Analyzing Public Policy

The fully revised and updated new edition of this textbook continues to provide the most accessible overview of the main approaches in the study of public policy. It seeks to review the most common and widely used frameworks in the study of policy analysis:

- institutions
- groups and networks
- society and the economy
- individual interests
- ideas.

The book explains each one, offers constructive criticisms, and explores their claims in the light of a variety of American, British, and European examples.

Arguing that no one framework offers a comprehensive explanation of public policy, John suggests a synthesis based on different aspects of the approaches, introducing concepts and approaches of advocacy coalitions, punctuated equilibrium, and evolution as more effective ways to understand public policy.

Combining both a clear summary of debates in public policy and a new and original approach to the subject, this book remains essential reading for students of public policy and policy analysis.

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Analyzing Public Policy, 2nd Edition
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My main debt of thanks goes to Craig Fowlie at Routledge. He first suggested at the International Political Science Association meeting in Quebec in 1999 that I write a second edition of *Analyzing Public Policy*. But it took a very long time for Continuum to release the rights, and then there were the usual obstacles that authors encounter when producing books. The impacts of these delays have been interesting, revealing much about the field and me. Back in 1996 and 1997 when I was writing the original book, scholars in public policy were racing ahead with new frameworks of punctuated equilibrium and policy advocacy coalitions. With such a momentum of change, there was a risk the field would have changed so much during the intervening period that I would have to conceive a new structure for the book. The surprise is that, bar the large expansion of interest in interpretative policy analysis, there have been relatively few innovations in the theory of public policy since 1998, or at least not as many as there were in early 1990s. So I have concluded that the current state of the field allows me to retain the original structure and logic. I have been able to present the main approaches to public policy in five core chapters before arguing for synthetic theories. Naturally I have rewritten quite of lot of the book, mainly updating the citations, introducing new debates, and downplaying some issues that seemed more important in 1998 than they do now. I have also sought to introduce more material from mainstream political science, for example, from comparative political economy and recent studies of Congress, showing more links between the study of public policy and wider research programs than I did before, partly so that I keep abreast of the fast-moving world of political science and partly to imply that public policy scholars should do the same. But it is satisfying that the core argument remains plausible while the book sums up the latest thinking.

The main change over the intervening years has been in my own experience and outlook. I have developed much more of an interest in research methods and design. As a result I have endeavored to do more rigorous research, for example, by using randomized controlled trials in the evaluation of public policies, and I do fewer case studies and interviews than I did before. So it felt odd coming back to a book I wrote with a different intellectual sensibility. I was tempted to rethink the overall intellectual framework and mode of reporting the research, but on reflection I considered that the structure and approach still works well, largely because it already presented an argument in favor of more analytical treatments of public policy.

I am also sympathetic to the likely readers of this book. I have had a lot of positive feedback from readers of the first edition, or at least the critics have mainly held back. The main reaction I got from students and others was that the book was clear,
approachable, and pleasantly free of jargon. Even though some of the ideas and arguments are complex, the first edition was a genuine introduction to the field and one anyone could read with profit. I thought it would be a great shame if I spoiled this. In any case, Routledge has allowed me freedom to follow my current obsessions in my new book on the tools of government, *Making Policy Work* (2011), in which I argue for better research designs and randomized experiments.

One aspect of the first edition that did attract criticism was its application of evolutionary theory to public policy. I published a paper on local government taxation that drew on the book’s arguments (John 1999). This attracted a critical commentary (McConnell 2000, Dowding 2000) to which I replied (John 2000). I also had a chance to develop my position in another paper (John 2003), in which I refined my ideas and reflected on how to apply them. For these reasons the evolutionary coda to this book is more cautious in its claims than before. But it remains there nonetheless.

I have used this book for teaching master’s courses in public policy. Any writer benefits from the critical attention of bright students who ably dissect their work, and I was no exception. Their reactions not only prompted me to redraft some passages, but also helped me rewrite the text with an audience in mind, which is always a valuable corrective for an author. So I thank these students. I am also very grateful to friends and colleagues who have read the new edition or parts of it and made very helpful comments: Paul Cairney, Louise Chappell, Stephen Greasley, and Nick Turnbull. In addition I greatly appreciate the work of Kay Caldwell, who edited the manuscript for me.
Acknowledgments to the first edition

I am very grateful to the series editor, Jules Townshend, and commissioning editors, Nicola Viinkka and her successor, Petra Recter, for their encouragement and support during the writing period. I am also grateful to Alan Harding for suggesting my name as an author in the series.

Chris Bailey, Alistair Cole, Keith Dowding, Dilyse Hill, Bryan Jones, Helen Margetts, David Owen, and Hugh Ward took the trouble to read and comment on some or all of the draft chapters. The book has improved markedly as a result.

I would like to thank the students in my public policy classes who responded both positively and skeptically to the ideas presented in the book. The best students attended my Policy Making in British Government course in 1993–4, which I taught at Keele University. This class showed me that teaching policy can be fun.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my debt to Elisabeth Meehan, who introduced me to the study of public policy while I was an undergraduate at the University of Bath.
1 The study of public policy

The challenge of the policy-orientated approach

The study of politics is not just about elections, parties, and the behavior of politicians: it includes a wide range of public decisions. In democratic political systems, public office holders make choices about such diverse matters as the allocation of budgets, the enforcement of laws, and the introduction of new technologies. Then key personnel from the public and private sectors seek to influence these decisions and help carry them out. Even though most of these activities pass unnoticed by the media and the general public, the policies governments produce are probably more significant for ordinary citizens than the effervescence of much political debate. While highly profiled subjects, such as stories of political corruption, the personalities of political leaders, and changes in opinion polls, are important aspects of contemporary political life and deserve attention, citizens are more likely to be affected by such prosaic matters as the quality of education in schools, the performance of the economy, the efficiency of the public healthcare system, and the state of the sewage disposal infrastructure. Even though the activities of political leaders have meaning and significance in their own right, they need to achieve outcomes that the general public cares about.

