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Chapter 1

Introduction: Theories and Issues

The aim of this chapter is to identify the key themes that run throughout the public policy literature, and the book as a whole. We consider:

- From the old to the new? How contemporary theories draw on, or reject, the classic focus on policy cycles and ‘bounded rationality’.
- Power, agenda setting and public policy. The role of policymakers and the actors that seek to influence how policy is made.
- Governance and the power of the centre. The extent to which power is concentrated within central government or dispersed to other types of governmental and non-governmental actors.
- Individuals, institutions and environments. The individuals that make decisions, the institutions in which they operate and the socio-economic pressures that they face.
- Bureaucratic politics, policy networks and group–government relations. The importance of ‘sub-systems’ or ‘policy networks’ in which relationships form between policymakers, civil servants and other policy participants such as interest groups.
- The role of ideas. The pursuit of policy goals may depend as much on the strength of the argument, and the beliefs of the participants, as the strength of the participants.
- Stability and instability; continuity and change. Why policymaking involves stable relationships and policy continuity at one point, but instability and policy change at another.

Why do we study public policy?

We study public policy because we want to know why particular decisions are made. Why did so many governments decide to ‘bail out’ the banks, rather than let them fold, after the economic crisis in 2008? Why did many governments ‘privatize’ their industries and introduce private sector ideas to the public sector from the 1980s? Why did President Obama pursue healthcare reforms in the in 2009? Why have so many governments introduced major tobacco control policies while others, such as Germany, have opposed further controls? Why did the government introduce the ‘poll tax’ in 1989? Why did the Australian government reform gun laws in 1996 (McConnell, 2010: 149–53)? Why do countries go to war?
We study theories of public policy because we recognize that there are many different answers to these questions. These answers are based on different perspectives. We can focus on individual policymakers, examining how they analyse and understand policy problems. We can consider their beliefs and how receptive they are to particular ideas and approaches to the problem. We can focus on institutions and the rules that policymakers follow. We can identify the powerful groups that influence how policies are made. We can focus on the socio-economic context and consider the pressures that governments face when making policy. Or, we can focus on all five factors. Most contemporary accounts try to explain policy decisions by focusing on one factor or by combining an understanding of these factors into a single theory. However, there is no single unifying theory in public policy. Rather, we can take the insights from one and compare it with insights from others. The aim of this book is to outline major theories of public policy and explore how we can combine their insights when seeking to explain the policy process.

The use of multiple perspectives was pioneered by Allison (1969; 1971), whose aim was to explain why the US and Soviet Union made decisions that led to the Cuban missile crisis. Allison highlighted the limitations to ‘realist’ explanations based on treating a government as an individual with a single coherent understanding of its interests. He compared it with ‘bureaucratic politics’ accounts which focus on the pursuit of different interests in different parts of government, and ‘game theory’ accounts which focus on how each individual within the government behaves, to produce a more detailed understanding of the process (Box 1.1). Debates on the ‘poll tax’ in the UK perform a similar function. The decision to reform local taxation was a policy disaster and it contributed to the resignation of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, prompting many to consider why the policy was adopted. For example, John’s (1999) focus on the evolution and adoption of a powerful economic idea can be compared with McConnell’s (2000) focus on the role of ‘powerful socio-economic interests’. Cairney, Studlar and Mamudu (2012) explore major tobacco policy change. They ask why many developed countries had few policies on tobacco in 1950 but now have comprehensive tobacco controls which include high taxes and bans on smoking in public places. They discover a long-term process of reinforcement: the institution responsible for policy changed (the Department of Health has replaced the Treasury); there was a shift in the beliefs of policymakers and their understanding of the problem (it used to be treated as an economic good; now it is a health problem); the balance of power between tobacco companies and public health groups shifted; fewer people smoked, tobacco taxes fell and public opinion in favour of tobacco control rose; and, new medical knowledge and ideas on how to address the health risk became increasingly accepted within government.
However, they also identify the idiosyncratic elements of policymaking: short term ‘windows of opportunity’ open (Chapter 11) and policy often only changes when a number of events happen at the same time (for other examples of multiple perspectives see Parker et al., 2009; Greenaway et al., 1992; Dunleavy, 1990; Gamble, 1990; Greener, 2002; Rosamond, 2000 and Mintrom and Vergari, 1996).

In each example, we find that a range of perspectives can be brought to bear on analysis. Our task is to explain policy decisions as fully as possible by drawing on that range. For example, consider what we would want to know about the decision of a government to ‘bail out’ its banks. How did policymakers analyse and understand the policy problem? How high was it on their agenda when compared to other issues? What arguments and economic ideas do they appear most receptive to? How were the issue and the decision processed within governing institutions? Which groups were consulted and listened to most? What socio-economic pressures did they face when making the decision? Second, we consider how these questions are synthesized by theories of public policy. For example, the advocacy coalition framework (Chapter 10) would identify the banking sector as part of a powerful coalition operating within a specialized part of the political system, maintaining close links to key policymakers and making sure that their economic ideas dominate policy debates even during periods of crisis. Further, by using the language of that theory we can compare the results of one study with a range of studies (on, for

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**Box 1.1 Essence of decision**

