How do policy change proposals succeed?
Programmatic actors and discursive strategies

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In current debates on understanding policy change, there is a lack of consensus on the role of policymakers. While researchers view the role of policymakers as weak, policymakers themselves claim in their discourses to have a key role. In most contemporary policy approaches, policy actors are considered to be a factor that deepens resistance to – rather than facilitates – policy change (i.e. as veto players, Tsebelis 2002). Researchers view policy change as mainly explained by exogenous factors. In this context, political discourses stressing government capacity to reform policies sounds like an illusion to researchers.

If it was not the case in the 1950s and 1960s when the debates were focused on how to understand the decision making process (Simon 1945; Lasswell 1956; Allison and Zelikow 1999), "who governs" (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Dahl 1965), and who holds power in our societies, the emphasis on the role of actors seems to have become less important in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time the question of decision making disappeared from the research agenda to allow the broader issues of the policy process (from agenda setting to implementation) and policy change take its place. Since this period, the idea that it is not possible to observe an isolated decision without taking into account the whole process that contributes to policy change became more popular. Researchers began to consider the policy change process by widening the temporal focus to examining long-term policy dynamics (e.g., economic, technological, knowledge-based, etc.) that policy actors are not able to influence directly or to curve as well as medium-term policy dynamics by highlighting stable configurations of actors (like policy networks or communities) in order to understand the difficulties for changing policy but not policy change itself.

In most policy process research, policy change is produced by exogenous factors, thereby reducing the resistance of actors favoring stability (like veto players). This is also the case of more contemporary approaches, like those of neo-institutionalism in which policy change analysis is more focused on the constraints that limit policymakers than on their capacity to influence policy. These included the punctuated equilibrium approach (True, Jones, and Baumgartner 1999), which sought to

explain the overcoming of institutional resistance by pointing out the occasional intrusion of exogenous factors, such as changes in the macro political context or in dominant societal values; the Advocacy Coalition Framework approach (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999), which explained more important policy changes by considering changes in the broader policy context; and interpretive approaches that focus more on policy stability and the power of discourses than on the role of actors (Durnova and Zittoun 2013).

By neglecting the role of actors, these authors face increasing difficulty in understanding how politics and power work in our society and, as Hill (2014) argues, "the study of the policy process is essentially the study of the exercise of power in the making of policy" (p. 26). Furthermore, faced with this paradox, some authors in recent years have tried to reconsider the question; however, in doing so, they encounter epistemological and methodological limitations in their attempts to simultaneously consider the power of actors, the power of constraints, and the power of discourses. This is why we propose an actor-centered approach, focusing on policymakers' resources, professional and sociological backgrounds, activities, strategies, and discourses to help us to reconsider the role of specific groups of actors in the policy change process. More precisely, in this paper, we suggest that some actors are able to play a central role in the policy process and to shift those constraints limiting change precisely because they constitute collective actors sharing the same policy proposals, relying on several resources, and using successfully discursive strategies in order to build a broader discursive coalition that promotes their policy change agenda. In the first part of this paper we situate our approach in the policy change literature in order to stress its specificities. Then, in the second part, we tackle the two main analytical and empirical challenges of this approach: the analysis of the constitution of such groups of policy actors driving change and the analysis of their capacity to succeed in imposing policy change based on their proposals by following discursive strategies and building discursive coalitions.

1. Actors in policy change theories and approaches

While understanding policy change has been one of the main issues in policy studies since the beginning of the discipline (Capano and Howlett 2009), the way of taking into account the role of actors has changed. As observed in the 1950s and 1960s, when studying the policy process was more limited to examining the decision-making process, the debate about the role of decision makers was central. This debate later weakened with the shift from "decision" to "policy" studies in the 1970s. It has only been in recent decades that some policy analysis has stressed the role of specific actors in the policy change process.

From "decision" to "policy" studies: The fading of actors from empirical observation

In 1950s and 1960s, the question of decision became a core issue in Political Science in order to answer a key question: "Who governs"? It generated a broad controversy between pluralism (Dahl 1965) and elitism (Mills 1959) and led to the elaboration of a new methodology by Robert Dahl. His aim was to empirically "explore" the power of actors in action and respond to the questions: "How are important political decisions actually made?" and "What kinds of people have the greatest influence on decisions?" (p. 7). For this, he proposed observing the decision making process, specifically who initiates proposals (which become decisions) and who succeeds in vetoing a proposal

(Dahl 1965, 102). In this way, the role of actors was empirically characterized through the success and failure of policy proposals: success highlights the influence of proposal initiators and failure highlights the influence of opponents.

Juxtaposed against Dahl's approach was that of Barach and Baratz (1963), who defended the idea that focusing on decisions does not allow researchers to take into account the whole policy process and empirically examine other phenomena. For them, it was necessary to first analyze who contributes to selecting the problems put on the policy agenda and to limit the number of proposals taken into account by different actors before making decisions. They argued that cultural, economic, and technical aspects play a central role in policy decisions by constraining the capacity of actors to influence such decisions. They further argued that over-emphasizing actors who take action to initiate or veto policies and measuring their influence through the success or the failure of policy proposals leads to the underestimation of the complex web of causalities (e.g., the beliefs of a person who was influenced by another).