Research on public policy seeks to explain how decision makers, working within or close to the machinery of government and other political institutions, produce public actions that are intended to have an impact outside the political system. The subject focuses on the decisions that generate outputs, such as transportation policies, the management of a public health service, the administration of a school system, and the organization of a defense force. No less important is how these decisions produce intended or unintended changes outside the formal political system, such as the effective use of transportation, rising levels of health, good educational performance, and effective defense in wartime—what are sometimes called policy outcomes. Researchers in public policy aim to explain how public decision making works, why societies get the policies they do, and why policy outputs and outcomes differ from place to place and across time.

The field of public policy encompasses the operation of the political system as a whole, whether in the neighborhood, city, nation-state, or international society—or across these arenas. That is public policy’s main contribution to political science. A policy-orientated approach examines public decision making from the viewpoint of what concrete actions come out of the political realm. It considers how each element in policy making can cause a particular output and outcome. Public policy researchers study decision making in a policy sector or subgovernment, such as agriculture or
energy, and observe the differences and similarities between these areas of activity and others. Each sector has all of the elements of a political system in miniature. It has identifiable participants: interest group representatives, bureaucrats, elected politicians, lobbyists, experts, and the interested general public. Even though the participants operate within complex institutional structures of voting systems, legislatures, courts, bureaucracies, and public agencies, as they negotiate and seek influence in various arenas and territorial levels, they usually relate to one principal field of activity. Thus one of the purposes of the policy-orientated approach is to sharpen up the analysis of politics by examining the links between decision makers as they negotiate with each other and seek influence over public actions that have consequences outside politics.

Because of the breadth and depth of policy studies, the subject has the capability to transform both the topics and the methods of political science. The focus is less on discrete fields of political activity, often occurring within political institutions. Public policy scholars pay particular attention to the links between different decision makers, the many people and organizations concerned with public policy, whether in public or private bodies. Because public policy crosscuts many aspects of politics, the task of explaining decision making requires theories that connect such diverse activities. The same theory needs to cope with such contrasting activities as the salience of public opinion, the operation of the legislature, and the detailed application of public legislation. In order to capture the scope of the subject and the varying types of activity, analysts of public policy often adopt a more open and multidisciplinary approach to their subject than other political scientists. To theorize about policy making, writers use insights from sociology, the study of organizations, management sciences, economics, law, and psychology, as well as specialist knowledge from their policy sector, whether it is, for example, housing studies, criminology, or educational research. Policy-orientated research uses methods attuned to the highly variable relationships that occur within the decision-making process. For example, network analysis, the study of links between individuals and organizations (see chapter 4), is well placed to understand the complexity of policy making. While there are many difficulties that arise from studying the complex pattern of relationships between the decision makers, groups, and publics, the potential is for a richer account of political life than more discrete and institutionally defined research topics can offer, such as studies of voting behavior or political attitudes, and is much broader than studies of the internal management of public organizations.

The origins of the subdiscipline

The neglect of the study of public policy in political science was partly due to the dominance of the North American behavioral social science. Scholars in the US—and many in Europe—tended to examine readily observable phenomena, such as voting in legislatures and party strategies to win elections, usually the inputs of the political system. With their concern to study easily measurable behavior, researchers isolated the sociological and cultural determinants of voting, party systems, and the organization of political parties, and assumed these phenomena reflect the political traditions of each country, such as the experience of war or the progress of economic modernization. Behavioral social science sought to understand the particular constellations of social structures that produce the form of voting, interest group interaction, or type of party system under study. The political system was usually
looked at as part of a chain of events leading from social change to political behavior. With some notable exceptions (for example, Lasswell 1951), policy appeared as a separate and less important activity occurring at the end of the process.

The belief that the discipline of political science left out the most significant aspects of political life created modern policy studies. It is true that the study of public administration had always been important. In the UK, for example, scholars had long examined the structure of the civil service and the means whereby Parliament sought to scrutinize the executive (for example, Chester and Bowring 1962, Walkland 1968). There had also been much research into the organization of local government (for example, Robson 1948). In the United States of America too, there had been a long and productive tradition of studying public administration, particularly after those in the reform movement of the early years of the twentieth century proposed neutral administrative structures to overcome the excesses of party politics. Yet these studies tended to concentrate on the procedures of administration rather than on the practice of policy making in sectors like agriculture or health. Traditional institutionalists investigated the details of administrative decisions, but they were more concerned with the search for political accountability and the efficiency of the procedures of government than in explaining decision making. Writers rarely mentioned the word policy. Even the quantitative study of public administration is more concerned with the internal practices of bureaucracies rather than decision making generally. Partly as a result of this gap, scholars found a need for a subdiscipline or field of research to comprehend the totality of public decision making and to investigate the complex links between inchoate public demands and detailed implementation of policy choices.