Allison (1971) represents a pivotal attempt to compare multiple explanations for the same event. It combines discussion of three approaches to rationality: the ‘neorealist’ assumption of state rationality in which national governments are treated as ‘centrally coordinated, purposive individuals’; the use of comprehensive and bounded rationality to examine the ‘standard operating procedures’ of the organizations that make up governments; and the use of game theory to discern an overall pattern of behaviour from the rational choices of key individuals (1971: 3–7; 257). Each approach provides different perspectives to explain the Cuban missile crisis. The value of multiple explanations is that they produce different (but comparable) answers to the same question and prompt us to seek evidence that we would not otherwise uncover (1971: 249). In Allison’s case, we move from the type of explanation of state behaviour – in terms of the costs and benefits of action – that could be done by an ‘armchair strategist’ towards the pursuit of more detailed, relevant, evidence (1971: 251). Treating states as unified actors may produce parsimonious explanation, but only at the expense of more nuanced explanations based on organizational procedures, the decision-making environment and the need for all decision makers to bargain and accept compromise within government (1971: 253–4; see also Caldwell, 1977; Bendor and Hammond, 1992).
example, environmental or health policy) conducted using a similar research framework. Third, we compare the results with other theories that produce different, but often complementary, insights. Most of this book is devoted to often-abstract theories, but the ultimate aim is to help explain why decisions are made in the real world.

The general approach

Public policy is difficult to study but it is worth the effort. The policy process is complex, messy and often appears to be unpredictable. Further, the idea of a single process is a necessary but misleading simplification. When we scratch beneath the surface we find that there are multiple policy processes: the behaviour of policymakers, the problems they face, the actors they meet and the results of their decisions often vary remarkably. They often vary by region, political system, over time and from policy issue to issue. Indeed, we might start to wonder how we can make convincing generalizations about all public policy. That is why much of the literature employs the case study method just to make sense of very specific events.

However, there are well-established ways to make sense of the process as a whole. The first step is to define public policy, identify types of policy and then decide how to make the study of policymaking more manageable (Chapter 2). Traditionally, there have been two main ways to manage the study of policymaking. The first is to treat the policy process as a cycle and break it down into a series of stages such as agenda setting, formulation, legitimation, implementation and evaluation. The second is to consider a policymaking ideal – ‘comprehensive rationality’ – in which a policymaker has a perfect ability to produce, research and introduce her policy preferences. The modern history of the literature involves taking these approaches as the starting point, examining how useful they are as a way to organize policy studies, and considering how best to supplement or replace them with other theories. The main aim of this book is to identify those theories, explain how they work and assess their value. A further aim is to explore how their merits can be combined. For example, we can try to produce a single framework that combines the insights from more than one theory, or maintain the separation to encourage us to seek multiple perspectives. We might even compare the value of each theory as a way to choose one and reject another. If so, we might consider if we should choose the same theory each time, or if a particular theory is suited to particular types of case study.

The plan of each chapter is as follows. First, it sets out a key theory or concern of public policy. In some cases, such as punctuated equilibrium and the advocacy coalition framework, this is straightforward because
the theory is linked to a small number of authors with a coherent research plan. In others, the chapter describes a rather disparate literature with many authors and approaches (institutionalism, rational choice, policy transfer, multi-level governance). Or, the chapter describes an important issue (defining policy, structural factors, bounded rationality, the role of ideas and power) and outlines key concepts or theories within that context. Second, it identifies the questions that each theory seeks to answer. Third, it considers the value of each theory in different circumstances. For example, we may explore its applicability to more than one political system. Many theories have developed from a study of the US political system characterized by a separation of powers; some thought is required when we try to apply their lessons in, for example, Westminster systems (see Chapter 4). Fourth, it explores how the key themes and issues raised by each theory relate to concerns raised in other chapters. We explore the language of policy studies and the extent to which theories address the same issues, and often come to similar conclusions, in different ways. Finally, Chapter 13 brings together this analysis and explores how best to combine the insights of public policy theories.

Theories of public policy: from the old to the new?

The way that we study public policy has changed significantly since the post-war period. A common narrative of policy analysis suggests that studies began, in the early 1950s, to focus on the ‘policy sciences’ and a belief that particular scientific methods should be applied to policy analysis (Lerner and Lasswell, 1951; Parsons, 1995: 16–28; Radin, 2000). In turn, policy analysis could be used by policymakers to better understand and make decisions. This led to a focus on two related forms of analysis: ‘comprehensive rationality’ and the policy cycle.

The idea of comprehensive rationality is that elected policymakers translate their values into policy in a straightforward manner. They have a clear, coherent and rank-ordered set of policy preferences which organizations carry out in a ‘logical, reasoned and neutral way’ (John, 1998: 33). There are clear-cut and ordered stages to the process (aims are indentified, the means to achieve those aims are produced and one is selected) and analysis of the policy-making context is comprehensive. This allows policymakers to maximize the benefits of policy to society in much the same way that an individual maximizes her own utility (as described by rational choice theory – Chapter 7).
While earlier accounts took this as an ideal to aspire to (when focusing on prescriptive or normative policy analysis), it is now more likely to be treated as an ideal-type or useful departure point when discussing how policymaking really works (when focusing on descriptive policy analysis). The phrase most used is ‘bounded rationality’ which Simon (1957) coined to describe a process in which people or organizations use decision-making short-cuts rather than comprehensive analysis, and seek satisfactory rather than ‘optimal’ solutions to policy problems.