These important controversies on the role of actors and on how they are understood by researchers shifted in the 1970s and 1980s. The question of decision making disappeared from the research agenda to let the broader issues concerning the policy process (from agenda setting to implementation) and policy change take its place. In the analysis of policy change, two orientations became dominant. The first was to stress the role of exogenous variables (i.e., economic, knowledge-oriented, technological, political, and international, etc.) in order to explain changes in the policy process. Policy change studies tried appear more "scientific", "rigorous" and "objective," and this was due to studies that examined policy change over longer periods of time, the reification of the dynamic of policy change to a physical movement, and by revealing some invisible variables and transforming them into "causes." The second was to focus on the constraints that limit policymakers in their capacity to influence policy.

This is especially the case for the neo-institutionalist approaches. They tend to consider the middle range policy dynamic as a very stable process, a feature enshrined in the notion of path dependence applied by Douglas North to economic development (1983; 1990), then by Paul Pierson to policy studies (1993; 2004), and then widely diffused. As explained by Mahoney and Thelen (2009), "The connection between institution and persistence makes it natural for all of these approaches to focus on explaining continuity rather than change" (p. 4). In this process, the role of the actors is limited to maintaining stability and the common problem is "the focus on stability and exogenous shock" (p.5). In this way, neo-institutionalism helps to explain the conditions and timing of policy change (e.g., the emergence and diffusion of a new policy image, policy failures, or a policy paradigm crisis), but do little to explain the process of change itself, its content, and the role of policymakers in this process. Even when neo-institutionalist authors take the role of policymakers more directly into account, they consider these actors to play a role only by developing some explicit veto strategies to block policy or by using hidden strategies to discreetly and gradually change policy (Streeck and Thelen 2005), which is very different from what political discourse explains.

The punctuated equilibrium model does something similar. While Baumgartner and Jones began their work by questioning the role of actors using bounded rationality theory, it was more to grasp resistance to policy change than to explain policy change. This approach (True, Jones and Baumgartner 1999) helps to explain the conditions and timing of policy change (i.e., the emergence

and diffusion of a new policy image, policy failures, or a policy paradigm crisis), but do little to explain the process of change itself and its content.

The comeback of actors in more recent approaches

In the more recent policy analysis literature, the role of actors in policy change has been taken more directly into account in three different ways: by stressing the role of policy brokers, by focusing on political leaders, and by relating types of change agents with types of policy change in a neo-institutionalist perspective. But these approaches have not proposed a sufficient and/or a coherent actor-centered framework to analyze policy change. Approaches focusing on policy brokers are limited to focusing on the policy broker's active role in their explanations of change, approaches focused on political leadership neglect other kind of actors and the collective dimension, and the revised neo-institutionalist framework still favors the strong impact of institutions. Not mentioned here is policy network analysis because even though it is actor-centered, its aim is to explain policy stability more than policy change, the latter of which is related to contextual factors external rather than to different policy networks (Marsh and Rhodes 1992).

The role of policy brokers is examined by different approaches. It is particularly important for the advocacy coalition framework approach (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999). Policy brokers are defined as actors located outside the existing advocacy coalitions (i.e., experts) involved in a policy-oriented learning process and therefore able to shape acceptable proposals for the different advocacy coalitions involved in a given policy sector. The role of brokers involved in negotiations between different policy actors is also stressed by some network analysis approaches (Fernandez and Gould 1994). These policy brokers share some similarities with policy entrepreneurs stressed by Kingdon (1984): they are simultaneously advocates of policy proposals with extensive experience in a specific policy field and brokers with a great capacity to negotiate. But in Kingdon's analytical framework, the role of these specific actors is limited to agenda setting. More generally, the approaches that take into account the role of policy brokers are limited in their ability to explain change because the success of brokering is linked to the accepting of compromises by other policy actors. Thus, more important changes are explained by changes in the broader policy context, as is the case in the advocacy coalition framework. Exogenous factors still play a stronger role than endogenous factors as drivers of policy change.

Analysis focusing on political leaders tries to explain more important policy changes by examining the role of another type of individual policy actor. These studies (Helms 2012) underline the importance of personal, political, and institutional resources (i.e., the role of presidential institutions in then case of the US; see Skrowonek 2001). There are two main critiques of this approach. First, authors advocating this approach tend to overstress the degree of change linked to political change and to neglect the role of the context (i.e., the case of the role of Margaret Thatcher; see debate between Marsh 1994 and Moon 1995). Second, these authors neglect the fact that political leaders alone are not able to elaborate policy proposals. Thus, it is necessary to take into account the role of their staff and more generally different kind of actors influencing their policy conceptions (such as think tanks) and their allies in the policy process (Irondelle 2011). The main conclusion drawn here is that actors (even political actors) in policy change should be more deeply analyzed as collective actors than as individual actors.

A third approach that recently turned more attention to the role of actors in policy change is neo-institutionalism. Streeck and Thelen's (2005) edited volume that insisted on the gradual dimension of change has been complemented by a framework that takes policy actors more systematically into account (Mahoney and Thelen 2009). The different types of gradual change are related to four explanatory variables: the strength of veto players, the level of discretion in interpretation, the enforcement of policy decisions, and change agents and coalitions with institutional challengers or supporters. Nevertheless, institutions and the political context (veto points and players) remain the main explanatory variables in this approach, and they serve to explain the type of (gradual) change more than the content of change. The status of actors, meanwhile, is rather ambiguous; they are at once a dependent (their strategies are highly influenced by institutions) and an independent variable (in order to explain the type of change). The main purpose of the approach is to extend the typology of gradual change with a typology of change agents related to them: insurgents (related to displacement), symbionts (related to policy drift), subversive actors (related to layering), and opportunists (related to conversion). Because actors are more institutionally than sociologically defined, this analytical perspective does not propose an all-encompassing and coherent actor-centered framework. This is why we propose to develop a new kind of actor-centered approach combining sociological, cognitive, and discursive dimensions.

