiation of the policy process. Instead of ending with the decision to adopt a particular course of action, the focus was extended to cover the implementation of policies and, in particular, the reaction of the affected target group (impact) and the wider effects of the policy within the respective social sector (outcome). Also, the tendency of policies to create unintended consequences or side-effects became apparent through this policy process perspective.

While the policy cycle framework takes into account the feedback between different elements of the policy process (and therefore draws a more realistic picture of the policy process than earlier stages models), it still presents a simplified and ideal-type model of the policy process, as most of its proponents will readily admit. Under real-world conditions, policies are, e.g., more frequently *not* the subject of comprehensive evaluations that lead to either termination or reformulation of a policy. Policy processes rarely feature clear-cut beginnings and endings. At the same time, policies have always been constantly reviewed, controlled, modified, and sometimes even terminated; policies are perpetually reformulated, implemented, evaluated, and adapted. But these processes do not evolve in a pattern of clear-cut sequences; instead, the stages are constantly meshed and entangled in an ongoing process. Moreover, policies do not develop in a vacuum, but are adopted in a crowded policy space that leaves little space for policy innovation (Hogwood and Peters 1983). Instead, new

policies (only) modify, change, or supplement older policies, or—more likely—compete with them or contradict each other.

Hogwood and Peters (1983) suggested the notion of policy succession to highlight that new policies develop in a dense environment of already existing policies. Therefore, earlier policies form a central part of the systemic environment of policy-making; frequently other policies act as key obstacles for the adoption and implementation of a particular measure. At the same time, policies create side-effects and become the causes of later policy problems—across sectors (e.g., road construction leading to environmental problems) as well as within sectors (e.g., subsidies for agricultural products leading to overproduction)—and, hence, new policies themselves (“policy as its own cause,” Wildavsky 1979, 83–85).

Despite its limitations, the policy cycle has developed into the most widely applied framework to organize and systemize the research on public policy. The policy cycle focuses attention on generic features of the policy process rather than on specific actors or institutions or particular substantial problems and respective programs. Thereby, the policy cycle highlighted the significance of the policy domain (Burstein 1991) or subsystem (Sabatier 1993; Howlett, Ramesh 2003) as the key level of analysis. However, policy studies seldom apply the whole policy cycle framework as an analytical model that guides the selection of questions and variables. While a number of textbooks and some edited volumes are based on the cycle framework, academic debates in the field of policy studies have emerged from research related to particular stages of the policy process rather than on the whole cycle. Starting at different times in the development of the discipline, these different lines of research developed into more or less separate research communities following a distinct set of questions, analytical perspectives and methods. In other words, the policy cycle framework has guided policy analysis to generic themes of policy-making and has offered a device to structure empirical material; the framework has, however, not developed into a major theoretical or analytical program itself.

With these limitations of the policy cycle perspective in mind, the following briefly sketches theoretical perspectives developed to analyze particular stages of the cycle framework and highlights main research findings. While this overview does only offer a very limited and selective review of the literature, the account stresses how research related to particular stages has shaped the general understanding of the policy process and the policy cycle framework.

THE STAGES OF THE POLICY CYCLE

AGENDA-SETTING: PROBLEM RECOGNITION AND ISSUE SELECTION

Policy-making presupposes the recognition of a policy problem. Problem recognition itself requires that a social problem has been defined as such and that the necessity of state intervention has been expressed. The second step would be that the recognized problem is actually put on the agenda for serious consideration of public action (agenda-setting). The agenda is nothing more than “the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside the government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time” (Kingdon 1995, 3). The government’s (or institutional) agenda has been distinguished from the wider media and the overall public (or systemic) agenda (Cobb and Elder 1972). While the government’s (formal and informal) agenda presents the center of attention of studies on agenda-setting, the means and mechanisms of problem recognition and issue selection are tightly connected with the way a social problem is recognized and perceived on the public/media agenda.

As numerous studies since the 1960s have shown, problem recognition and agenda-setting are inherently political processes in which political attention is attached to a subset of all possibly relevant policy problems. Actors within and outside government constantly seek to influence and

collectively shape the agenda (e.g., by taking advantage of rising attention to a particular issue, dramatizing a problem, or advancing a particular problem definition). The involvement of particular actors (e.g., experts), the choice of institutional venues in which problems are debated and the strategic use of media coverage have been identified as tactical means to define issues (cf. Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). While a number of actors are involved in these activities of agenda control or shaping, most of the variables and mechanisms affecting agenda-setting lie outside the direct control of any single actor.

Agenda-setting results in a *selection* between diverse problems and issues. It is a process of structuring the policy issue regarding potential strategies and instruments that shape the development of a policy in the subsequent stages of a policy cycle. If the assumption is accepted that not all existing problems could receive the same level of attention (and some are not recognized at all; see Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 10), the questions of the mechanisms of agenda-setting arise. What is perceived as a policy problem? How and when does a policy problem get on the government's agenda? And why are other problems excluded from the agenda? Moreover, issue attention cycles and tides of solutions connected to specific problems are relevant aspects of policy-studies concerned with agenda-setting.

Systematic research on agenda-setting first emerged as part of the critique of pluralism in the United States. One classic approach suggested that political debates and, hence, agenda-setting, emerge from conflict between two actors, with the less politically powerful actor seeking to raise attention to the issue (conflict expansion) (Schattschneider 1960). Others suggested that agenda-setting results from a process of filtering of issues and problems, resulting in non-decisions (issues and problems that are deliberately excluded from the formal agenda). Building on the seminal community-power literature, policy-studies pointed out that non-decisions result from asymmetrical distribution of influence through institutional structures that exclude some issues from serious consideration of action (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; see also Crenson, 1971; Cobb, Ross, and Ross, 1976).

The crucial step in this process of agenda-setting is the move of an issue from its recognition—frequently expressed by interested groups or affected actors—up to the formal political agenda. This move encompasses several substages, in which succeeding selections of issues under conditions of scarce capacities of problem-recognition and problem-solving are made. Several studies of environmental policy development, for example, showed that it is not the objective problem load (e.g., the degree of air pollution) which explains the intensity of problem recognition and solving activities on the side of governments (Prittwitz 1993; Jaenicke 1996). Instead, a plausible definition of a problem (see Stone 2001) and the creation of a particular policy image (Baumgartner and Jones 1993) allowing to attach a particular solution to the problem, have been identified as key variables affecting agenda-setting.

While problem recognition and problem definition in liberal democracies are said to be largely conducted in public, in the media or at least among domain-specific professional (public) communities, the actual agenda-setting is characterized by different patterns in terms of actor composition and the role of the public (cf. May 1991, Howlett and Ramesh, 2003). The *outside-initiation* pattern, where social actors force governments to place an issue on the systemic agenda by way of gaining public support, presents but one of different types of agenda-setting. Equally significant are processes of policies without public input such as when interest groups have direct access to government agencies and are capable of putting topics on the agenda without major interference or even recognition of the public (cf. May, 1991). The agriculture policy in certain European countries would be a classic example for such *inside-initiation* patterns of agenda-setting. Another pattern has been described as the *mobilization* of support within the public by the government after the initial agenda-setting has been accomplished without a relevant role for non-state actors (e.g., the introduction of the Euro or, rather, the campaign prior the implementation of the new currency).

Finally, Howlett and Ramesh (2003, 141) distinguish *consolidation* as a fourth type whereby state actors initiate an issue where public support is already high (e.g., German unification).

Despite the existence of different patterns of agenda-setting, modern societies are characterized by a distinctive role of the public/media for agenda-setting and policy-making, especially when novel types of problems (like risks) emerge (see Hood, Rothstein, and Baldwin 2001). Frequently, governments are confronted with forced choice situations (Lodge and Hood, 2002) where they simply cannot ignore public sentiment without risking the loss of legitimacy or credibility, and must give the issue some priority on the agenda. Examples range from incidents involving aggressive dogs, and Mad Cow Disease to the regulation of chemical substances (see Lodge and Hood 2002; Hood, Rothstein, and Baldwin 2001). While the mechanisms of agenda-setting do not determine the way the related policy is designed and implemented, policies following so-called knee-jerk responses of governments in forced choice situations tend to be combined with rather intrusive or coercive forms of state interventions. However, these policies frequently have a short life cycle or are recurrently object of major amendments in the later stages of the policy cycle after public attention has shifted towards other issues (Lodge and Hood, 2002).

The confluence of a number of interacting factors and variables determines whether a policy issue becomes a major topic on the policy agenda. These factors include both the material conditions of the policy environment (like the level of economic development), and the flow and cycle of ideas and ideologies, which are important in evaluating problems and connecting them with solutions (policy proposals). Within that context, the constellation of interest between the relevant actors, the capacity of the institutions in charge to act effectively, and the cycle of public problem perception as well as the solutions that are connected to the different problems are of central importance.

While earlier models of agenda-setting have concentrated on the economic and social aspects as explanatory variables, more recent approaches stress the role of ideas, expressed in public and professional discourses (e.g., epistemic communities; Haas 1992), in shaping the perception of a particular problems. Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 6) introduced the notion of policy monopoly as the “monopoly on political understandings” of a particular policy problem and institutional arrangements reinforcing the particular “policy image”; they suggested that agenda-setting and policy change occurs when “policy monopolies” become increasingly contested and previously disinterested (or at least “non-active”) actors are mobilized. Changing policy images are frequently linked to changing institutional “venues” within which issues are debated (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, 15; 2002, 19–23).

How the different variables—actors, institutions, ideas, and material conditions—interact is highly contingent, depending on the specific situation. That also implies that agenda-setting is far from a rational selection of issues in terms of their relevance as a problem for the wider society. Instead, the shifting of attention and agendas (Jones 2001, 145–47) could eventually lead governments to adopt policies that contradict measures introduced earlier. The most influential model that tries to conceptualize the contingency of agenda-setting is Kingdon’s multiple streams model that builds on the garbage can model of organizational choice (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972). Kingdon introduced the notion of windows of opportunity that open up at a specific time for a specific policy (Kingdon, 1995). The policy window opens when three usually separate and independent streams—the policy stream (solutions), the politics stream (public sentiments, change in governments, and the like), and the problem stream (problem perception)—intersect. (The classical garbage can model distinguishes solutions, problems, actors, and decision opportunities.)

In a long-term perspective, attention cycles and the volatility of problem perception and reform moods for particular issues can be revealed (see the classic article by Downs 1972, his “issue-attention cycle” has been criticized for omitting the impact of agenda-setting on future policies by shaping institutional structures; Peters and Hogwood, 1985; Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 87). Within such cyclical processes, single issues appear on the agenda, will be removed later on, and

may reappear on that agenda as part of a longer wave. Examples include the cyclical perception of environmental, consumer protection and criminal issues, in which (combined with economic and political conditions) single events (like accidents, disasters, and the like) could trigger agenda-setting. A longitudinal perspective also points at changes in perceptions of a single issue, with some prior solutions later becoming problems (e.g., nuclear power). Baumgartner and Jones (1993; 2002) highlight the existence of both periods of stable policy agendas and periods of rapid change and take these findings as a starting point for the development of a policy process model (punctuated equilibrium) that challenges conventional notions of incrementalism.

POLICY FORMULATION AND DECISION-MAKING

During this stage of the policy cycle, expressed problems, proposals, and demands are transformed into government programs. Policy formulation and adoption includes the definition of objectives—what should be achieved with the policy—and the consideration of different action alternatives. Some authors differentiate between formulation (of alternatives for action) and the final adoption (the formal decision to take on the policy). Because policies will not always be formalized into separate programs and a clear-cut separation between formulation and decision-making is very often impossible, we treat them as substages in a single stage of the policy cycle.

In trying to account for different styles, patterns, and outcomes of policy formulation and decision-making, studies on this stage of the cycle framework have been particularly theory-oriented. Over the last two decades or so, a fruitful connection with organizational decision theories has evolved (see Olsen 1991). A multiplicity of approaches and explanations has been utilized, ranging from pluralistic and corporatist interest intermediation to perspectives of incrementalism and the garbage can approach. Others are public choice approaches and the widely utilized neo-institutionalist perspectives (both in its economical and historical-institutionalist variant; for an overview see Parsons 1995, 134).

At the same time, studies of policy formulation have long been strongly influenced by efforts to improve practices within governments by introducing techniques and tools of more rational decision-making. This became most evident during the heyday of political planning and reform policy in the 1960s and 1970s. Policy analysis was part of a reform coalition engaged in developing tools and methods for identifying effective and cost-efficient policies (see Wittrock, Wagner, and Wollmann 1991, 43–51; Wollmann 1984). Western governments were strongly receptive to these ideas given the widespread confidence in the necessity and feasibility of long-term planning. Pioneered by attempts of the U.S. government to introduce Planning Programming Budgeting Systems (PPBS), European governments engaged in similar efforts of long-term planning.

Among parts of the policy research community and government actors, PPBS was perceived as a basis for rational planning and, hence, decision-making. The establishment of clearly defined goals, output targets within the budget statement, and the application of cost-benefit analysis to political programs were regarded as tools facilitating the definition of long-term political priorities. From this perspective an *ex-ante*, rather rationalistic branch of policy analysis as analysis for policy developed, inspired by micro-economics and operational research (Stokey and Zeckhauser 1978). Right from the beginning, these concepts of decision-making and political planning were heavily criticized from a political science background for being over-ambitious and technocratic ('rescuing policy analysis from PPBS', Wildavsky 1969). The role of economics and political science-based policy analysis in the wider reform debate of political planning provided a fertile ground for the prosperous development of the discipline. As policy advice (analysis for policy-making) became a major aspect of the planning euphoria during the 1970s, empirical research on decision-making practices (analysis of policy-making) was initiated for the first time (e.g., through the project group of governmental and administrative reform in Germany; Mayntz and Scharpf 1975).

Especially political scientists argued from the beginning (Lindblom 1968; Wildavsky 1979) that decision-making comprises not only information gathering and processing (analysis), but foremost consists of conflict resolution within and between public and private actors and government departments (interaction). In terms of patterns of interdepartmental interaction, Mayntz and Scharpf (1975) argued that these usually follow the type of negative coordination (based on sequential participation of different departments after the initial policy program has been drafted) rather than ambitious and complex attempts of positive coordination (pooling suggested policy solutions as part of the drafting), thus leading to the typical process of reactive policy-making. The aim of political science based policy analysis was, therefore, to suggest institutional arrangements which would support more active policy-making.

While these (earlier) studies pointed to the crucial role of the ministerial bureaucracy and top civil servants in policy formulation (Dogan 1975; Hecló and Wildavsky 1974), governments and higher civil servants are not strictly separated from the wider society when formulating policies; instead, they are constantly interacting with social actors and form rather stable patterns of relationships (policy networks). Whereas the final decision on a specific policy remains in the realm of the responsible institutions (mainly cabinet, ministers, Parliament), this decision is preceded by a more or less informal process of negotiated policy formation, with ministerial departments (and the units within the departments), organized interest groups and, depending on the political system, elected members of parliaments and their associates as major players. Numerous policy studies have convincingly argued that the processes in the preliminary stages of decision-making strongly influence the final outcome and very often shape the policy to a larger extent than the final processes within the parliamentary arena (Kenis and Schneider 1991). Moreover, these studies made a strong case against the rational model of decision-making. Instead of a rational selection among alternative policies, decision-making results from bargaining between diverse actors within a policy subsystem—the result being determined by the constellation and power resources of (substantial and institutional) interest of the involved actors and processes of partisan mutual adjustment. Incrementalism, thus, forms the typical style (Lindblom 1959, 1979) of this kind of policy formation, especially in allocation of budgets (Wildavsky 1964, 1988).

During the 70s and 80s, traditional theories of pluralism in policy-making (many, competing interests without privileged access) were, at least in Western Europe, substituted by theories of corporatist policy-making (few, privileged associations with strong influence, cf. Schmitter and Lehmbruch, 1979). At the same time, more elaborate theories of policy networks became prominent (Hecló 1978; Marin and Mayntz, 1991). Policy networks are, generally, characterized by nonhierarchical, horizontal relationships between actors inside the network. Generalized political exchange (Marin 1990) represents the characteristic mode of interaction and diffuse reciprocity (opposed to market-type direct reciprocity) is the corresponding social orientation of actors in the inner circle of networks. In contrast, a higher degree of conflict is to be expected as far as the access to these policy networks is concerned. However, as Sabatier (1991, cf. Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith 1993, 1999) stressed, a policy subsystem frequently consists of more than one network. The different networks (or advocacy coalitions) then compete for the dominance in the respective policy domain.

Despite the considerable level of self-governance within policy networks, governments still play a crucial role in influencing the actor constellation within these networks, for example by altering the portfolio of ministries, creating new ones or establishing/abolishing agencies. (The renaming of the German federal Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food, and Agriculture during the BSE [Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy] crisis serves as an example of a deliberate attempt to break up long-established policy networks in the agriculture sector as a prerequisite for policy change. Similar changes occurred also in the UK.) One major reason for the strong inclination of ministerial bureaucracies to defend their turf lies in the linkage between the allocation of responsibilities within government and the venues provided for social actors to the policy-making system (Wilson 1989). While these access points are of crucial importance for social

actors seeking to influence policy formulation, established relationships with interest groups at the same time provide the power-basis of departments in interdepartmental relationships and conflicts. Any redistribution of organizational structures and institutional arrangements will favor some and discriminate against others and will, therefore, become a contested issue.

While patterns of interaction between governments and society in policy networks are regarded as an omnipresent phenomenon, the particular constellation of actors within policy networks vary between policy domains, as well as between nation states with different political/administrative cultures, traditions of law (cf. Feick and Jann 1988) and differences regarding the wider constitutional setting. As the historical-institutional approach in policy research has pointed out, countries have developed particular types of policy networks resulting from the interaction of the pre-existing state structure and the organization of society at critical junctures in history (Lehmbruch 1991). These differences are said to foster national styles of policy-making in terms of preferred policy instruments and patterns of interaction between state and society (Richardson, Gustafsson, and Jordan 1982; Feick and Jann 1988). It remains, however, a debated issue in comparative policy research if policy networks are to a larger degree shaped by the (different) basic national institutional patterns or if the policies within specific policy subsystems are, to a larger extent, shaped by sectoral, domain-specific governance structures (with the implication of more variety between sectors within one country than between countries regarding one sector) (see e.g., Bovens, t'Hart, and Peters 2001). Some have argued that the emphasis on the pervasive nature of policy networks obscured national variations of patterns of policy-making that are in fact related to (different) underlying institutional arrangements and state architectures (Döhler and Manow 1995).

In order to allow for the analysis of different structural patterns of state-society interaction, policy research has developed taxonomies of policy networks. While considerable variation (and maybe even confusion, cf. Dowding 2001) prevails, one major distinction has been made between *iron triangles*, *sub-governments*, or *policy communities* on the one hand and *issue networks* centered around a particular policy issues (e.g., abortion, fuel taxes, speed limits) on the other hand. These two basic types are differentiated along the dimensions of actor composition and the insulation of the network from the wider environment. Iron triangles typically consist of state bureaucracies, parliamentary (sub-) committees, and organized interests generally sharing policy objectives and ideas. Others suggested the notion of policy communities to emphasize the latter aspect of coherent world-views and shared policy objectives (however, the term has been defined in many ways, including a meaning that resembles the notion of issue networks). Hecló (1978) has contrasted iron triangles with issue networks consisting of a multitude of actors, and with comparatively open boundaries and a looser coupling between the actors involved.

When it comes to the final adoption of a particular policy option, the formal institutions of the governmental system move into the center. But even during this substage, modes of self-regulation, sometimes in the shadow of hierarchy, have increasingly been regarded as a widespread pattern of policy-making (Mayntz and Scharpf 1995). Which of the proposed policy options will be finally adopted depends on a number of factors; two of them should be highlighted. First, the feasible set of policy options is reduced by basic substantial parameters. Some policies are excluded because of scarcity of resources—not only in terms of economic resources, but also because political support presents a critical resource in the policy-making process. Second, the allocation of competencies between different actors (e.g., government) plays a crucial role in decision-making. For example, tax policy in Germany is one of the domains in which the federal government is not only dependent on the support of the Federal Parliament (Bundestag, which is most of the time assured in parliamentary systems), but also on the consent of the Federal Council (Bundesrat, the representation of the Länder governments). The scope for substantial policy changes is, all other things being equal, more restricted in federal systems, where second chambers of parliaments and also (more frequently) constitutional courts are in a position of the potential veto player (Tsebelis 2002). At the

same time, subnational levels of government possess more leeway to initiate policies in countries with a federal or a decentralized structure than in centralized countries.

Another crucial aspect of policy formulation represents the role of (scientific) policy advice. While earlier models differentiated between technocratic (policy decisions depending on superior knowledge provided by experts) and decisionist (primacy of politics over science) models of the science/policy nexus (see Wittrock 1991), the dominant normative understanding favored a pragmatic and cooperative interaction at eye level (pragmatic model, see Habermas, 1968). Empirically, policy advice was recognized as a 'diffuse process of enlightenment', in which politicians and bureaucrats (contrary to conventional wisdom, especially in the academic world) are not influenced by single studies or reports. Instead, policy advice has an impact on the middle- and long-term changes of general problem perceptions and world views (Weiss 1977). Moreover, scientific research is only one of diverse sources of information and knowledge that is being brought into the policy-making process (Lindblom and Cohen 1979, 10–29).

Over the last years, the role of think tanks in these processes has formed a focal point in debates on changing ways of policy-making, for example in the formulation of neoliberal policies in the 1980s (Weiss 1992). Think tanks and international organizations are regarded as catalysts fostering the exchange and transfer of policy ideas, solutions, and problem perceptions between governments and beyond (Stone 2004). Some have argued that policy transfer has become a regular, though distinctive, part of contemporary policy formulation (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000). However, while the practice and existence of processes of transfer and learning are hardly deniable, the literature has difficulties in drawing clear boundaries between policy transfer and other aspects of policy-making, especially as the notion of lesson drawing (as one pattern of policy transfer) resembles the rational model of decision-making (cf. James and Lodge 2003). The study of policy transfer and learning has been advanced by insights drawn from organizational theory, in particular the notion of institutional isomorphism that differentiates between coercive, mimetic and professional mechanisms of emulation (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; for applications see, among others, Lodge and Wegrich, 2005b; Jann 2004; Lodge 2003).

Most studies dealing with the role of knowledge in policy formulation agree that, in the contemporary age, knowledge is more widely spread beyond the boundaries of (central) governments than some decades ago. Experts and international institutions (like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]) are said to play an increasingly visible role in communicating knowledge within the public debate on political issues (Albaek, Christiansen, and Togeby 2003). Therefore, the perception of a monopoly of information on the side of the bureaucracy (Max Weber's *Dienst- and Herrschaftswissen*) is obsolete. Policy formulation, at least in western democracies, proceeds as a complex social process, in which state actors play an important but not necessarily decisive role.