Lindblom’s (1959) theory of incrementalism emerged as both a descriptive and prescriptive alternative to comprehensive rationality. In a descriptive sense, incrementalism was a better fit with the evidence of the policy process. Decision makers did not look far and wide for policy solutions. Rather, their values limited their search and their decisions reflected decisions taken in the past. Indeed, policy analysis often involves merely solving the problems of past policies. Incrementalism also had a normative appeal for Lindblom (1959; 1979) who argued that more limited searches for policy solutions were efficient and less dispiriting. Further, existing policy represented a negotiated settlement between competing interests. Therefore, radical change would be inappropriate since it would require a government to ride roughshod over an existing policy consensus. As Chapter 5 suggests, the term ‘bounded rationality’ informs many contemporary theories and, while many follow Lindblom to identify incrementalism, others identify the potential for radical policy change.

The concept of policy cycles has a similar history. It was once employed prescriptively as a way to organize policymaking. The suggestion is that policymakers should divide the process into a series of stages to ensure policy success: identify policymaker aims, identify policies to achieve those aims, select a policy measure, ensure that the selection is legitimized by the population or its legislature, identify the necessary resources, implement and then evaluate the policy. The cycle is still employed in some policymaking circles (see Chapter 2). However, it is now generally used as an organizing framework for the study of policy. Few texts suggest that the policy process can be divided into stages unproblematically. Rather, the cycle metaphor suggests that the evaluation stage of policy 1 represents the first stage of policy 2, as lessons learned in the past form the basis for choices in the future. In other words, policymaking is a never-ending process rather than a single event. There are also distinct literatures dedicated to the study of agenda-setting, formulation and implementation stages.
Yet, fewer and fewer books begin with a discussion of comprehensive rationality and fewer authors structure their books around the cycles metaphor. Indeed, one of the most influential theories is built on a rejection of this approach (see Sabatier, 2007a: 7). Further, if you compare the contents pages of this book with those of Sabatier (2007a) and John (1998; 2012) you will see agreement on which theories and issues now deserve the most attention: new institutionalism, rational choice, multiple streams, punctuated equilibrium, advocacy coalitions, policy transfer, socio-economic factors, policy networks (and multi-level governance) and the role of power and ideas.

In this context, the aim of the book is to focus on theories of public policy at the expense of an approach which devotes a chapter to all or most stages of the policy cycle. Yet, I also demonstrate in Chapters 2 and 5 why a discussion of public policy is incomplete without comprehensive rationality and policy cycles. Most theories still draw on the concept of bounded rationality and most explore the consequences of cyclical decision making in which policy represents ‘its own cause’ (Wildavsky, 1980: 62; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 245). Studies of public policy are incomplete without this consideration of the context within which decisions are made, the limited resources that policymakers possess and their limited ability to change decisions made in the past.

**Power, agenda setting and public policy**

Power is a central concept in political science and the role of Chapter 3 is to set up the key issues. Its starting point is the ‘community power’ debate which explores different characterizations of power and the extent to which we can observe and measure it. At the heart of such discussions is the question of proof: how do we demonstrate that some are powerful and others are powerless? What is the evidence and where can we find it? For instance, power can be described in terms of reputations. It can relate to who we think or know is powerful. The most obvious illustration is elected policymakers who are, in principle, given the authority to govern by the electorate. Our aim in this context is to examine the extent to which that power is used in good faith. For example, we may examine the responsiveness of public policy to public opinion or the electoral and legal mechanisms used to keep policymakers in check. Yet, more attention is often given to the reputational power of unelected elites and organizations such as businesses and interest groups that represent business. We can see the importance of that focus if we return to the banking crisis example. Elected officials may make policy, and take heed of public opinion, but they are also acutely aware of the views and beliefs of the banking sector.
Discussions of power go well beyond Chapter 3. Most studies of public policy are based on an initial consideration of the concentration of power — is it concentrated in the hands of a few elites or dispersed more widely? In fact, it may be concentrated and dispersed. Public policy is broken down into a series of sectors and sub-sectors and most groups direct their attention to a small number of issues. Elites may dominate one sub-sector while other elites dominate others. The dominance of particular issues or aspects of policy is a key part of the study of public policy. Powerful groups often maintain their position by minimizing attention to certain issues. Policy change requires attention from policymakers and other interested participants but such attention is a rare commodity: a policymaker can only consider so many issues, a newspaper can contain only a handful of headlines and the public will only pay fleeting attention to politics. Power is exercised to make sure that important issues do not arrive at the top of the policy agenda.

This outcome may be achieved in several ways. First, issues are portrayed as not worthy of high-level or widespread attention. They can be portrayed as issues that were once important but have now been solved, with only the technical and unimportant issues of implementation to address. Or, they can be described as private issues that the government should not become involved in. Second, issues can be ‘crowded out’ of the policy agenda by other issues that command more attention. Third, the rules and procedures of government can be manipulated to make sure that proponents of certain issues find it difficult to command policymaker attention. We can find elements of all three in our banking example: the rules and regulations of banking are obscure and difficult for most of us to understand; banking rarely received critical attention when the economy was booming; issues such as banking bonuses have often been defended as a private matter (at least until governments bailed out certain banks); and, critics of the regulatory system have found it difficult (until recently) to be heard within government circles.