The actor-centered discursive perspective

Two main differences between the approach proposed here and those we discussed above should be emphasized at the outset. Unlike punctuated equilibrium, policy networks, or the advocacy coalition framework, we provide a largely endogenous explanation of change rather than one based on institutional, political, societal, or economic context. In addition, our macro and micro level approach, with its focus on small groups of individuals behaving as collective actors, can clearly be distinguished both from research strategies that take the institutional arrangements of a state as a whole as their unit of comparison and from the methodological individualism of rational choice models and of policy analysis focused on the role of specific actors (i.e., political leaders, policy brokers, or policy entrepreneurs).

This actor-centered approach to policy change builds upon two areas of scholarship. The first one is the French policy studies tradition largely influenced by sociological approaches and organization studies applied to bureaucracy (Simon 1947; Crozier 1977; Demongeot and Zittoun 2010; Hassenteufel 2008). The second one is the studies of the sociology of elites, which provides not only analytical tools to grasp the policy decision process but also methods to analyze groups of actors holding different kinds of power resources (Genieys and Hassenteufel 2012). One of the main limits of these perspectives is their neglect of the cognitive and discursive dimensions of public policy. Thus, our actor-centered approach of policy change also aims to grasp the elaboration of policy change proposals and how they succeed in the policy process by taking into account not only organizational, institutional, and political strategies but also discursive strategies. It rests on five key dimensions, framing the way to analyze collective actors in the policy change process.

First, all individual actors always have a margin of freedom, which is not compatible with models based only on constraints (Crozier 1977). This does not mean that every actor does what he wants but rather that, even under conditions where there are a lot of constraints, he can make different choices. Sociological contributions that have focused on situations with significant constraints, like the work of Howard Becker (1985), show that a margin of freedom always exists. Thus we can defend

the idea that within bureaucracies, public or private organizations, or political systems, freedom does exist. This does not mean that actors are completely free to choose any alternative they want, but rather that they always have different possible alternatives (March and Simon 1958).

Thus, actors must be considered as having "strategic capacities" to act (Crozier 1977). Even if these capacities are always limited, actors develop their own strategies to take into account constraints and develop their own actions. This "strategic" concept reveals not only the freedom of the actors, but their capacity to comprehend a situation and act within it as a function of a contingent and non-consistent situation. In this process, the actors who are faced with a major problem do not stay inactive but always in some way simplify the problem and employ a subjective method to solve it (Lindblom 1958; Lindblom and Cohen 1979). This method is nothing more than a problem-solving strategy (Lindblom 1979) and the choice of an alternative to a strategy that makes sense for the actors. The notion of strategic capacity can also be applied to collective actors and is crucial in the explanation of the success of policy change proposals.

Second, actors always act by giving meaning to their own action. Inspired by Weber (1995), this idea has been developed by Simon (1947) with the concept of "subjective rationality." Even though this concept was later transformed into "bounded rationality," Simon's early idea was to show the logical impossibility of any objective rationality to solve complex problems because of the overabundance of uncertainty in each instance of problem solving. Because making a choice between different alternatives cannot be an objective choice (i.e., one unique solution), actors always need to choose between several imperfect alternatives. Simon suggested that actors choose the solution they consider as most relevant for them and speak about "subjective rationality" to underline the importance of their own interpretation in a specific context.

Drawing on the above analytical perspective, we focus our attention on actors sharing a similar perception of a given public policy related to policy change proposals. More precisely we advance the hypothesis that collective actors can come together around a common policy change program rather than around a common interest[1] or common value. This program contains four main dimensions: a common definition of the problem they want to tackle; a common perception of how not to change policy, which can become a significant problem in the future if not dealt with sooner; a common repertory of policy measures and proposed instruments; and a common understanding of how these different instruments accomplish desired changes and lead to a new future. To the extent that these dimensions are found to exist – and this, of course, must be established empirically as was done for the case of health care reforms in Europe (Hassenteufel et al. 2010) – such collective actors can be thought of as the positive counterpart to "veto players" (Tsebelis 2002). These "programmatic actors" are not only the switchmen but the tracklayers in Weber's railway of ideas (J. Hall 1993). By selecting, translating, recombining, and, most importantly, by imposing ideas, they fulfil a genuinely creative and constructive role. It is this creative aspect that distinguishes them from the "policy brokers" or the "policy entrepreneurs" described by Kingdon (1984), whose role is to act as brokers and packagers of policy ideas as we have seen, but not to create them.

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[1] As suggested by Easton, using the concept of "interest" is problematic because it creates confusion between an objective perspective of interest and a subjective perspective of interest depending on the meaning the actors give to their own interest, which can further depend of the context of the situation. For example, it is not uncommon to observe two actors in a same position as having different perceptions of their interests.