It is no coincidence that the study of public policy emerged at the same time as most Western states expanded the scope of their responsibilities. While the twentieth century saw the rapid expansion in the range of activities undertaken by governments and an acceleration of the proportion of national income taken up by taxes and government expenditure, the 1960s was the period when the rate of growth accelerated. In the late nineteenth century the state had taken responsibility for many public goods that the market could not effectively provide, such as sanitation and public health. After 1945, it extended its reach to economic policy and to combating unemployment. But it was in the 1960s that public action expanded to encompass antipoverty programs, efforts to combat racial discrimination, policies to improve public healthcare, and many other measures. The US, for example, started to emulate western European states by introducing and implementing some far-reaching social policies. Lyndon Johnson, after he was elected president in 1964, persuaded Congress to introduce the Great Society programs and the War on Poverty. Other Western states also increased public expenditure and strove to ameliorate public problems, such as urban deprivation and racial disadvantage.

The new policies stimulated political scientists to study aspects of politics that were hitherto thought to be unimportant, such as the new agencies and procedures for administering these programs. Moreover, for a time social policy issues dominated electoral, presidential, and legislative politics in the US. In the 1960s, it became more plausible to believe that public action could solve perennial social problems, a view that reflected the optimism and confidence of the decade. Just as US governments could put human beings in space, so they thought they could eliminate social problems. The optimism affected the social sciences and convinced scholars that
research could contribute to the success of public action. Part of the stimulus for the policy-orientated approach was the belief that all of the disciplines of the social sciences could contribute to the grand project of socially aware public intervention. Governments became eager to deploy the insights of research when designing responses to public problems. As a result, in the US and later in Europe, policy-orientated research institutes were established, and the employment of political scientists in government became fashionable. Research councils and professional associations sponsored conferences and publications on policy matters (Parsons 1995: 28). The new subdiscipline of public policy came into being.

Even though the interest in the Great Society programs waned after the election of President Nixon in 1968, the association of politics with policy grew in the 1970s and 1980s, partly because experts and advocates got more involved with decision making and took a more prominent public role. If the optimism stimulated the initial involvement of political scientists in public policy studies, it was the perceived failure of many 1960s programs that led to a more critical and analytical approach. The conventional wisdom about the policies of the 1960s was that, in spite of all the effort and money that went into them, they did not achieve their objectives. These programs were even supposed to have adverse effects, often the opposite of their original intentions (Moynihan 1969). In response, public policy researchers wanted to know why these policies failed, and in order to do that they had to devise models and theories of the policy process. Even though some of the self-confidence of public policy researchers waned in the 1970s and 1980s, interest in the subject grew largely because it is so hard to solve public problems. The challenge of explaining policy failure was intellectually stimulating even though it was politically depressing.

Reflecting the importance of the subdiscipline, mainstream political science research itself has become more policy orientated. For example, the study of elections has established that the public votes consistently on policy matters rather than just according to party affiliations and class loyalties (Heath et al. 1985, Clarke et al. 2009). The policy role of Parliament is examined in several studies (for example, Judge 1990). The US Congress is the subject of many investigations of its policy-making machinery and the way it processes public issues (for example, Cox and McCubbins 2005). The European Union, a topic that was formerly the purview of lawyers and institutionalists, has become the object of the policy-orientated approach (for example, Richardson 1996, Wallace et al. 2010). The Union has a highly decentralized and fragmented set of decision-making procedures that public policy analysis is well placed to analyze. The interest in policy has grown, as represented by journals (for example, the European Journal of Public Policy, the Journal of Public Policy and the Policy Studies Journal), the numbers of books with the word policy in the title, and textbooks with the mandatory chapter on the topic—as well as many courses, particularly at postgraduate level.

Today the interest in public policy extends from the practitioner world of government and public agencies to subject specialist areas, such as studies of crime and health, and across to the academic discipline of political science. Governments still implement policies but do not know enough about why they are successful or fail. Bureaucrats and experts struggle to understand the complexity of the decision-making arenas they are involved with. Political scientists are trying to retreat from their ivory towers of abstract theory to show the relevance of politics and decision making for the wider society—the impact agenda.
Policy sectors

The concept of policy weakens some of the certainties in the discipline of political science. The variability of policy making challenges the unitary character of modern states and other political organizations, an assumption upon which much of political science rests, particularly in Europe with its strong national governing structures. National-level analysis predominates even in federal countries, such as analysis of Congress and the president in the US. Once researchers relax the assumption of a singular or unitary political system, they can observe the different kinds of political actors and institutions in a policy area in all their complexity. The type of issues, the pattern of bargains, and structures of opportunities and constraints within each sector create particular types of politics that may or may not resemble those implied by national political traditions and constitutional norms, and may extend across institutions to other levels of governance at the subnational level or in supranational institutions. One key claim of policy studies is that the relative influence of politicians, bureaucrats, and interest group representatives differs according to the sector of activity, whether it be, for example, health, education, or transportation. Each policy sector varies by the extent to which actors cooperate to achieve their goals. The policy sectors are also different in the way decision makers can achieve outcomes and whether success or failure of a policy feeds back into the rest of the political world. The policy-orientated approach shows that the practice of decision making, the balance of power, the type of outputs, the likelihood of policy success, and the specific beneficiaries are often a function of the type of activity public action seeks to regulate. For example, health policy produces a certain type of relationship between professionals and politicians because of the specialized and technical nature of healthcare. Politicians find it very hard to regulate medicine because they lack expert information, something they seek to overcome, often by reforming the institutional and legal framework.