Governance and the power of the centre

Our discussions also relate to the concentration of power within government. Two related questions are explored throughout the book: is power concentrated at the centre of government; and, should power be concentrated at the centre of government? For example, the ideals of comprehensive rationality and policy cycles both suggest that power should be held centrally, perhaps because central policymakers are elected and implementers are not. In particular, a condition of ‘perfect implementation’ is that central policymakers have ‘perfect control’ and that the people who carry out their decisions display ‘perfect obedience’
(Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 198). Yet, this may be an inappropriate model because implementing officials may also be elected and have a legitimate and practical role in the making of policy. Or, in broader terms, a concentration of power in one place without checks and balances may be the best formula for its abuse.

The concentration of power is a key feature of discussions of federalism and multi-level governance (MLG) in Chapter 8. Both identify the absence of a single centre of government. Federalist studies identify a dispersal of power to multiple institutions and examine how they negotiate with each other (intergovernmental relations). MLG takes it one step further. It identifies a further dispersal of power to quasi and non-governmental actors and, in effect, blurry boundaries between formal and informal sources of authority. In some cases, such as the US and Switzerland, power is often devolved to a range of elected organizations. In others, power is often held by unelected quasi-non-governmental organizations (quangos), and policy is influenced heavily by non-governmental organizations. In our banking example, this might refer to the role of the central bank, which often operates independently of government, and financial regulators which are often quangos that work closely with the financial services industry.

Our main focus is on the difference that power diffusion makes to public policy processes and outcomes. MLG suggests that the process is messy: many actors may be involved at various levels of government and their relationships vary across time and policy issue. This makes policy outcomes difficult to predict because the formal responsibility for policy issues changes over time, different actors may become involved and there may be scope to influence and change policy at different stages of the process.

**Individuals, institutions and environments**

Our understanding of power also informs our explanation of policy dynamics. When we seek to understand policy change, do we assign responsibility to the individuals that make policy decisions, the institutions in which they operate or the policy conditions and the socio-economic pressures that they face? Of course, the answer is: all three. In analytical terms, it is question of structure and agency (Chapter 6; Hay, 2002: 89). In practice, these processes are difficult to separate: policy-makers act in accordance with institutional rules and their action depends partly on the nature of the

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**Policy conditions** — refers to the nature or structure of the policy environment and hence the specific problems that policymakers face. Relevant contextual factors include a political system’s size, demographic structure, economy and mass behaviour (Chapter 6).
problem they face. Yet, these concepts still have an analytical value. They help us simplify and make sense of rather complex processes, and therefore help us draw generalizations and develop theories to explain other events and processes. Further, although we may agree that policy change results from a wide range of factors, theories often devote their attention to certain aspects: institutions (Chapter 4), the comprehensively rational policy-maker (Chapter 5), structural factors (Chapter 6) and the aggregate behaviour of individuals (Chapter 7).

In each case, if our focus throughout the book is on power, we must decide who or what can possess and exercise it. For example, we may attribute the exercise of power only to individuals because socio-economic and institutional structures do not act and therefore cannot exercise power. This appears to make things simpler, but it just raises another question: how else can we describe convincingly the importance of institutions and structures? Each chapter addresses these questions in different, but often complementary, ways. The rationality approach, explored in Chapters 5 and 7, focuses on the characteristics of actors such as policymakers. It identifies a series of assumptions about how individuals think and behave and identifies how much this explains, or explores what happens if these assumptions prove unrealistic (see Box 7.2 for a comparison of comprehensive rationality and rational choice theory). Rational choice theory employs ‘methodological individualism’ or a commitment to explain socio-political outcomes as the aggregation of the decisions of individuals. The basic aim is to establish how many, or what proportion of, political outcomes one can explain with reference to the choices of individuals under particular conditions.

These approaches compare with accounts that begin by considering the nature of the policymaking environment and how it impacts on the policy process. ‘New institutionalism’ (Chapter 4) treats institutions as sets of rules, norms, established practices and relationships that produce regular patterns of policymaking behaviour. Rules can be formal, such as the rules set out in the constitutions of political systems. Or, they can be informal, such as the common norms, understandings and expectations that people develop when they interact regularly with other people.

The basic premise of structural accounts (Chapter 6) is that powerful external forces determine, or at least influence, the way that individuals or
governments make policy decisions. Or, policymakers are part of a large complex system that they have limited control over. There is a long list of examples and discussions to choose from. The socio-economic background of states may affect the size and scope of their welfare policies. There may be a strong imperative for governments to support the capitalist system and therefore the interests of the classes that benefit most from that system. We may identify the effects of ‘globalization’ – an imperative for governments to compete with each other to protect their economy and secure foreign direct investment, by reducing regulations, corporation taxes and public spending. We may explore the idea that policy represents ‘its own cause’: governments inherit massive policy commitments which constrain their ability to change policy beyond the margins; it is relatively difficult to introduce new policies and terminate others.

