Contemporary Approaches to Public Policy

THEORIES, CONTROVERSIES AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY
B. Guy Peters and Philippe Zittoun

INTERNATIONAL SERIES ON PUBLIC POLICY

International Series on Public Policy

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Printed on acid-free paper

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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

In the first roundtable focusing on contemporary approaches to public policy at the 2013 International Public Policy Conference, one of the participants described the field of policy sciences as populated by "warring tribes." While the degree of conflict among different approaches to policy can easily be exaggerated, a number of important, and at times contradictory, approaches are commonly used when studying public policy. These approaches offer alternative explanations for policy choices and provide a range of means for understanding the consequences of those policy choices. The approaches have different intellectual backgrounds and epistemological assumptions associated with different ideas about the dynamics of policy, so that the same set of data about policymaking may be perceived in quite different ways.

These various approaches often tend to ignore each other as much as they conflict with each other. To a degree this is a function of the perspectives of the different academic disciplines involved in policy studies. More surprisingly, some of this mutual indifference is the consequence of differ-

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ent epistemological approaches in the same discipline. The case of Political Science, one of the most important disciplines—which considers public policy to be an entire sub-discipline—constitutes a relevant example of this indifference. Within the field of public policy, we can identify more than ten different approaches which are relatively indifferent to each other.

From a scientific perspective, this indifference is problematic because discussion, even if it is apparently divisive and contentious, can help to guide hypotheses, concepts, empirical observation, understanding, and conclusions and can ultimately help to produce knowledge that is more rigorously logical. To borrow a term from Karl Popper, the testing and argumentative exchange around a theory can help to consolidate its "scientificity."

This book proposes to contribute to this debate between approaches by focusing on political science approaches to public policy. Therefore it tends to largely ignore the importance of economic analysis, ethics, and substantive fields such as public health (as it concerns public policy). If this selectivity is in some ways limiting—given that other disciplines do have a great deal to say about policy—we consider it a first step which, by restricting the universe of discourse, offers a real opportunity to open up the debate.

To better understand the policy field in political science, let us first present a quick mapping of the different approaches that have been developed. The tendency of these approaches to policy to ignore one another may be understood firstly in relation to fundamentally different purposes in studying policy. We identify two different dimensions which produce an initial conception of the difference in Policy Studies. The first dimension distinguishes the key object of the studies: policy versus policy process.

This first dimension, which we call "Policy Analysis," attempts to study policy itself as an object and to produce understanding and normative knowledge for the policy process. A Policy Analysis study generally tries to identify the different elements which compose public policy—for example, instruments, problems, causes, consequences, laws, decisions, public concerns, and so on—to understand the link between them or/and to propose some new connections. Inside Policy Analysis, we can group different subcategories like "Policy Design," which contribute to produce "clear connections between the assumed causes of the problem being addressed, the instruments used to attempt to remedy this situation, and an understanding of what desirable outcome would be" (Peters 2015, p. 2). We can also include "Policy Evaluation," which proposes to produce normative knowledge between the outcomes and the outputs and the goals of policy. Policy Analysis, which has been widely developed in the USA since the

1950s, is exclusively produced not only by researchers but also by practitioners and experts.

The second dimension, the one that we call "Policy Process Studies," aims at producing knowledge on the policy process itself to enable us to better understand the dynamics of policymaking and the different factors which play a key role in its development. These kinds of studies are very interested in the different elements composing the whole process—like problem agenda-setting, decision-making, policy formulation, implementation, and so on; and they focus on the normative and causal link between them. In these kinds of studies, where temporality is a key dimension, there is specific attention to the role of context, of the different kinds of practitioners (bureaucrats, politicians, companies, citizen, etc.), of the different institutions, and of the different kinds of ideas and discourses, among other things. In this second category, we can regroup different subcategories like "policy-change studies," "policy-making studies," and "policy-implementation studies."

Another reason it can be difficult to define public policy is the distinction between some approaches—which consider that the theoretical dimension of understanding policy or policy process and the applied dimension of recommendations to produce advice are complementary—and approaches which consider that these two dimensions are incompatibles and contribute to biases the understanding. If, in the first approach, the purpose is to affect the political process, in the second approach, the purpose of studying public policy is most often to simply understand the political process (Zittoun 2014), as manifested in the way in which policy proposals are processed through the "issue machine" (Braybrooke 1974). This is an old debate which is present in all social sciences and can be found, for example, in the critiques produced by David Easton in opposition to Lasswell's work when the latter began to develop policy sciences. Easton spoke about two Lasswell studies—the first one, before the Second World War, aimed at creating knowledge to assist the government in understanding the elite process and the propaganda machines—and later Lasswell works intended to help the government implement the "good" decision (Easton 1950). But this difference is not only epistemological, but also influenced by the research policy of the countries involved and their relationship to political science. This is probably why we find more researchers in the second category from Germany and France and in the first one more researchers from the USA and UK.

All of these approaches are valid and can contribute to policy studies, but because they focus on different objects and different questions, they

do not necessarily connect with one another. As we suggest in the subtitle of this volume (*Theories, Controversies, and Perspectives*), the aim of this book is to present some different approaches to Policy Studies and thus promote the debates, exchanges, and mutual understanding to be gleaned from new perspectives. For this reason, we selected eight contemporary approaches (which we judged to be most commonly used in the research community) and asked the leading experts in each approach to consider not only the nature of contemporary policy studies but also paths for future research. This book therefore provides significant insight into contemporary public-policy studies and the continuing questions that arise in this field of study.