Policy sectors vary according to the instruments and resources available to decision makers. Instruments, for example, can have a variety of forms: they can be legal, that is, laws that compel people and organizations to do things; financial, allocating funds to encourage or penalize organizations and people; institutional, creating rules to facilitate coordination and effective decision making; organizational, applying bureaucratic power to solve problems; informational in transmitting encouraging signals to individuals and organizations; or the property of a network that allows those at the center to persuade others to achieve its goals (Hood 1986, Hood and Margetts 2007, John 2011). Tools to manage the environment are very different from those used for agriculture, for example. The environment is difficult to legislate for because it is harder to influence outcomes. Because of the size of the problem, the environment involves many more organizations and participants. There are contrasting local, national, and supranational dimensions to environmental problems. In contrast, agriculture involves a smaller number of interest group representatives, mainly farmers and representatives from the agricultural industry (although other groups, such as environmentalists and health professionals, are becoming much more important in recent years). It is relatively easy to apply financial instruments to achieve limited policy goals, such as encouraging the cultivation of more land and protecting rural incomes (though farming problems are now much less easy to solve with crises of overproduction, poor hygiene, and the growing concerns about the wider environment).
The breakthrough in the study of public policy was Lowi’s 1964 and 1972 articles that distinguish between different types of policy making. Lowi distinguishes between distributive politics of subsidies and tariffs, which is characterized by logrolling (interest groups trading-off costs and benefits with each other) and a passive form of executive leadership; the constituency politics of boundary changes and electoral organization; regulatory politics, such as the control of competition; and redistributive politics, which is more ideological in character, producing policies like progressive income taxes. The type of activity affects how groups and branches of government interact, thus creating the four subsystems. Lowi’s formulation challenges writers who argue that US policy making changed with the evolution of its political system, from the unregulated politics before the 1930s to the federal intervention of the New Deal. Lowi argues that several types of politics, all involving different relationships between the different levels of government, coexist at the same time.

Several writers doubt the distinctions Lowi proposes and detect a more messy reality. There is no empirical verification of his classification, partly because no one can agree on what counts as the various types of policy making and the typology is difficult to apply (Heidenheimer 1985). Some writers believe Lowi’s scheme better describes types of democratic systems and forms of elite behavior rather than explaining variation according to policy sector (Peters et al. 1977). Peters et al. find that consociational and depoliticized democracies (regimes characterized by long-term coalition politics) produce regulative and redistributive policies. More fragmented systems have distributive policies. Countries with homogenous political cultures and competitive elites, such as those with two-party systems, formulate regulatory policies. Lowi’s scheme seems better able to describe differences across countries rather than within them.

However, it is not the exact application of Lowi’s typology that is important. What is crucial is his argument that each policy sector should be studied in its own right and has a unique politics of its own, and this is what triggered a different approach to studying public decision making. So today, instead of books about education, crime, and the economy being written solely by educationalists, criminologists, and economists, students of public policy also write books on these topics, such as on the politics of education, the public agenda of crime, and the electoral constraints about managing the economy (for example, Klein 2006, Baggott 2007). It is the characteristics of decision making and the impact of political factors, such as the prospect for reelection on the behavior of incumbents, and relationships with interest groups, which are important rather than just the technical issues of, for example, educational performance, crime detection, and predictions of economic growth. Each sector has a unique combination of technological attributes, problems to be solved, demands of managing the policy, and combinations of producer and consumer interest groups that conflict or cooperate to achieve common or group-based goals. There is also variation caused by the history of past decisions and programs that affect current policy choices.

Instead of elaborate typologies, Lowi’s schema has stimulated the policy subsystem approach where group interactions and the formation of coalitions are studied in each sector (see chapter 4). Though always important, the concept of policy subsystems became central in the study of public policy in the US. Instead of institutions, like the presidency and the Congress, acting as one block, there are groups of decision makers in each policy sector drawn from congressional committees, the executive branch,
interest groups, analysts, and political consultants. Scholars found it easy to find subgovernments in other contexts, such as the UK (Richardson and Jordan 1979).

The way in which decision making differs according to policy sector can be summed up by the aphorism “policy determines politics” instead of the more intuitive “politics determines policy” (Lowi 1972). Party competition and constitutional traditions are not the only factors that affect public decisions, as relationships within a policy sector influence the type and degree of party competition and the extent to which bureaucrats or ministers have power. The direction of causation between policy and politics is thus two-way.

**The search for causal mechanisms**

After the pronouncement of the importance of outputs of government at the end of the 1960s, analyses of public policy multiplied. Researchers hoped that public policy would take off as an integrated study of politics by applying all the disciplines of the social sciences to explain public action and recommending improvements to public decision making. However, in spite of the expansion of the subject, no unified paradigm emerged to organize research. Instead, there are many approaches and a range of methodologies. Trends and approaches fall in and then out of favor with an endless succession of concepts and labels. A particular approach becomes the currency of the subject, only to be replaced by a new one a few years later.

The lack of unity to the study of public policy reflects the nature of the research topic. Public policy is hard to research effectively as it is a composite of different processes that crosscut most branches of government and involve many decision makers. The task of investigating decision making in policy sectors is also highly complex (Greenberg *et al.* 1977). There are many types of policies. The same policy differs according to the different branches and levels of government where it is being decided. There are subsets of issues within policies, and areas where policy fields intersect. Moreover, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference between policy outputs and outcomes.

Because of the difficulty of doing policy-orientated research, many studies are descriptive. It is often enough just to map all the relationships and the roles of the different organizations, which can offer insights about the nature of a particular set of problems and relationships, for example, about public interventions in cities as in urban policy. Much policy-orientated work, especially in Europe, reports policy making in particular fields, such as health (for example, Ham 2004, Weissert 2006) or housing (Malpass and Murie 1999, Schwartz 2006). Researchers in public policy gain insights from secondary documents and interviews with key decision makers without using an explicit theoretical framework, and they often achieve this task admirably. The caution of much research is understandable and is an indication of the difficulty of the overall project.