IMPLEMENTATION

The decision on a specific course of action and the adoption of a program does not guarantee that the action on the ground will strictly follow policy makers' aims and objectives. The stage of execution or enforcement of a policy by the responsible institutions and organizations that are often, but not always, part of the public sector, is referred to as implementation. Policy implementation is broadly defined as "what happens between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of the government to do something, or to stop doing something, and the ultimate impact in the world of action" (O'Toole 2000, 266). This stage is critical as political and administrative action at the frontline are hardly ever perfectly controllable by objectives, programs, laws, and the like (cf. Hogwood and Gunn 1984). Therefore, policies and their intentions will very often be changed or even distorted; its execution delayed or even blocked altogether.

An ideal process of policy implementation would include the following core elements:

- Specification of program details (i.e., how and by which agencies/organizations should the program be executed? How should the law/program be interpreted?);
- Allocation of resources (i.e., how are budgets distributed? Which personnel will execute the program? Which units of an organization will be in charge for the execution?);
- Decisions (i.e., how will decisions of single cases be carried out?).

The detection of the implementation stage as a missing link (Hargrove 1975) in the study of policy-making can be regarded as one of the most important conceptual innovations of policy research in the 1970s. Earlier, implementation of policies was not recognized as a separate stage within or element of the policy-making process. What happens after a bill becomes a law (Bardach 1977) was not perceived as a central problem—not for the decision makers and, therefore, also not for policy analysis. The underlying assumption was that governments pass laws, and this is where the core business of policy-making ends.

This perception has fundamentally changed since the seminal study by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984 [1973]) on the implementation of a program targeting unemployment among members of minority groups in Oakland, California. Subsequently, the study of implementation as a core and often critical stage of the policy-making process became widespread currency. The starting point of Pressman and Wildavsky's analysis of the substeps involved in the implementation of the federal program, that was part of the ambitious social policy reform agenda put forth by President Johnson, was the unexpected failure of the program. Based on the analysis of the multitude of decision and clearing points at which involved actors were able to influence the policy along the lines of their particular interests, any successful policy implementation seemed to be more surprising than implementation failure (note the subtitle, *How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland, or Why It's Amazing that Federal Programs Work at All*).

Following the path-breaking study, implementation research developed into *the* central field of policy research in the 1970s and early 1980s. Initially, implementation was regarded from a perspective that was later called the top-down approach. Implementation studies followed the hierarchical and chronological path of a particular policy and sought to assess how far the centrally defined goals and objectives are achieved when it comes to implementation. Most studies centered on those factors leading to deviations from these objectives. Intra- and inter-organizational coordination problems and the interaction of field agencies with the target group ranked as the most prominent variables accounting for implementation failures. Another explanation focused the policy itself, acknowledging that unsuccessful policy implementation could not only be the result of bad implementation, but also bad policy design, based on wrong assumptions about cause-effect relationships (cf. Pressman and Wildavsky 1984 [1973]; Hogwood and Gunn 1984).

Implementation studies of the first generation thus shared a hierarchical, top-down understanding of governance, at least as a normative yardstick for the assessment of outcomes of implementation. Implementation research was interested in developing theories about what works. One way to do this has been to assess the effectiveness of different types of policy instruments based on particular theories about cause and effect relations. Policy instruments have been classified into regulatory, financial, informational, and organizational policy tools (cf. Hood 1983; Mayntz 1979; Vedung 1998, see Salomon, 2002, for a more differentiated classification). One of the most prominent outcomes of the policy instruments perspective in implementation research has been the importance of the relationship between tool selection and policy implementation: Different policy instruments are vulnerable to specific types of implementation problems, with regulatory policies being aligned with control problems and subsidies with windfall gains on the side of the target group (see Mayntz 1979). Another result of this line of research has been that the reliance on wrong theories about

cause and effect relations frequently leads to negative side-effects or even reverse effects of state interventions (see Sieber 1981).

Since the mid 1970s, implementation studies based on the top-down perspective have been increasingly challenged on analytical grounds, as well as in terms of their normative implications (see Hill and Hupe 2002, 51–57). Empirical evidence, showing that implementation was not appropriately described as a hierarchical chain of action leading directly from a decision at the center to the implementation in some field agency, provided the ground for a competing concept of implementation. The so-called bottom-up perspective suggested a number of analytical reorientations that subsequently became accepted in the wider implementation and policy literature. First, the central role of implementation agencies and their personnel in shaping the actual policy outcome has been acknowledged (street level bureaucracy, Lipsky 1980); in particular the pattern of coping with diverse and often contradictory demands associated with policies is a recurring theme in this line of research (see also Lin 2000; Hill 2003; deLeon and deLeon 2002). Second, the focus on single policies regarded as inputs into the implementation process was supplemented, if not replaced, by a perspective that regarded policy as the outcome of implementation resulting from the interaction of different actors *and* different programs. Elmore (1979/80) suggested the notion of backward mapping for a corresponding research strategy that begins at the last possible stage, when “administrative actions intersects with private choices” (Elmore 1979/80, 604). Third, the increasingly widespread recognition of linkages and networks between a number of (governmental and social) actors within a particular policy domain, cutting across the implementation/policy formulation borderline, provided the ground for the eventual abandonment of the hierarchical understanding of state/society interaction.

In sum, implementation research played a major role in triggering the move of policy research away from a state-centered endeavor, which was primarily interested in enhancing the internal administrative and governmental capacities and in fine-tuning program design and implementation. Since the late 1980s, policy research is primarily interested in patterns of state-society interaction and has shifted its attention toward the institutional set-up of organizational fields in the wider society (e.g., the health, education, or science section). Based on the multiplicity of empirical studies in numerous policy areas, the classic leitmotiv of hierarchical governance has been abandoned. Policy networks and negotiated modes of coordination between public and private actors are not only (analytically) regarded as a pervasive pattern underlying contemporary policy-making, but also (normatively) perceived as an effective mode of governance that reflects conditions of modern societies. Studies of policy-making were decreasingly following the traditional stages model, but encompassed all kinds of actors in the organizational and regulatory field, thereby undermining the policy cycle framework.

EVALUATION AND TERMINATION

Policy-making is supposed to contribute to problem solving or at least to the reduction of the problem load. During the evaluation stage of the policy cycle, these intended outcomes of policies move into the center of attention. The plausible normative rationale that, finally, policy-making should be appraised against intended objectives and impacts forms the starting point of policy evaluation. But, evaluation is not only associated with the final stage in the policy cycle that either ends with the termination of the policy or its redesign based on modified problem perception and agenda-setting. At the same time, evaluation research forms a separate subdiscipline in the policy sciences that focuses on the intended results and unintended consequences of policies. Evaluation studies are not restricted to a particular stage in the policy cycle; instead, the perspective is applied to the whole policy-making process and from different perspectives in terms of timing (*ex ante*, *ex post*).

Evaluation research emerged in the United States in the context of political controversies centered on the social reform programs of the Great Society of the 1960s. This early debate was concerned with methodological issues and sought to demonstrate its own relevance (cf. Weiss 1972; Levine et al. 1981; Wholey 1983). Evaluation research subsequently spread across OECD countries and was concerned with the activities of the interventionist welfare state (Albaek 1998) and reform policies in general. Evaluation was, for example, perceived as a way to systematically apply the idea of experimental testing of (new) policy options in a controlled setting (Hellstern and Wollmann 1983). Despite the inclination of evaluation research toward a rigorous application of quantitative research tools and quasi-experimental research designs, the general problem of isolating the influence and impact of a specific policy measure on policy outcomes has not been solved (given the variety of variables shaping policy outcomes). Moreover, attempts to establish evaluation exercises as part of politics-free policy-making have been widely regarded as failures. Their results were contested as being largely dependent on the inherent and often implicit values on which the evaluation was based (see, e.g., Fischer 1990).

Moreover, the role of evaluation in the policy process goes far beyond the scope of scientific evaluation studies. Policy evaluation takes place as a regular and embedded part of the political process and debate. Therefore, scientific evaluation has been distinguished from administrative evaluations conducted or initiated by the public administration and political evaluation carried out by diverse actors in the political arena, including the wider public and the media (cf. Howlett and Ramesh 2003, 210–16). Not only scientific studies, but also government reports, the public debate and activities of respective opposition parties embrace substantial elements of evaluation. Also the classical forms of overseeing government and public services in liberal democracies by law courts and legislators as well as audit offices can be grouped as evaluations.

While evaluation research sought to establish evaluation as a central part of rational evidence-based policy-making, activities of evaluation are particularly exposed to the specific logic and incentives of political processes in at least two major ways, both of them related to blame games (Hood 2002). First, the assessment of policy outputs and outcomes is biased according to the position and substantial interest, as well as the values, of a particular actor. In particular, the shifting of blame for poor performance is a regular part of politics. Second, flawed definition of policy aims and objectives presents a major obstacle for evaluations. Given the strong incentive of blame-avoidance, governments are encouraged to avoid the precise definition of goals because otherwise politicians would risk taking the blame for obvious failure. Even outside constellations that may be seen as shaped by partisan politics, the possibility of a self-evaluating organization has been strongly contested, because it conflicts with some of the fundamental values and interests of organizations (e.g., stability; Wildavsky 1972).

Evaluations can lead to diverse patterns of policy-learning, with different implications in terms of feed-back mechanisms and a potential restart of the policy process. One pattern would be that successful policies will be reinforced; a pattern that forms the core idea of so-called pilot projects (or model experiment), in which a particular measure is first introduced within a (territorial, substantive, or temporal) limited context and only extended if the evaluation is supporting. Prominent examples range from school reforms, the introduction of speed limits (and related measures in the field of transport policy), to the whole field of genetic engineering. However, instead of enhancing evidence-based policy-making, pilot projects may represent tools that are utilized for purposes of conflict avoidance; contested measures are not finally adopted but taken up as a pilot projects and thereby postponed until the political mood is ripe for a more enduring course of action.

Evaluations could also lead to the termination of a policy. Reform concepts and management instruments like Sunset Legislation and Zero-Based-Budgeting (ZBB) have been suggested as key tools that encourage terminating prior policies in order to allow for new political priorities to materialize. ZBB is supposed to replace traditional incremental budgeting (the annual continuation of budget items with minor cuts and increases reflecting political moods and distribution of power).

Instead, a new budget should be developed for single policy areas (and the responsible agencies) that expires at a predetermined date (sunset). All programs have to be periodically reassessed, designed, and budgeted. While ZBB proved to be overtly rationalistic and technocratic and, therefore, remained a short-lived reform idea, the notion of sunset legislation has regained more widespread currency (at least on the level of reform debates) since the mid-1990s in connection with the so-called regulatory policy agenda (OECD 2002).

The primary idea of policy termination—a policy problem has been solved or the adopted policy measures have been recognized to be ineffective in dealing with the set policy goals—seems rather difficult to enforce under real-world conditions of policy-making (see Bardach 1976; Behn 1978; deLeon 1978; Kaufman 1976). Rather large-scale budget cuts (e.g., related to subsidies) or windows of opportunity (e.g., changing governments, public sentiments) could trigger policy termination (Geva-May 2004). These processes are frequently connected with partisan motivations, like the implementation of election promises (see the change in energy policy introduced at the beginning of President George W. Bush's first term, or the first Schröder government's withdrawal of pension reforms introduced by the Kohl-Government in Germany).

However, the literature on policy termination suggests that attempts of policy termination are neither widespread nor successful in overcoming resistance of influential actors, allowing for the growth of a "Jurassic Park of programs" (Pollitt 2003, 113). Studies of policy termination, therefore, are frequently concerned with why policies and programs "live on" although they have "outlived their usefulness" (Geva-May 2004, 309). Counter-strategies against termination efforts range from window-dressing activities (instead of substantial changes) to the formation of cross-cutting anti-termination coalitions formed by beneficiaries of programs (e.g., delivery agencies, affected interest groups, local politicians; Bardach 1976). These coalitions can rely on a comparative advantage, because they are easier able to overcome collective action problems than any pro-termination coalition (given the threat of a potential loss of resources provided by the policy). In addition, politicians face greater incentives towards the declaration of new programs rather than the termination of old ones that include the admission of failures. The short-term political, as well as financial, costs of termination may outweigh the long-term benefits (cf. Bardach 1979; deLeon 1978; Geva-May 2004).

Apart from cases of unsuccessful termination, dynamic developments of policy booms (Dunleavy, 1986) as well as phenomena of extinction and reversal (Hood 1994) are alternative patterns of policy development. Among the most important variables accounting for policy reversals (the most important ones being economic policy changes since the late 1970s) are changing ideas and political coalitions supporting a new packaging of policy problems and solutions.

Overall, the analysis of the final stage of the policy cycle has witnessed a substantial departure from its initial focus on evaluation towards wider issues of policy change and inertia and the variables affecting these patterns.

CRITIQUE

While the numerous empirical studies and theoretical debates concerned with *single* stages of the policy cycle have substantially contributed to a better understanding of the prerequisites, elements, and consequences of policy-making, they also have triggered a rising critique challenging the underlying policy cycle framework. This critique is primarily questioning the analytical differentiation of the policy process into separate and discrete stages and sequences. As mentioned above, implementation research has played a crucial role in preparing the ground for that critique; implementation studies revealed that a clear-cut separation between policy formation and implementation is hardly reflecting real-world policy-making, neither in terms of any hierarchical or chronological sequence (first formation, then implementation), nor in terms of the involved actors.

Starting from empirical observations referring to single aspects of the cycle model an increasingly fundamentalist critique evolved, challenging the whole cycle framework. The approach was named, rather polemically, the textbook approach (Nakamura 1987). While the role of the stages heuristic in transforming political research and allowing the analysis of different stages of the policy process involving various institutional actors has been acknowledged even by its fiercest critics, it is said that the model has outlived its usefulness and should be replaced by more advanced models (Sabatier 1999). According to Sabatier, the uncritical application of the stages model prevents scientific progress rather than promotes it. Calls for the utilization of alternative frameworks and theories have criticized the stage heuristic in particular on these grounds (cf. Sabatier 1999; Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith, 1993):

- With regard to description, the stages model is said to suffer from descriptive inaccuracy because empirical reality does not fit with the classification of the policy process into discrete and sequential stages. Implementation, for example, affects agenda-setting; or a policy will be reformulated while some field agencies try to enforce ambiguous programs; or policy termination has to be implemented. In a number of cases it is more or less impossible, or at least not useful, to differentiate between stages. In other cases, the sequence is reversed; some stages miss completely or fall together.
- In terms of its conceptual value, the policy cycle lacks defining elements of a theoretical framework. In particular, the stages model does not offer causal explanations for the transition between different stages. Hence, studies of particular stages draw on a number of different theoretical concepts that have not been derived from the cycle framework itself. The specific models developed to explain processes within single stages were not connected to other approaches referring to other stages of the policy cycle.

The policy cycle is based on an implicit top-down perspective, and as such, policy-making will be framed as a hierarchical steering by superior institutions. And the focus will always be on single programs and decisions and on the formal adoption and implementation of these programs. The interaction between diverse programs, laws, and norms and their parallel implementation and evaluation does not gain the primary attention of policy analysis.

Moreover, by adopting the policy cycle perspective, the elements of the policy process that are not related to problem-solving activities are systematically ignored. Symbolic or ritual activities and activities purely related to the maintenance of power (Edelman 1971) do not feature in the stages model. However, rather than being the main objective of political action, policy-making frequently results as a by-product of politics. While the political process could be analyzed in terms of its impact on problem-solving, this should not be confused with an interpretation that regards actors as primarily taking a problem-solving orientation. Finally, the policy cycle framework ignores the role of knowledge, ideas and learning in the policy process as influential independent variables affecting all stages of the policy process (and not only in the evaluation stage).

Overall, the cycle framework leads toward an oversimplified and unrealistic world-view. Policy-making appears to be too straightforward; the whole process is reduced to initiating and continuing programs. As mentioned earlier, the role of prior policies in shaping policy-making as well as the interaction between diverse cycles, stages and actors is not systematically taken into account. However, a central feature of the policy process in modern societies is the interaction between policy-related activities at different levels (local, regional, national, inter- and supranational) and arenas (governmental, parliamentary, administrative, scientific communities, and the like) of governance. Policies are constantly debated, implemented, enforced, and evaluated. For example, environmental policy-making in the United States and in the European Union is not appropriately understood without the acknowledgement of interaction between initiatives from the different levels of government and without taking the impact of activities in other policy areas (e.g., transport, energy,

or the wider economic policy) into account. Even the assumption of clearly defined and separated policy subsystems seems to be unrealistic.

The fundamental critique of Sabatier and others has triggered the development of alternative approaches beside. The advocacy coalition framework developed by Sabatier, the multiple-stream framework, the institutional rational choice approach, policy diffusion models, and the punctuated equilibrium theory are regarded as particularly promising alternative frameworks (see Sabatier 1999).

LIMITATIONS AND UTILITY OF THE POLICY CYCLE PERSPECTIVE

With that fundamental critique in mind, what would be an overall assessment of the limitations and the utility of the policy cycle framework? First of all, most of the different single points of criticism are reasonable. Like any framework, the cycle framework draws an extremely simplified picture of reality, highlighting some aspects while disregarding others. Above all, the policy cycle does not offer a causal model of the policy process with clearly defined dependent and independent variables. Therefore, the policy cycle or stages perspective could, according to Sabatier, not act as a theoretical framework of the policy process.

However, as Renate Mayntz has already emphasized in 1983, policy research is not only, and frequently not primarily concerned with the application of the analytical scientific theory (*analytische Wissenschafts-therorie*) (testing hypothesis, causal relations between variables) (see the debate on different logics of research in Brady and Collier 2004). Instead, the detailed and differentiated understanding of the internal dynamic and peculiarities of complex processes of policy-making counts as distinctive and relevant objectives of policy research (Mayntz 1983, 14).

Against these objectives, the policy cycle perspective has proven to provide an excellent heuristic device. Studies following the policy cycle perspective have enhanced our understanding of the complex preconditions, central factors influencing, and diverse outcomes of the policy process. The diverse concepts developed in studies seeking to understand specific parts of the policy cycle have offered a number of useful tools to classify various elements of the whole process. Hence, the policy cycle perspective will continue to provide an important conceptual framework in policy research, as long as the heuristic purpose of the framework is considered and the departure from the hierarchical top-down perspective and the receptivity for other and new approaches in the wider political science literature is taken into account.

The cycle framework also fulfils a vital role in structuring the vast amount of literature, the abundance of theoretical concepts, analytical tools and empirical studies, and therefore is not only crucial for teaching purposes (Parsons 1995, 80). The framework is also essential as a basic (background) template for assessing and comparing the particular contributions (and omissions) of more recent theories of the policy process. Therefore, the critique of the policy cycle, which is centered on general criteria for frameworks, theories and models, neglects the crucial role of the perspective in providing a base-line for the 'communication' between the diverse approaches in the field. In that respect, we agree with Schlager (1999, 239, 258), who highlights the openness of the cycle perspective for different theoretical and empirical interests in the field of policy studies (and agree with the critique of any application of the cycle perspective as a theoretical framework or model in a strict sense), but would add and emphasize the vital role of the cycle perspective for the integration of the diverse literature.

Numerous empirical studies and theoretical considerations have been conducted along the lines of single stages; these studies made important contributions not only to the policy literature, but also to the wider political science literature. For example, the whole debate on (new forms of) governance and the development from government to governance builds on results of and debates within policy research (Jann 2003; Lodge and Wegrich 2005a, b). Research on implementation has

prepared the ground for the governance debate by detecting non-hierarchical modes of governance and patterns of co-governance between state and social actors, and through the recognition of the crucial role of civil society (organizations) for policy delivery.

Central research questions in the academic policy literature as well as in applied research are (more or less explicitly) still derived from the heuristic offered by the policy cycle framework. Questions concerning the actual impacts of particular interventions (evaluation) or concerned with the consequences following from the results of evaluations (termination, new problem perception and recognition) will remain important ones. The same applies to the other stages of the policy process; of course, it is still of central importance if and why a policy drifts away from the original design during implementation, or which actors are the most important ones in defining a policy problem or during the formal adoption of a particular policy.

In terms of democratic governance and from the perspective of public administration research, it remains of central relevance in which stage which actors are dominant and which are not. Which role do parties, parliaments, the media, interest groups, single agencies, or scientific communities play in defining which problems should be addressed or how laws should be applied and enforced? Could it be that, contrary to our normative models, crucial policies are formulated without major interference of elected politicians, which then are only capable to initiate minor adaptations during implementation? The risk exists that empirical findings concerning the complex policy process—pictured as a densely entangled space in which numerous parallel processes operate with frequent interactive feedback loops—leads to the negligence of these central research questions concerning actors' different roles in the different stages of the policy process. Elected officials and appointed bureaucrats, interest groups and corporations, and scientists and experts have different responsibilities in democratic processes—and these roles are linked to the different stages of the policy process, with the maturity of the respective policy.

Therefore, the policy cycle framework does not only offer a yardstick for the evaluation of the (comparative) success or failure of a policy; it also offers a perspective against which the democratic quality of these processes could be assessed (without following the assumption of a simple, discrete sequence and clear separation of stages). Additionally, the cycle framework allows the use of different analytical perspectives and corresponding research questions that will stay among the most important ones in policy research, although the stages heuristic of the policy cycle does not offer a comprehensive causal explanation for the whole policy process and even if the fundamental theoretical assumptions, on which initial versions of the framework were based, have long been left behind; of course, it is still of central importance if and why a policy drifts away from the original design during implementation. Similarly, it is still a relevant question, which actors are the most important in defining a policy problem or formally adopting a particular policy.

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5 Agenda Setting in Public Policy

Thomas A. Birkland

In *The Semisovereign People*, E. E. Schattschneider asserts, “the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power” (Schattschneider 1960/1975, 66). The definition of alternative issues, problems, and solutions is crucial because it establishes which issues, problems, and solutions will gain the attention of the public and decision makers and which, in turn, are most likely to gain broader attention. This chapter considers the processes by which groups work to elevate issues on the agenda, or the process by which they seek to deny other groups the opportunity to place issues. Of particular importance is the fact that is not merely issues that reach the agenda, but the construction or interpretation of issues competes for attention. The discussion is organized into four major parts. In the first, I review the agenda-setting process and our conceptions of how agendas are set. In the second part, I consider the relationships between groups, power, and agenda setting. In the third part, I discuss the relationship between the construction of problems and agenda setting. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of contemporary ways of measuring and conceiving of the agenda as a whole and the composition of the agenda.