Third, the question of social recognition and identity is central for the actors (Honneth 2000; Mead et al. 2006) and we must take into account all the distinctive activities that contribute to this process and that require conflict and opposition as often as agreement and identification with a social or political group (Edelman 1988). During each action, the actors build and expose their identity and it is not possible to distinguish the action from the person who does it. It is the reason we use the term "actor."

From this perspective, we put forward the hypothesis that being the promoter of policy change proposals and their successful entrance into the policy process produces social recognition. In the case of health care reform (Hassenteufel and al. 2010) a study of programmatic actors in various countries was conducted and a common desire to gain "autonomy" vis-à-vis powerful actors (such as former policy elites, interest groups, or cross-sectoral actors, including ministries of finance) was identified, as well as the wish to be "taken seriously" by these same actors and the need to meet targets set by political leaders (who were careful to specify only ends but not means). Taken together, these findings are consistent with the hypothesis that actors compete for legitimate authority, which is a permanent incentive for policy innovation in large part because of the "prestige" that comes from being the ones that shape policy (Genieys and Smyrl 2008).

Fourth, we cannot distinguish thinking from discourse for each actor in a sense that any thinking needs language which is always expressed as a discourse (Habermas 1987) and any observer needs discourses to grasp thinking. As Foucault suggested, the concept of discourse is more useful than the concept of thinking, ideas, or representations in the sense that we only can empirically grasp the discourses of actors, which always associates discourse to real social activities (Foucault 1971). In this way, an actor's discourse can be considered as the foundation of knowledge and thinking where meaning takes place and form "in action" (Wagenaar 2011). When an actor chooses an alternative, he does not only have to think in his mind subjectively to find his choice, but he also has to generally "justify" his choice in a social, organizational, and political context (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991) and, because actors anticipate this justification as being necessary in many cases involving the policy-making process, the ability to justify an alternative becomes one of the key factors in shaping the actors' choice (Zittoun 2014).

Fifth, while the policy-making process needs to be conceptualized as a succession of interactions between collective actors, we must consider that the constitution of these collective actors, like programmatic actors and/or discursive coalitions, is problematic. As shown by many studies on collective action, like the prisoner dilemma or Olson's work (Olson 1978), building an agreement between individual actors is complex and it obligates them to make concessions in term of freedom and identity. Crozier suggested that conflict and the limited coherence of any coalition of actors is the cost of this agreement. By taking into account this hypothesis, we take collective actors sharing policy change proposals not as a "fact" or a logical result of the aggregation of people that share the same interests (like in NIMBY theory) or the same values (like in the Sabatier's ACF), but rather as a complex and costly construction that requires agreement between actors who are always free to not cooperate. This is why we cannot consider any collective actor as a coalition or a network with a unique goal, purpose, interest, discourse, or common action. The agreement between actors must be taken into account as a result of individual activities and not as a fact that drives action.

The constitution of collective actors driving change is therefore the first analytical challenge the approach has to face. The second one is explaining how the policy proposals that bring collective policy actors together (sometimes) succeed.

2. Operationalizing the actor-centered discursive perspective

Our main argument here is that tackling these analytical challenges requires combining the programmatic perspective based on sociological approaches (Hassenteufel et al. 2010; Genieys and Hassenteufel 2012, 2014) and the pragmatic perspective based on discursive approaches (Zittoun 2014).

The sociological analysis of programmatic actors

The programmatic perspective takes its main inspiration from the sociology of elites. More precisely, it focuses research in the manner of Laumann and Knoke (1987) on internal domains of state activity, each with a distinctive policy history. Looking at what happens inside these policy domains requires quantitative data about the wins and losses of interest groups, or even entire civil societies, when competing with policy elites (Kriesi and Jegen 2001). Second, qualitative data about the intellectual programs of elite groups in specific policy domains and how they evolve over relatively long time periods are required. There is a need, in short, for a method that uncovers the complex connections between the constitutive elements of policy actors – their social backgrounds, occupational careers and specializations, formal position-holding, reputations for policy influence, and not least shared ideas – with what they actually do when reaching decisions that produce policy change. The notion of programmatic actors rests on two premises: (1) the importance of considering professional trajectories in public policy domains over extended periods and (2) the importance of competition in the framing of public policies. The concept relates the content of policy programs to the formation of collective policy actors with distinctive sociological and intellectual characteristics. It supposes that the transformative power of policy actors in specific policy domains is derived from programs for policy change and from resources (such as professional knowledge/expertise and location in key power positions) sufficient to decide and even implement change proposals. Unlike "policy brokers" in the advocacy coalitions sketched by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999) or by Fernandez and Gould (1994), the influence of programmatic actors on the policy process is linked to their occupational backgrounds. The focus is on actors' career trajectories (in order to understand the accumulation of resources, i.e. their capacity to change a public policy), their cognitive frameworks and policy change proposals (in order to understand the orientation and content of change they promote), and their interventions in the policy-making process (in order to understand the nature and the scope of their change action).