To make sense of a complex and changeable world, metaphors have become important devices for explaining public policy. Examples include medical problems and their solution, with terms such as *disease, prevention,* and *treatment* to refer to activities policy makers engage in (Hogwood and Peters 1985); dinosaurs and their habitat to explain policy reversals in economic policy (Hood 1994); and a policy virus to describe unstoppable ideas in transportation policy (Dudley and Richardson 2000). Though often useful, metaphors sometimes disguise explanation and hide the
complexity of the relationships rather than illuminate them. Researchers also use a bewildering array of labels to try to explain policy making, and these, too, tend to be descriptive rather than explanatory. Examples of technical terms, which perhaps promise more than they can deliver, are *issue networks, guidance mechanisms, front-end policy making, epistemic community, feedback, policy style,* and *policy-action framework.*

To understand these relationships further, researchers have often elaborated a framework or an account of behavior, which is a set of labels or a learning device that helps researchers understand the policy process. In this enterprise the task of social science is to invent a conceptual scheme or to create signposts, mainly to assist the investigator’s understanding of what is going on. Frameworks or accounts are simplifications of the complex real world that can illuminate what is happening. Although frameworks have their use, researchers need to be aware that they often tend to be descriptive rather than explanatory. There is the risk that the application of concepts could just turn into elaborate redescriptions of the intricacies of decision making, the equivalent of “spraying on” theory, or applying a set of labels, rather than testing a model or a set of implications. Frameworks often turn into elaborate metaphors.

Further, much of public policy research evaluates decision making in governments and public bureaucracies. These studies tend not to assess causation but the effectiveness of policy instruments and interventions, and this is a different branch of study (see John 2011). Moreover, there is a strong normative element to the study of public policy, and this can confuse the aim of explanation. For example, some forms of policy analysis explicitly investigate techniques that could improve decision making (see chapter 2). The funding of much policy research by practitioner bodies, such as government departments, charities, and local governments, can also limit the search for causal mechanisms. Effective policy analysis, however, needs to know how policy works. If reformers do not understand causation in public policy, they cannot know if their proposals for changes in decision-making procedures will work or not. Often the inability of policy makers to implement their policies stems from their failure to infer the correct causal model between what they decide to do and what is likely to happen on the ground (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973: chap. 2), and many of these links are as much about efficient policy making as about what happens in society and the economy. The failure of public polices may be due to feedback from the policy intervention to the decision-making procedures themselves.

The expansion of policy-orientated research has also compartmentalized the subject within political science, which is ironic given the ambitious aims of the subdiscipline and the expansion of policy research in mainstream political science. By conceiving a sphere of action supposedly at the end of the decision-making process and by making it the province of public policy, researchers have tended to neglect the central debates within political science and to develop a language of their own. Public policy researchers have focused too much on implementation and policy analysis as discrete forms of activity (see chapter 2), and researchers less often seek to explain precisely the operation of the complex pattern of political relationships and to understand the interactions, bargains, and conflicts within policy sectors, which happen right across the arena of public decision making from voting to delivering the policy to the citizen. Well-developed theories of political action and rigorous empirical tests should be at the center of policy studies. In political science, the methodologically sophisticated academic work that has characterized the study of elections, electoral systems,
congressional roll calls, and party competition needs to be the normal form of analysis in the study of public policy.

It is encouraging that since the 1990s, research on ideas, agendas, policy analysis, and coalition formation pushed forward the subject (see chapters 7 and 8). For example, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) combine interests and ideas in what they term the policy advocacy coalition framework. Policy advocacy coalitions are alliances of interests cemented by common forms of policy analysis and ideas within a policy sector. The framework tries to explain policy change and stability as well as policy variation (see chapter 8). Since the 1990s the policy agenda’s account of policy change and stability, which developed from the analysis of US politics (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2009), now dominates the study of public policy (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). It started from the idea of bounded rationality, whereby policy proceeds at a slow pace from which radical departures may be made. It now seeks to expand the analysis to incorporate the role of institutions and different ways of making policy. These works, though not without their problems, echo the theme of this book that the insights of political science need to be brought more to the center of the study of policy whereby the analysis will incorporate all the key variables affecting policy choices. Key to innovation is the use of better methods to measure and analyze political attention to policy issues. For example, data collection and research on policy agendas has expanded beyond the US to incorporate most developed countries (see policyagendas.org, <http://www.comparativeagendas.org/>).

While lauding the recent adoption of methods and forms of analysis from political science, this book accepts some of their limitations in the study of public policy. Although the goal of explanation is laudable, it is often difficult to test a causal model in the complex field of policy making and implementation. The practice of decision making rarely arranges itself in a manner suitable for the testing of hypotheses. It is difficult to find experimental conditions to uncover the exact relationships between variables within the political system, though there are some solutions to this problem. The other problem is that association and correlation between variables are easy to find. They appear explanatory, but they can in fact be spurious because they are caused by some other factor not accounted for or impossible to measure. Or the analysis is just atheoretical, with social scientists adding an explanation afterwards. It can be hard to know what the direction of causation is between the factors under study. Many causal relationships are hard to observe because of the imperfection of research instruments. For example, much interview-based research can confirm the views of the participants and records how they justified the decisions in which they participated. Some social scientists believe the research process itself is theory dependent because researchers find the facts they are looking for. Investigators design research that embodies assumptions about the world and thus produces results within that frame of reference. Moreover, the subjects of research, individuals, are conscious and to an extent autonomous, so their responses can reflect and respond to circumstances, as individuals seek to gain understanding from their experience, moving them forward from what might appear to be set patterns of behavior. The contingency of the empirical world suggests that particularity and trendless variation are the norms, rather than the regularity assumed in social science theory. Making generalizations is thus fraught with danger.