THE AGENDA-SETTING PROCESS

Agenda setting is the process by which problems and alternative solutions gain or lose public and elite attention. Group competition to set the agenda is fierce because no society or political institutions have the capacity to address all possible alternatives to all possible problems that arise at any one time (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Groups must therefore fight to earn their issues’ places among all the other issues sharing the limited space on the agenda or to prepare for the time when a crisis makes their issue more likely to occupy a more prominent space on the agenda. Even when an issue gains attention, groups must fight to ensure that their depiction of the issue remains in the forefront and that their preferred approaches to the problem are those that are most actively considered. They do so for the reasons cited by Schattschneider: the group that successfully describes a problem will also be the one that defines the solutions to it, thereby prevailing in policy debate. At the same time, groups fight to keep issues off the agenda; indeed, such blocking action is as important as the affirmative act of attempting to gain attention (Cobb and Ross 1997).

Central to understanding agenda setting is the meaning of the term *agenda*. An agenda is a collection of problems, understandings of causes, symbols, solutions, and other elements of public problems that come to the attention of members of the public and their governmental officials. An agenda may be as concrete as a list of bills that are before a legislature, but also includes a series of beliefs about the existence and magnitude of problems and how they should be addressed by government, the private sector, nonprofit organizations, or through joint action by some or all of these institutions.

Agendas exist at all levels of government. Every community and every body of government—Congress, a state legislature, a county commission—has a collection of issues that are available for discussion and disposition, or that are being actively considered. All these issues can be categorized based on the extent to which an institution is prepared to make an ultimate decision to enact and implement or to reject particular policies. Furthest from *enactment* are issues and ideas contained

in the *systemic agenda*, in which is contained any idea that could possibly be considered by participants in the policy process. Some ideas fail to reach this agenda because they are politically unacceptable in a particular society; large-scale state ownership of the means of production, for example, is generally off the systemic agenda in the United States because it is contrary to existing ideological commitments.

It is worthwhile to think of several levels of the agenda, as shown in Figure 5.1. The largest level of the agenda is the *agenda universe*, which contains all ideas that could possibly be brought up and discussed in a society or a political system. In a democracy, we can think of all the possible ideas as being quite unconstrained, although, even in democracies, the expression of some ideas is officially or unofficially constrained. For example, in the United States, aggressively racist and sexist language is usually not tolerated socially in public discourse, while Canada has laws prohibiting hate speech and expression. Canada’s laws are unlikely to be copied and enacted in the United States because they would likely conflict with the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. But laws may not be the most effective way of denying ideas access to the agenda. Social pressure and cultural norms are probably more important. Thus, ideas associated with communism or fascism are so far out of bounds of politically appropriate discourse in the United States that they rarely are expressed beyond a fringe group of adherents. Indeed, sometimes people paint policy ideas with terms intended to place these ideas outside the realm of acceptable discussion. For example, health care reforms that would involve an increase in government activity are often dismissed as socialized medicine, with the threat of “socialism” invoked to derail the idea. In a democracy that prizes freedom of speech, however, many ideas are available for debate on the systemic agenda, even if those ideas are never acted upon by governments.

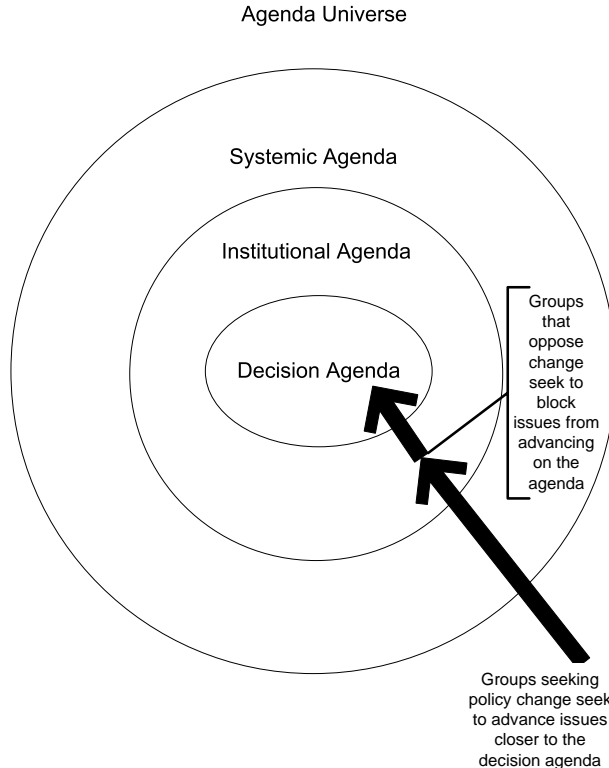


FIGURE 5.1 Levels of the Agenda.

Cobb and Elder say that “the systemic agenda consists of all issues that are commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention and as involving matters within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority.” The boundary between the systemic agenda and the agenda universe represents the limit of “legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority” (Cobb and Elder 1983, 85). That boundary can move in or out to accommodate more or fewer ideas over time. For example, ideas to establish programs to alleviate economic suffering have waxed and waned on the agenda when the national mood is more expansive toward the poor, as it was during the 1960s, or less compassionate, as during the 1990s.

If a problem or idea is successfully elevated from the systemic agenda, it moves to the institutional agenda, a subset of the broader systemic agenda. The institutional agenda is “that list of items explicitly up for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decision makers” (Cobb and Elder 1983, 85–86). The limited amount of time or resources available to any institution or society means that only a limited number of issues is likely to reach the institutional agenda (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; O’Toole 1989). However, institutions can increase their carrying capacity and can address more issues simultaneously (Baumgartner and Jones 2004; Talbert and Potoski 2002), either when there are many pressing issues, or when resources or technology are available to manage this increased load.

Even with this increased carrying capacity, however, relatively few issues will reach the decision agenda, which contains items that are about to be acted upon by a governmental body. Bills, once they are introduced and heard in committee, are relatively low on the decision agenda until they are reported to the whole body for a vote. Notices of proposed rule making in the *Federal Register* are evidence of an issue or problem’s elevation to the decision agenda in the executive branch. Conflict may be greatest at this stage, because when a decision is reached at a particular level of government, it may trigger conflict that expands to another or higher level of government. Conflict continues and may expand; this expansion of conflict is often a key goal of many interest groups. The goal of most contending parties in the policy process is to move policies from the systemic agenda to the institutional agenda, or to prevent issues from reaching the institutional agenda. Figure 5.1 implies that, except for the agenda universe, the agenda and each level within it are finite, and no society or political system can address all possible alternatives to all possible problems that arise at any time. While the carrying capacity of the agenda may change, the agenda carrying capacity of any institution ultimately has a maximum bound, which means that interests must compete with each other to get their issues and their preferred interpretations of these issues on the agenda.

Even when a problem is on the agenda, there may be a considerable amount of controversy and competition over how to define the problem, including the causes of the problem and the policies that would most likely solve the problem. For example, after the 1999 Columbine High school shootings, the issue of school violence quickly rose to national prominence, to a much greater extent than had existed after other incidents of school violence. So school violence was on the agenda: the real competition then became between depictions of school violence as a result of, among other things, lax parenting, easy access to guns, lack of parental supervision, or the influence of popular culture (TV, movies, video games) on high school students. This competition over *why* Columbine happened and *what* could be done to prevent it was quite fierce, more so than the competition between school violence and the other issues vying for attention at the time (Lawrence and Birkland 2004).

POLITICAL POWER IN AGENDA SETTING

The ability of groups—acting singly or, more often, in coalition with other groups—to influence policy is not simply a function of who makes the most persuasive argument, either from a rhetorical or empirical perspective. We know intuitively that some groups are more powerful than others, in the sense that they are better able to influence the outcomes of policy debates. When we think of

power, we might initially think about how people, governments, and powerful groups in society can compel people to do things, often against their will. In a classic article in the *American Political Science Review*, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz argue that this sort of power—the ability of actor A to cause actor B to do things—is one of two faces of power. The other face is the ability to keep a person from doing what he or she wants to do; instead of a coercive power, the second face is a blocking power.

Of course power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. But power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A's set of preferences. (Bachrach and Baratz 1962, 952)

In the first face of power, A participates in the making of decisions that affect B, even if B does not like the decisions or their consequences. This is the classic sort of power that we see in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, but we can also see this sort of power in the United States and other democracies, because there are many groups that have very little power to influence decisions made on their behalf or even against their interests. Prisoners, for example, have little power to influence the conditions of their sentencing and incarceration, while minors have little say in policies made on their behalf or in their interests, such as policies influencing education or juvenile justice. This is not to say that other people and groups do not speak for prisoners or minors. But these spokespeople are working on behalf of groups that are either constructed as “helpless” or “deviant” (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

In the second face of power, A *prevents* B's issues and interests from getting on the agenda or becoming policy, even when actor B really *wants* these issues raised. Environmentalism, for example, was, until the late 1960s and early 1970s, not a particularly powerful interest, and groups that promote environmental protection found that their issues rarely made the agenda because these issues in no way were those of the major economic and political forces that dominated decision making. Not until the emergence of high-profile environmental crises, such as the revelation of the problems with the pesticide DDT or the Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969, were these problems coupled with broad-based group mobilization, thereby elevating these issues to where mainstream actors paid attention to it. Even then, one can argue that actor A, representing the business and industrial sector, bent but did not break on environmental issues and is still able to prevent B, the environmental movement, from advancing broader (or radical, depending on one's perspective) ideas that could have a profound effect on the environment.

The blocking moves of the more powerful interests are not simply a function of A having superior resources to B, although this does play a substantial role. In essence, we should not think of the competition between actor A and actor B as a sporting event on a field, with even rules, between two teams, one vastly more powerful than the other. Rather, the power imbalance is as much a function of the nature and rules of the policy process as it is a function of the particular attributes of the groups or interests themselves. As Schattschneider explains:

All forms of political organization have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because *organization is the mobilization of bias*. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out. (Schattschneider 1960/1975, 71)

In other words, some issues are more likely to reach the agenda because the bias of the political system allows them to be raised, while others are, according to the bias of the system, unfit for political consideration. Housing, education, a job, or health care are not provided as a matter of right in America because the bias of the American political system rests on cultural values of self-reliance, which means that the United States lags behind other nations in the state provision of these services. This bias is not static or God-given, but changes rather slowly as some interests oppose the provision of these things as a matter of right.

Other scholars of political power have conceived of a third face of power, which differs substantially from the second face of power in that large groups of people who objectively have a claim that they are disadvantaged remain quiescent—that is, passive—and fail to *attempt* to exert their influence, however small, on policy making and politics. This is the story John Gaventa tells in his book *Power and Powerlessness* (1980, 168). Gaventa explains why a community of Appalachian coal miners remained under the repressive power of a British coal mining company and the local business and social elite. As Harry G. Reid (1981) notes, Gaventa takes on the traditional idea that political participation in Appalachia is low because of the people's own shortcomings, such as low educational attainment and poverty. Rather, in the third face of power, social relationships and political ideology are structured over the long term in such a way that the mining company, remains dominant and the miners cannot conceive of a situation in which they can begin to participate in the decisions that directly affect their lives. When the miners show some signs of rebelling against the unfair system, the dominant interests are able to ignore pressure for change. In the long run, people may stop fighting as they become and remain alienated from politics; quiescence is the result.

This necessarily brief discussion of the idea of power is merely an overview of what is a very complex and important field of study in political science in general. It is important to us here because an understanding of power helps us understand how groups compete to gain access to the agenda *and* to deny access to groups and interests that would damage their interests.

GROUPS AND POWER IN AGENDA SETTING

E. E. Schattschneider's theories of group mobilization and participation in agenda setting rest on his oft-cited contention that issues are more likely to be elevated to agenda status if the scope of conflict is broadened. There are two key ways in which traditionally disadvantaged (losing) groups expand the scope of conflict. First, groups go public with a problem by using symbols and images to induce greater media and public sympathy for their cause. Environmental groups dramatize their causes by pointing to symbols and images of allegedly willful or negligent humanly caused environmental damage.

Second, groups that lose in the first stage of a political conflict can appeal to a higher decision-making level, such as when losing parties appeal to state and then federal institutions for an opportunity to be heard, hoping that in the process they will attract others who agree with them and their cause. Conversely, dominant groups work to contain conflict to ensure that it does not spread out of control. The underlying theory of these tendencies dates to Madison's defense, in *Federalist* 10, of the federal system as a mechanism to contain political conflict.

Schattschneider's theories of issue expansion explain how in-groups retain control over problem definition and the way such problems are suppressed by dominant actors in policy making. These actors form what Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 142) call policy monopolies, which attempt to keep problems and underlying policy issues low on the agenda. Policy communities use agreed-upon symbols to construct their visions of problems, causes, and solutions. As long as these images and symbols are maintained throughout society, or remain largely invisible and unquestioned, agenda

access for groups that do not share these images is likely to be difficult; change is less likely until the less powerful group's construction of the problem becomes more prevalent. If alternative selection is central to the projection of political power, an important corollary is that powerful groups retain power by working to keep the public and out-groups unaware of underlying problems, alternative constructions of problems, or alternatives to their resolution. This argument reflects those made by elite theorists such as C. Wright Mills (1956) and E. E. Schattschneider himself, who famously noted that "the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (1960/1975, 35) This does not deny the possibility of change, but acknowledges that change is sometimes slow in coming and difficult to achieve.

OVERCOMING POWER DEFICITS TO ACCESS THE AGENDA

Baumgartner and Jones argue that when powerful groups lose their control of the agenda, less powerful groups can enter policy debates and gain attention to their issues. This greater attention to the problem area tends to increase negative public attitudes toward the status quo, which can then produce lasting institutional and agenda changes that break up policy monopolies.

There are several ways in which groups can pursue strategies to gain attention to issues, thereby advancing issues on the agenda. The first set of ways for less advantaged interest groups to influence policy making relates to Kingdon's streams metaphor of agenda change (Kingdon 1995). "Windows of opportunity" for change open when two or more streams—the political, problem, or policy streams—are coupled. In the political stream, electoral change can lead to reform movements that give previously less powerful groups an opportunity to air their concerns. An example is policy making during the Lyndon Johnson administration's Great Society program, which contained a package of policies that sought to attack poverty, poor health, racial discrimination, and urban decline, among other problems. This package of programs was made possible by an aggressively activist president and a large Democratic majority in the Congress, the result of the Democratic landslide of 1964.

Second, changes in our perception of problems will also influence the opening of a "window of opportunity" for policy change. In the 1930s, people began to perceive unemployment and economic privation not simply as a failure of individual initiative, but as a collective economic problem that required governmental solutions under the rubric of the New Deal. In the 1960s and 1970s, people began to perceive environmental problems, such as dirty air and water and the destruction of wildlife, not as the function of natural processes but as the result of negative human influences on the ecosystem. And, third, changes in the policy stream can influence the opening of the window of opportunity. In the 1960s, poverty and racism were seen as problems, but were also coupled with what were suggested as new and more effective policies to solve these problems, such as the Civil Rights Acts, the Voting Rights Act, and the War on Poverty.

Lest we think that all this change is in the liberal direction, it is worth noting that other periods of change, notably the Reagan administration, were also characterized by the joining of these streams. These include changes in the political stream (more conservative legislators, growing Republican strength in the South, the advent of the Christian right as a political force), the problem stream (government regulation as cause, not the solution, of economic problems, American weakness in foreign affairs), and the policy stream (ideas for deregulation and smaller government, increased military spending and readiness) that came together during the first two years of the Reagan administration. These factors help explain policies favoring increased military spending, an increase in attention to moral issues, and a decrease in spending on social programs.

In each of these instances, it took group action to press for change. Groups worked to shine the spotlight on issues because, as Baumgartner and Jones argue, increased attention is usually negative

attention to a problem, leading to calls for policy change to address the problems being highlighted. But the simple desire to mobilize is not enough. Groups sometimes need a little help to push issues on the agenda; this help can come from changes in indicators of a problem or focusing events that create rapid attention. And groups often need to join forces to create a more powerful movement than they could create if they all acted as individuals.

GROUP COALESCENCE AND STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

A major shortcoming of elite theory and of power theories is that some interests simply accept their fate and give elite groups relatively little trouble. Related to this is the assumption that the elite is somehow a monolith, single-mindedly marching toward the same class-related goals. Neither of these assumptions is true. Less advantaged interests in the United States can enter policy disputes without inviting the wrath of the state; their major risk is irrelevance or impotence. And powerful social and economic interests often conflict with each other, such as when producers of raw materials, such as oil and steel, want to raise prices and producers of goods that use these inputs, such as automobile makers, seek to keep raw material costs low, or when broadcasters battle powerful values interests over the content of music, movies, or television. Within industries, vicious battles over markets and public policy can result, as in the ongoing legal and economic battles between Microsoft and its rivals, or between major airlines and discount carriers (Birkland and Nath 2000). And many movements that seek policy change are led by people whose socioeconomic condition and background are not vastly different from that of their political opponents. In this section, we will review how less advantaged interests, led by bright and persistent leaders, can and sometimes do overcome some of their power deficits.

The first thing to recognize about pro-change groups is that they, like more powerful interests, will often coalesce into advocacy coalitions. An advocacy coalition is a coalition of groups that come together based on a shared set of beliefs about a particular issue or problem (see Hank Jenkins Smith's chapter in this volume). These are not necessarily these groups' core belief systems; rather, groups will often coalesce on their more peripheral beliefs, provided that the coalition will advance all groups' goals in the debate at hand.

This is one way in which the dynamics of groups and coalitions can work to break down the power of dominant interests. This strength in numbers results in greater attention from policy makers and greater access to the policy-making process, thereby forming what social scientists call *countervailing power* against the most powerful elites. But where should a group begin to seek to influence policy once it has formed a coalition and mobilized its allies and members? This question is addressed by Baumgartner and Jones in their discussion of "venue shopping" (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 31).

Venue shopping describes the efforts groups undertake to gain a hearing for their ideas and grievances against existing policy (e.g., Pralle 2003). A *venue* is a level of government or institution in which the group is likely to gain the most favorable hearing. We can think of venues in institutional terms—legislative, executive, or judicial—or in vertical terms—federal, state, local government. The news media are also a venue, and even within a branch of government, there are multiple venues.

Groups can seek to be witnesses before congressional committees and subcommittees where the chair is known to be sympathetic to their position or at least open-minded enough to hear their case. This strategy requires the cooperation of the leadership of the committee or subcommittee, and unsympathetic leaders will often block efforts to include some interests on witness lists. But the many and largely autonomous committees and subcommittees in Congress allow groups to venue shop within Congress itself, thereby increasing the likelihood that an issue can be heard.

After a major focusing event (discussed below), it is particularly hard to exclude aggrieved parties from a congressional hearing, and members whose support was formerly lukewarm may be more enthusiastic supporters when the magnitude of a problem becomes clearer.

Groups that cannot gain a hearing in the legislative branch can appeal to executive branch officials. For example, environmentalists who cannot get a hearing in the House Resources Committee may turn to the Environmental Protection Agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the various agencies that compose the Department of the Interior, and other agencies that may be more sympathetic and might be able to use existing legal and regulatory means to advance environmental goals. Or the environmentalists may choose to raise their issues at the state level. While an appeal to these agencies may raise some conflict with the legislative branch, this tactic can at least open doors for participation by otherwise excluded groups. Groups often engage in litigation as a way to get their issues on the agenda, particularly when other access points are closed to the group.

Groups may seek to change policies at the local or state level before taking an issue to the federal government, because the issue may be easier to advance at the local level or because a grass-roots group may find it can fight on an equal footing with a more powerful group. This often happens in NIMBY (not in my back yard) cases, such as decisions on where to put group homes, cell phone towers, expanded shopping centers, power plants, and the like. And, of course, groups sometimes must address issues at the state and local level because these governments have the constitutional responsibility for many functions not undertaken by the federal government, such as education or, as became clear in the same-sex marriage issue in 2003 and 2004, the laws governing marriage. In this example, it's clear that gay rights groups have adopted a state by state or even more local strategy because it makes no sense to seek change at the federal level.

On the other hand, groups may expand conflict to a broader level—from the local level to the state level, or from the state to federal level—when they lose at the local level. E. E. Schattschneider calls this “expanding the scope of conflict.” This strategy sometimes works because expanding the scope of conflict often engages the attention of other actors who may step in on the side of the less powerful group. An example of the expanding scope of conflict is the civil rights movement, which in many ways was largely confined to the South until images of violent crackdowns on civil rights protesters became more prominent on the evening news, thereby expanding the issue to a broader and somewhat more sympathetic public. Indeed, groups often seek media coverage as a way of expanding the scope of conflict. Media activities can range from holding news conferences to mobilizing thousands of people in protest rallies. Sometimes an issue is elevated to greater attention by the inherent newsworthiness of the event, without preplanning by the protest groups, such as the just-cited example of media coverage of civil rights protests.

Finally, gaining a place on the agenda often relies on coalescing with other groups, as was discussed earlier. Many of the great social movements of our time required that less powerful interests coalesce. Even the civil rights movement involved a coalition, at various times, with antiwar protesters, labor unions, women's groups, antipoverty workers, and other groups who shared an interest in racial equality. By coalescing in this way, the voices of all these interests were multiplied. Indeed, the proliferation of interest groups since the 1950s has resulted in greater opportunities for coalition building and has created far greater resources for countervailing power.

Before concluding this discussion, we must recognize that elevating issues on the agenda in hopes of gaining policy change is not always resisted by political elites. Cobb and Elder (1983) argue that, when political elites seek change, they also try to mobilize publics to generate mass support for an issue, which supports elite efforts to move issues further up the agenda. Such efforts can constitute either attempts to broaden the influence of existing policy monopolies or attempts by some political elites (such as the president and his staff) to circumvent the policy monopoly established by interest groups, the bureaucracy, and subcommittees (the classic iron triangle model). The president or other key political actors may be able to enhance the focusing power of an event by visiting a disaster or accident scene, thereby affording the event even greater symbolic weight.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

Problems can be defined and depicted in many different ways, depending on the goals of the proponent of the particular depiction of a problem and the nature of the problem and the political debate. The process of defining problems and of selling a broad population on this definition, is called social construction. Social construction refers to the ways in which we as a society and the various contending interests within it structure and tell the stories about how problems come to be the way they are. A group that can create and promote the most effective depiction of an issue has an advantage in the battle over what, if anything, will be done about a problem.

At the same time, there remain many social problems that people believe should be solved or, at least, made better. Poverty, illiteracy, racism, immorality, disease, disaster, crime, and any number of other ills will lead people and groups to press for solutions. Often, these social problems require that governmental action be taken because services required to alleviate public problems that are not or cannot be addressed by private actors are *public goods* that can primarily be provided by government actors. While in the popular mind, and often in reality, economic and social conservatives believe in limited government activity, these conservatives also believe there are public goods, such as regulation of securities markets, road building, national defense, and public safety, that are most properly addressed by government. In the end, though, it is probably best to think about problems by thinking first about a clear definition of the problem itself, before concerning ourselves with whether public or private actors must remedy the problem. Beyond this, whether a problem really is a problem at all is an important part of political and policy debate: merely stating a problem is not enough, one must persuade others that the problem exists or that the problem being cited is the *real* problem.