The remainder of this introductory chapter examines some basic questions found in the public-policy literature. We discuss these questions in general and then point to the ways in which specific chapters in this volume address these issues.

What Is Public Policy?

The most basic question that must be asked is, How do we conceptualize public policy and the role of the state in policy? There are probably as many different definitions as there are different authors; and the ten chapters in this book do not break this tradition that Thomas Dye (1972) already observed in 1970s. Beyond this multiplicity, the most fundamental epistemological question concerning defining policy is the extent to which it is an empirically defined phenomenon versus one that is more constructed by political and social processes. The bulk of the work done in public-policy analysis takes an essentialist position: scholars argue that the understanding of policy is constructed by political processes and its meaning is more a matter of interpretation than of essence (Zittoun 2014; Fischer and Gottweiss 2012).

The second definitional question is to what extent public policy is confined to the activities of the state—or does it also include the actions of groups and individuals that act in the name of the state or who have influence as if they were public-sector actors. At one end of this spectrum are scholars who focus almost exclusively on the public sector—although these tend to be an increasingly small segment of the population (see Bell and Hindmoor 2009)—while at the other are scholars who argue that governance (and hence policy-making) without government is both possible and desirable (Rhodes 1996; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004). If we eschew that extreme position, it remains undeniable that contemporary

public policy involves significant levels of interactions between public- and private-sector actors, whether those private-sector actors are market or non-market (Torfing et al. 2012).

There can be, and are, other definitional debates about public policy, but the study of this field has tended to be a "big tent" that has been capable of containing a range of approaches. Indeed, the diversity of perspectives and methodologies for addressing public policy within political science has contributed to the vibrancy of the field. Not only do the policies actually adopted and implemented continue to change, but so too do the intellectual approaches used to understand them. And if we include work in other scholarly domains such as economics, sociology, and planning, the research becomes even more diverse and more challenging.

Chapter 3 in this volume discusses the nature of policy and alternative ways of thinking about these actions of governments and their partners. Anna Durnova, Frank Fischer, and Philippe Zittoun in Chap. 3 examine how the definition of, and the arguments for, policy constitute a major discursive activity between practitioners in the policy process that researchers need to grasp not in order to judge the process or to propose a new one, but to understand the policy process and its political dimension.

Policy Stages

The political science approaches discussed here can be, in turn, divided into several camps; and those different camps can help to identify the modes of thinking in this discipline about policy. Perhaps the dominant strand in political science approaches to policy is to consider the policy process.[1] This concern has been central in this discipline, since before the study of public policy became institutionalized within the discipline. Legislative scholars, for example, would discuss "how a bill becomes a law," and this is what we might now call a study of formulation and legitimation of policy. The stages model of the policy process (Jones 1984) contains five stages, beginning with agenda-setting and proceeding through evaluation that became institutionalized as a standard means of understanding how the policy process functioned.

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[1] For a relatively early discussion of the process approach, see Shipman (1959). We are indebted to Chris Weible for bringing this to our attention. But the earliest and seminal work on the policy process is Harold Lasswell's analytic description (1956)

This stages model has been elaborated with specialized studies of individual process stages. One of the most notable of these perhaps was the Pressman and Wildavsky (1974) study of implementation that preceded the development of the stages model *per se,* but which clearly developed the ideas relevant to one of the stages. The study of implementation remains a mainstay in public policy and public administration, although some would argue (but see Saetren 2014) that there has been relatively little intellectual development in the field after publication of the original book and perhaps the ensuing discussion of backward mapping as an approach to implementation (Elmore 1985; Linder and Peters 1989). Evaluation research represented a second major elaboration of one of the stages of the policy process. This literature has both a more applied dimension and a more political dimension. The applied work is perhaps best represented by works such as Rossi et al. (2014) and Weiss (1972) that provided insights into the techniques of evaluation, as well as some of the difficulties encountered in this research.[2] The more political evaluation studies (see Vedung 2013) emphasized the particular political obstacles to evaluation and the manner in which evaluation could be used within the political process. Both lines of research, however, pointed out how important understanding the consequences of policy interventions was for government, and for the society being served by government.

The third area in which the basic policy-process model has been elaborated significantly has been in the study of agendas and agenda-setting. This area of research began with first identifying the importance of agendas for the outcomes of the policy process, and later began to elaborate dimensions of agendas and mechanisms for setting agendas (Cobb and Elder, 1972). In addition, this literature identified the need to define policy problems and the importance that particular definitions of those policy problems may have for the outcomes of the process (Dery, 2000; Payan 2006). The agendas literature has further developed in the punctuated-equilibrium model, which will be discussed in some detail in Chap. 6.

Beyond the research on the separate stages, one principal consideration of researchers is to understand the link between the different stages. If Charles Jones is relatively uncertain and presents the five steps more as heuristics

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[2] Although being identified here as political science, a good deal of the evaluation literature actually might be located more appropriately in sociology, using methodologies better developed in that literature and focusing on social problems that are to a great extent the province of sociology.