The difficulty of doing research does not mean social scientists should always fall back on description. The researcher has to make sense of chains of causation, appraise
the other possible worlds of counterfactuals (Hawthorn 1991), weigh up the importance of pieces of information, and revise explanations and theory in the light of new discoveries. Political scientists should not despair that they do not have all the conditions and methods of natural scientists. They can theorize and test hypotheses, providing they are careful about their research design and infer correctly from the results of their studies. By avoiding looking for explanations of a lawlike nature, political scientists instead can look for mechanisms which show the links in a causal model: “By concentrating on mechanisms, one captures the dynamic aspect of scientific explanation: the urge to produce explanations of ever finer grain” (Elster 1989: 7).

The approach of this book

Public policy scholars need to be explicit about the aims of their research. This book suggests there are two main sets of phenomena students of public policy generally seek to explain: policy variation and policy change, each with two aspects. There are other questions public policy asks, such as: Which policy is more effective? What is the cause of policy success and failure? And, how democratic and accountable is public policy making? However, the four problems here are the most basic and fundamental ones. Satisfactory answers to these can help with the others.

Policy variation

Differences between policy sectors

Given the importance of spheres of activity, such as education, health, or defense, it is essential to understand how and why policy making differs between sectors. Is power concentrated in the hands of a few decision makers or is it dispersed? Is it the case that professional groups and trade unions dominate some sectors of activity whereas others have more input from elected politicians and lobbyists representing consumers? The implication is that a few powerful interest groups may drive policy in one sector whereas in another there may be more people involved and more innovation and change. The other question concerns the relative impact of the nature of the activity on the decision-making process. It may be the case that, irrespective of political culture and institutional history, policy making takes the same form in a particular sector.

Differences between places

Just as policy making can be compared between sectors, so there are similarities and differences across places. Often the way a sector is governed in two different nation-states is quite distinct. Education, for example, is administered centrally in France and less so, at least in the past, in the UK. The difference reflects particular state traditions and the principles underlying political systems, say between a centralized or statist tradition in France and a parliamentary tradition in the UK. In the former case, decisions were made by central ministries and national groups partly in a top-down approach; in the latter, decisions were made by locally elected local authorities with the Department of Education taking a supervisory role. It can be argued that the
pattern of policy making depends on important political events occurring perhaps
many centuries before. For example, the evolution of the state after the French
Revolution created a particularly strong form of public intervention in France. In
contrast, the gradual adaption of the British constitution from monarchy to constitu-
tional monarchy to parliamentary democracy may have created a limited government
and a balanced constitution. The policy researcher needs to know how important
these factors are compared to contemporary demands of public opinion and the
evidence from experts, and to probe beyond the conventional wisdoms. The same
argument applies to spaces below the nation-state, such as cities and rural areas, or
to regions at the international level. The institutionalist approaches discussed in
chapter 3 explore the comparative dimension further.

Policy dynamics

Policy stability

Policy making in sectors like agriculture or transportation policy often changes rela-
tively slowly. The same policy makers dominate decision making for long periods
of time, whether it is the bureaucrats in a ministry or the representatives of powerful
producer interest groups, such as doctors in health policy. For long periods of time,
policy can reflect the long-term interests of an established elite. Public policy theorists
need to ask why policy making is stable. Rather than accept a particular style
of decision making as the natural order of things, researchers should aim to
find out what keeps certain decision makers influential and why participants in the
policy-making process agree on what the policy problems and the means for their
solution are.

Policy change

The reverse of policy stability is policy change. Why do policies emerge? Why does a
stable period of decision making sometimes give way to flux and unpredictability?
Why does a political system enact a major policy change, such as decreasing spending
on welfare or abolishing performance management? For example, why is it the case
that at one point in time pollution control was hardly practiced, but in the following
decades it became a major component of public policy (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith
1993: 13)? Do the origins of change lie in human agency or socioeconomic forces?
Do political institutions allow policy makers to adapt and to innovate?

To explain variation and change, social science seeks to understand the influence
and interaction of social, economic, and political factors within which individuals
make decisions. Studies of public policy are no exception when they explore the con-
fluence of factors that shape public decision making. This book argues that the way to
explain how political systems make and implement policy is to specify the interests,
resources, interrelationships, constraints, and norms of the actors under study. Each
arena will have different constellations of these decision makers, and their relation-
ships can change or be static over time. The question to answer is how to come up
with an overarching explanation that can account for these four features of public
policy. This involves a consideration of methodological issues, which are briefly
addressed in the following section.
Methodological issues

In social science there are disagreements about what are the main causes of behavior, and political science is no exception. Researchers usually locate their investigations within one type of understanding or theoretical perspective, which this book calls an approach. Although they complement each other, sometimes they conflict. The argument of the central chapters of the book is that there are, broadly, five political science approaches that can help explain how policy is made and implemented. Each approach claims to explain why policies differ between policy sectors and countries, and why some policies are stable and others change, though typically most researchers only address one of these problems at a time. Though the relevant chapter outlines and explains each approach, the following is a brief summary.

1. Institutional approaches: the view that political organizations, such as parliaments, legal systems, and bureaucracies, structure public decisions and policy outcomes.

2. Groups and network approaches: the claim that associations and informal relationships, both within and outside political institutions, shape decisions and outcomes. At its most refined, the group approach turns into the idea that networks of relationships between actors determine policy outputs and outcomes.