The way a problem is defined is an important part of this persuasive process and is important in the choice of solutions. The social construction of a problem is linked to the existing social, political, and ideological structures at the time. Americans still value individual initiative and responsibility, and therefore make drinking and driving at least as much a matter of personal responsibility as social responsibility. The same values of self-reliance and individual initiative are behind many of our public policies, dealing with free enterprise, welfare, and other economic policies. These values differentiate our culture from other nations' cultures, where the community or the state takes a more important role. In those countries, problems are likely to be constructed differently, and different policies are the result.

CONDITIONS AND PROBLEMS

Conditions—that is, things that exist that are bothersome but about which people and governments cannot do anything—can develop over time into problems as people develop ways to address these conditions. A classic example is polio: until Dr. Jonas Salk developed the polio vaccine, millions of children and their parents lived in fear of this crippling disease. Without the polio vaccine, this disease was simply a dreaded condition that could perhaps be avoided (people kept their kids away from swimming pools, for example, to avoid contracting polio) but certainly not treated or prevented without very high social costs. With the vaccine, polio became a *problem* about which something effective could be done.

When people become dependent on solutions to previously addressed problems, then the interruption of the solution will often constitute a major problem, resulting in efforts to prevent any such interruptions. One hundred and fifty years ago, electricity as public utility did not exist; today, an interruption in the supply of electricity and other utilities is a problem that we believe can be ameliorated—indeed, we believe it should never happen at all! An extreme example is the power

outage that struck Auckland, New Zealand, in February 1998. The outage lasted for over ten days, closing businesses, forcing evacuations of apartments due to water and sewer failures, and ending up costing New Zealanders millions of dollars. The cause of the outage was the failure of overtaxed power cables; regardless of its cause, people do not expect, nor lightly tolerate, the loss of something taken for granted for so long. Indeed, while the blackouts that struck eight eastern states and two Canadian provinces in August 2003 lasted hours, not days, for most locations, but led to significant social and economic disruption as elevators failed, subways ceased to work, computer systems shut down, and all the modern features on which urban societies rely were unavailable.

Many problems are not as obvious and dramatic as these. After all, it did not take a lot of argument to persuade those evacuated from their apartments or those who spent the night in their offices because subways and trains didn't work that there was some sort of problem. But other problems are more subtle, and people have to be persuaded that something needs to be done; still more persuasion may be necessary to induce a belief that *government* needs to do something about a problem.

SYMBOLS

Because a hallmark of successful policy advocacy is the ability to tell a good story, groups will use time-tested rhetorical devices, such as the use of symbols, to advance their arguments. A symbol is “anything that stands for something else. Its meaning depends on how people interpret it, use it, or respond to it” (Stone 2002, 137). Politics is full of symbols—some perceived as good, others as bad, and still others as controversial. Some symbols are fairly obvious: the American flag, for example, is generally respected in the United States, while flying a flag bearing the Nazi swastika just about anywhere in the world is considered, at a minimum, to be in poor taste, and, indeed, is illegal in many countries.

Deborah Stone outlines four elements of the use of symbols. First, she discusses *narrative stories*, which are stories told about how things happen, good or bad. They are usually highly simplified and offer the hope that complex problems can be solved with relatively easy solutions. Such stories are staples of the political circuit, where candidates tell stories about wasteful bureaucrats or evil businessmen or lazy welfare cheats to rouse the electorate to elect the candidate, who will impose a straightforward solution to these problems. Stories are told about how things are getting worse or *declining*, in Stone's term, or how things were getting better until something bad happened to stop progress, or how “change-is-only-an-illusion” (142). An example of this last is the stories told on the campaign trail and on the floor of the legislature in which positive economic indicators are acknowledged but are said not to reflect the real problems that real people are having.

Helplessness and control is another common story of how something once could not be done but now something can be done about an issue or problem. This story is closely related to the condition/problem tension.

Often used in these stories is a rhetorical device called *synecdoche* (sin-ECK'-do-key), “a figure of speech in which the whole is represented by one of its parts” (Stone 2002, 145). Phrases such as “a million eyes are on the Capitol today” represent great attention to Congress's actions on a particular issue. In other cases, people telling stories about policy use *anecdotes* or *prototypical cases* to explain an entire phenomenon. Thus, as Stone notes, the idea of the cheating “welfare queen” took hold in the 1980s, even though such people represented a small and atypical portion of the welfare population. Related to such stories are horror stories of government regulation run amok. Such stories are usually distorted: Stone cites the example of how those opposed to industry regulation claimed that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) “abolished the tooth fairy” by requiring that dentists discard any baby teeth they pulled; the actual regulation merely required that appropriate steps be taken to protect health workers from any diseases that may be transmitted in handling the teeth.

TABLE 5.1
Types of Causal Theories with Examples

Actions	Consequences	
	Intended	Unintended
Unguided	Mechanical cause intervening agents brainwashed people machines that perform as designed, but cause harm	Accidental cause nature weather earthquakes machines that run amok
Purposeful	Intentional cause oppression conspiracies that work programs that work as intended, but cause harm	Inadvertent cause intervening conditions unforeseen side effects avoidable ignorance carelessness omission

Source: Stone 2002

CAUSAL STORIES

An important part of story telling in public policy is the telling of *causal stories*.³¹ These stories attempt to explain what caused a problem or an outcome. These stories are particularly important in public policy making, because the depiction of the cause of a problem strongly suggests a solution to the problem. In general, Stone divides causal stories into four categories: mechanical causes, accidental causes, intentional causes, and inadvertent causes. These examples are shown in Table 5.1.

INDICATORS, FOCUSING EVENTS, AND AGENDA CHANGE

John Kingdon discusses changes in indicators and focusing events as two ways in which groups and society as a whole learn of problems in the world. Changes in indicators are usually changes in statistics about a problem; if the data various agencies and interests collect indicate that things are getting worse, the issue will gain considerable attention. Examples include changes in unemployment rates, inflation rates, the gross domestic product, wage levels and their growth, pollution levels, crime, student achievement on standardized tests, birth and death rates, and myriad other things that sophisticated societies count every year.

These numbers by themselves do not have an influence over which issues gain greater attention and which fall by the wayside. Rather, the changes in indicators need to be publicized by interest groups, government agencies, and policy entrepreneurs, who use these numbers to advance their preferred policy ideas. This is not to say that people willfully distort statistics; rather, it means that groups will often selectively use official statistics to suggest that problems exist, while ignoring other indicators that may suggest that no such problem exists. The most familiar indicators, such as those reflecting the health of the economy, almost need no interpretation by interest groups or policy entrepreneurs—when unemployment is up and wages lag behind inflation, the argument is less about whether there is an economic problem but, rather, what to do about it. But even then, the choice of which indicator to use is crucial: in the 2004 presidential campaign, the Bush administration focused on the relatively low national unemployment rate, while the Kerry campaign focused on the numbers of jobs that had allegedly been lost between 2001 and 2004. These are two rather different ways of measuring a similar problem.

An example of indicators used by less advantaged groups to advance claims for greater equity is the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States. According to the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (United States Department of Commerce, 1999 #3110, table 742), in 1970, those households making \$75,000 or more per year, in constant (1997) dollars, comprised 9 percent of all American households; by 1997, this group had doubled its share to 18.4 percent of all households. Where did the other groups shrink to make up this difference? The middle categories, those earning between \$25,000 and \$49,999, saw their share decrease from 37.2 percent of households in 1970 to 29.6 percent. This kind of evidence is used to argue that the rich are getting richer, while the middle class and, to some extent, the lowest economic classes are worse off in terms of their share of the wealth (see, for example, Phillips, 1990). While these numbers are not in great dispute, the *meaning* of the numbers is in dispute, and the numbers have not had much of an impact on public policy. Indeed, these trends were accelerated with the tax cuts implemented under the Bush administration, which tended to benefit the wealthy more than middle-class and lower-class workers. On the other hand, indicators of educational attainment do have an impact on the agenda, causing periodic reform movements in public education. This is due, in large part, to the activism of the very influential teachers' unions, parent-teacher associations, and other groups that use these indicators to press for greater resources for schools. In the end, the numbers have to be interpreted by groups and advanced on the agenda in order to induce mass and policy maker attention.

Focusing events are somewhat different. Focusing events are sudden, relatively rare events that spark intense media and public attention because of their sheer magnitude or, sometimes, because of the harm they reveal (Birkland 1997). Focusing events thus attract attention to issues that may have been relatively dormant. Examples of focusing events include terrorist attacks (September 11, 2001 was, certainly, a focusing event), airplane accidents, industrial accidents such as factory fires or oil spills, large protest rallies or marches, scandals in government, and everyday events that gain attention because of some special feature of the event. Two examples of the latter are the alleged beating of motorist Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police Department in the early 1990s and O. J. Simpson's murder trial in 1995; the Rodney King incident was noteworthy because, unlike most such incidents, the event was caught on videotape, while the Simpson trial was noteworthy because of the fame of the defendant.

Focusing events can lead groups, government leaders, policy entrepreneurs, the news media, or members of the public to pay attention to new problems or pay greater attention to existing but dormant (in terms of their standing on the agenda) problems, and, potentially, can lead to a search for solutions in the wake of perceived policy failure.

The fact that focusing events occur with little or no warning makes such events important opportunities for mobilization for groups that find their issues hard to advance on the agenda during normal times. Problems characterized by indicators of a problem will more gradually wax and wane on the agenda, and their movement on or off the agenda may be promoted or resisted by constant group competition. Sudden events, on the other hand, are associated with spikes of intense interest and agenda activity. Interest groups—often relatively powerful groups that seek to keep issues off the agenda—often find it difficult to keep major events off the news and institutional agendas. Groups that seek to advance an issue on the agenda can take advantage of such events to attract greater attention to the problem.

In many cases, the public and the most informed members of the policy community learn of a potential focusing event virtually simultaneously. These events can very rapidly alter mass and elite consciousness of a social problem. I say “virtually” because the most active members of a policy community may learn of an event some hours before the general public, because they have a more direct stake in the event, the response to it, and its outcome.

MEASURING AGENDA STATUS OF ISSUES

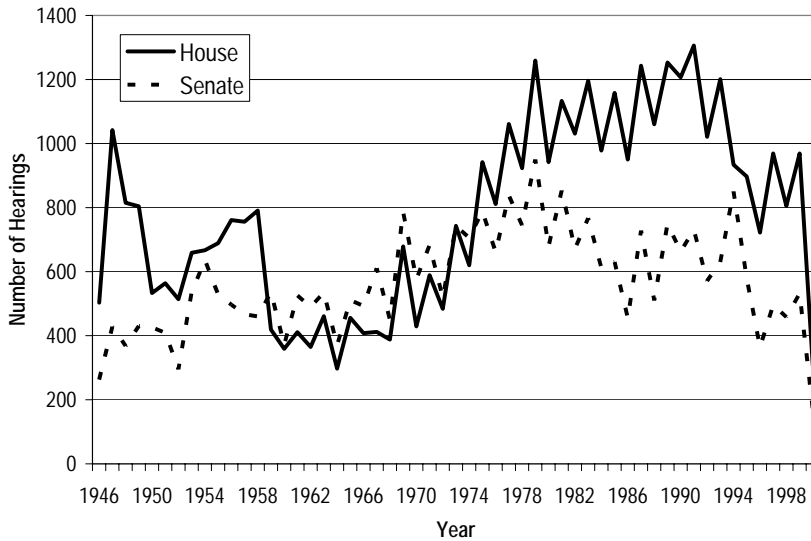
In a volume on policy analysis it is important to understand how we analyze the status of issues on the agenda. We can do so both qualitatively and quantitatively, and the way we approach this analysis is clearly influenced by the nature of the questions we ask. The two basic categories of questions are What is on the agenda? and What is the agenda status? of any particular issue.

It is probably easiest to measure issues on the national institutional agenda, because the Congress and executive branch have historically kept remarkably good records, and because these records have been put into databases that are reasonably easily searched. Thus, a researcher can use the Congressional Information Service (CIS) index to track the substance of Congressional hearings, the Library of Congress's THOMAS database to track legislation or debate in the *Congressional Record* and various legal research tools to review and track rulemaking in the *Federal Register*. The *Congressional Quarterly* also provides a good source of information about the important issues on the federal agenda. While information on the federal agenda is relatively easy to obtain, there is so much of it that one can easily become lost in a sea of potential data. It is important that the researcher have a well thought out coding scheme for placing data into appropriate subject matter categories while avoiding the temptation to split the difference by putting items—congressional testimony, for example, or entries in the *Congressional Record*—into several categories.

Fortunately, a great deal of the work of involved in gathering and categorizing important agenda information has been achieved under the auspices of the Policy Agendas Project at the Center for American Politics and Public Policy at the University of Washington (<http://www.policyagendas.org/>) (see also Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson 2002). This project is the outgrowth of Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones's efforts to understand the dynamics of agenda setting over many years. The project has collected data on the federal budget, *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* (herein after *CQ Almanac*) stories, congressional hearings from 1946 to 2000, executive orders from 1945 to 2001, front page stories in the *New York Times*, the Gallup Poll's "most important problem" question (which reflects public opinion on the agenda status of key issues), and public laws from 1948–1998. The goal of this project is to provide a base of agenda data, using a comparable coding scheme over time and between the different agendas or "arenas," that researchers can use to study agenda setting. The founders of this effort intended for these databases to be extended, supplemented, and studied in greater depth by researchers. At least two workshops on the use of these data have been held at the annual meeting of the American Political Science association, and the data set was the foundation of the studies published in Baumgartner and Jones's volume *Policy Dynamics* (2002).

The key value of the Agendas Project data is the ability to show the change in the composition of the United States national agenda over time. Because the data set is comprehensive and because it uses a consistent coding scheme, we can see the ebb and flow of issues, and we can understand the expansion and contraction of the agenda as a whole, suggesting that the carrying capacity of the agenda can change with changes in the nature of the institution, including, as Talbert and Potoski note, when "legislative institutions are adapted to improve information processing" (2002, 190) Such improvements can include increases in the numbers of committee, increases in staff support to the members of the legislature, improvements in information processing and retrieval systems, devoting more time to legislative business, among other things.

We can see the results of this increase in carrying capacity, as well as the individual will of the legislative branch to attack more issues, if we plot the number of congressional hearings held each year, a figure easily calculated from the Agenda Project's data, and plotted in Figure 5.2. Clearly, the House and Senate's agendas grew during the 1960s; I will leave it to other analysts to decide whether this increase in the agenda was a response to executive initiative, perceived public demand for legislation, legislators' motivations to hold more hearings, or some combination of these elements.



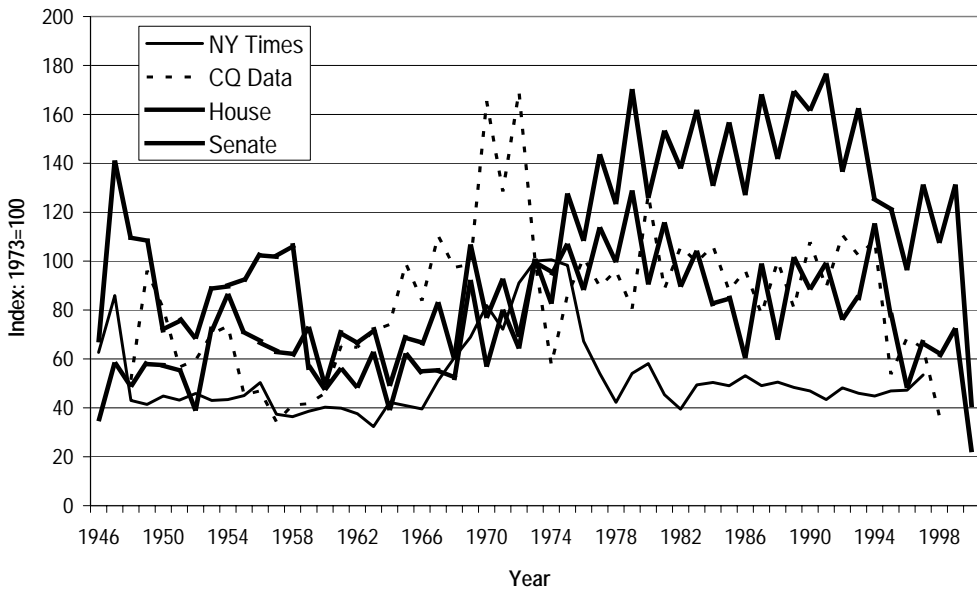
Source: Agendas Project, www.policyagendas.org

FIGURE 5.2 House and Senate Agendas, 1947–2000.

What is interesting about the data is the degree to which both agendas show a saw tooth pattern, reflecting the much greater volume of hearings in odd-numbered, non-election years. Interestingly, the Senate and House held roughly the same number of hearings in 1973, but the growth in the House's hearing agenda continued and then remained much larger than the Senate's agenda well into the early 1990s, while the size of the Senate's agenda remained relatively static. This growth in the House's agenda is likely the result of the proliferation of House subcommittees that followed the post-1974 legislative reforms, coupled with rules changes that allowed subcommittees to act independently of the committee chairs. Many of these newly empowered subcommittees were chaired by activist members who used the rules changes to react to the suppression of the agenda by House leadership and by the executive branch until the early 1990s. The agenda then shrinks in both the House and Senate as the Republican Party becomes ascendant and as party discipline restricts the size of the agenda. While it is clear that the size and composition of the agenda is in many ways out of the control of legislators (Walker 1977), these data suggest that legislators can control the overall size of the agenda through the promotion and management of institutional structures, as Talbert and Potoski note.

Much as the legislative agenda is elastic, so is the news media agenda, and the agenda as measured by the volume of stories in the *CQ Almanac*. The raw number of news stories in the *New York Times* might be somewhat related to the size of the congressional agenda, in large part because the *Times* is considered (and considers itself) the national newspaper of record; presumably, weighty matters of state handled in the Congress would be reflected in the *Times*. The *CQ Almanac*, on the other hand, occupies an intermediate position between the news media and the Congress; the *CQ Almanac* is very closely tied to congressional activity. The relative size of the *Times*, *CQ Almanac*, and the House and Senate agendas are shown in Figure 5.3. Because we want to compare relative sizes, the agendas are indexed so that all four agendas in 1973 equal 100; 1973 was chosen because it is the middle year in the data and because it is the year in which the Senate and House hearings volumes were nearly equal.

Clearly, the agenda, as represented by the *CQ Almanac* and the *Times*, is reasonably elastic. The major growth period for the *Times* came in the late 1960s, likely a result of the political turmoil



Source: Agendas Project, www.policyagendas.org

FIGURE 5.3 Relative Size of Key Agendas, 1947–2000.

surrounding the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, and peaked in 1974 with the Watergate scandal. The *CQ Almanac* shows the saw tooth trend evident in the hearings data, but tends to peak during election years; its peaks in the early 1970s appear to be related to the institutional changes in the Congress, coupled with the growing confrontation between the executive and legislative that preceded the Watergate period.

This discussion is merely suggestive, and the reasons for the dynamics of the agenda are deserving of further analysis. But we do know that the agenda is fluid, and that the data available to the analyst are rich, varied, and lead to immensely useful insights. Indeed, a deeper analysis of the relative position of issues on the agenda is beyond the scope of this chapter, but one can, for example, use the agendas data to show the relative decline of defense as an agenda item in the 1970s as other issues gained prominence. The relative position of issues on the agenda is an important feature of the policy history and of the political development of the United States, and is of interest to policy analysts and historians alike.

CONCLUSION

The study of agenda setting is a particularly fruitful way to begin to understand how groups, power, and the agenda interact to set the boundaries of political policy debate. Agenda setting, like all other stages of the policy process, does not occur in a vacuum. The likelihood that an issue will rise on the agenda is a function of the issue itself, the actors that get involved, institutional relationships, and, often, random social and political factors that can be explained but cannot be replicated or predicted. But theories of agenda setting, coupled with better and more readily available data, are enabling researchers to understand why and under what circumstances policy change is likely to occur.

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6 Policy Formulation: Design and Tools

Mara S. Sidney

In a traditional stages model of the public policy process, policy formulation is part of the pre-decision phase of policy making. It involves identifying and/or crafting a set of policy alternatives to address a problem, and narrowing that set of solutions in preparation for the final policy decision. According to Cochran and Malone, policy formulation takes up the “what” questions: “What is the plan for dealing with the problem? What are the goals and priorities? What options are available to achieve those goals? What are the costs and benefits of each of the options? What externalities, positive or negative, are associated with each alternative?” (1999, 46). This approach to policy formulation, embedded in a stages model of the policy process, assumes that participants in the policy process already have recognized and defined a policy problem, and moved it onto the policy agenda. Formulating the set of alternatives thus involves identifying a range of broad approaches to a problem, and then identifying and designing the specific sets of policy tools that constitute each approach. It involves drafting the legislative or regulatory language for each alternative—that is, describing the tools (e.g., sanctions, grants, prohibitions, rights, and the like) and articulating to whom or to what they will apply, and when they will take effect. Selecting from among these a smaller set of possible solutions from which decision makers actually will choose involves applying some set of criteria to the alternatives, for example judging their feasibility, political acceptability, costs, benefits, and such.

In general, we expect fewer participants to be involved in policy formulation than were involved in the agenda-setting process, and we expect more of the work to take place out of the public eye. Standard policy texts describe formulation as a back-room function. As Dye puts it, policy formulation takes place in government bureaucracies, in interest group offices, in legislative committee rooms, in meetings of special commissions, in think tanks—with details often formulated by staff (2002, 40–41). In other words, policy formulation often is the realm of the experts, the “hidden participants” of Kingdon’s policy stream (1995), the technocrats or knowledge elites of Fischer’s democracy at risk (2000).

Policy formulation clearly is a critical phase of the policy process. Certainly designing the alternatives that decision makers will consider directly influences the ultimate policy choice. This process also both expresses and allocates power among social, political, and economic interests. As Schattschneider reminds us, “. . . the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power” (1960, 68). Contemporary interest in policy formulation can be traced to Dahl and Lindblom who urged scholars in 1953 to take up the study of public policies rather than to continue to focus on ideologies as the critical aspects of political systems. They argued that broad debates about the merits of capitalism versus socialism were less important to the well being of society than was careful consideration of the myriad “techniques” that might be used to regulate the economy and to advance particular social values. In part they suggest that the details matter—that is, capitalism or socialism may be advanced through any number of specific public policies, and the selection among them will have important consequences that scholars should consider.

Scholarship on policy formulation takes up a variety of issues. It examines the factors that influence how actors craft alternatives, it prescribes means for such crafting, it examines how and why particular policy alternatives remain on or fall off of the decision agenda. Research considers particular policy tools and trends in their use, as well as their underlying assumptions about problems and groups. As scholars answer such questions, they consider the array of interests involved and the balance of power held by participants, the dominant ideas and values of these participants, the institutional structure of the alternative-setting process, more broadly the historical, political, social, and economic context. The best work on policy formulation and policy tools brings together the empirical and normative. That is, it sets out trends and explains relationships while also proposing normative criteria for evaluating the processes and the tools, and considering their implications for a democratic society.