A combination of each approach suggests that we need to recognize the importance of structures and rules without saying that they determine behaviour. Contemporary theories of public policy address this issue by examining how policymakers and pressure participants adapt to their policy environment by, for example, using socio-economic shifts to set the agenda or ‘learning’ and adapting their beliefs to reflect those shifts (I use the term ‘pressure participants’ because not all participants are pressure or interest groups. They may also be businesses, organizations such as Universities, government agencies or different levels of government – see Jordan et al., 2004). In our banking crisis example, we can identify the immense effect that the ‘credit crunch’ had on most governments. The issue rose to the top of their agenda and put incredible pressure on them to act. While most policymakers had, in theory, the ability to choose, they faced, in practice, a situation in which their choices were limited. In many cases, governments decided not only to bail out the banks but also to alter financial institutions, signalling their intent to change the rules in which the financial services industry operated and was regulated. Yet, few governments entertained a radical overhaul of the financial sector. Instead, they worked with, and amended, the system they inherited.

**Bureaucratic politics, policy networks and group–government relations**

A focus on big government and the inheritance of policy commitments suggests that many decisions are effectively outwith the control of individual policymakers. If they focus on one issue they have to ignore at least 99 others. As a result, most policies may change very little because they receive little attention. This theme can also be found in studies of ‘subsystems’ or ‘policy networks’. Richardson and Jordan (1979) argue that policy change is generally incremental because most policy deci-
sions are beyond the reach of policymakers. The sheer size of government, and the potential for ‘overload’, necessitates breaking policy down into more manageable units. Therefore, the policymaking world tends to be specialized, with the responsibilities of government divided into sectors and sub-sectors. Policymakers devolve the responsibility for policy management within these sub-sectors to civil servants who, in turn, rely on interest groups and other pressure participants for information and advice. These arrangements exist because there is a logic to devolving decisions and consulting with certain affected interests. Policymakers rely on their officials for information and advice. For specialist issues, officials rely on specialist organizations. Those organizations trade information (and other resources, such as the ability to implement government policy) for access to, and influence within, government. Consequently, much public policy is conducted primarily through policy networks which process ‘technical’ issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public, often with minimal policymaker or senior civil service involvement. Participants tend to be specialists and we find in many fields that relationships develop between those who deliver policy and those who seek to influence it. Our aim is to establish how stable those relationships are and what effect they have on policy decisions.

The policy networks literature suggests that most public policy is processed in relatively small policy networks that often operate out of the public spotlight. However, most approaches now try to capture a change in group–government relationships since the early post-war period. We have moved from a small, insulated ‘clubby world’ to a more competitive and complex political system, containing a much larger number of groups, experts and other policy participants, which makes it much more difficult for policy issues to be insulated from attention and for groups to restrict debate. This process is the focus for three chapters in this book, all of which seek to capture the changing group–government world in different contexts and with different concepts.

The multi-level governance literature (Chapter 8) links these changes to events and decisions made by governments in the past. For example, many governments reformed their public sectors from the late 1970s in the spirit of ‘new public management’, which describes (rather vaguely) the application of private sector business methods to the public sector. Many sold off previously nationalized industries and contracted the delivery of services to non-governmental organizations. The reforms have reduced the ability of central governments to deliver public services directly. They are
now more likely to ‘steer’ rather than ‘row’, negotiating and making shared decisions with actors outwith the public sector. In countries such as the UK, the era of Europeanization, combined with the devolution of power to sub-national authorities, has further complicated the national government role. Decision-making responsibility is now shared across multiple levels of government, and with quangos and non-governmental actors. Consequently, the government is no longer able to centralize and insulate decision making. Rather, the policy process contains a much larger number of actors that central government must negotiate with to pursue its policy aims. Further, the group–government world has become much more complicated, with many groups lobbying and seeking to influence policy in multiple venues. The result is a rather messy policy process.

Punctuated equilibrium theory (Chapter 9) examines the changing group–government world to explain why political systems can be characterized as both stable and dynamic. Most policies stay the same for long periods while some change very quickly and dramatically. Punctuated equilibrium explains this dynamism with a combination of bounded rationality and agenda setting: since decision makers cannot consider all issues at all times, they ignore most and promote relatively few to the top of their agenda. This lack of attention to most issues helps explain why groups and officials can maintain closed policy communities and why most policies do not change. ‘Policy monopolies’ are created by ‘framing’ an issue in such a way as to limit the number of participants who can claim a legitimate role in the process. Groups argue that a policy problem has been solved, with only the technical and unimportant issues of implementation to address. If successful, the ‘technical’ description reduces public interest and the ‘specialist’ description excludes those groups considered to have no expertise.