Thus studying the constitution of programmatic actors involves five main steps. The first is to identify actors who may belong to an elite group in a given policy domain. This means selecting a population of actors who hold positions plausibly linked to important decisions in the policy domain being studied. Second, individuals need to be identified who, over time, have held several powerful positions in the domain. Third, the extent to which careers of all those identified have been similar or disparate in contours and trajectories is investigated. Fourth, the extent to which occupational socialization appears to have spawned a group identity based on reciprocal esteem and interaction is assessed. Fifth, the extent to which the identified individuals have espoused a distinct intellectual

program over a significant period of time is judged in terms of four dimensions: (1) objectives or general policy goals; (2) shared formulations of problems to be solved and diagnoses of how this should be accomplished; (3) widely articulated arguments and reasons that justify preferred policy changes; and (4) agreed measures and instruments to accomplish the changes.[2]

In the programmatic perspective the power of policy actors sharing certain characteristics that allows them to constitute themselves into relatively homogenous groups focused on specific sets of sectorial policies is characterized by three kinds of resources: (1) a collective intervention in the policy-making process based on a common professional trajectory; (2) an active presence and influence in loci of intellectual reflection about sectorial policy ideas and reforms; and (3) the capacity to institutionalize their authority by placing themselves in new positions of power created by implementation of policies they advocate. In order to capture both the capacity of these programmatic actors to transform policies according to their policy change proposals and the ways in which, in turn, these policy changes affect their structure, position, and power, two aspects are explored. First, the ways in which these specific policy actors have intervened in the policy-making process – for example, through proposals for change or the provision of new tools for implementing change – must be investigated. Thus, it is necessary to precisely study its members' interactions with other actors and groups in the policy domain over at least a decade's time (especially veto players). The other dimension is the analysis, over the same time period, of the content and the implementation of policy decisions in order to understand how they affect the position and the power of these actors and determine the intensity of the policy change. In this perspective, two dimensions play a key role in explaining the success of some of the proposals put forward by programmatic actors: (1) the nature and level of resources (knowledge, institutional position, legitimacy and degree of acceptance of the proposals, degree of fit between the proposals and the problems they promise to solve) compared to those of other actors defending the status quo (veto players) or other policy change proposals (concurrent programmatic groups) and (2) the strategies followed by these actors, often based on a policy learning process concerning not only the nature of the main problems in the policy fields but also the policy tools (content, potential impact, way of implementation) and the formal and informal rules structuring the interactions between the different actors of the policy field (strategic policy learning) (May 1992).

The pragmatic analysis of discursive practice

Inspired by Charles Pieces and developed by William James and John Dewey, the pragmatic philosophy emerged in the begin of 20's essentially in USA (Frega et Gabaret 2015; James, Madelrieux, et Ferron 2011). Opposed to the Kantian theory wish is distinguish the thinking and the action or the Cartesian philosophy distinguish the internal world of thinking from the external universe, this philosophy proposes to consider thinking from its consequences on external world. Challenging the ontological distinction between inside and outside, thinking and acting, object and subject, unity and plurality developed by analytical philosophy, this philosophy open a new way to understand the social world. Inspiring Chicago's school of sociology as so as author like Laswell

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[2] Identifying a policy change program empirically must satisfy two requirements. The first is that discursive materials in the form of media interviews, reports, speeches, and points of view voiced in political or administrative bodies, press releases, articles written in the specialized and non-specialized press, though not of equal importance, form a coherent intellectual corpus. The second requirement is that the intellectual corpus emanates from a specific locus – universities, laboratories, conferences, official commissions, think tanks, discussion forums, reports, advisory bodies, private agencies, and/or international institutions.

(Lasswell 1971), this philosophy has an important influence on policy studies, specifically on the problem definition process and problem agenda setting (Dewey 2010, James 2016). Since twenty years, this philosophy known a renew in USA but also in France with the emergence of pragmatic sociology of authors like Luc Boltanski and Bruno Latour. In public policy, some authors begin to develop a pragmatic perspective too (Schubert, XXX; Zittoun, 2014).

To better understand the pragmatic perspective in social sciences in general and in Public Policy, we can consider five main characteristics (Barthe et al. 2014). First, the pragmatic perspective is an empirical and comprehensive scientific approach, which considers as essential the inquiry work at the micro-level to observe, to describe and to understand the logic of the actors' concrete practices. This empirical inquiry focuses on the concrete activities developed by actors in situation with a specific attention to their discursive practices.

Second, this approach gives a great importance to the cognitive, discursive and analytical skill of the actors to define concepts and situation, to argue, to develop strategies, to discuss, to persuade and to convince, to build agreement and disagreement with other, to give meaning to their purpose, to adapt themselves to the different contexts, etc. It takes seriously into account the knowledge devices that actor mobilized as an essential but deforming filter to confront themselves to the reality. It is clearly inspired by the Weberian comprehensive and constructivist perspective which consider that behavior is link to the subjective meaning actors gives to it,

Third, this approach rejects the classical concepts and distinction used by social scientists to grasp social phenomena to focus on this distinguish work developed by the actors themselves in their practices. For example, It rejects the distinction between subjective and objective or between private and public to focus on the way the actors themselves make and use this distinction. They also reject the idea to define a "problem", a "public", a "solution" or a "policy" focusing on the definitional work developed by actors to give meaning to this concept. They challenge too the opposition between macro and micro by using a micro-level observation even to grasp the macro phenomena through the concrete practices of actors.

Forth, this approach rejects the distinction between discourse and practice but also between idea and interest considering that the idea is a discourse which can't be separate from its user and its enunciation. They challenge the idea to analyze a discourse by itself to privilege the discourse integrated in the social practice it is enunciated. This perspective speaks about idea "in action" or "meaning in action" to challenge all analytical tools which proposes a separate or an isolate analysis of the idea and of the practices.