APPROACHES TO POLICY FORMULATION

The literature on policy design or formulation is somewhat disconnected. Policy formulation is an explicit object of inquiry in studies of policy design and policy tools. But attention to policy formulation also is embedded in work on subsystems, advocacy coalitions, networks, and policy communities (see Weible and Sabatier; Miller and Demir; Raab and Kenis, this volume). Even classic works on agenda-setting take up aspects of policy formulation (e.g., Kingdon 1995; Birkland, this volume). These various frameworks and theories of policy change consider the coalitions of actors taking part in (or being excluded from) the policy making process. Identifying these actors, and understanding their beliefs and motivations, their judgments of feasibility, and their perceptions of the political context, goes a long way toward explaining the public policies that take shape (Howlett and Ramesh 1995).

POLICY DESIGN

The most recent wave of literature explicitly focused on policy formulation uses the concept of policy design. Work on policy design emerged in response to implementation studies of the 1970s that held bureaucratic systems responsible for policy failure. Policy design theorists argued that scholars should look further back in the causal chain to understand why policies succeed or fail, because the original policy formulation processes, and the policy designs themselves, significantly contribute to implementation outcomes. Undergirding many of these works is an assumption of bounded rationality (Simon 1985). That is, limits to human cognition and attention, and limits to our knowledge about the social world inevitably lead policy makers to focus on some aspects of a problem at the expense of others, and to compare only a partial selection of possible solutions (see Andrews, this volume). Research on policy formulation thus seeks to understand the context in which the decision makers act and to identify the selectivity in attention that occurs. Often the aim is to bring awareness of the “boundaries” of rationality to the design process in order to expand the search for solutions, in hopes of improving the policies that result.

Under the rubric of policy design, some scholars have written from the perspective of professional policy analysts, exploring how notions of policy design can improve the practice of policy analysis and the recommendations that analysts make. Their purpose is an applied one—they hope to improve the process of designing policy alternatives. They propose that improving the search for, and generation of, policy alternatives will lead to more effective and successful policies. Essentially, these scholars seek to reduce the randomness of policy formulation (e.g., as portrayed in the garbage can model) by bringing awareness to, and then consciously structuring, the process.

For example, Alexander recommends a “deliberate design stage” in which policy makers search for policy alternatives (1982). Typically, designing policy involves some degree of creativity, or extra-rational element, in addition to rational processes of search and discovery, but Alexander argues that “a conscious concern with the systematic design of policy alternatives can undoubtedly effect a significant improvement in decisions and outcomes” (*ibid.*, 289). Linder and Peters elaborate by proposing a framework that policy analysts can use to generate and compare alternative solutions, resulting in a less random process of policy design (1985). They echo a call made by many design theorists for analysts to suspend judgment on alternatives until they have generated the most comprehensive possible set. An effective framework to guide this process would enable analysis, comparison, and matching of the characteristics of problems, goals, and instruments.

Weimer agrees that consulting broad lists of policy instruments can systematize policy formulation, but warns that developing truly innovative solutions involves crafting designs that fit specific substantive, organizational, and political contexts (1992). He urges policy designers to think in terms of institution-building. That is, policies as institutions shape behavior and perceptions, so policies can be structured in such a way as to bring about desired changes in problematic conditions, but also the political coalitions to support them. Bobrow and Dryzek (1987) also advocate contextual designs that explicitly incorporate values, and urge policy analysts to draw from a range of perspectives on policy analysis, from welfare economics, public choice, and structural approaches to political philosophy when searching for alternatives. They suggest that analysts take care to include in a list of alternatives policy designs that offer no intervention, the status quo, and solutions vastly different from current practice. Fischer (2000) and Rixecker (1994) suggest that innovation and creativity will emerge from attention to the voices that contribute to the policy dialogue. Rixecker urges conscious inclusion of marginalized populations in the design process. Fischer examines the epistemology that leads citizens to defer to experts on policy matters, arguing that local contextual knowledge has an important role to play both in improving policy solutions and in advancing democracy.

Scholars who approach policy design from an academic research perspective typically seek to develop a framework that can improve our understanding, analysis, and evaluation of policy processes and their consequences. Many of these works aim to identify aspects of policy making contexts that shape policy design. They draw on institutional theories that suggest laws, constitutions, and the organization of the political process channel political behavior and choices. That is, institutions shape actors’ preferences and strategies by recognizing the legitimacy of certain claims over others, and by offering particular sorts of opportunities for voicing complaints (Immergut 1998). Some focus on discourse and dominant ideas. Politics consists of competing efforts to make meaning as much as to win votes. Indeed, the pursuit and exercise of power includes constructing images and stories, and deploying symbols (Fischer and Forester 1993; Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Schneider and Ingram 1997, 2005; Stone 2001; Yanow 1995). Ideas about feasibility, dominant judicial interpretations, ideas about groups affected by the policy, all play a role in shaping the policy alternatives that emerge.

May proposes that political environments vary in terms of the level of public attention focused upon them, having important consequences for the policy design process. The degree to which organized interests have developed ideas about an issue will entail particular dynamics and challenges in the policy design process. For instance, on some issues, many interest groups will take an active part in defining the problem and proposing alternatives; they will offer an array of opposing ideas. The design challenge in such a scenario is to find solutions that will be acceptable to participants but also will achieve desired outcomes: “A dilemma arises when policy proposals that balance the competing interests do not necessarily lead to optimal outcomes” (1991, 197). On the other hand, on some issues, few groups pay attention and discussions about solutions occur far from the public eye. The dilemmas here involve concerns about democratic process, but also policy designers may have trouble capturing the attention of decision makers. Here the challenge is sometimes to mobilize interest, to mobilize publics to care about, and eventually to comply with, policies.

Ingraham considers environment in terms of institutional setting, proposing that the level of design interacts with the locus of design to shape the policy prescription (1987). She contrasts the legislative setting with the bureaucratic setting to illustrate how different institutions carry particular kinds of expertise and decision processes to policy design. For example, legislative settings often require compromise among diverse opinions, which may lead to the broadening or blurring of a policy's purpose and content. On the other hand, bureaucratic settings enable technical and scientific expertise to be brought to bear on the design process, but at the expense of democratic legitimacy.

In addition to the distinction between applied and traditional scholarly work, researchers diverge in their conceptions of the activity of formulating or designing policy. Some see it as a technical endeavor, leading them to characterize policies as "more" or "less" designed, as "well" or "poorly" designed (e.g., Ingraham 1987; Linder and Peters 1985). For example, these authors would describe a policy as well-designed if a careful analysis of means-end relationships had been conducted prior to its adoption (Ingraham 1987). For others, designing policy does not by definition include certain kinds of analytic tasks. These scholars tend to understand policy design as a political process preceding every policy choice (Bobrow and Dryzek 1987; Kingdon 1995; Schneider and Ingram 1997; Stone 2001). Rather than hoping for a rational policy design to emerge, they expect designs to lack coherence or consistency as a result of the contested process that produces them.

APPROACHES TO POLICY TOOLS

Over time, a subset of policy literature has focused explicitly on policy tools. In part, these studies catalog the generic types of tools that might be used in a policy design. Additionally, this body of work charts the trends in usage of particular policy tools across time and space. This research seeks to discern the range of instruments, detached from their association with particular policy programs, both to broaden the alternatives that policy designers consider, and to look for patterns in the dynamics and politics of program operation that arise across policy areas where similar tools are used (Salamon 1989, 2002). It also often looks to theorize about the assumptions and implications of various policy tools.

Bardach offers the appendix "Things Governments Do" in his eight-step framework of policy analysis, describing taxes, regulation, grants, services, budgets, information, rights, and other policy tools (2005). For each tool, he suggests why and how it might be used, and what some of the possible pitfalls could be, aiming to stimulate creativity in crafting policy. Hood analyzes a range of government tools in significantly more detail (1986) with the ultimate aim of making sense of government complexity, generating ideas for policy design and enabling comparisons across governments (115). Recent literature on policy tools documents trends away from direct provision of government services and toward measures that embed government officials in complex collaborative relationships with other levels of government, private-sector actors, and non-government organizations. These arrangements grant government parties much greater discretion than the close supervision and regulation of the past (Salamon 2002). These indirect measures include contracting, grants, vouchers, tax expenditures, loan guarantees, government-sponsored enterprises and regulations, among others; many do not appear on government budgets, which Salamon suggests helps to explain their popularity (*ibid.*, 5).

Like some of the work on policy design, research on policy tools highlights the political consequences of particular tools, as well as their underlying assumptions about problems, people, and behavior. Salamon characterizes the choice of tools as political as well as operational: "What is at stake in these battles is not simply the most efficient way to solve a particular public problem, but also the relative influence that various affected interests will have in shaping the program's

postenactment evolution” (11). Additionally, tools require distinctive sets of management skills and knowledge, thus the choice of tools ultimately influences the nature of public management. Literature on tools offers various dimensions according to which tools may be compared, such as directness, visibility, automaticity, and coerciveness, matching these with likely impacts (such as equity, efficiency, political support, manageability) (ibid.). Tools also carry with them particular assumptions about cause and about behavioral motivations. For example, inducements that offer payoffs to encourage behavior assume “that individuals respond to positive incentives and that most will choose higher-valued alternatives” (Schneider and Ingram 1990, 515). Capacity tools that provide information or training assume that barriers to desired behavior consist of lack of resources rather than incentives (ibid., 517).

POLICY DESIGN BEYOND THE STAGES MODEL

The most recent advance in the study of policy formulation and policy tools is Schneider and Ingram’s policy design framework (1997). In their book, *Policy Design for Democracy*, the authors present a framework that pushes past a simple stages model by conceptualizing an iterative process. It brings the discrete stages of the policy process into a single model, and emphasizes the connections between problem definition, agenda setting, and policy design on the one hand, policy design, implementation and impact on society on the other. It offers some predictions about the types of policy designs that will emerge from different types of political processes, and it explicitly incorporates normative analysis by considering the impact of policy designs on target groups and on democratic practice.

Schneider and Ingram’s framework answers calls for integrative approaches to policy research. Lasswell and other policy scientists consistently emphasized the importance of integrative approaches to policy scholarship, and political scientists also have begun to acknowledge the limitations of analysis that focuses exclusively on interests, ideas, or institutions. The policy design perspective offers a framework to guide empirical research that integrates these three dimensions: Ideas and interests interact within an institutional setting to produce a policy design. This policy design then becomes an institution in its own right, structuring the future interaction of ideas and interests. While complex, this model can be used to guide empirical analysis; and studies can test and refine Schneider and Ingram’s predictions about policy designs and their impact.

With their framework, Schneider and Ingram also incorporate critical approaches to policy studies that explore how government and policy create and maintain “systems of privilege, domination, and quiescence among those who are the most oppressed” (1997, 53). They theorize that policy designs reflect efforts to advance certain values and interests, that they reflect dominant social constructions of knowledge and groups of people, and existing power relations. Moreover, policy designs influence not merely policy implementation, but also political mobilization and the nature of democracy. Schneider and Ingram elevate the status and importance of public policies beyond bundles of technical instruments that may or may not solve contemporary problems; they call public policies “the principal tools in securing the democratic promise for all people” (Ingram and Schneider 2005, 2). Viewing policies in this way calls for analysis that considers how effectively policies mitigate social problems, but also the degree to which they advance democratic citizenship—that is, inspire political participation and remedy social division.

Schneider and Ingram are particularly concerned about the impacts of policy designs that result from “degenerative” political processes (see also Schneider and Ingram, this volume). During such processes, political actors sort target populations into “deserving” and “undeserving” groups as justification for channeling benefits or punishments to them. While political gain can be achieved this way, they argue that policies formulated based upon such arguments undermine democracy and hinder problem solving. The language and the resource allocation tend to stigmatize disadvantaged

groups, reinforce stereotypes, and send the message—to group members and to the broader public—that government does not value them.

POLICY DESIGNS

Central to the policy design perspective is the notion that every public policy contains a design—a framework of ideas and instruments—to be identified and analyzed. Rather than a “random and chaotic product of a political process,” policies have underlying patterns and logics (Schneider and Ingram 1997, chap. 3). This framework posits policy designs as institutional structures consisting of identifiable elements: goals, target groups, agents, an implementation structure, tools, rules, rationales, and assumptions. Policy designs thus include tools, but this approach also pushes scholars to look for the explicit or implicit goals and assumptions that constitute part of the package.

POLICY FORMULATION: CONTEXT AND AGENCY

To understand and explain why a policy has a particular design, one must examine the process leading to its selection. Schneider and Ingram’s framework draws on institutional and ideational theories, the stages model, and theories of decision making, such as bounded rationality. Policy making is seen to occur in a specific context, marked by distinctive institutions and ideas. Institutional arenas, whether Congress, the courts, the executive branch, and the like, have rules, norms, and procedures that affect actors’ choices and strategies. Additionally, policy making takes place at a particular moment in time, marked by particular dominant ideas related to the policy issue, to affected groups, to the proper role of government, etc. These ideas will influence actors’ arguments in favor of particular solutions, and their perceptions and preferences when they take specific policy decisions.

Analysis of a particular context might lead to broad predictions about the policy design that will emerge from it. But because designs have so many “working parts” (goals, problem definitions, target groups, tools, agents, and such), such analysis cannot specify in advance the particular package of dimensions that actors will build at a particular point in time. Prediction also is complicated by the human dimension of policy making. Actors might reimagine a constraining context, reframe the structure of opportunities before them, as they attempt to create policy solutions to pressing problems. In considering agency—leadership, creativity, debate, and coalition-building—Schneider and Ingram essentially turn to the insights of agenda-setting and problem-definition literature, which characterize policy making as interested actors struggling over ideas (Edelman 1988; Fischer and Forester 1993; Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Stone 1989). Adding attention to the problem definitions that these actors hold offers a richer understanding of what political support and “interest” mean in a given policy process. Beyond examining who participates, we can consider whether actors succeed in expanding or restricting such participation, and how this mobilization affects the policy choice (Cobb and Elder 1972; Schattschneider 1960).

CONSEQUENCES OF PUBLIC POLICY

Here, Schneider and Ingram take up the original impetus for policy design research—to better understand implementation. They suggest that policy designs act as institutional engines of change, and analysis can trace how their dimensions influence political action. Policy implementation distributes benefits to some groups, while imposing burdens on others. In doing so, designs establish incentives for some groups to participate in public life, and offer them resources for doing so. Other groups receive negative messages from policies. For example, if benefits are distributed in

a stigmatizing way, individuals may be intimidated by government, withdraw from public life, or feel alienated from it (Soss 1999).

Schneider and Ingram's framework builds on arguments about policy feedback. These suggest a number of ways through which policies shape the course of future politics. Groups receiving benefits from government programs are likely to organize to maintain and expand them. Mobilization is facilitated when policies provide resources to interest groups such as funding, access to decision makers, and information (Pierson 1994, 39–46). Consequently, target groups whose understanding of the problem differs or who lack the expertise needed to use a policy's administrative procedures, will not receive the same degree of support or legitimacy from the policy; they will have greater barriers to overcome in order to achieve their goals. The selection of a particular policy design also imposes lock-in effects. Once a choice is taken, the cost of adopting alternative solutions to the problem increase. The significance of the policy formulation process is that much greater because the barriers to change—such as investments in its programs and commitments to its ideas—cumulate over time.

Empirical applications of the policy design framework are beginning to accumulate, and to extend and refine the perspective itself (e.g., Schneider and Ingram 2005). Sidney tracks the development, designs, and impact of two policies intended to fight housing discrimination (2003). She shows how the social construction of target groups, and the causal stories that legislators told as they advocated for and revised policy alternatives, became embedded into the resulting policy choices, constraining the impact on the problem, and importantly shaping the trajectories of implementing agents. Her work situates the policy design perspective within the context of federalism and posits nonprofit organizations as important mediating agents between policy design and target group members.

Soss traces the impact of several means-tested welfare policy designs on recipients' attitudes toward government and disposition toward participation. Comparing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Social Security disability insurance (SSDI), he shows that programs designs have significant consequences for client perceptions, with AFDC clients likely to develop negative views of government and to avoid speaking up, while SSDI recipients think of government as helpful and interested in their views (2005). In the process, he raises questions about the causal claims that are possible in this framework, since individuals simultaneously belong to many target groups, thus receiving cues from multiple policy designs at once.

CRITIQUE AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Critiques of literature on policy formulation and policy tools may focus on the limitations of the stages model itself. That is, the specification of policy alternatives and the selection of policy tools does not follow neatly from the agenda setting process nor lead neatly into implementation. Rather, selection of alternatives might occur prior to or during the agenda setting process, and implementation often involves reformulation of policy design as well. Thus to the extent that studies offer recommendations for generating alternatives as if problem framing has already occurred, and as if the resulting design will simply be passed on to the implementers, they are flawed at their root. On the other hand, if researchers conceive of policy formulation as a function rather than as a stage that begins and ends in a certain sequence of stages, they are likely to search the empirical record of particular policy arenas more broadly. With their integrative framework that places policy designs at its center, Schneider and Ingram depart from the stages model and, with a growing community of scholars, offer a theory of public policy that directly addresses the question of who gets what, when, and how from government (Schneider and Ingram 2005). Critics charge that it lacks a clear mechanism of policy change that can be tested across cases (deLeon 2005).

The judiciary is the governmental sphere most absent from scholarship on public policy analysis.

Although many researchers study the court's role in public policy making and implementation, this body of work is largely disconnected from theoretical work on the policy process generally, and policy formulation in particular. In part, the traditional understanding of courts as interpreting rather than making law may serve as a barrier, although this conventional wisdom is increasingly challenged (e.g., Miller and Barnes 2004). Many scholars argue that the work of the courts by nature constitutes policy making (e.g., Van Horn, Baumer, and Gormley Jr., chap. 7). Certainly courts represent a distinctive institutional setting, whose actors, procedures, language, and processes of reasoning differ from those that prevail in legislatures and bureaucracies. Yet we can conceptualize court cases as processes of policy formulation, with plaintiffs, defendants, and amici as participants proposing alternatives, and judges as the decision makers. Courts thus offer a potentially fruitful comparative case for studies of the impact of institutions on policy formulation. In the U.S. context at least, many policy issues eventually reach the court system.

Attention to the nonprofit sector's role in policy formulation and tools has steadily increased. Recent work on policy instruments emphasizes that "non-profitization" constitutes a policy tool—and one that is more commonly used across policy arenas, from education (e.g., charter schools) to welfare to housing among others. But non-government organizations (NGOs) also are policy makers in their own right. Research about the kinds of policy designs that NGOs formulate is beginning to emerge, building on a longstanding research tradition about the third sector (e.g., Boris 1999; Smith and Lipsky 1993). Although most extant studies of policy formulation presume a legislative or executive-branch site of activity, recent work examines NGOs as policy designers.

Neighborhood organizations, for example, have quite different motivations and incentives when designing policy than do legislators, so theories of policy design that presume a legislative context may not be helpful in understanding policy making at this small, and extra-governmental, scale (Camou 2005). In Baltimore's poor neighborhoods, organizations targeted their policies to the most needy, framing individuals as redeemable, in contrast to Schneider and Ingram's expectations that policy makers eschew directing benefits to the most marginalized groups. In cities across the country, community-based organizations have designed numerous innovative policies and successfully implemented them (Swartz 2003). More attention to policy formulation outside the bureaucracy, and below the national level can broaden our theories and substantive knowledge of this important function. Such work would build on research about national policy that increasingly finds policy formulation to occur outside of government offices—that is, in think tanks and within the loose networks of advocacy and interest groups that together with government officials make up policy communities (see Miller and Demir, and Stone, this volume).

Research on policy formulation and policy tools draws on, overlaps with, and contributes to research on agenda setting, problem definition, implementation, and policy coalitions, among others. Its singularity emerges in its focus on the micro-level of public policies—that is the specific policy alternatives that are considered, how they differ in terms of policy tools, and how what may seem on the surface, or at a macro-level, to be small differences actually have significant consequences for problem-solving, and for the allocation and exercise of power. Attention to policy design essentially reminds us that democracy is in the details.

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7 Implementing Public Policy

Helga Pülzl and Oliver Treib

1 INTRODUCTION

Implementation studies are to be found at the intersection of public administration, organizational theory, public management research, and political science studies (Schofield and Sausman 2004, 235). In the broadest sense, they can be characterized as studies of policy change (Jenkins 1978, 203).

Goggin and his colleagues (1990) identified three generations of implementation research. Implementation studies emerged in the 1970s within the United States, as a reaction to growing concerns over the effectiveness of wide-ranging reform programs. Until the end of the 1960s, it had been taken for granted that political mandates were clear, and administrators were thought to implement policies according to the intentions of decision makers (Hill and Hupe 2002, 42). The process of “translating policy into action” (Barrett 2004, 251) attracted more attention, as policies seemed to lag behind policy expectations. The first generation of implementation studies, which dominated much of the 1970s, was characterized by a pessimistic undertone. This pessimism was fuelled by a number of case studies that represented shining examples of implementation failure. The studies of Derthick (1972), Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), and Bardach (1977) are the most popular. Pressman and Wildavsky’s work (1973) had a decisive impact on the development of implementation research, as it helped to stimulate a growing body of literature. This does not mean, however, that no implementation studies were carried out before, as Hargrove (1975) suggested when writing about the discovery of a “missing link” in studying the policy process. Hill and Hupe (2002, 18–28) point out that implementation research was conducted under different headings before the 1970s. Nevertheless, the most noteworthy achievement of the first generation of implementation researchers was to raise awareness of the issue in the wider scholarly community and in the general public.

While theory building was not at the heart of the first generation of implementation studies, the second generation began to put forward a whole range of theoretical frameworks and hypotheses. This period was marked by debates between what was later dubbed the top-down and bottom-up approaches to implementation research. The top-down school, represented for example by scholars like Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) or Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983), conceived of implementation as the hierarchical execution of centrally-defined policy intentions. Scholars belonging to the bottom-up camp, such as Lipsky (1971, 1980), Ingram (1977), Elmore (1980), or Hjern and Hull (1982) instead emphasized that implementation consisted of the everyday problem-solving strategies of “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980).

The third generation of implementation research tried to bridge the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches by incorporating the insights of both camps into their theoretical models. At the same time, the self-proclaimed goal of third-generation research was “to be more *scientific* than the previous two in its approach to the study of implementation” (Goggin et al. 1990, 18, emphasis in original). Third-generation scholars thus lay much emphasis on specifying clear hypotheses,

finding proper operationalizations and producing adequate empirical observations to test these hypotheses. However, as observers like deLeon (1999, 318) and O'Toole (2000, 268) note, only a few studies have so far followed this path.