Yet, in the smaller number of instances in which policymakers do focus on these issues, their levels of attention are disproportionate and their response is ‘hypersensitive’. Change comes from a successful challenge to the way that an issue is framed, by finding other influential audiences with an interest in new ways of thinking. In many cases this shift can be explained by an increasingly crowded and multi-level policymaking process. When groups are excluded at one level, they ‘venue-shop’, or seek influential audiences in other venues such as legislative committees, the courts or other levels of government. If they catch the attention of another venue, newly involved policymakers increase their demand for new information and new ways to think about and solve old policy problems. In a process of government characterized by interdependence between groups and government, and overlapping jurisdictional boundaries (in which many institutions can be influential in the same policy areas), these innovations can be infectious. The actions of one often catch the attention of others, producing a ‘bandwagon effect’ of attention and major policy change.
For the advocacy coalition framework (Chapter 10), the policy process is driven by actors attempting to translate their beliefs into public policy. Common beliefs bring people together within advocacy coalitions. In turn, different coalitions with different beliefs compete with each other within sub-systems. It identifies a complex and crowded political system and focuses on policy change over ‘a decade or more’ to reflect the importance of implementation. Widening the scope of study in this way means including multiple levels of government and a range of actors involved at various policy stages. The ACF partly represents an attempt to show how socio-economic factors are mediated by actors within policy networks. The idea is that within a policy sub-system these advocacy coalitions are not only jostling for position but also learning from past policy and revising their strategic positions based on new evidence and the need to react to external events. While many of these external factors – such as global recession, environmental crises and demographic changes – may be universally recognized as important, coalitions influence how policymakers understand, interpret and respond to them. They do so by adapting to events by drawing on their policy beliefs, and then promoting their understanding of the policy situation within the sub-system.

Overall, we have three major theories that draw on similar starting points – a focus on sub-systems and the relatively open nature of group–government relations – but take different positions on the factors that drive the policy process. The value for our focus on multiple perspectives is that each theory is applicable to more than one political system. While the ACF and punctuated equilibrium developed from studies of the US, they have been applied successfully to many other systems. While MLG developed from a study of the EU, it is applicable to other systems and has strong parallels to studies of federalism. It is therefore possible to consider the same case study from a variety of viewpoints, using each theory to draw our attention to different aspects of the same process.

In our banking example, MLG invites us to consider the deregulation of financial services and the development of policy networks of businesses and regulatory bodies outwith the public spotlight and often far removed from government attention. It may also highlight the need for governments to negotiate with (as well as, or rather than, merely compel) financial institutions to produce policy change. Punctuated equilibrium helps us track the effects of attention on policy. We can identify policy continuity when attention to finance was low, partly because long periods of growth helped groups present the policy problem as solved, with only experts interested in the technical details. Attention then rose dramatically following the credit crunch, prompting a huge number of groups to become involved in a range of policymaking venues.
Governments that had previously supported the market and deregulation suddenly came under pressure to guarantee deposits in, or buy shares in, banks to reinstate confidence and stop the major institutions from failing. The ACF helps us identify the role of beliefs and the way that they shape policy decisions. For example, we might identify two competing coalitions – an anti-regulation coalition that believes government intervention makes business less efficient, and a pro-regulation coalition that wants governments to curb the ability of businesses to take risks and regulate their behaviour to ensure particular ends (such as a cap on banker bonuses or more favourable rights for employees). We might expect that the anti-regulation coalition was relatively powerful until the economic crisis that undermined its belief system. A coalition unable to explain what went wrong may find itself out of favour with key government actors, prompting a shift in the balance of power within subsystems.

The role of ideas

As our focus on beliefs shows, policymaking is not just about people exercising power to pursue their interests. It is also about the role of ideas. A key concern of policy studies is to ‘take ideas seriously’ by recognizing the ‘symbiotic relationship between power and ideas; to treat explanations for policy outcomes as more than the mere extension of power politics or the battle of ideas’ (Kettell and Cairney, 2010: 302). This relationship can take many forms, reflecting the many ways in which we can define ideas. For example, ideas may be the shared beliefs that give people a common aim and a reason to believe that they have shared interests. They can represent the accumulation and establishment of knowledge within the political system, used to make policy decisions. Ideas may be paradigms, or the most established ways for people to understand their environment. Paradigmatic ideas are taken for granted and acted upon with little further thought. Ideas can be norms, or represent standards of behaviour that are considered to be normal and therefore acceptable. Ideas can be ideologies, or a more comprehensive set of political beliefs, used by individuals or groups as the basis for policy action. In each case, the exercise of power takes place in a context in which only certain beliefs or norms of behaviour may be considered acceptable. In this sense, ideas may represent a constraint on policy action. This understanding compares with the identification of ideas as more dynamic factors: ‘viruses’ that infect political systems; visions of political leaders used to ‘carry’ the electorate with them; or, policy proposals or new solutions that lead to policy change.

Combined, ideas represent both a constraint on, and a resource that can be used to encourage, policy change. It is this relationship between power
and ideas, and conception of ideas as sources of stability and instability, which the literature tries to capture (Chapter 11). When we examine the role of ideas, we are looking for ways to identify: (a) the beliefs or thought processes of policymakers; (b) the factors that help maintain those beliefs; and, (c) the factors that might contribute to a change in beliefs, or how policymakers think and then act. When ideas are treated as ‘viruses’ we also consider the role of the ‘host’ and the ability of existing policymakers, with established beliefs, to resist ‘infection’. Norms have a strong influence on behaviour but perhaps mostly when people exercise power to enforce them. Paradigms may represent the most established beliefs about what the nature of the policy problem is and how we should solve it, but crises also prompt policymakers to revisit, and often reject, those beliefs. In particular, Chapter 11 considers multiple streams analysis which suggests that, although the adoption of a policy solution may seem inevitable in retrospect, it requires the coming together of three factors at the same time: a problem is high on the agenda and ‘framed’ in a particular way, a solution already exists, and policymakers have the motive and opportunity to adopt that solution and translate it into policy. The relationship between power and ideas is also considered in other chapters: it is central to ‘constructivist institutionalism’ (Chapter 4); ideas are used to create a monopoly on the way that we understand policy issues (Chapter 9); and, beliefs are the ‘glue’ that bind coalition members in the advocacy coalition framework (Chapter 10).