Five, this approach considers as essential the inquiry, the experiment and the test developed by the actors themselves confronted to uncertainty. To define concept, to analyze situation, to make new proposal, to argue, the actors investigate to produce them and also test them inside interactions which challenge them through the critiques. During this challenging process, their definition need to "resist" which implies to argue but also to adapt. As Boltanski explains, the pragmatist sociology proposes to describe the social world as the trial scene during actors in incertainty make inquiry, quote their interpretation in report, etablish qualification and accepted to test themselves (« La sociologie pragmatique a entrepris de décrire le monde social comme la scène d'un procès au cours duquel des acteurs en situation d'incertitude, procèdent à des enquêtes, consignent leur

interprétation de ce qui se passe dans des rapports, établissent des qualifications et se soumettent à des épreuves » (Boltanski, 2009, p. 48)).

Taking into account all this five characteristics, the main task to develop a pragmatic approach of policy making consists to grasp the path of the policy proposal from its emergence as an "idea" to its transformation into a "decision" through the observation or the reconstitution of the scenes where the proposal is discussed, criticized, challenged and/or propagated. These scenes can be a public scene like through media or in the parliament but also in the dark inside or between the multiple institutions which want to influence the proposal. Based mainly on policymakers' interview or on observation, the main idea of this approach is to reconstitute the main scene when the proposal knows a new step, a new form, a new transformation.

Open the black box of the policy process: from programmatic actors to discursive coalition

We must also take into consideration, as Dahl (1961) and Lindblom (1968) suggested, that, before being transformed into a decision, each policy proposal follows a complex path from the hands of the few individual actors (such as the programmatic actors) who initiated it to a broader coalition that supports it. If we consider that the agreement of people and the career of proposals are not linear or logical but tortuous and the result of costly agreement, we must also work on the linking process between building coalition and propagating policy proposals. In other words, at the beginning of the process there are very few (programmatic) actors and at the end there many more. We need to follow the enrollment process through which new people arrive to join a discursive coalition and express support for the proposal itself in order to assess the implications of the enrollment process. When we observe different policy making processes, one of the main activities of policymakers during these processes is to have discursive interactions like argumentation, discussion, persuasion, negotiation, conviction, opposition, etc., on policy proposals (Majone 1989; Fischer 2003).

Theories that have focused on aggregate actors (Heclo and Wildawsky 1974, Marsh and Rhodes 1992, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999) have insisted on the prior existence of a network linking individuals among themselves. Policy networks have especially been considered both the cause and the consequence of the aggregation of actors. Paradoxically, these theories have been unable to link configurations of actors with public policy. They are thus unable to explain the variation of coalitions depending on the proposals for change or the mutation of change proposals depending on aggregation. Our assumption here is that while the existence of frequent relationships between actors can largely facilitate coalition building, which is a fact widely demonstrated by these authors, it is insufficient for understanding how shared proposals are developed. By considering that agreement on policy change statements forges the link between actors, we propose, on the contrary, that the development of policy change proposal statements cements the coalition building. A statement under construction is not only what actors propagate, but it is also an object which mutates depending on aggregations and becomes the cement of a discursive coalition. The institutionalization of common discourse and the relationships between individuals thus forms one process which results in a discursive coalition.

In order to associate actors' configurations to their proposals, we define a discursive coalition as all those actors who share proposals and focus on the process by which a policy change statement and discursive coalitions are jointly developed and institutionalized. We therefore assume that it is the institutionalization of proposals, which is what we call the construction of a policy change statement,

which unites actors and constitutes the cement of the coalition. This implies that the successive revisions of policy change proposals illustrate coalition building.

This assumption makes it possible for the empirical situation to express and illustrate the varying contours of actor associations in a contingent manner. Moreover, it makes it possible to associate an interpersonal action of persuasion through discussion to the building of a discursive coalition through the proliferation of these discussions and convictions. The circulation of proposals therefore functions like a microbe which cannot propagate itself without contact between two individuals but which, with each propagation, boosts the number of its bearers and increases the contagion phenomenon. To put it differently, although policy change proposals can arise from a very limited number of initial bearers, their circulation, which gives form to the discursive coalition, increases the number of potential defenders and therefore the possibility of circulation. The circulation process, therefore, becomes increasingly powerful as new actors are assembled. It is important to note that the more widespread proposals are, the more they stabilize and become solid and can therefore easily convince others. The intersubjective making of likelihood is therefore a self-sustaining phenomenon which reinforces itself with time – if it works.

It is this circulation and institutionalization experience that we focus on. We need to understand it empirically and see if it grows or on the contrary, stagnates, or even regresses. To achieve this, we need to increase both the number of discussions to be observed as well as the study duration. Undoubtedly, changing the scale poses major epistemological and methodological problems as it tends to make these moments of interaction invisible. Only the selective memory of actors, of which we know the methodological limits, or continuous empirical observation – largely impracticable over long periods – can make it possible to distinguish the two. However, it is by reflecting on the nesting and compatibility of an instantaneous process and of a process spread over time that comprehension can be achieved. In other words, changing the observation scale should by no means be a pretext for the researcher to exonerate himself from the reality he observes, as is far too often the case. We thus observe that persuasion takes place within concrete spaces and, when it succeeds, is part of a larger movement of discursive coalition.

To make these two types of observation compatible, we will use the statement concept both as the form on which actors agree and as an object which is circulated and distributed. Shifting from discourse on the proposals to stable change statements makes it possible to understand the interpersonal movement, the collective movement, and the structural link between content and a gathering.