While the largest part of implementation research stemmed from the United States, the second generation was also especially marked by important theoretical contributions from European authors like Barrett, Hanf, Windhoff-Héritier, Hjern, Mayntz, or Scharpf. Europe was also the origin of a new strand of literature that focused on the issue of implementation in the context of European integration studies.

It is the aim of this chapter to summarize the theoretical lessons to be drawn from the wealth of literature produced by more than thirty years of implementation research. The chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses three different analytical approaches in traditional implementation theory in more detail: top-down models, bottom-up critiques, and hybrid theories that try to combine elements of the two other strands of literature. We explicate the theoretical underpinnings and discuss the pros and cons of the respective approaches. Section 3 then provides an overview of more recent theoretical approaches to implementation, all of which depart from central underpinnings of traditional implementation studies. In particular, we address insights gained from the study of implementation processes in the context of the European Union and we discuss the interpretative approach to implementation, which follows an alternative ontological path. Section 4 focuses on the main insights gained from more than thirty years of implementation research for a proper understanding of implementation processes. Moreover, it discusses the contributions of implementation analysis to the wider field of policy analysis and political science. Finally, Section 5 identifies a number of persistent weaknesses of implementation analysis and concludes by suggesting possible directions of future research to overcome these weaknesses in the years to come.

2 TOP-DOWN, BOTTOM-UP, AND HYBRID THEORIES OF IMPLEMENTATION

The three generations of implementation research presented earlier can be subdivided into three distinct theoretical approaches to the study of implementation:

1. Top-down models put their main emphasis on the ability of decision makers' to produce unequivocal policy objectives and on controlling the implementation stage.
2. Bottom-up critiques view local bureaucrats as the main actors in policy delivery and conceive of implementation as negotiation processes within networks of implementers.
3. Hybrid theories try to overcome the divide between the other two approaches by incorporating elements of top-down, bottom-up and other theoretical models.

The following discussion will briefly outline the theoretical underpinnings of these approaches. It is only possible to present some of the key contributions within the confines of this chapter (see Figure 7.1).

The selection of presented contributions is based on the suggestions of leading scholars (Hill and Hupe 2002; deLeon 1999, 2001; Parsons 1995; Sabatier 1986a) as well as on our own views on the relative importance of the studies discussed.

2.1 TOP-DOWN THEORIES

Top-down theories started from the assumption that policy implementation starts with a decision made by central government. Parsons (1995, 463) points out that these studies were based on a

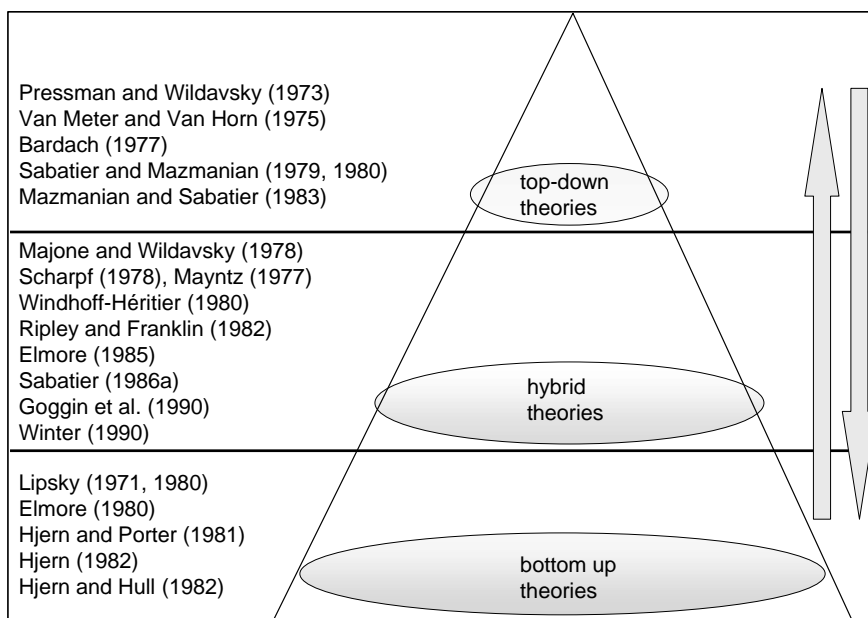


FIGURE 7.1 Top-down, bottom-up, and hybrid theories: key contributions.

“blackbox model” of the policy process inspired by systems analysis. They assumed a direct causal link between policies and observed outcomes and tended to disregard the impact of implementers on policy delivery. Top-downers essentially followed a prescriptive approach that interpreted policy as input and implementation as output factors. Due to their emphasis on decisions of central policy makers, deLeon (2001, 2) describes top-down approaches as a “governing elite phenomenon”. The following authors are classical top-down scholars: Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), Bardach (1977), as well as Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, 1980, see also Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983).

Pressman and Wildavsky’s original work followed a rational model approach. They started from the assumption that policy objectives are set out by central policy makers. In this view, implementation research was left with the task of analyzing the difficulties in achieving these objectives. Hence, they saw implementation as an “interaction between the setting of goals and actions geared to achieve them” (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973, xv). The authors underlined the linear relationship between agreed policy goals and their implementation. Implementation therefore implied the establishment of adequate bureaucratic procedures to ensure that policies are executed as accurately as possible. To this end, implementing agencies should have sufficient resources at their disposal, and there needs to be a system of clear responsibilities and hierarchical control to supervise the actions of implementers. Pressman and Wildavsky’s book, a study of the implementation of a federal program of economic development in Oakland, California, highlighted the importance of the number of agencies involved in policy delivery. They argued that effective implementation becomes increasingly difficult, if a program has to pass through a multitude of “clearance points.” As most implementation settings, especially in the United States, are of a multi-actor type, the thrust of their analysis was rather skeptical as to whether implementation could work at all.

American scholars Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) offered a more elaborate theoretical model. Their starting point, however, was very similar to the one of Pressman and Wildavsky. They were concerned with the study of whether implementation outcomes corresponded to the objectives set

out in initial policy decisions. Their model included six variables that shape the relationship between policy and performance. While many of these factors had to do with organizational capacities and hierarchical control, the authors also highlighted two variables that slightly departed from the top-down “mainstream”: They argued that the extent of policy change had a crucial impact on the likelihood of effective implementation and that the degree of consensus on goals was important. Hence, significant policy change was only possible if goal consensus among actors was high. Unlike other representatives of the top-down school, the model of Van Meter and Van Horn was less concerned with advising policy makers on successful implementation but with providing a sound basis for scholarly analysis.

Bardach’s book *The Implementation Game*, published in 1977, provided a classical metaphor for the implementation process. He acknowledged the political character of the implementation process and therefore promoted the idea of using game theoretic tools for explaining implementation. Bardach thus provided ideas that also influenced bottom-up scholars (see below). However, his preoccupation with advising policy makers on how to improve implementation makes him a clear member of the top-down camp. His core recommendation was to give attention to the “scenario writing” process, which meant that successful implementation was possible if policy makers succeeded in structuring the implementation games thoughtfully.

Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, 1980, see also Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983) are among the core authors of the top-down approach. Like Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), Sabatier and Mazmanian started their analysis with a policy decision that was made by governmental representatives. Therefore, they assumed a clear separation of policy formation from policy implementation. Their model lists six criteria for effective implementation: (1) policy objectives are clear and consistent, (2) the program is based on a valid causal theory, (3) the implementation process is structured adequately, (4) implementing officials are committed to the program’s goals, (5) interest groups and (executive and legislative) sovereigns are supportive, and (6) there are no detrimental changes in the socioeconomic framework conditions. Although Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, 489–92, 503–4) acknowledged that perfect hierarchical control over the implementation process was hard to achieve in practice and that unfavorable conditions could cause implementation failure, they argued that policy makers could ensure effective implementation through adequate program design and a clever structuration of the implementation process.

2.2 BOTTOM-UP THEORIES

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, bottom-up theories emerged as a critical response to the top-down school. Several studies showed that political outcomes did not always sufficiently relate to original policy objectives and that the assumed causal link was thus questionable. Theorists suggested studying what was actually happening on the recipient level and analyzing the real causes that influence action on the ground. Studies belonging to this strand of research typically started from the “bottom” by identifying the networks of actors involved in actual policy delivery. They rejected the idea that policies are defined at the central level and that implementers need to stick to these objectives as neatly as possible. Instead, the availability of discretion at the stage of policy delivery appeared as a beneficial factor as local bureaucrats were seen to be much nearer to the real problems than central policy makers. The classical bottom-up researchers are: the American researchers Lipsky (1971, 1980) and Elmore (1980) as well as the Swedish scholar Hjern (1982), also in collaboration with other authors such as Porter and Hull.

Lipsky (1971, 1980) analyzed the behavior of public service workers (e.g., teachers, social workers, police officers, doctors), which he called “street-level bureaucrats.” In his seminal article, published in 1971, Lipsky argued that policy analysts needed to consider the direct interactions

between social workers and citizens. Hudson (1989) argues that the power held by street-level bureaucrats' stretches beyond the control of citizens' behavior. Street-level bureaucrats are also considered to have considerable autonomy from their employing organizations. The main source of their autonomous power thus stems from the considerable amount of discretion at their disposal.

According to Hill and Hupe (2002, 52–53), Lipsky's work has been widely misinterpreted as he did not only underline the difficulties in controlling street-level bureaucrats' behavior. Still more important, Lipsky showed that street-level policy making created practices that enable public workers to cope with problems encountered in their everyday work. The importance of Lipsky's work lies in the fact that his approach was, on the one hand, used as justification for methodological strategies that focus on street-level actors. On the other hand, it showed that top-down approaches failed to take into account that a hierarchical chain of command and well-defined policy objectives are not enough to guarantee successful implementation.

The main concern of Elmore (1980) was the question of how to study implementation. Instead of assuming that policy makers effectively control implementation, his concept of "backward mapping" suggested that analysis should start with a specific policy problem and then examine the actions of local agencies to solve this problem.

The Swedish scholar Hjern, in close cooperation with colleagues like Porter and Hull, developed an empirical network methodology to the study of the implementation process (Hjern 1982; Hjern and Porter 1981; Hjern and Hull 1982). In their view, it was essential for researchers to acknowledge the multi-actor and inter-organizational character of policy delivery. Therefore, they suggested that implementation analysis should start with the identification of networks of actors from all relevant agencies collaborating in implementation and then examine the way they try to solve their problems. According to Sabatier (1986a), this approach offers a useful tool to describe the "implementation structures" (Hjern and Porter 1981) within which policy execution takes place. However, he also criticizes the lack of causal hypotheses on the relationship between legal and economic factors and individual behavior.

2.3 COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

There are several characteristics of top-down and bottom-up theories that account for the wide gulf that separates these two schools of thought in implementation theory: They are marked by competing research strategies, contrasting goals of analysis, opposing models of the policy process, inconsistent understandings of the implementation process, and conflicting models of democracy (see Table 7.1).

It was due to their contrasting research strategies that the two camps came to be known as "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches. Top-downers typically start from a policy decision reached at the "top" of the political system and work their way "down" to the implementers. Bottom-uppers, in contrast, start out with the identification of actors involved in concrete policy delivery at the "bottom" of the politico-administrative system. Analysis then moves "upwards" and "sideways" in order to identify the networks of implementing actors and their problem-solving strategies.

The goal of analysis of top-down scholars is to reach a general theory of implementation. This theory should be parsimonious enough to allow for predictions as to whether an individual piece of legislation is likely to be implemented effectively.¹ Moreover, the theory should enable scholars to derive recommendations for policy makers with a view to improving implementation. The aim

1. It has to be noted, however, that the models proposed by top-down scholars do not always meet the standard of theoretical parsimony. For example, the model proposed by Sabatier and Mazmanian (1981, 7) lists no less than seventeen independent variables.

TABLE 7.1
Top-down and Bottom-up Theories Compared

	Top-down theories	Bottom-up theories
Research strategy	Top-down: from political decisions to administrative execution	Bottom-up: from individual bureaucrats to administrative networks
Goal of analysis	Prediction/policy recommendation	Description/explanation
Model of policy process	Stagist	Fusionist
Character of implementation process	Hierarchical guidance	Decentralized problem-solving
Underlying model of democracy	Elitist	Participatory

of bottom-up studies, in contrast, is rather to give an accurate empirical description and explanation of the interactions and problem-solving strategies of actors involved in policy delivery. As Sabatier (1986b, 315) critically notes, many of the bottom-up studies do not go beyond providing descriptive accounts of the large amount of discretion available to implementers. However, some of them actually tried to transcend the sphere of description. This resulted in rather complex heuristic models of the network structures or “implementation structures” (Hjern and Porter 1981) within which implementation takes place.

Both schools of thought rest upon contrasting models of the policy process. Top-downers are heavily influenced by what has been called the “textbook conception of the policy process” (Nakamura 1987, 142). This “stagist” model assumes that the policy cycle may be divided into several clearly distinguishable phases. Top-down analyses thus do not focus on the whole policy process, but merely on “what happens after a bill becomes a law” (Bardach 1977). In contrast, bottom-up approaches argue that policy implementation cannot be separated from policy formulation. According to this “fusionist” model, policy making continues throughout the whole policy process. Hence, bottom-up scholars do not just pay attention to one particular stage of the policy cycle. Instead, they are interested in the whole process of how policies are defined, shaped, implemented and probably redefined.

Both approaches contain widely differing views on the character of the implementation process. Top-downers understand implementation as “the carrying out of a basic policy decision” (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983, 20). In this view, implementation is an apolitical, administrative process. Power ultimately rests with central decision-makers, who define clear policy objectives and are capable of hierarchically guiding the process of putting these objectives into practice. Bottom-up scholars reject the idea of hierarchical guidance. In their view, it is impossible to formulate statutes with unequivocal policy goals and to control the implementation process from top to bottom. Instead, the model suggests that implementers always have a large amount of discretion. Rather than considering implementation an apolitical process of following orders “from above,” bottom-uppers hold that the implementation process is eminently political and that policies are even shaped to a decisive extent at this level. Hence, policies are not so much determined by the statutes emanating from governments and parliaments but by the largely autonomous political decisions of the actors directly involved in policy delivery. The focus thus lies on the decentral-problem-solving of local actors rather than on hierarchical guidance.

Finally, the two approaches are based on fundamentally different models of democracy. Top-down approaches are rooted in traditional, elitist conceptions of representative democracy. In this view, elected representatives are the only actors within a society who are legitimized to take collectively binding decisions on behalf of the whole citizenry. It is thus a matter of proper democratic governance to ensure that these decisions are carried out as accurately as possible. In other words,

any deviation from the centrally defined policy objectives is seen as a violation of democratic standards. Bottom-up approaches contest this model of democracy. They stress that local bureaucrats, affected target groups and private actors have legitimate concerns to be taken into account as well. In their view, the elitist model disregards these concerns and thus leads to illegitimate decisions. Deviating from the centrally defined policy objectives thus does not contravene democratic principles. Seen from this angle, legitimate democratic governance is only possible in a participatory model of democracy which includes those who are affected by a particular decision (lower-level administrative actors, interest groups, private actors etc.) in policy formation.

The comparison between both approaches shows that the debate between top-down and bottom-up scholars focused on more than the proper empirical description of the driving forces behind implementation. It is true that this is one important dimension of the dispute. But if this aspect had been the only bone of contention, the debate indeed would have been as sterile as some observers seem to have perceived it (O'Toole 2000, 267). It is certainly true that both sides exaggerated their respective positions and thereby oversimplified the complex implementation process (Parsons 1995, 471). As Sabatier (1986a) rightly notes, top-downers overemphasized the ability of central policy makers to issue unequivocal policy objectives and to meticulously control the process of implementation. In criticizing this "law-makers' perspective," bottom-uppers at the same time overestimated the amount of discretion of local bureaucrats and thus overemphasized the autonomy of the "bottom" vis-à-vis the "top." As scholars gathered more and more empirical evidence that demonstrated the relevance of both approaches, it would have been easy to agree on mutually acceptable theoretical models of implementation that pay attention to both central steering and local autonomy (see e.g., O'Toole 2000, 268). This is the path followed by some of the "hybrid theories" discussed in the next section.

2.4 HYBRID THEORIES

As a reaction to growing uneasiness with the heated debate between top-downers and bottom-uppers, researchers such as Elmore (1985), Sabatier (1986a), and Goggin et al. (1990) tried to synthesize both approaches. The new models presented by these scholars combined elements of both sides in order to avoid the conceptual weaknesses of top-down and bottom-up approaches. Other key contributions were made by scholars like Scharpf (1978), Windhoff-Héritier (1980), Ripley and Franklin (1982), and Winter (1990). Taking the top-downers' concern with effective policy execution as their starting point, they blended several elements of the bottom-up perspective and of other theories into their models. This is why we discuss this group of scholars under the heading of "hybrid theories."

Elmore, previously discussed as a member of the bottom-up camp, combined in his later work (1985) the concept of "backward mapping" with the idea of "forward mapping." He argued that program success is contingent upon both elements, as they are intertwined (Sabatier 1986a). Policy makers should therefore start with the consideration of policy instruments and available resources for policy change (forward mapping). In addition, they should identify the incentive structure of implementers and target groups (backward mapping).

Backing away from his earlier theoretical contributions together with Mazmanian, Sabatier (1986a) gave an account of a different theoretical approach to policy implementation. In his seminal article on implementation research, he argued that not distinguishing between policy formation and implementation would disqualify the study of policy change and evaluation research. He put forward an "advocacy coalition framework" which he developed further in his later work together with Jenkins-Smith (1993). The advocacy coalition framework rejected the "stage heuristic" of the policy process and aimed at empirically explaining policy change as a whole. This conception has some resemblance with the bottom-up approach as the analysis starts from a policy problem and proceeds in reconstructing the strategies of relevant actors to solve this problem. In addition, it

emphasizes the role of policy learning and recognizes the importance of extraneous social and economic conditions that may impact on the policy making. However, the advocacy coalition approach seems to neglect the social and historical context in which change occurs. This problem is addressed by discourse analysts, who argue that discourses shape actors' perceptions and may thus influence political elites' interpretation of social events (for further discussion, see Fischer 2003, 99).

Wildavsky, another prominent representative of the top-down school, also turned his back on the linear approach that had marked his earlier contributions. Together with Majone (Majone and Wildavsky 1978), he presented a model that pointed in a similar direction as the advocacy coalition framework. The core argument was that implementation is an evolutionary process in which programs are constantly reshaped and redefined. The conception thus started from policy inputs defined by central policy makers. At the same time, it also embraced the idea that these inputs will almost inevitably be changed in the course of their execution. Thus incremental learning processes were at the heart of this approach.

Winter (1990) contributed to overcoming the separation of policy formation and implementation. Still embracing the "stagist" model of the policy process, he points to the effect of the policy formulation process on implementation. Unlike top-downers, however, he is not interested in the design of the policy itself but looks at how characteristics of the policy formulation process (like the level of conflict or the level of attention of proponents) impacts on implementation.

Goggin, Bowman, Lester, and O'Toole (1990), the self-proclaimed founders of the "third generation" of implementation research, tried to bridge the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches. Like top-downers, they continued to accept the perspective of a centrally defined policy decision to be implemented by lower-level actors. Their goal of developing a general theory of implementation on the basis of rigorous methods also owes much to the top-down perspective. However, their conception of the implementation process embraced the fact that implementers are political actors in their own right and that the outcome of this endeavor entailed complicated negotiation processes between implementers and central authorities. Drawing on empirical case studies that involved the implementation of federal programs by state authorities in the United States, they developed a communicative model of intergovernmental implementation. As Hill and Hupe (2002, 66–68) point out, the specific focus on the interactions between federal and state layers of government in American federalism raises doubts about the general applicability of the model.

Scharpf (1978) was one of the earliest writers who tried to reconcile the idea of political steering by central governments with the argument of bottom-up scholars that the transformation of policy goals into action depends upon the interaction of a multitude of actors with separate interests and strategies. Introducing the concept of policy networks to implementation research, he suggested giving more weight to processes of coordination and collaboration among separate but mutually dependent actors. The concept of policy networks later became a major approach to the study of policy change as a whole (see e.g., Marin and Mayntz 1991).

A further line of argument places emphasis on a factor that was almost completely neglected by both top-down and bottom-up scholars: the type of policy to be implemented. Building on the seminal article by Lowi (1972), Ripley and Franklin (1982) distinguish between distributive, regulatory, and redistributive policies, arguing that each of these policy types involves different groups of stakeholders as well as different types and levels of conflict in implementation. Windhoff-Héritier (1980) makes a similar argument. She distinguishes between distributive and redistributive policies. This distinction includes regulatory policy, which can fall into either of the two categories depending on whether or not a regulatory program involves clearly identifiable winners and losers.² Her book reveals that distributive policies may be implemented in any implementation structure,

2. Mayntz (1977), another German scholar, followed a similar line of reasoning with regard to policy types. She distinguishes between different types of policy instruments (imperatives and restraints, positive and negative incentives, procedural regulations, public provision of services) and discusses the different implementation problems typically associated with these policy instruments.

while redistributive policies need a hierarchical implementation structure to be executed effectively (Windhoff-Héritier 1980, 90).

In sum, the approaches we summarized under the heading of “hybrid theories” brought two important innovations to implementation theory. First, they tried to overcome the conceptual weaknesses of the polarized debate between bottom-up and top-down scholars. Leaving aside the normative aspects of the controversy, they focused instead on empirical arguments about the proper conceptualization of the implementation processes and pragmatically blended the extreme arguments of both sides into models that embraced both central steering and local autonomy. Second, some of the hybrid theorists pointed to important factors that had hitherto received little attention.

Scholars like Sabatier or Winter raised the awareness that implementation cannot be analyzed without looking at the policy formulation process. Sabatier stressed the need to view implementation processes (or processes of policy change in general) not in isolation. Instead, his advocacy coalition framework recognizes that extraneous factors such as external economic developments or influences from other policy fields have to be taken into account as well. Finally, Ripley and Franklin, Windhoff-Héritier and others hinted at the impact of different policy types on the way policies are executed.

What is overlooked by advocates of a synthesis of top-down and bottom-up approaches are the fundamentally different views of both sides on the proper conceptualization of the policy process and the legitimate allocation of power over the determination of policy outcomes in the light of democratic theory. Hence, while it seems possible to combine some of the insights of both models, Parsons is also right in pointing out that some of the differences are so fundamental that the effort to seek a comprehensive synthesis of both approaches is like trying to combine “incommensurate paradigms” (Parsons 1995, 487, see also deLeon 1999, 322–23).

The theoretical approaches discussed so far, despite differing in important respects from each other, have two things in common: They all study implementation processes within nation states rather than at the international level, and they share a common positivist worldview in terms of ontology and epistemology. In what follows, we will discuss a number of recent contributions that take the study of implementation beyond these traditional paths.