Chapter 12 focuses on the transfer of ideas. The literature on policy transfer refers to the evidence for, and causes of, similarities in policy across political systems. This can relate to the transfer of ideologies and wholesale programmes, broad ideas, minor administrative changes and even negative lessons (when one country learns not to follow another country). Our discussion of ideas suggests that the scale and likelihood of transfer depends partly on the beliefs already held within the importing country. To take an extreme example, a capitalist and a socialist country may not find much to learn from each other about how to balance the public and private sectors or pursue economic growth. In less extreme examples, we may focus more on the rather technical reasons for the likelihood of transfer: if the borrowing country has an incentive to learn from another (for example, if they share a common problem and have a similar political system); if the policy is simple and easy to adopt; if the values of borrower and lender coincide; and, if their administrative arrangements are similar. Our discussion of power suggests that some countries may also become pressured to follow the lead of another. Chapter 12 explores the role of coercion, from the direct pressure of another country or supranational institution, to the feeling among an importing country that it should keep up with international trends. Overall, the study of transfer gives us the ability to explain not only why policy changes, but also the extent to which that change is common throughout the world.
In our banking example, we may identify in many countries some ideas that underpin policy, including ‘economic growth is a key goal’, to ideas that suggest the private sector is best placed to produce growth. Government adherence to such basic ideas can be used by economic groups to undermine policy solutions calling for a much greater involvement of the state (although most states actually regulate the economy rather extensively). Such attitudes will also influence the transfer of ideas and even the search for lessons elsewhere. For example, the UK and US rarely seek lessons on economic reform from China. Further, they might look to places such as Japan and Germany but find that their attitudes to business are different and that many lessons are not directly applicable. On the other hand, the economic example is further complicated by globalization and the interdependence between states. While governments may disagree about the solution to the financial crisis they are under some pressure to cooperate because their actions may have an effect on the actions of other governments.

**Stability and instability: continuity and change**

A central aim of most theories is to explain why policymaking involves stable relationships and policy continuity at one point, but instability and policy change at another. There is a discussion of policy continuity and change in every chapter. Policy cycle models identify decision points at which policy will change, but also that decisions made in the past constrain present options. Theories of power highlight the ways in which the powerful create or reinforce barriers within decision making, but also that these can be overcome. New institutionalism may focus on the constraints on policy change, often caused by events and decisions in the past, but also the extent to which rules and norms are challenged and reformed. Bounded rationality can produce both incremental and radical change. Structural factors are generally cited as sources of constraint, but developments such as demographic change can put immense pressure on policymakers to respond. Rational choice theory aims to identify points of equilibrium, in which there is no incentive for any individual to make a different choice, but much analysis seeks to explain the frequent absence of equilibrium and the potential for ‘cycling’. MLG identifies new sources of ‘veto points’ within political systems, but also new sources of policy innovation and diffusion. Punctuated equilibrium uses theories of bounded rationality and agenda setting to explain long periods of stasis but bursts of innovation. The ACF identifies the core beliefs of advocacy coalitions, and the parameters of policy (such as fundamental social structures) as sources of continuity, but policy learning and external shocks to the sub-system as drivers for change. Ideas can
represent paradigms that represent stability and continuity, but also new policy proposals that can be used to encourage change. We may also consider whether decision makers seek lessons from elsewhere to pursue innovation or legitimize existing decisions.

In each case, the theories only tell us that policymaking can be stable or unstable; that policy can change or stay the same. We must also establish what happens, using theoretical constructs to guide empirical studies. In other words, it is up to us to identify what policy is and the extent to which it has changed. We use multiple perspectives to help us identify and then explain that change.

The structure of the book

The book is designed to introduce theories and concepts in a particular order. Chapters 2–4 introduce key concepts and background to the study of public policy:

- **Chapter 2.** We consider the meaning of public policy, describe the main ways to identify policy types and measure change, examine the role of models, theories and concepts and examine the classic starting point of policy analysis: the policy cycle.
- **Chapter 3.** We explore power as a key concept that underpins discussion in all subsequent chapters. We derive insights from the ‘community power debate’ to consider how to define power and consider the methods to identify power within policymaking systems.
- **Chapter 4.** We consider how to define institutions and identify the new study of institutionalism. We explore the role of institutions as the sets of laws and rules that govern the operation of policymaking systems.