How do policy proposals succeed to propagate? The role of resources and persuasion

This combination of a sociological approach (inspired by the sociology of elites) and of a discursive approach is a way to grasp the dynamic going from the constitution of a close groups of policy actors sharing policy change proposals (defined as programmatic actors) to a broader discursive coalition that comes together based on these proposals. Nevertheless in some cases it is not sufficient for explaining their success and, therefore, how policy change is driven by policy actors. This is why we insist on the analysis of the argumentative strategies used by policy actors in order to persuade others. Our main assumption here is that at each stage of the policy process, all new policy proposals provoke much argumentation and critical discussion within the conflict arena of policymakers. This can be explained by the fact that no policy proposal can be adopted without sufficient policymakers

to sponsor it. As the literature on decision and policy processes shows, no decision is the result of a single man making his decision alone in his office, even if he is the president of the United States. He needs to find a number of policymakers, experts, bureaucrats, and interest groups to sponsor his policy proposal. Second, this can be explained by the fact that no policy proposal can be circulated without intense persuasion by proposal bearers, who target other policymakers. Even in the internet era, it is somewhat complicated for a policy proposal to circulate from one policymaker to another without actual meetings and discussions. The third reason is that the policymakers' world is a real arena in which many individuals compete with each other. Within the State, we can empirically note that there is conflict between each minister and ministry, between the different departments within the same ministry, between different offices within each department, and between agents within each office.

For these reasons, circulating a new policy proposal is a complex activity that must be empirically analyzed. This reveals the manner in which different stakeholders reach agreement or not. To grasp these different discursive activities within the policy-making process, we need to heuristically distinguish two types of activities which take place at the very heart of the policy process and which correspond to the different uses of argumentation.

"Promotion" is the first type of activity. This activity is based on policymakers' will to propagate their policy change proposals and share their relevance with their interlocutors. To achieve this, actors establish arguments which predominantly support and prove the link they have established through their statements between the proposal and the problem it must resolve, the public policy it must change, the values it must promote and the future it must design.

We also find "criticism" which, on the contrary, is an activity that consists of pointing out a proposal's lack of credibility. As opposed to promotion, this activity highlights the brittleness of the links that connect the different elements of a statement. This, therefore, involves proving that a proposal does not respond to an identified problem and does not produce the anticipated changes or give rise to unexpected consequences that pose even more serious problems. This activity is also present when it involves showing that an existing public policy is problematic.

Persuasion is based on a specific argumentative practice which seeks to legitimize the proposed discourse. While an argument is specific and depends on both the speaker and the audience targeted, it is possible to identify the typology of the arguments that stakeholders use. The key point here is that while stakeholders are masters of their argumentative strategy and that this strategy varies depending on their audience, the type and the number of arguments used remains limited. They thus draw from a repertoire of available arguments which they then adapt in their own way, eventually transforming them. Sometimes, albeit rarely, stakeholders develop completely new arguments but these are often weaker and need some degree of legitimization to consolidate.

Here we can rely on Perelman's studies and his famous treatise on argumentation (1958). The latter identifies four types of argument. The first type of argument is the "quasi-logical" argument. As Perelman restricts truth to mathematical demonstration, he pointed out that what is likely can be constructed using quasi-logical arguments. In other words, these arguments appear logical; they use the logical approach but always have weaknesses that prevent them from becoming "logical." Consequently, with regard to reduction to the absurd, which is very frequent in mathematics, Perelman suggested argumentation through ridicule. The ridicule makes it possible to underscore the

contradictions and the incompatibilities of adverse reasoning. Within the quasi-logical category, there are also tautological, transitivity, dilemma, and division arguments. Moreover, there is definition that gives words or concepts meaning by defining an equivalence. It is therefore clear that "quasi-logical" arguments constitute a fundamental base in the construction of discourses and their institutionalization into statements.

The second type is what Perelman (1958) named arguments based on reality. These are arguments that rely on the association between two events that exist or are likely to exist rather than on logic and its implications. The causal links that make it possible to link two successive events is a good example of this process. Linking poverty and school failure associates two situations perceived as true in order to make one the cause of the other. Perelman also highlights what he called the pragmatic argument, which makes it possible to describe a situation depending on its favorable or unfavorable consequences, transferring somewhat the value given to one onto the other. Judging that a law is "good" because it has positive outcomes is typical of this transfer process.

The third major type of argument is not founded on reality but rather founds reality. It is the use of examples, models, or illustrations. It is also an activity that involves comparisons, analogies, and metaphors.

Finally, the fourth major type of argument is what Perelman named dissociation. Distinguishing, separating, dissociating, or dividing notions are processes that contribute to other types of argumentation. According to Perelman, dissociation is often used as an argumentation technique. For instance, the dissociation appearance/reality makes it possible to dissociate within reality what is the "genuine" reality from that which is only an illusion. Indeed, Perelman argued that all dissociation that separates two notions constitutes an argument.

This typology highlights the existence of a possible diversity of argumentative strategies that offer stakeholders an important field of possibilities. In public policy, using arguments is particularly common in persuasion processes. Stakeholders generally do not simply make their proposals heard or quote a stabilized statement; they take the time to use diverse and varied arguments to make their interlocutor adhere to their proposal. These arguments can be of different types and can circulate depending on stakeholders' interest in them.