3 NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS

While the origins of implementation research lay in the study of policy change within nation states, the growing importance of policy making at the international level has given rise to a substantial body of literature that addresses the implementation of these “international” policies at the domestic level. There has been some interest in the effectiveness of implementing international agreements (Brown-Weiss and Jacobson 1998; Victor et al. 1998). Even more scholars have addressed issues of implementation within the European Union.

3.1 IMPLEMENTATION IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT: NEWS FROM EUROPEAN INTEGRATION STUDIES

The first wave of studies addressing implementation issues in the context of European integration started out with largely descriptive accounts of implementation failures. To the extent that theoretical conclusions were drawn at all, these primarily mirrored the insights of the top-down school in implementation theory. The domestic implementation of European legislation was portrayed as a rather apolitical process whose success primarily depended on clearly worded provisions, effective administrative organization and streamlined legislative procedures at the national level (Siedentopf and Ziller 1988; Schwarze et al. 1990; Schwarze et al. 1991, 1993). Problems in policy execution were not put down to political resistance by domestic implementation actors, but to “technical”

parameters such as insufficient administrative resources, inter-organizational co-ordination problems or cumbersome legislative or administrative procedures at the domestic level.

As far as the general analytical perspective is concerned, most of the research on the implementation of EU legislation continued to be characterized by a top-down view. Implementation processes are usually approached from a perspective that asks for the fulfillment of centrally defined policy goals. Any deviation from the original goals is seen as an implementation problem obstructing the even execution of European-level policies rather than the legitimate problem-solving strategy of “street-level bureaucrats.” What changed over time, however, was the increasing awareness among scholars that implementation is a political process and that the execution of policies is obstructed often enough by the political resistance of domestic actors. EU implementation research thus moved into the direction of what we dubbed “hybrid theories.”

The political character of implementation processes was embraced by the second wave of implementation studies, which evolved in the 1990s. Most of the studies of this second wave focused on European environmental policy, one of the policy areas where implementation gaps had become particularly visible. The theoretical innovation of this strand of literature was the incorporation of frameworks and arguments from comparative politics. One particularly prominent line of argument was based on historical institutionalist assumptions about the “stickiness” of deeply entrenched national policy traditions and administrative routines, which poses great obstacles to reforms aiming to alter these arrangements. Starting from the observation that many member state governments struggled to “upload” their own policy models to the European level (Héritier et al. 1996), it was only a short way to the argument that the “downloading” process becomes problematic if this strategy of policy export should fail (Börzel 2002).

The degree of “misfit,” that is the extent to which a particular supranational policy required member states to depart from their traditional ways of doing things in terms of policy legacies and organizational arrangements, thus moved to the forefront in explaining implementation outcomes. Seen from this angle, European policies face deeply rooted institutional and regulatory structures. If both fit together, implementation should be a smooth and unproblematic process. If European policies do not match existing traditions, however, implementation should be highly contested, leading to considerable delays, and involving a high risk of total failure (see in particular Duina 1997, 1999; Duina and Blithe 1999; Knill and Lenschow 1998, 2000; Börzel 2000, 2003).

It soon became clear that this theoretical argument was too parsimonious to hold in a broader set of empirical cases. Although acknowledging the political character of implementation, the “misfit” argument laid too much emphasis on structural parameters, assuming that domestic actors merely acted “as guardians of the status quo, as the shield protecting national legal-administrative traditions” (Duina 1997, 157). This one-dimensional view was challenged by scholars who argued that the implementation behavior of domestic government parties, interest groups and administrations was independent of the degree of fit or misfit (Haverland 2000; Treib 2004; Falkner et al. 2005).

Thus, researchers increasingly acknowledged that implementation analysis had to pay attention to a multiplicity of domestic actor networks including the variegated preferences and institutional properties of these networks. As suggested by some of the approaches we dubbed “hybrid theories” above, scholars now began to take into account the complexities of the “implementation games” played at the domestic level, and they fully embraced the political character of bringing EU legislation into practice. Again building on theories from the field of comparative politics, domestic implementation processes were seen to be shaped not only by the fit with existing policy legacies, but also by factors like the number of veto players, the presence or absence of a consensus-oriented decision-making culture, or the support or opposition of interest groups (Cowles et al. 2001; Héritier et al. 2001).

The problem with these broader approaches is well-known from “national” implementation research: the more factors we include in our theoretical models, the less are we able to decide which of these factors are the crucial ones and which circumstances determine whether they become rel-

evant (e.g., O'Toole 2000, 268). One tentative solution to this problem is offered by a recent study that analyzed the implementation of EU social policy in fifteen member states (Falkner et al. 2005). Starting from a broad theoretical perspective that incorporated a wide range of hypotheses suggested by previous research, the authors conclude that most of these hypotheses had some explanatory power, but none of them could explain the whole range of implementation patterns observed in the total of ninety case studies. As a solution to this puzzle, they then offer a typology of three "worlds of compliance," which result from the varying importance of a culture of law-abidingness in the political and administrative systems of the different member states. Hence, the analysis highlights the importance of country-specific cultural conditions. These cultural conditions then determine which sets of other factors are relevant in a particular country setting.

In sum, EU scholars enriched the study of implementation processes by two notable innovations. First, they adopted new methodological strategies. In contrast to "national" implementation research, where "solid cross-national investigations are still rare" (O'Toole 2000, 268), the specific setting of the European Union encouraged an approach that was much more comparative in nature. As a result, cross-country comparison has meanwhile become the standard methodological approach in this field of study. Unlike traditional implementation researchers, EU scholars thus increasingly became aware of systematic institutional and cultural differences in the typical implementation styles of different countries. Moreover, there is a growing number of statistical analyses using the official data on infringement procedures initiated by the European Commission against noncompliant member states (Mendrinou 1996; Lampinen and Uusikylä 1998; Börzel 2001; Mbaye 2001). Although these studies are struggling with all kinds of methodological problems,³ they could serve to counteract the case study bias that has marked large parts of implementation research so far.

The second innovation is that EU implementation research, instead of seeking to establish a specific "implementation theory," became more and more receptive to general theories, especially from the field of comparative politics. This is an important development because the incorporation of concepts from historical institutionalism, game theory or cultural approaches facilitates communication with other fields of study and might thus increase the visibility of implementation research in the wider scholarly community.

3.2 THE INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH TO POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

The interpretative approach to policy implementation departs from a different ontological stance than the theoretical contributions previously discussed. It considers the strict distinction between facts and values underlying the positivist philosophy of science as untenable, and it challenges the possibility of neutral and unbiased observations. In Yanow's (2000, ix) words, this means that "...interpretative policy [implementation] analysis shifts the discussion from values as a set of costs, benefits, and choice points to a focus on values, beliefs, and feelings as set of meanings, and from a view of human behavior as, ideally, instrumentally and technically rational to human action as expressive (of meaning)."

The interpretative approach does not take the factual essence of problems as its main point of reference, but shows that multiple and sometimes ambiguous and conflicting meanings, as well as a variety of interpretations, coexist in parallel. While traditional analysis concentrates on explaining the implementation gap between policy intention and outcome, interpretative analy-

3. Since this data only represents the cases of noncompliance that were actually detected and prosecuted by the Commission, there are serious doubts as to whether they can be taken as an indicator for the true level of noncompliance with EU law. In other words, they might represent no more than the tip of the iceberg, which does not necessarily say much about the size or the shape of those parts that remain below the waterline (Falkner et al. 2005, chap. 11).

sis focuses on the analysis of “how policy means” (Yanow 1996). It also rejects the assumption that policy implementation can be studied without looking at the process of policy formation. In contrast, it assumes that prior debates and policy meanings have an impact on policy execution as they influence implementers’ understanding of the policy problem. Implementing actors are also confronted with multiple policy meanings as policy formation frequently involves the accommodation of contradicting interests. Moreover, the written content of policies may only reflect goals that are publicly expressible, while implementing agencies are also confronted with the need of implementing so-called “verboden goals” (Yanow 1996, 205) that are only tacitly communicated. In this sense, interpretative analysis studies the very definition of the problem or, in other words, it examines the “struggle for the determination of meanings” (Yanow 1996, 19) and scrutinizes “how those meanings are communicated” (Yanow 1996, 222).

Rather than assuming that policy statements are purely rational and goal-oriented, Yanow suggests that statements also have an expressive character. Through them, a polity may reveal its distinct identity (Yanow 1996, 22). In her case study on the establishment of community centers in Israel, Yanow highlighted that the use of the metaphor “functional supermarket” had shaped the concept of community centers’ identity in terms of programs, administrative practices and staff roles. It thus had turned into an organizational metaphor (Yanow 1996, 129–53).

The focus of the interpretative approach therefore lies on the interpretation of meaning passed on by policy actors, implementation agencies and target populations (for a similar argument, see Pülzl 2001). Symbols, metaphors, and policy language, which embody multiple meanings, are embedded in what Yanow (1987, 108) calls policy “culture.” It is the analysts’ main task to examine how different actors interpret this policy culture and then track down the effect of these multiple understandings on the implementation process. Furthermore, the analysis focuses on the context in which policy is transformed into practice. In this sense, the examination of the context-specific meaning of policy reveals essential features of the implementation process, as Yanow’s (1996) empirical analysis has also demonstrated.

4 THIRTY YEARS OF IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

More than thirty years after the publication of Pressman and Wildavsky’s pioneering study, the time seems right to take stock of the lessons we learned from implementation research. We will start by summarizing what seem to us the most relevant insights gained with regard to the area of implementation itself. Second, we will discuss a number of contributions of implementation research to the wider field of policy analysis and political science.

What has implementation research taught us about the driving forces behind implementation? The following five points seem to be worth highlighting:

1. After years of debate between top-down and bottom-up scholars, both sides seem to agree that implementation is a continuum located between central guidance and local autonomy. The preferences of street-level bureaucrats and the negotiations within implementation networks have to be taken into account to the same extent as centrally defined policy objectives and efforts at hierarchical control. The actual position of individual implementation processes on this continuum is an empirical rather than a theoretical question.
2. Bottom-uppers have successfully convinced the wider community of implementation scholars that implementation is more than the technical execution of political orders from above. It is itself a political process in the course of which policies are frequently reshaped, redefined or even completely overturned.

3. What bottom-up scholars already suggested a long time ago has become more and more accepted also among the proponents of “hybrid” or “synthesizing” theories: implementation and policy formulation are highly interdependent processes. If not abandoning the “stagist” model of the policy process altogether, it now seems to be widely accepted that it is at least necessary to take into consideration the impact of policy formulation on implementation.
4. Especially the work of Sabatier has alerted us to the fact that implementation processes (and processes of policy change more generally) should not be viewed in isolation. Instead, exogenous influences from other policy fields or external economic developments need to be taken into account.
5. Recent EU implementation analysis has highlighted that different countries seem to have different “implementation styles.” To learn more about the contrasting logics of implementation in different country settings, more research with an explicit focus on cross-country comparison (national, regional and local studies) is needed. Moreover, this strand of the literature demonstrated that rather than searching for a unique “implementation theory”, theoretical arguments from comparative politics, such as the veto player theorem or insights from historical institutionalisms, can shed new light on implementation processes.

Further to these insights on the forces that drive the process of putting policy into practice, implementation studies have also contributed to three wider debates in policy analysis and political science.

First, implementation research contributed decisively to the debates in public administration and organizational theory about the character of modern bureaucracies. As bottom-up scholars persistently argued that administrative actors are often not tightly enough controlled by politicians and have quite some autonomy in determining how policies are actually executed, they delivered a serious blow to the conviction that modern public administrations resembled the Weberian model of a hierarchically organized and technocratic bureaucracy that is subordinate to the authority of political leaders. What has come to the fore, instead, is the view that public administrations have much more complex organizational structures and are much less hierarchically ordered than assumed by the Weberian model. Above all, implementation analysis has shown that administrative actors have their own political goals and that they use the considerable discretion they often have to pursue these goals rather than the ones prescribed by the political echelons above them. In this sense, Palumbo and Calista (1990, 14) are right in concluding that “implementation research has finally laid to rest the politics–administration dichotomy”. Instead, implementation scholars paved the way for a more realistic conception of the institutional features and the role of modern public administration in politics.

Second, the wider debates on political steering and governance, which have been particularly lively in Europe, especially in Germany, owe much to the insights of implementation scholars (for an overview, see Mayntz 1996, 2004). In the 1960s and early 1970s, the dominant view in this debate was characterized by political planning approaches (Mayntz and Scharpf 1973). These approaches started from the assumption of a simple hierarchical relationship between an active state and a passive society. In this view, the ability of political leaders to shape society according to politically defined goals found its limits only in the availability of scientific knowledge about the most pressing problems to be solved and in the effectiveness of the state machinery to devise the proper political strategies to address them. Neither the actual execution of policies by administrations nor the reactions by target groups were seen as a major problem. The findings of implementation scholars about the complexities and problems of policy execution meant a serious setback to this model. The second attack came from interest group research, which discovered, especially in Europe, various forms of neocorporatist patterns where governments cooperated with strong interest associations in policy formation and implementation or even delegated certain public tasks to “private interest

governments” (Schmitter and Lehbruch 1979; Streeck and Schmitter 1985). In theoretical terms, a fundamental critique of the paradigm of hierarchical steering was added by autopoietic systems theory, which argues that society is made up of a set of autonomous subsystems, each of them functioning according to a specific logic. The relative closure of each individual subsystem makes it hard for other subsystems (and therefore also for the political system) to influence them in a deliberate fashion (Luhmann 1985). All of these developments finally gave rise to a new, nonhierarchical model of political steering. The new keyword of this model is “governance” within policy networks or negotiation systems where public actors from different levels cooperate with private actors in the production and execution of policies (Rhodes 1997; Scharpf 1997; Pierre and Peters 2000, chaps. 6 and 9).

Third, implementation scholars, especially those from the bottom-up camp, were among those who voiced serious concerns as to whether classical liberal democratic theory was still appropriate for a world in which not only elected representatives but also administrative actors and interest groups have a decisive say in shaping and delivering policies. Hence, implementation analysis gave an important impulse for the development of alternatives to the model of representative democracy.

Admittedly, the efforts to develop such an alternative model of democracy have only produced some preliminary results. However, there are two strands of theorizing that should be noted here. The first one centers on the Habermasian notion of deliberative democracy, which is based on the idea that democratic decisions are the outcome of consensus-oriented, rational discourses among all affected actors (Habermas 1987; Miller 1993). In implementation research, scholars like deLeon (2001) have taken up the notion of deliberative democracy, and interpretative approaches to implementation (such as Yanow 1996) are also built upon this model of democracy. The other strand does not presuppose consensus-orientation and arguing, but tries to develop democratic standards for the interactions of public and private actors within negotiation systems or policy networks. One example is the model of “associative democracy” (Cohen and Rogers 1992; Hirst 1994), which is based on the assumption that in modern societies, many nonelected actors, especially interest associations, have a crucial say in policy making. Rather than seeing this as a danger for democracy, the authors suggest that these actors, to the extent that they are representatives of certain groups of citizens and their common interests, can also add to the legitimacy of political decisions.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER OUTLOOK

We have demonstrated in this chapter that implementation research has produced a number of important insights with regard to both the field of implementation itself and the wider context of the social sciences. Nevertheless, it is not particularly prominent in the wider scientific community. For example, neither the *New Handbook of Political Science* (Goodin and Klingemann 1996) nor the volume on *Theories of the Policy Process* edited by Sabatier (1999) include more than a few scattered paragraphs on the issue of implementation. In our view, the visibility of implementation analysis was severely hampered by three persistent weaknesses.

First, implementation research has been characterized by a lack of cumulation. For a long time, constructive cumulative research was impeded by the fundamental clash between top-down and bottom-up scholars (Lester et al. 1987, 210). However, as the discussion above has shown, this problem also persists after synthesizing or hybrid theories had tried to bridge the gap between these approaches. For example, the findings of European integration scholars have thus far been largely neglected by “national” implementation research.⁴

⁴ Neither the recent summarizing articles by O’Toole (2000) or deLeon (2001) nor the latest handbook on implementation research by Hill and Hupe (2002) or the recent symposium on implementation analysis in *Public Administration* (Schofield and Sausman 2004) include any reference to this strand of research.

Second, the theoretical models presented by implementation scholars, no matter whether they emerged in the context of the first, second, or third generations of research, typically comprise a multitude of potential explanatory variables. Yet we know little about which of these factors are more or less important under what kind of background conditions.

Third, the largest part of implementation research has been characterized by a shared positivist ontology and epistemology that largely ignores the role of discourses, symbols, and cultural patterns.

However, these weaknesses do not suggest that implementation research should be abolished altogether, as has been argued by scholars like Ingram or Sabatier, who moved on to other subjects such as policy design or the study of policy change more generally. Unlike this group of scholars, who have recently been dubbed “terminators” (Lester and Goggin 1998, 3), we think that it is still very useful to invest time and money into the study of how policies are transformed into action. Unlike the advocacy coalition framework and many network approaches, we think a separate analysis of implementation is useful since the actors involved in policy formation and implementation, while partly overlapping, are certainly not always exactly the same. Hence, keeping the stages of the policy process separate and focusing on one of them in more detail still seems to be worthwhile, although the interdependencies between the stages have to be taken into account as well.

But in order to advance our understanding of implementation beyond the level that has already been achieved, implementation research needs to take new directions. In particular, implementation analysis should strive to avoid the weaknesses that have hitherto curtailed its impact on the study of policy change. In this sense, we belong to the group of what Lester and Goggin (1998, 2) have called “reformers.” First, more mutual awareness of the findings of other scholars in the field could certainly boost more cumulative research. Processes of cross-fertilization could thus improve our understanding of implementation processes.

Second, the problem of overcomplex theoretical models might be mitigated by moving toward what deLeon (1999: 318) has dubbed “contingency concepts,” which take institutional properties of implementation structures, policy types, or country-specific cultural variables as framework conditions that make certain types of implementation processes and certain clusters of explanatory variables more likely than others. There have been some initial attempts in this direction (e.g., Matland 1995; Windhoff-Héritier 1980), but the potential of this approach has certainly not been used to the fullest extent possible. Careful comparative investigations of cases that have been selected with a view to systematically varying different policy types, institutional settings, countries and (more or less) successful or failed instances of implementation, could complement these theoretical efforts.

While these two strategies point into a similar direction as the one suggested by third-generation scholars (see e.g., Lester and Goggin 1998), notably to continue implementation studies in a more sophisticated way, there is also another sphere which previous research has only touched upon rudimentarily. There is much to be learned from interpretative and constructivist approaches, which argue that policy contents and objectives as well as implementation problems often cannot be discerned on an objective basis. Instead, the nature of what is at stake in processes of policy execution may be subject to fundamentally different perspectives that are shaped by language, culture, and symbolic politics.

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8 Do Policies Determine Politics?

Hubert Heinelt

1 INTRODUCTION

One influential thesis for analyzing the policy process has been formulated by Theodore Lowi.¹ He has argued, “Policies determine politics” (Lowi 1972, 299). In this chapter, the context will first be outlined against which Lowi developed his thesis (section 1). The chapter will then address the influence of this thesis on the academic debate as well as on the doubts raised about its explanatory potential for analyzing individual policy sectors like labor market policy, public old age pension policy, environment policy, or migration policy. The main focus of this chapter will be on how to make use of Lowi’s thesis in respect of individual policy fields. However, such an attempt is limited because policies cannot effectively be considered separately from their related historical and locational structures and actor constellations related to them. What this implies and how to cope conceptually with this problem will be addressed in the chapter’s final sections.

2 LOWI’S THESIS “POLICIES DETERMINE POLITICS”. . .

Lowi’s thesis was initially related to basic policy mechanisms or policy types, namely, distributive, redistributive, and regulatory policies.² Its relevance has first of all to be seen in the time during which it was formulated. It was Lowi’s ambition to develop a framework for categorizing case studies (see Benz 1997, 303). At the same time, he wanted to draw attention to the question: what does policy making (in the sense of politics) depend on? This was a key issue because at that time studies were strongly influenced by Easton’s (1965) model of the political system according to which the political-administrative system remains a black box between political input (demands of and support from citizens) and political outputs (laws, programs and such). Processes within the political system remained unanalyzed. Lowi’s thesis pointed in the direction in which one should look for an answer—at the content of a policy and the kind of problems associated with it.

Because the content of a policy—in the sense of its distributive, redistributive, or regulatory character (see Table 8.1)—implies particular outcomes, this results in particular responses from those affected, which, in turn, have an impact on political debate in terms of decision making as well as implementation. Or as Lowi (1964, 707) put it, “It is not the actual outcomes but the expectations as to what the outcomes can be that shape the issues and determine their politics.” This leads to different kinds of “policy arenas” that exhibit particular features of conflict or consensus. They are crucially shaped by the costs and benefits identified by those involved. In summary, a policy aimed at redistribution and an unequal allocation of costs and benefits will be found in an arena

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1. This paper has been finished during a stay as a visiting fellow at the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol. I have benefited a lot from fruitful discussion there, especially with Alex Marsh and Randall Smith.
 2. Later on (Lowi 1972) *constituent policy* was added, i.e., procedural policy setting the rules for policy making, which will not be addressed in detail in the following.

TABLE 8.1
Classification of Policy Types

Policy Type	Characteristics of the Policy	Characteristics of the Arena	Examples	Guiding Principles
Distributive	Collective public provision	Consensual No opposition/resistance	Research grants General tax reduction	Incentives
Redistributive	Relation between costs and benefits obvious	Conflictual Polarization between winners and losers Ideological framing	Progressive taxation Labor market policy Social assistance	Imposition by the state
Regulatory	(Legal) norms for behavior/interaction	Changing coalitions according to the distribution of costs and benefits	Consumer protection Safety at work Protection of environment	Imposition by the state Persuasion Guidance by exemplary models Self-regulation

Translated and modified from Windhoff-Héritier 1987, 52–53.

characterized by conflict. By way of contrast, a policy trying to offer universally available services or goods with unclear consequences for the distribution of costs and benefits will be found in an arena characterized by conflict-free processes of policy making. The same applies to a regulatory policy which includes a binding code that does not result in observable benefit. It may imply costs and benefits but they are hard to calculate or predict. Or to put it precisely: “In all components of conventional politics—legislative, administrative, judicial and civil society—the choice of policy mechanisms imposes predictable constraints on the outcomes of public actions and is not simply derivative from either the electoral process or the configuration of interest groups” (Nicholson 2002, 165 with reference to Lowi 1972, 300).

The emphasis given by Lowi to the linkage between the mentioned policy mechanisms and policy arenas characterized by a certain degree of conflict or consensus was inspired by a certain approach: Lowi was interested in “the choices about how to apply the power of the state and not primarily on what goals the state should pursue” (Nicholson 2002, 163). This led to a microanalysis of how public power has been applied coming to the result that this could be done in different ways and that policy choices are possible—namely between the mentioned policy mechanisms or types. In other words, because perceptions of policy outcomes are relevant, strategic policy makers—in a position to influence those perceptions—can increase the likelihood of a direct influence on the policy process.