Chapters 5–7 explore the role of structure and agency in policy studies:

- **Chapter 5.** We consider the second classic starting point for policy analysis: comprehensive rationality. We focus on policymakers at the heart of government and consider what conditions need to be met to ensure that they have the ability to research and articulate a series of consistent policy aims and then make sure that they are carried out. Our identification of ‘bounded rationality’ allows us to consider what happens when these conditions are not met.
- **Chapter 6.** We effectively start at the other end of the spectrum, identifying the role of factors that may be beyond the control of policymakers. Lowi’s (1964) famous point is that too many people assume that policy analysis should begin with a discussion of ‘rational’ poli-
cymakers rather than the environment in which they operate. We explore the key ‘structural’ causes of policy outcomes (including the role of institutions), the extent to which policymakers are influenced by economics, the idea that policymakers inherit policy commitments and the idea that they form one part of a large complex policymaking system.

- Chapter 7. We consider the role of rational choice theory. While it appears to embody a primary focus on the role of individuals, it actually considers how they operate within structured environments. This can be demonstrated with ‘game theory’ which identifies the different ways that individuals act when faced with different incentives and constraints. Rational choice theory raises a series of important questions about the ability of individuals to ‘free ride’ (or enjoy the benefits of collective action without taking part) and how institutions can be structured to influence their behaviour.

Chapters 8–10 explore the relationships between policymakers and policy participants within policy networks or subsystems. Each chapter considers how to characterize the move from a small, insulated ‘clubby world’ to a more competitive and complex political system:

- Chapter 8. We identify multi-level governance, or the dispersal of power from national central government to other levels of government and non-governmental actors. We consider how do define governance and MLG, identify its origins in studies of the UK and EU, consider its applicability to other political systems and identify the links between MLG and other theories studying sub-systems.

- Chapter 9. We consider punctuated equilibrium theory, whose aim is to explain long periods of policy stability and continuity punctuated by short but intense periods of instability and change. Punctuated equilibrium theory is based on the study of bounded rationality, policy sub-systems and the literature on agenda setting. We explore the ability of interest groups to ‘venue shop’, or seek sympathetic audiences elsewhere, when they are dissatisfied with the way that policymakers understand and seek to solve policy problems.

- Chapter 10. We consider the advocacy coalition framework. It focuses on the role of coalitions driven by their common beliefs. Coalitions compete with each other, within sub-systems, to gain the favour of policymakers. Some coalitions can dominate the way that policy problems are understood and solved for long periods, but are also subject to challenge when external ‘shocks’ force them (and others) to reconsider the adequacy of their beliefs.

Chapters 11 and 12 consider the role and transfer of ideas:
• Chapter 11. Our basic premise is that policymaking is not just about power. Instead, we must identify how power and ideas combine to explain policy processes and outcomes. We consider how to define and identify ideas, explore the ways in which theories of public policy conceptualize the relationship between power and ideas, and outline the importance of ‘multiple streams analysis’ to capture both the explanatory power of ideas and ways in which ideas are promoted and accepted within government.

• Chapter 12. We consider the transfer of ideas from one policymaking system to another and consider the global spread of ideas. In some cases, transfer follows learning, when the knowledge of one system is used to inform policy in another. However, the transfer of ideas or policy programmes is also about power and the ability of some countries to oblige or encourage others to follow their lead. We consider what policy transfer is, who does it and why.

However, the chapters do not need to be read in strict chronological order. For example, Chapters 3 and 11 can be usefully combined to consider the role of power and ideas. Chapters 3 and 9 consider power and agenda setting. Chapters 4 and 6 have a common focus on structure and agency. Chapters 5 and 7 consider the role of rationality and agency in different but complementary ways. The role of Chapter 13 is to consider these multiple links in more detail and to consider how best to combine theories and concepts in public policy.

Conclusion

The most basic question we ask ourselves when studying public policy is: what do we want to know? The answer is that we want to know: what policy is; what policy measures exist; what measures have been taken; and how to best make sense of what has happened. In particular, we want to know what the most useful theories of public policy are, what each of them tells us, and what the cumulative effect of their knowledge is. We study theories of public policy because we want to ask why particular decisions are made, but recognize that there are many different answers to that question. The use of multiple theories allows us to examine the policy process, and build up a detailed narrative of events and decisions, using multiple perspectives. We focus on policymakers and seek to identify how they understand policy problems, how high the problem is on their agenda and which arguments and solutions they are most receptive to. We identify the political, social and economic pressures that they face when making decisions. We identify the main governing institutions and examine the rules they follow when they process issues. We identify
policy networks and the relationships between interest groups and government. We also consider the extent to which policy is within the control of elected policymakers; how much is devolved to other actors such as civil servants and groups, other types of government and non-governmental organizations.

Each chapter sets out a key theory or concern of public policy, identifies its value and explores the questions that each theory seeks to answer. It then considers, where appropriate, how each theory or concept has been applied empirically and how much it tells us about different political systems, policy areas and time periods. The role of Chapter 13 is to consider how to best combine the insights of public policy theories. Theories can be synthesized to produce a single theory or kept separate to encourage multiple perspectives. Theories can also present contradictory analysis and empirical outcomes, suggesting the need to replace rather than accumulate our policy knowledge in some cases. In other words, we may identify common questions but different and perhaps contradictory ways to answer them. While we would like to combine the merits and insights of each theory, we must also consider whether this is a process of accumulating the knowledge gained from each theory or whether the results from one approach undermine those of another. Are these complementary or contradictory explanations?
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