3. Exogenous approaches: the assertion that factors external to the political system determine the decisions of public actors and affect policy outputs and outcomes.

4. Rational actor approaches: the claim that the preferences and bargaining of actors explain decisions and outcomes. This is often called rational choice.

5. Ideas-based approaches: the view that ideas about solutions to policy problems have a life of their own. Ideas circulate and gain influence independently or prior to interests in the policy process.

Each of these approaches offers compelling accounts of the policy process and some make claims to be the theory of public policy. Institutional approaches examine the constraints that political actors face, and take account of the norms and habits of policy making in different political systems and policy subsystems. Group accounts analyze alliance building, networking, and mobilization in public decision making. Exogenous accounts focus on the importance of socioeconomic factors, both in terms of practical constraints on action and as ideologies. Individual actor approaches, as investigated by rational choice theory, investigate the preferences and choices of the actors themselves in the situations they face. Ideas-based approaches appraise actors’ beliefs and conceptions about policy.

In some ways these approaches or theories offer self-contained worlds from which to view the policy process. Institutional approaches stress that rule-following within an institutional context is the key feature of political systems and is the main explanation of policy variation, stability, and change. Institutions become all-embracing because they carry norms embodied in constitutional rules and conventions. Group approaches focus on the associational relationships that circumvent institutions and define the roles of bureaucrats and other policy participants. In its most extreme sense, the group approach sees every action as an expression of group dynamics whether operating within or outside political institutions and bureaucracies. Exogenous approaches
stress the primacy of the world outside the policy-making system, in particular pressures from the economy and society, and explore the salience of power structures that maintain economic and social relationships. In individual actors approaches, the policy process is about bargaining between individuals. Institutional arrangements also result from bargaining between decision makers at some previous time point but become embedded to constrain current policy choices. In the ideas approach, individual motivations, group dynamics, and institutional frameworks flow from the intentions and beliefs of the participants in the policy process.

Policy researchers can choose an approach to situate their analysis. It is possible to subordinate all political action to one principle, and some writers do this, for example, by thinking that all public policy is a reflection of socioeconomic processes. But the more common approach is to assume one set of causal processes is dominant while the others assume a lesser role. For example, exogenous approaches can include as part of their explanation the idea that institutions shape how the state responds to economic change. The exogenous argument is that institutions cannot militate against economic forces in the long run.

Though the approaches usually coexist in political science at the same time, they have also emerged in reaction to each other and as responses to the failures of earlier accounts of policy change and variation. Thus the institutional approach was the traditional way in which political scientists understood decision making in the first half of the twentieth century, and this approach had the advantage that it corresponded with the formal arrangements in political systems. Group approaches, which became more prevalent during the 1950s and early 1960s, emerged in reaction to the limits of institutionalism. Associational political analysis was able to give a more realistic account of the everyday practice of decision making than formal accounts. The network approach, which became popular in the 1980s and 1990s, continues the theme. Institutionalists in the 1980s countered by reasserting the importance of the state and the salience of routines in politics. Exogenous approaches emerged as a reaction to the failure of political science to appreciate the context in which public policy is made and were particularly in favor in the 1960s and 1970s. In turn, social scientists reacted against the neglect of politics in social and economic approaches, a feeling that in part fuelled the interest in individual-level approaches in the 1980s. The interest in the influence of ideas in the policy process reflects the growing importance of debates about norms and discourse in the social sciences. In the 2000s, there is a move to encompass a broader account of the foundations of human action, one which can encompass individual-level analysis but acknowledge the constraints on rational action and the importance of norms and ideas.

Though in dialogue with each other, the approaches may also be self-referential paradigms based on assumptions about the possibilities of human agency, the effect of structures, the meaning of power, and the nature of public authority. If these concepts are contested there can be no unified or agreed-upon research program that connects together approaches or theories in public policy. Indeed, the organization of the central parts of the book suggests a relativist epistemology. There can be no test or refutation of these theories. This, however, is not the case. Though it is possible to use the approaches as ways to generate useful frameworks for investigating the policy process, especially if a particular set of relationships is prominent in one context, only an integrated framework, one that utilizes important insights from all of the approaches, can fully explain the variety and complexity of the practice of policy.
making and implementation. The approaches are not rivals; they can complement each other and be part of the explanation.

However, policy making and implementation is more than a varying amalgam of institutional, group, socioeconomic, individual, and ideas-based processes. There is a danger, once again, that simply blending the approaches into a multitheoretic framework will just describe decision making, not explain it. The approach would be over-determined, rather than parsimonious. It would always account for what occurred in any situation in terms of the interaction between the five elements. Instead, the form of explanation needs to be a theory that integrates the five approaches in such a way that the causal relationships between them are clear. The book suggests that individual-level approaches as explored by rational actors have the potential to offer a better explanation of policy than the others, partly by using individuals as the building blocks and seeing the world as a series of past, present, and future choices. Its advantage is that it is a theory of action and motivation within a structural context. Some of the other approaches can be refined by the insights of rational choice, such as group approaches. Other accounts, such as the institutional and exogenous approaches, when analyzed carefully, are really constraints on—rather than reasons for—political action, and so become frameworks of analysis rather than theories. The book argues that the individual actor approach as elaborated by rational choice theory is capable of linking action to structure by explaining how agents respond to a range of constraints, and more problematically, the theory seeks to understand how actors seek to shape those constraints. Rational actor models provide a convincing account of causation because they have an explanation of human action but at the same time utilize what is best from the other approaches. Thus an individual-level explanation can incorporate the role of institutions, groups, and political and socioeconomic factors, as well as look at individual choices. In that sense rational choice is the most cogent theory on offer. It also offers models the researcher can test, even if in the end the research would like to relax some of the assumptions of rational action and accept that individuals face information costs and seek to economize on the use of information. Other approaches or ways of integrating the five approaches may tend to generate frameworks of analysis that can be helpful but lack coherence overall and only allow us to understand the impact of just one variable in public policy, whether it is institutions or interest groups, for example.