This is addressed in the policy analysis literature by the key phrase “issue relabelling” (see Windhoff-Héritier 1987, 56–57 for an overview). This means that by relabelling a policy, the perception of what a policy is about can be influenced—and by this the policy process is also affected. For example, regional policy aiming at equalizing or at least balancing regional and social disparities is apparently redistributive. However, to calm down controversies resulting from the redistributive effects of this policy, emphasis can also be placed on related measures that are of general benefit. The development of the infrastructure, for instance, can improve the accessibility of regions, in relation to the exchange of products (the market) or the mobility of people (for the workforce as well as for tourists) (see Heinelt 1996, 20).

The success of “issue relabelling” depends crucially on the specific context. This applies for the expressions used and the notions to which they are related. A good example is the opening up of a debate about immigration policy in Germany in 2000 by the discussion about a “green card.” The expression “green card” was related to its particular American context, and thus to a “demand-driven” and selective immigration policy.

This example also points in another way to the importance of embedding “issue relabelling” in a particular context. Chancellor Schroeder introduced this issue at a specific place and in front of a particular audience. It was the opening speech at Cebit Hanover, the world’s largest fair for computers, communication, and information technology, where he could be sure (against the background of a labor shortage in this sector of the German economy) that his rearticulation of the immigration agenda would find not only support from his listeners, but also be picked up by the media.

3 ...AND ITS IMPACT ON DEBATES IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

Although this line of thinking has been very influential not only in policy analysis but in political science in general (see Benz 1997, 303) and reflections on the distributive, redistributive, or regulatory effects of policies have become usual starting points in analyzing policy processes, Lowi’s approach has also been criticized.

For instance, it can be argued that the emphasis placed on expectations or perceptions by Lowi (when stating that it “is not the actual outcomes but the expectations as to what the outcomes can be that shape the issues and determine their politics”) does not lead to clarification in respect of policies or policy types. Instead, because perceived outcomes are determining politics, the clarity gets lost in linking particular policies to conflictual or consensual arenas. Indeed, when one-sided restrictions or disadvantages are perceived in respect of a law with a regulatory content, it can lead to political conflict just like redistributive policy, even though such a law may be generally binding and affecting everyone.

One example of this is the European Union directive about the employment of workers from other member states in addressing issues like social security contributions and benefits, as well as wages according to national wage agreements. This directive has caused major arguments in some countries (like Germany) where the negative impact on the endogenous workforce has been obvious. In the light of this example, one can question Majone’s thesis (1994) that the future of the EU is that of a “regulatory state,” i.e., the EU will be capable only of regulative (market-correcting) and not redistributive policies, because the latter implies conflict and goes beyond the decision making capacity of the EU (see Heinelt 1996, p. 17–20). The same argument could apply to a distributive policy. Consider the provision of kindergartens in a time when the proportion of households without children is increasing. In such a context this “classical” distributive policy, can be perceived as redistributive one, as a one-sided support for families or a redistributive burden sharing between households with and without children.

The academic debate on Lowi’s thesis has also been taken further in another direction. The thesis (policies determine politics) has been de-coupled from the types of redistributive, distributive, and regulatory policies insofar as attempts have been made to relate it to policy sectors like labor market, public old-age pension, environment, immigration, and the like. This approach to providing an answer to the question of how and why policies determine politics has been linked to the increasing focus of policy analysis on specific policy sectors (Windhoff-Héritier 1983, 351). But in looking at individual policy sectors, the focus on the three policy types appears not to be very fruitful, because within policy sectors distributive, redistributive, and regulatory policies as well as consensual or conflictual policy arenas can be found at the same time as well as sequentially. For instance (like in Germany; see Egner et al. 2004), in housing policies rent allowance and legal protection of tenants can be complementary, i.e., instruments supporting tenants in the housing sector comprising, in the first, case a redistributive and, in the second case, a regulatory policy mechanism. Further, these instruments can (at least in some countries) rely on social housing built in the past by developers who have received subsidies which represent a redistributive policy. Finally, one can consider measures for the improvement of the infrastructure in a neighborhood, which can be labeled as distributive policies.

Attempts to make clear statements on the nature of policy-politics interdependencies by individual policy sectors are not only confronted by the phenomenon that regulatory, redistributive and distributive policies can be of relevance for a certain policy field at the same time. Furthermore—and providing that such an attempt should start from Lowi's model—it has to be clear that Lowi offers a tool of microanalysis (as mentioned above), i.e., to explain or even to predict why a certain program characterized by one of the mentioned policy mechanisms is leading to particular policy processes. "This is not a fatal flaw and it does not, in and of itself, undermine the utility of the model so long as one applies it safely within particular historical eras and specified institutional frameworks" (Nicholson 2002, 170). But attempts to make clear statements on the nature of policy-politics interdependencies by individual policy sectors are clearly not restricted to the application of a certain model (like that of Lowi) to a historically given institutional setting. Instead, a more general approach is in play clarifying general characteristics of policy processes in policy fields. Additionally, it can be argued that "policy choices," i.e., choices between a regulatory, redistributive, and distributive policy (as assumed by Lowi's approach of microanalysis of the policy process) are hard to make (or even hardly possible). Instead reflections on structural constraints and opportunities for policy making or tools of macro analysis seem to be necessary—not least as argued in this chapter regarding policy sectors.

However, in looking for such tools to identify structural constraints and opportunities for policy making by individual policy sectors contingent factors, labeled by Windhoff-Heritier "policy contingencies" (1983, 359), can hardly be denied. These policy contingencies mean that policy sectors should not be seen as unchanging or independent, but as contingent, that is, dependent on institutional structures as well as affected by the specific perceptions and actions of actors. Benz (1997) has tried to address the challenge to consider specific policy-politics relations as well as "policy contingencies" from the perspective of an actor-centered institutionalism. According to him, the interests of actors define what a policy is or should be about. However, this actor, or interested-related definition of policies, has to be connected with (1) a "feasible set" given at a certain point in time and with (2) an already existing institutional structure (Benz 1997, 306). In other words, simply through the definition of a policy a problem becomes subject to political decision and therefore a task of politics. Nevertheless, institutional conditions and power relations impact on the definition of a policy, but they do not totally determine decisions. They leave room for discretion (see Benz 1997, 305, 310) according to the particular (historical) situation in which actors have to solve a problem or define it.

This argument avoids the difficulty that academic policy analysts can get into if they strictly follow the thesis "policies determine politics" regarding policy sectors and if this thesis is not combined with reflections on policy contingencies. Specifically, the would imply—given that a policy sector would be seen as the only relevant variable for explaining politics—that institutions, parties, forms of interest mediation, political culture, etc. do not matter, only the policy sector does.

In fact, the statement that only the policy sector matters is inadequate for academic policy analysts. For example, studies in comparative public policy start from national variations in individual policy sectors and try to explain them by institutions, parties, forms of interest mediation, and political culture (see the seminal work of Heidenheimer et al. 1975 and for different approaches to explain national differences Heidenheimer et al. 1990, p. 6 ff.). Again, in policy studies focused at the local level differences in urban policies are explained by diverging institutional conditions, particular situations ("feasible sets"), as well as actor-related definitions or perceptions of problems and ways to solve them (see for an overview of recent studies Haus et al. 2005).

However, in these studies on policy sectors, generalized arguments on policy-politics interdependencies are missing, or are conceptually underdeveloped (this is also true for the work of Heidenheimer et al. 1975). This is not so surprising: "the comparison of a single policy sector across nation-states prioritizes institutional variation" (John and Cole 2000, 251), and a comparison of case studies of cities in a single country with more or less the same institutional settings leads to a focus on local particularities.

John and Cole (2000) try to provide an empirical answer to the question “When do institutions, policy sectors, and cities matter?” and concluded that the “research findings do not neatly confirm one of the three hypotheses” (John and Cole 2000, 264)—namely “policy sectors matter,” “institutions matter,” and “cities matter” (where the latter would relate not only to place but also to a certain “feasible set” at a particular point in time). But the study made clear (based on local economic development and secondary education two French and two British cities) that policy sectors play a role insofar as nationally divergent institutional settings are embedded in them, which influence the formation of local particularities and certain “feasible sets” at particular points in time in general. This can be linked to a concept of “policy institution” according to which “a particular policy arena has a set of formal and informal rules that determine the course of public decision making” (John and Cole 2000, 249 with reference to Mazzeo, 1997).

In the following, the formation of different policy institutions (or policy-specific arenas) will be linked to two elements characteristic of a particular policy sector: the distinctiveness of the problems to be addressed, and specificity of the consequent effects of a policy.

The first element points to specific conditions (challenges as well as options) to address a problem according to its very nature. The second element refers to specific impacts on those affected.

In practical terms, this means that in the case of public pension policy, for example, a centralized structure of the delivery system is likely as well as conditionally structured policy instruments, i.e., particular conditions that have to be met for someone to benefit from the provision offered by this policy. Furthermore, the potential beneficiaries of such a policy are likely to remain passive. This means meeting the conditions laid down—those which apply to them not just as individuals but to a social category or a collective entity (e.g., older people). It also means being guaranteed to receive a clearly defined provision from a centralized delivery system. The situation is different in the case of social services. Here decentralization, an orientation toward a certain policy objective (e.g., social inclusion in general or drug prevention in particular), is linked to an individual (e.g., a drug addict) and the active involvement of that person is crucial.

Although changes over time in individual policy sectors as well as international comparisons of public policies demonstrate major variations, they also point to some general policy-specific institutional arrangements—such as those just mentioned regarding public pension policy and social services—and the prevalence of certain forms of policy making in different policy sectors. Such features will be considered in the next section.

4 DIMENSIONS FOR DISTINGUISHING POLICY-POLITICS RELATIONS

Let us start from the point discussed earlier—the perception of a problem as well as the impact of the solution of a problem play a crucial role in conceptualizing policy-politics relations. Additionally, three further aspects are connected to perceptions of how a problem can be solved politically—differences in predictability, shifting or static policy boundaries, and interdependencies between policy sectors (see Table 8.2).

4.1 DIFFERENTIAL OR GENERAL IMPACT OF A PROBLEM

Assuming policy making is analyzed as a process of solving problems—as is usual for policy analysis (Mayntz 1982, 72)—the kind of problem to be solved politically cannot be ignored. Problems transferred from the societal environment into the political system and taken up by the latter to be solved by a societally binding decision can be classified in different ways. In this section, the emphasis is on the distinction between problems affecting everyone and those that just affect some. This distinction is important because it refers to the level of conflict that can occur if something (or nothing) happens to address a particular problem.

TABLE 8.2
Dimensions for Distinguishing Policy-Politics Relations

Dimensions	Examples	
	(Active) Labor Market Policy	Public Old Age Pension Policy
Application of a problem: selective vs. universal	(socially) selective	universal
Policy effects: individualizing vs. collective	individualizing	collective
Predictability	relatively clear	clear
Policy boundaries*	shifting	stable
Policy interdependencies*	substantial	limited

*The aspects of policy boundaries and policy interdependencies will be considered together in section 4.4.

This becomes clear when looking at standard risks of employees addressed by different social policies. Everyone gets older and every employee is confronted with the prospect of not being able to earn his/her own living. Unemployment differs from these standard risks because it may threaten every employee but actually affects only some, and it affects some in such a way that the chance of earning one's living is placed in question over a long time so that social exclusion is likely to occur. The fact that unemployment is a socially selective risk may explain why unemployment—in contrast to the social risk of not being able to earn one's living beyond a certain age—is addressed politically in a rhetorical sense but not with real priority. When unemployment is high on the public policy agenda (beyond political rhetoric, as in the case of the ongoing “workfare” reforms; see for an overview Finn 2000) it is usually done for other reasons, such as to reduce public spending.

However, the difference between a problem affecting some people but not everyone is not all that clear and, moreover, can be dynamicized due to political debate. In comparing countries, it becomes clear that views on those affected, as well as the perception of reasons why they are affected, differs between countries. For instance, the perception that it is one's personal responsibility if one is unemployed is widespread in the UK, whereas in Germany the prevailing perception is that unemployment is a societal (and not an individual) problem to be solved politically (see Cebulla 2000).³ However, as the recent reform of labor market policy in Germany shows (Heinelt 2003) this can change.

4.2 INDIVIDUALIZING AND COLLECTIVE POLICY EFFECTS

That political actors can respond, for example, to the problem of unemployment cannot be explained adequately by the structure of the problem according to the distinction outlined above. What also has to be considered is whether or not the effect or the objective of a policy is regarded as something related to individuals or to a group. This becomes clear when considering labor market policy. An active labor market policy consists of measures aimed at bringing the unemployed back into the work force. A “passive” labor market policy consists of providing cash benefits for the unemployed (see Schmid et al. 1992).

3. This fits in with Luhmann's (1991, 1993) distinction between “risk” and “danger.” According Luhmann, a risk refers to action or nonaction by an actor, whereas a danger refers to something beyond the scope of individual influence. However, as argued above, what is perceived as a risk or as a danger varies. Furthermore, it can be said that a thunderstorm may be a danger, but it is a risk to walk over an open plain during a thunderstorm or when a thunderstorm is expected.

Because active labor market policy focuses directly on improving “employability” (to use the EU jargon) or creating employment, it implies an individualization as it depends on how individuals do or do not make use of job offers, job qualifications, and job creation schemes and so forth.⁴

The situation for public old age pension policy is different from unemployment and labor market policy. It addresses not only the (collective) security of living beyond a certain age for older people in society but also for younger people, because they have an interest in having secure prospects for the later stages of their lives.

The profile of an active labor market policy implies that (key) policy makers can point to the individual use (or nonuse) of policy instruments available for (re)integration into the employment system that may reduce political demands to do more. In the case of public pension policy, arrangements have to be made which include collective entitlements to withdraw from the labor market. However, the importance of a fixed retirement age depends on a politically secured level of income enabling those reaching this age (as a social group) actually to withdraw from the labor market.

Therefore, differences in specific policy sectors do not only result from the fact that some problems just affect some (i.e., that some problems are socially selective) and other problems affect everyone but also from individualizing and collective policy effects. These two dimensions, through the different responses by citizens and policy makers, lead to further specific features of the politics of the policy making process.

4.3 PREDICTABILITY

The predictability of both the development of the societal environment of the political system, as well as of the effects of political decisions or interventions, are crucial issues for politics which differ by policy sectors.

The predictability of the effects of political decisions is related to the range of choices available. As more options become available, the effects of political decisions are harder to predict and the more contested the debate becomes on how to solve a problem. This becomes clear when looking at the political debates on how to combat unemployment. The more diagnosis about the reasons for unemployment and measures to solve this problem are not only manifold but also contradictory, the more the predictability of the outcomes of certain programs is questioned from the very beginning.

However, looking at labor market and employment policy further, policy sector-related particularities linked to predictability of policy outcomes can be clarified. In the case of active labor market policy, the effects of political decisions on the labor market are relatively easy to predict because they are directly linked to employment or training offers for specific (groups of) persons and can directly decrease the number of unemployed. Such a decrease is quantitatively predictable. In the case of employment policy, i.e., a policy aimed at reducing unemployment indirectly through an increase in public demand/spending, the financial support of private investment or a reduction in the working week/month the circumstances are different because the effects of such measures on the labor market depend on spillovers and the behavioral responses of independent (economic) agents, which can hardly be influenced politically. For instance, a reduction in working hours per week does not necessarily imply that the workforce will increase proportionately.

Even more clear is predictability in public (old age) pension policy. In this case, using known demographic structures and actuarial calculations, it is statistically simple to measure the future financial consequences of a new regulation.

4. Furthermore, the majority of unemployed people do not see unemployment as a problem determining their lives but as a transitory phenomenon.

4.4 INTERDEPENDENCIES AND POLICY BOUNDARIES

In the case of labor market policy, further fundamental challenges appear, reflecting some of the characteristics of policy-politics interdependencies. On the one hand, effects and feedbacks from other policy sectors are harder to assess than in other areas—for example, public pension policy. This is due to the fact that labor market policy does not have clear boundaries. Instead, it is characterized by shifting boundaries in relation to education, early retirement, (urban) regeneration, or family policy. On the other hand, dependency on economic development is more striking than in the case of public pension policy. For the latter, benefit demands are predictable against the background of a more or less stable demographic development, and pension policy is dependent on economic development only on the income side and not additionally in the short term on the spending side, as in the case of labor market policy.

Interdependencies and shifting boundaries of a policy imply more than uncertainty in policy processes in respect to predicting, planning, and taking decisions. Shifting policy boundaries are also associated with an actor constellation being many layered, many faceted, fragile, and muddled. Actors may enter or leave the arena; new linkages may evolve, loosen or even get cut; policy objectives may move, be newly established, or even abolished. Whereas this applies particularly to policy sectors like the labor market, public pension policy is an example of a policy sector in which the involvement of actors is relatively stable and the dominant policy objectives do not shift.

However, in some respects the impact of shifting policy boundaries and interdependencies can also be ambiguous. Linking a policy sector with others can strengthen it in respect to agenda setting, allocation of funding, etc. But the other side of the coin is that the more there are interlinkages with other policy sectors and the more a variety of actors are involved, the bigger the danger of blurred policy objectives that can, in turn, negatively impact agenda setting, allocation of funding, and the like. Which situation applies depends on (as discussed in section 3) the perception of problems and the definition of what a policy is or should be about, and this is the result of the objectives and interests of actors. But this is connected with a certain institutional context and a particular “feasible set” at a given point in time (see, as an example, the development of housing policy in Germany; Egner et al. 2004).

5 “POLICY INSTITUTIONS”

To exploit the explanatory potential of the just described framework for distinguishing and clarifying policy-politics relations within policy sectors against the background of John and Cole’s (2000) definition of “policy institutions” as well as the ideas of Benz (1997) inspired by an actor-centered institutionalism, mentioned before the following seems to be appropriate.

One should start from the distinctiveness of problems to be addressed in a policy sector and the particularities of effects linked to it. To do this the dimensions developed for distinguishing policy-politics offer guidance. Building on these dimensions, specific institutional settings (including their formal and informal rules) of policy sectors to be found in individual countries (or even at subnational level) and at certain points in times should be scrutinized. Through such an empirical approach, historically specific features of policy sectors will emerge, as will the relevance of core patterns of actor constellations over time and variation between countries and cities. Such constellations can be seen as *sector-specific* patterns of *policy networks* comprising of particular executive, legislative and societal organizations or actors typically involved in the development, decision making and implementation of a particular policy. Therefore, policy sectors can differ over time and by country or city, but attention should be paid to specific policy networks characteristic of a particular policy sector (for overviews about different typologies of policy networks see Jorden and Schubert, 1992; Waarden, 1992).

For instance, the kind of actors involved, as well as their constellation or the linkages between them, can differ with respect to centralization or decentralization of implementation as a result of the particular problem to be addressed (see public pension policy and social services above). Furthermore, the kind of actors clearly differs when looking at local level policies aiming at economic competitiveness or social inclusion (see Klausen and Sweeting 2005) because in the one case a limited number of highly resourced economic and public actors are involved, whereas in the other a multitude of societal actors are usually integrated beside different public ones. In these two policy sectors the ways the actors are interacting or taking decisions are strikingly different, which has without any doubt effects on how policy is made (by majority, hierarchy, bargaining, or arguing; see Klausen et al. 2005). In the field of economic competitiveness, the participation of highly resourced economic actors is decisive to achieve policy objectives and the relevance of majoritarian decision making by a representative body and hierarchical interventions by public administration officials is limited because the economic actors should not feel frustrated. Instead bargaining plays a crucial role. In the sector of social inclusion societal actors (e.g. from the voluntary sector) have limited opportunities for negotiating with public authorities. Instead, they have to convince them by “good reasons” or public argument, and majoritarian decision by a representative body and hierarchical interventions by public servants are usually crucial for redistributing financial resources, and defining and securing the claims of single individuals as well as of groups, such as disabled people.

The institutional setting embedded in policy sectors, i.e., “policy institutions” goes beyond actor constellations or policy networks, although there is a link between institutions determining a “feasible set” of choices for actors and actors reproducing and reshaping institutional imperatives.

The explanatory value of the notion of “policy institutions” is clarified by the following examples (see Heinelt and Meinke-Brandmeier 2005). Environment protection is usually characterized as a regulatory policy, but it can also rely on financial incentives or support and therefore on redistributive or distributive policies. When it comes to the application of regulatory rules hierarchical decisions by public authorities (by planning acceptances or rejections) are crucial. Additionally, the approval or rejection of hierarchical decisions can play a role. Both can be perceived as “policy institutions” determining the course of policy making in the phase of implementation of environment protection. These *sector-specific* “policy institutions” in the phase of implementation of environment protection differ from those in consumer protection, although the latter is also primarily a regulatory policy relying (as in the case of environment protection) on financial incentives or support. Consumer protection regulates relations between producer, customer, and standards of food safety. It employs therefore prescriptions subject to legal review by courts. However, a main policy instrument for food safety is labeling. This leaves the decision of buying or not buying a certain commodity (e.g., genetically modified products) to the customer, and the institution through which individual consumer choices might lead to a particular outcome (production or availability of a certain commodity) is the market or its so-called “invisible hand.”

The consequences of these two “policy institutions”—public administrations intervening (together with courts) hierarchically in society in the one case and guidance and control through the invisible hand of the market in the other—for politics are obvious—for example, looking at room for political maneuvering for civil society. Whereas environment groups see themselves in an unfavorable situation because they are forced to transform their ecological reasoning into a legal argument and mount protests (which do not usually impress public administrations or courts), consumer protection groups are in a better position because they can try to influence consumer choices by public reason and persuasion—the heart of their repertoire of political actions (for more detail, see Heinelt and Meinke-Brandmeier 2005).

If we take particular institutional setting and policy-specific networks in the way outlined above, then Lowi’s thesis “policies determine politics” makes sense insofar as characteristics of policy processes can be related to institutional settings and actor constellations typically involved in the development, the decision making, and implementation of a particular policy.

6 CONCLUSION

To realize what Lowi's thesis intended, namely to offer a basis for the development of a "policy theory" by a typology of policy-related structural features, three points are crucial. First, Lowi's orientation to policy choices and its focus on microanalysis has to be broadened by reflections on a macro level. Second, the systematic distinction of perceived problems as well as policy outcomes has to be taken further. The reflections on different dimensions for distinguishing policy-politics relations (see section 4) offer some progress in this respect. Third, specific "policy institutions," i.e., "a particular policy arena [with] a [certain] set of formal and informal rules that determine the course of public decision making" (John and Cole 2000, 249), should be analyzed to answer the question why they allow for policy processes with certain characteristics—and not for others. Although such an analysis would be empirical and historically oriented, options for generalization are not impossible per se. On the contrary, options for generalization are mostly available and should be more strongly used.

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