While we have defined statements as institutionalized discourses intended to be imposed without argument, they are often severely put to the test when they are present within the processes of promotion, guardianship, or veto. The argumentative process should therefore be seen not only as a process seeking adhesion but also participating in the institutionalization of discourses by transforming them into evidence.

From policy change proposals to decision: The political dimension

In the previous section, we distinguished conviction, which is based on the existence of a public audience that is large, impersonal, and voiceless, from persuasion, which assumes that the speaker targets a specific audience to whom he can inflect positions. We have also heuristically considered until now that the argumentative practice is independent of the reactions of the listener and of its impact on him. We would like to consider here that while real encounter is inevitable in persuasion, unlike in conviction, this cannot be contemplated as a simple monologue but, first and foremost, as an exchange or a discussion. Hence the listener does not simply listen to the discourse and the

arguments of his speaker but asks questions, elaborates objections, raises doubts and critiques, and opposes arguments. Discussion, therefore, appears primarily as a test of the statement under construction and of the arguments supporting it.

Persuasion is consequently a specific type of discussion. On the one hand is the speaker who uses discourse as an argumentative strategy. On the other hand is the listener who tests and through this shapes his own opinion of the discourse. Whether the listener adopts this discourse or not at the end of the discussion, this discussion will have contributed in testing the solidity of the statement and the arguments supporting it. While the results of discussion cannot be foreseen, we argue that discussion is an interaction whose outcome affects the listener, the speaker, and the statement itself.

A policy-making process, therefore, generally passes through a phase of conflict during which a coalition built around a statement can be confronted by a stakeholder or an entire coalition supporting an alternative proposal statement. In such a case, conflict lasts even longer as the statements that reflect position are mutually incompatible. It is often a question of "contrasting" or "deciding" between alternatives that have become immeasurable. This does not mean that it is not possible to associate the two solutions or find a compromise but rather to understand that semantic debate does not only take place with regard to the proposal itself but also to the position.

The conflict in imposing a solution is also a positional challenge, often interactive, in which stakeholders develop complex strategies that make it possible to differentiate themselves from each other. This conflict is present in most public policy processes, as it is especially rare that a proposal does not require the mobilization of stakeholders with "equivalent" positions for whom differentiation is at stake. This conflict obviously exists between the defenders and opponents of a policy proposal that defines a new position. However, even more often, the conflict involves a particular aspect of the proposal that stakeholders determine using a range of several incompatible alternatives.

While the policy-making process undergoes a phase of statement elaboration and circulation, its transformation into a decision requires specific politicization involving the ability of its spokespersons to make plausible its capacity to absorb societal disorder as well as the decision-making capacity of the political actors who establish it. To transform a statement into a decidable solution, it must therefore somewhat become the proof that the government, capable of restoring order within society, is legitimate.

The legitimization of a solution is thus inseparable from the definition of positions of those who become "decision-makers." To stabilize a proposal, actors therefore define a topography of positions and distribute a series of labels, starting with the "decision-maker" label. As a result, generating solutions always incorporates a reconfiguration of the power stakes which accompany it. In the words of Habermas, generating a solution is therefore both a communicative activity developed through persuasion and a strategic activity which also structures the asymmetric issues of position. It is two sides of the same process which defines both, and tries to make actors' positions and their position-taking compatible.

Combining these two contradictory sides is thus possible. Indeed, the decision-making phase, which is based on the politicization of solutions, makes it possible for the decision to respond to a contradictory requirement: making a statement into a policing tool, in the sense of Rancière, or a

commanding tool, in the sense of Freund. In other words, a statement marked by its capacity to transform a proposal into an unquestionable solution driven by a legitimate "decision-maker" and a controversial political tool. It is this tool which makes debate and opposition possible and legitimizes the existence of disorder, which therefore makes restoring order possible.

Far from the garbage can model, which discerns change in public policy based on the almost random drawing by actors from a garbage can in order to find problems to solutions they have in hand, the elaboration of a policy proposal assumes a complex recycling activity for the actors who drive them. This activity includes coupling with a problem through argumentation, with a coalition through persuasion, as well as with a "decision-maker" through imposition.

CONCLUSION

We do not claim that this actor-centered and discursive framework explains everything about policy change. Indeed, the proper conclusion of this paper is a call for methodological and disciplinary pluralism. From a disciplinary perspective, an actor-centered discursive approach to policy change encourages us to combine the methods of the sociology of policymakers with those of discursive analysis in order to identify policy actors sharing change proposals and the strategies they use to promote them by building discursive coalitions and using argumentative strategies. Contextual variables such as shift in the locus of authority (Hall 1993) and a perceived crisis in policy remain helpful in explaining both the perceived need for change and the timing of change. Institutional variables within each national case tell us where to look for programmatic actors and what structural challenges any successful group of such actors will face. Institutions provide normative structure, broader issue-based "communities" or "coalitions" may contribute intellectual raw material, and established interests function as partial veto players. All the while, however, it is identifiable actors, often at the center of the state, who provide the creative dynamic for change. When we place problem-solving and authority-seeking actors squarely at the center of our explanatory approach, both problems and institutions take on their proper role, not as a primary driving force but rather as part of the opportunity structure faced by these actors. Our actor-centered model, accordingly, invites us to examine the conditions – political as well as institutional – in which interactions among policy actors is carried out and how it leads to the shaping of policy outputs.

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