But as becomes apparent by the end of the book, the genie in the bottle is ideas. If ideas independently influence political action, they do not just reflect prior individual interests or dissolve into constraints. If argument and discourse shape the preferences of the actors, it is not possible to understand policy decisions simply as the consequence of interests. Once this line of argument is accepted, the project of founding an explanation of public policy just in terms of individuals making choices within structures fails, because the nature of those individuals and the importance of the structures are shaped by ideas and discourse. While the book is sympathetic to the importance of ideas, it criticizes an ideational approach that does not adequately theorize about the importance of interests. The challenge is to come up with a theory of public policy that accepts that individuals seek to follow their interests but understands that they acquire ideas about how to do so.

The solution the book considers is to specify the relationship between ideas and interests in an evolutionary theory. Evolutionary theory is relevant because ideas continually emerge about how to solve public problems, such as crime, poor
educational performance, and traffic congestion. These ideas, however, do not exist in a vacuum. To form and to be successful they need advocates, what are called *policy entrepreneurs*, people who invest time and energy in pushing for policy change and who can provide public goods. These entrepreneurs can be politicians, bureaucrats, experts, or interest group lobbyists who stand to advance their careers if the policy idea is successful. Similarly there are actors who defend the ideas of the established interests that are expressed in current policies. These entrepreneurs are bureaucrats, experts, and interest group lobbyists, with the difference that they stand to lose if their ideas do not find favor. The evolutionary approach links ideas and interests because one cannot survive without the other.

Evolutionary theory does not imply beneficent progress or teleology. Instead, the rapid and contingent nature of change, the frequent obstacles to cooperation, and the limits to human capability mean that contingency and chance play an important role in explaining policy choices and in accounting for the salience of certain ideas. In the policy process there is a continual debate and struggle for the success of ideas and their attendant interests. What causes policy variation and change is the way in which certain ideas are selected. Ideas emerge either from a policy entrepreneur’s skill at advocacy, for example, or from chance conjunctions of people and events or from a favorable environment. The various factors that affect the success of a policy are covered in the five approaches, but an evolutionary theory can synthesize them and give a plausible explanation of policy formulation and implementation. The attraction of the theory is that while it gives prominence to ideas, interests are dominant because, out of the range of possible ideas, they are the ones that cohere with the pattern of interests and the structure of constraints that emerge at any one time and place. In this sense, evolutionary theory is an extension of rational actor models. This is a controversial position to take, and the book examines various criticisms of it and seeks to make a plausible defense.

**The plan of the book**

The task of the five main chapters of the book is to engage in an argument for and against each approach. The chapters set up each approach as clearly as possible. Then the discussion highlights the variations within each one, shows how it has developed over time, and then elaborates the main weaknesses. In the course of the argument, each chapter contains an outline and criticism of the use of the approaches by some of the key writers, concentrating on three main examples from the literature.

After the five expositions and counterarguments, there follows a chapter discussing frameworks that synthesize the other five, including evolutionary theory. In the light of the five approaches and the different types of synthesis, the concluding chapter contains a review of the extent to which approaches to public policy can explain policy variation and change. The book aims to show (a) the limitation of an approach based on just one perspective and (b) that explanations in public policy need to synthesize these approaches in the way that evolutionary theory does.

The text draws on policy making in local authorities, in national governments, and in the European Union, and selects examples from across a range of policy sectors, such as urban policy, education, the environment, tax, and health. There is, however, no attempt to comprehensively summarize policy making and implementation at these levels and in these sectors, since the book seeks to illustrate or advance arguments
rather than to comprehensively cover the variety of decision making. For more detail on the policy-making process, particularly in country contexts, there are many other texts (for example, Savage et al. 1994, Mullard 1995, Dorey 2005, Peters 2006).

The examples selected come from the policy-making environment in economically developed liberal democracies, particularly Britain, France, and the United States of America, with examples from Sweden, Canada, and the European Union as well as other parts of the world. The implication of the book’s argument is that the five approaches and their synthesis are applicable in any time or place as institutions, groups, exogenous forces, rational actors, and ideas are likely to be present in various combinations wherever policy is being made and implemented. The book, however, does not show this, and readers need to make their own judgments about the applicability of the book’s framework to contexts other than the three economically developed liberal democracies it mainly discusses.

The book tries to avoid jargon but this is an impossible objective as the subject comes laden with technical terms. These are often ordinary words which writers render obscure by placing the term policy in front (for example, policy window, policy learning, and policy mess). The book uses some of them because they are the common language of scholarly debate. But when they appear, the text tries to give explanations of their meaning. As a fail-safe, there is a glossary of technical terms at the end of the book, although even here it is difficult to avoid using some technical terms that are needed to explain others, so creating a circle of jargon.

Before the treatment of the approaches and theories, the following chapter contains a summary and criticism of traditional models of the policy process. The book needs to cover them and to question the idea that policy proceeds in discrete stages. By abandoning the convention of dividing policy into separate elements, researchers can more readily embrace approaches that understand the policy process as a whole. Readers who do not need to be convinced may skip to chapter 3.
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